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Author: Florence Morse Kingsley
Illustrator: John Rae

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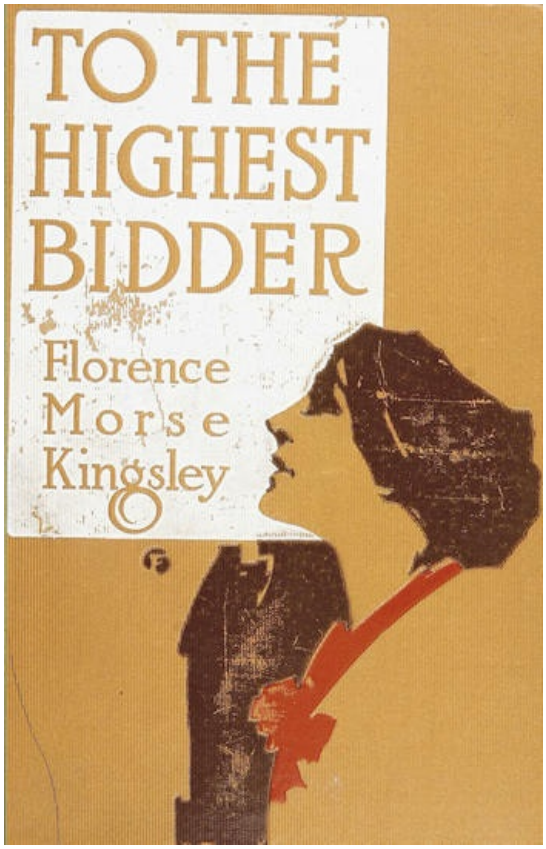
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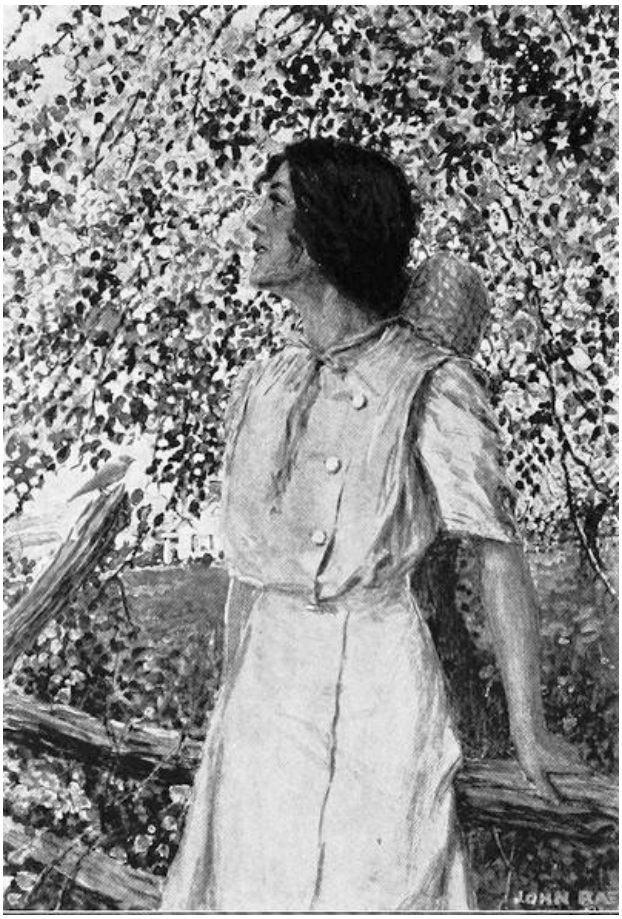

In the one spring-time when David Whitcomb loved her

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TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

By

FLORENCE MORSE KINGSLEY
Author of “The Singular Miss Smith,” “The Glass House,” etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN RAE

NEW YORK
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1911

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THE HIGHEST BIDDER

I

Abram Hewett and his son “Al” were distributing the mail in the narrow space behind the high tier of numbered glass boxes which occupied the left-hand corner of the general store known as “Hewett’s grocery.” There were not many letters and papers in the old leathern bag whose marred outer surface bore evidence to its many hurried departures and ignominious arrivals. Only the “locals” stopped at Barford; the expresses whizzed disdainfully past, discharging the mailbag on the platform of the ugly little station like a well-aimed bullet.

There was one letter in the scant pile awaiting official scrutiny over which the younger Hewett pursed his thick lips in a thoughtful whistle. He turned over the thin envelope, held it up to the light, squinted curiously at it out of one gray-green eye before he finally deposited it among the letters destined for general delivery.

This done, a slight sound drew his attention to the wabbly stand on the counter next to the post-office proper, whereon was displayed a variety of picture postal cards; “views” of Barford taken by the local photographer, and offered generously to the public at [2] the rate of two for five cents. Intermingled with the photographic representations of the village were cards of a more general and decorative nature; impossibly yellow Easter chickens, crosses, wreaths, and baskets of flowers, in a variety of startling colors, and lurking behind these in a manner suited to the time of year (it being the month of April) were reminders of a Christmas past, in the shape of stars, holly wreaths, and churches, their lighted windows sparkling with mica snows.

Before this varied collection a small boy, with a scarlet tam perched on the back of his curly head, stood gazing with longing eyes.

“Oh! hello there, bub!” observed Mr. Al Hewett rebukingly. “You mustn’t touch them cards, y’ know.”

The boy stared at him from under puckered brows, his rosy mouth half opened.

“What are they for?” he demanded.

“Why, to sen’ to folks, Jimmy,” explained Mr. Hewett, with a return of his wonted good humor. “Easter greetings, views of our town, et cetery. Want one t’ sen’ t’ y’r bes’ girl?”

“Yes, I do,” said the child earnestly. “I want one for—for Barb’ra. I want this one.”

He laid a proprietary hand on a Christmas tree sparkling with tinsel lights and surmounted by the legend, “I wish you a merry Christmas.”

“Well, son, that card’ll cost you a nickel, seein’ it’s early in the season,” responded the youth humorously. “A nickel apiece; three [3] fer ten. Shan’t I wrap you up an Easter greetin’ an’ th’ Meth’dist church along with it?”

The boy was engaged in untying a hard knot in the corner of his handkerchief.

“I’ve got ten cents an’ a nickel,” he said. “An’ I want ten cents’ worth of m’lasses an’ the mail an’ that card. It’s my birfday,” he added proudly, “an’ Barb’ra said I could buy anything I wanted with the nickel. She’s goin’ to make me some popcorn balls with the m’lasses.”

“How old are you, Jimmy?” inquired the youth, as he tied up the card in brown paper with a pink string, and languidly deposited the nickel in the till. “‘Bout a hunderd, I s’pose.”

“I’m six years old,” replied Jimmy importantly. “An’ I’m large of my age; Barb’ra says so.”

“Then it mus’ be so, I reckon. Say, here’s a letter fer Barb’ra f’om ’way out west. I’ve been wonderin’ who Barb’ra knows out west. Ever hear her say, Jimmy?”

The boy shook his blond head vigorously, as he bestowed the letter in the pocket of his coat.

“I’ll ask her if you want me to,” he said with a friendly little smile.

But young Mr. Hewett was back at his post behind the little window, where he presently became engaged in brisk repartee with a couple of red-cheeked girls over the non-arrival of a letter which one of them appeared confidently to expect.

Neither bestowed a glance upon the small figure in the red cap [4]
which presently made its way out of the door, carefully carrying a covered tin pail, and out of whose shallow pocket protruded the half of a thin blue envelope addressed to Miss Barbara Preston, in a man’s bold angular hand.

There was a cold wind abroad, roaring through the branches of the budding trees, and tossing the red maple blossoms in a riotous blur of color against the brilliant blue and white of the sky. To Jimmy Preston trudging along the uneven sidewalk, where tiny pools of water from the morning’s rain reflected the sky and the tossing trees, like fragments of a broken mirror, came a sense of singular elation. It was his birthday; in one hand he carried the beautiful sparkling card, and in the other the tin pail containing the molasses; while in the dazzling reflections under foot were infinite heights—infinite depths of mysterious rapture.

“If I sh’d step in,” mused Jimmy, carefully skirting the edges of a shallow uneven pool in the worn stones, “‘s like’s not I’d go clear through to heaven.”

Heaven was a wonderful place, all flowers and music and joyous ease. He knew this, because Barbara had told him so; and nearly all of the family were there—all but Barbara and himself. But there might not be popcorn balls in heaven; Jimmy couldn’t be certain on that point; and, anyway, he concluded it was better to stay where Barbara was and grow up to be a man as soon as possible.

The little boy broke into a manly whistle as he pictured himself in [5]
a gray flannel shirt with his trousers tucked into large boots, ploughing and calling to the horses, the way Peg Morrison did.

The sidewalk came to an end presently, together with the village street, just opposite the big house of the Honorable Stephen Jarvis. Jimmy stopped, as he always did, to look in through the convolutions of a highly ornamental fence at the cast-iron deer which guarded the walk on either side, and at the mysterious blue glass balls mounted on pedestals, which glistened brightly in a passing gleam of sunshine. There were other things of interest in the yard of the big house: groups of yellow daffodils, nodding gaily in the wind, red, white, and purple hyacinths behind the borders of blue-starred periwinkle, and shrubs with clouds of pink and yellow blossoms. In the summer there would be red geraniums and flaming cannas and pampas grass in tall fleecy pyramids. Jimmy wondered what it would be like to walk up the long smooth gravel path and open the tall front door. What splendors might be hid behind the lace curtains looped away from the shining windows; books, maybe, with pictures; a real piano with ivory keys, and chairs and sofas of red velvet.

“S’pos’n,” said Jimmy to his sociable little self, “jus’ s’pos’n me an’ Barb’ra lived there; an’ I should walk right in an’ find Barb’ra all dressed in a pink satin dress with a trail an’ maybe a diamon’ crown. She’d look lovely in a diamon’ crown, Barb’ra would.” [6]

His attention was diverted at the moment by the sight of a smart sidebar buggy, drawn by a spirited bay horse, which a groom was driving around the house from the stable at the rear. The man pulled up sharply at the side entrance, where the bay horse pawed the gravel impatiently. Jimmy observed with interest that the horse’s tail was cropped short and bobbed about excitedly.

He was imagining himself as coming out of the house and climbing into the shining buggy, and taking the reins in his own hands, and——

He waited breathlessly, his eyes glued to an opening in the fence, while the tall spare figure of a man wearing a gray overcoat and a

gray felt hat emerged from the house.

Jimmy recognized the man at once. He was the Honorable Stephen Jarvis. Few persons in Barford ever spoke of him in any other way. “The Honorable” seemed as much a part of his name as Jarvis. Jimmy, for one, thought it was.

“That’s me!” said Jimmy. “Now I’m climbin’ in; now I’ve took the lines! Now I’ve got the whip! And now——”

The vehicle dashed out of the open gate, whirred past with a spatter of half-frozen mud, and disappeared around a bend of the road where pollarded willows grew.

“My! I’m goin’ fast!” said Jimmy aloud. “But I ain’t afraid; no, sir! [7]
I guess Barb’ra’ll be some s’prised when she sees me drivin’ in! I’ll say, ‘Come on an’ take a ride with me, Barb’ra’; an’ Barb’ra, she’ll say, ‘Why, Jimmy Preston! ain’t you ’fraid that short-tailed horse’ll run away?’ An’ I’ll laugh an’ say, ‘Don’t you see I’m drivin’?’”

The laugh at least was real, and it rang out in a series of rollicking chuckles, as the child resumed his slow progress with the pail of molasses which had begun to ooze sticky sweetness around the edge. Observing this, Jimmy set it down and applied a cautious finger to the overflow; from thence to his mouth was a short distance, with results of such surprising satisfaction that the entire circumference of the pail was carefully gone over. “I guess,” reflected Jimmy gravely, “that I’d better hurry now. Barb’ra’ll be expectin’ me.”

A more rapid rate of progress brought about a recrudescence of the oozing sweetness which, manifestly, involved a repetition of salvage. By this time Jimmy had reached and passed the row of willows, cut back every spring to the gnarled stumps which vaguely reminded the child of a row of misshapen dwarfs; enchanted, maybe, and rooted to the ground like gnomes in the fairy-tales. Beyond the distorted willows, with their bunched osiers just budding into a mist of yellowish green, was the bridge with its three loose planks which rattled loud and hollow when a trotting horse passed over, and responded to the light footfalls of the child with a faint, intermittent creaking. On either side of the brook, swollen [8]
now to a muddy torrent with the spring rains, grew crisp green clumps of the skunk cabbage, interspersed with yellow adders’ tongues and the elusive pink and white of clustered spring-beauties.

“If I sh’d take Barb’ra some flowers, I guess she’d be glad,” communed Jimmy with himself. “I’m mos’ sure Barb’ra’d be awful glad to have some of those yellow flowers; she likes yellow flowers, Barb’ra does.”

He climbed down carefully, because of the molasses which seemed to seethe and bubble ever more joyously within the narrow confines of the tin pail, and having arrived at the creek bottom he set down the pail by a big stone and proceeded to fill his hands with pink and yellow blossoms. It was pleasant down by the brook, with the wind roaring overhead like a friendly giant, and the blue sky and hurrying white clouds reflected in the still places of the stream.

A thunder of hoofs and wheels sounded on the bridge, and the child looked up to see the round red face of Peg Morrison, and the curl of his whip-lash as he called to his horses.

“Hello, Peg!” shouted Jimmy, “wait an’ le’ me get in!” He caught up the pail and clambered briskly up the steep bank.

The man had drawn up his horses, his puckered eyes and puckered lips smiling down at the little boy.

“Wall, I d’clar!” he called out in a high cracked voice, “if this ’ere [9]
ain’t the Cap’n! Where’d you come f’om, Cap’n? Here, I’ll take your pail.”

“It’s got molasses in it, so you’d better be careful,” warned Jimmy. “I’m goin’ to have six popcorn balls an’ one to grow on, ’cause it’s my birfday an’ I’m large of my age.”

“Wall, now, I d’clar!” cried Peg admiringly, “so you be, now I come to think of it, Cap’n. You’re hefty, too—big an’ hefty.”

He pulled the little boy up beside him with a grunt as of a mighty effort. As he did so the blue letter slipped out of the small pocket, which was only half big enough to hold it, and dropped unnoticed to the ground. Then the wagon with a creak and a rattle started on once more.

“You c’n see,” said Peg gravely, “how the horses hes to pull now’t you’re in.”

“Didn’t they have to pull’s hard as that before I got in?” inquired

Jimmy. “Honest, Peg, didn’t they?”

“Why, all you’ve got to do is to look at ’em, Cap’n,” chuckled Peg. “I’m glad it ain’t fur or they’d git all tuckered out, an’ I’ve got to plough to-day. Say, Cap’n, the wind’s blowin’ fer business ain’t it? You’d better look out fer that military hat o’ your’n.”

“It does blow pretty hard,” admitted Jimmy; “but my hat’s on tight.”

He glanced back vaguely to see a glimmer of something blue skidding sidewise across the road into the tangle of huckleberry and [10] hard-hack bushes; then he turned once more to the man at his side.

“I’ve got a birfday present for Barb’ra,” he said eagerly.

“A birthday present fer Barb’ry? ’Tain’t her birthday, too, is it?” inquired Peg, clucking to his horses.

“No, it’s my birfday; but I got Barb’ra a birfday present with my fi’ cents. I’m six.”

“Sure!” cried Peg. “Anybody’d know you was six, Cap’n, jus’ to look at you! Six, an’ large an’ hefty fer your age. You bet they would! What sort of birthday present did you get for Barb’ry—hey?”

“If you’ll keep the molasses from spillin’ over I’ll show it to you,” offered Jimmy. “It’s a beautiful picture.”

“Wall, now I vow!” exclaimed Peg, when the pink string had been carefully untied and the sparkling Christmas tree exposed to view. “‘I wish you a merry Christmas,’” he read slowly. “Say, that’s great, Cap’n! Mos’ folks fergit all about merry Christmas long before spring. But they hadn’t ought to. Stan’s to reason they hadn’t. They’d ought to be merrier in April ’an in December, ’cause the goin’s better an’ it’s ’nuffsight pleasanter weather. I’ll bet Barb’ry’ll be tickled ha’f to death when she sees that.”

“It sparkles, don’t it, Peg?”

“Mos’ puts my eyes out,” acquiesced the man. “It’s all kin’s an’ [11] colors o’ sparkles. It cert’ly is a neligant present. D’ye want to drive while I do it up fer ye?”

Jimmy took the reins.

“I won’t let ’em run away,” he said gravely.

“Run away?” chuckled Peg. “I’d like to see ’em run away with you a-holt o’ the lines. They wouldn’t das to try it.”

“I s’pose I’ll be able to work the farm before long, Peg,” observed Jimmy, after a short silence, during which he sternly eyed the bobbing heads of the old farm horses. “I’m pretty old now, an’ I’m gettin’ taller every day.”

“H’m!” grumbled Mr. Morrison. “I guess the’ ain’t no ’special hurry ’bout your takin’ charge o’ the farm, Cap’n. Me an Barb’ry’s makin’ out pretty well; an’ you know, Cap’n, you’ve got to go to school quite a spell yet.”

Jimmy knit his forehead.

“I guess there is some hurry,” he said slowly. “I’ve got to grow up’s quick’s I can.”

The man looked down at the valiant little figure at his side with a queer twist of his weather-beaten face.

“Did—Barb’ry tell you that?” he wanted to know after a short silence.

“No,” said Jimmy, shaking his head, “Barb’ra didn’t tell me. I—just thinked it. You see, it’s this way,” he went on, with a serious grown-up air, “I’m all Barb’ra’s got, an’ Barb’ra’s all I’ve got. We’ve just got each other; an’—an’—the farm.”

Peg pursed up his lips in an inaudible whistle. “You wasn’t [12] thinkin’ of givin’ up the farm—you an’ Barb’ry; was you?” he inquired presently.

“What? Me an’ Barb’ra give up the—farm?” echoed Jimmy, in a shocked little voice. “Why—we couldn’t do that.”

“Seein’ the’s jus’ th’ two of you, Cap’n—you an’ Barb’ry, an’—an’—the farm, I didn’t know but what you was calc’latin’ t’ move int’ th’ village, where the’s more folks, an’——”

Jimmy shook his blond head vigorously.

“We couldn’t live anywhere else,” he said decidedly. “It’s—why, it’s our home!”

Peg had taken the reins and the wagon jolted noisily between the tall stone gate-posts, past the big elms and the groups of untrimmed evergreens, to where the house stood on its low grassy terrace, a gravelled driveway encircling it. It was a wide, low, old-fashioned

house with narrow porches and small-paned windows, glittering in the sun like little fires. Obviously the house had not been painted for a long time; and its once dazzling walls and green shutters had softened with time and uncounted storms into a warm silvery gray which lent a certain dignity to its square outlines.

Jimmy climbed down over the wheel and dashed excitedly into the house.

“I’ve come, Barb’ra!” he shouted imperiously. “Where are you, Barb’ra?”

The door of the sitting-room opened and a young woman came [13] out. She was tall and slender, with masses of warm brown hair, a red mouth, and a brilliantly clear pale skin; her gray eyes under their long dark lashes were wide and angry, but they softened as they fell upon the small figure in the red tam.

“I’ve got a neligant birfday present f’r you, Barb’ra,” announced the little boy loudly. “An’ I’ve got a quart of m’lasses an’ I’ve got a letter f’om way out west. An’ Al Hewett he wants to know——”

“Hush, Jimmy,” said the girl, stooping to kiss the child’s red mouth. “There’s—someone here. I—can’t stop now. Go and get warm in the kitchen. I’ll come presently.”

She opened a door peremptorily and the child passed through it, his bright face clouded with disappointment.

“Don’t you want to see your—birfday present, even?” he demanded with quivering lips. “I bought it with my fi’ cents, an’ it’s ——”

But the girl had already closed the door behind her; he could hear her speak to someone in the sitting-room. There followed the sound of a man’s voice, speaking at length, and the low-toned murmur of a brief reply. Jimmy laid the small flat parcel containing the postal card on the kitchen table, and set the pail of molasses on a chair. There was a froth of sweetness all around the edge now, but Jimmy didn’t care. Vaguely heavy at heart he walked over to the window and looked out. Hitched to the post near the lilac bushes [14] was a tall bay horse with a cropped tail. Behind the horse was a shining sidebar buggy with red wheels. The horse was stretching his sleek neck in an effort to reach the tender green shoots of the lilac bushes, his cropped tail switching irritably from side to side. Jimmy stared with round eyes.

Presently the side door opened and Stephen Jarvis came out quickly, jamming his gray felt hat low upon his forehead. He untied the horse, jerking the animal’s head impatiently to one side as he did so, and stepped to the high seat; then, at a savage cut of the whip, the horse darted away, the gravel spurting from under his angry hoof-beats.

“I’m glad I’m not that horse,” mused Jimmy, “an’ I’m glad—” he added, after a minute’s reflection—“‘at I’m not—him.”

He was still thinking confusedly about the short-tailed horse and his owner, when he heard Barbara’s step behind him.

The girl stooped, put both arms about the little boy, and laid her hot cheek on his. Then she laughed, rather unsteadily.

“Kiss me quick, Jimmy Preston!” she cried. “I want to be loved—hard!”

The child threw both arms fervently about his sister’s neck. “I love you,” he declared circumstantially, “wiv all my outsides an’ all my insides! I love you harder’n anyfing!”

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[15]

II

For a long time (it seemed to Jimmy) after the last hoof-beat of the ill-tempered horse with the cropped tail had died away on the gravelled drive Barbara sat with the child in her arms, his curly head close against her cheek; her gray eyes bright with tears resolutely held in check.

"Aren't you gettin' some tired of holdin' me?" inquired Jimmy, with a stealthy little wriggle of protest. "You know I'm six, an' Peg says I'm hefty for my age."

Barbara laughed faintly, and the little boy slipped from her arms with alacrity and stood before her, eyeing her searchingly.

"I bought you a birfday present with my fi' cents," he said, "but you wouldn't wait to see it."

"You bought me a birthday present?" cried Barbara. "Why, Jimmy Preston! Show it to me; I can't wait a minute longer."

Jimmy walked soberly across to the table. The first glow of his enthusiasm had vanished, and he frowned a little as he untied the pink string.

"Maybe you won't like it," he said modestly. "It's a picture, an'—an' it—sparkles. I fought—no; I mean I *thought* it was pretty, an' [16] that you'd like it, Barb'ra."

"Like it, boy! I should say so! It's the most beautiful birthday present I ever had." Barbara spoke with convincing sincerity and her eyes suddenly wrinkled with fun—the fun Jimmy loved. "I'd really like to kiss you six times—and one to grow on, if you'll allow me, sir," she said.

Jimmy considered this proposition for awhile in silence. "You don't kiss Peg," he objected at last.

"Mercy no! I should hope not!" laughed Barbara.

She seized the child firmly and planted four of the seven kisses on his hard pink cheeks. "Now two more under your curls in the sweet place," she murmured. "And the last one in the sweetest place of all!" And she turned up his round chin and sought the warm white hollow beneath like a homing bee.

"I guess I'll be some sweeter after I eat six popcorn balls," observed Jimmy, disengaging himself. "The molasses didn't spill much."

"Well, I'm glad of that!" cried Barbara. "I guess I'd better get to work. You run out and bring in some chips from the woodpile, and I'll have that molasses boiling before you can spell Jack Robinson."

"J-a-c-k," began Jimmy triumphantly; but Barbara chased him out of doors with a sudden access of pretended severity.

"You're getting altogether too clever for me, Jimmy Preston!" she [17] said. Then her face clouded swiftly at the recollection of Stephen Jarvis's parting words.

"What do you propose to do with the boy?" he had asked.

"Take care of him," she had replied defiantly, "and save the farm for him."

It was then that Jarvis had risen, crushing his gray felt hat angrily between his hands.

"You're likely to find it impossible to do either the one or the other," he said coldly. "The boy is a chip of the old block. As for the farm, I've been trying to make you understand for the last half hour that it does not belong to you, unless you can meet the payments before the date I set; and you've just told me you can't do that."

"Let me pop the corn, Barb'ra!" begged Jimmy, sniffing ecstatically at the molasses which was beginning to seethe and bubble fragrantly in the little round kettle. "I like birfdays," he went on sociably; "don't; you, Barb'ra? I mean I like *birthdays*. Did I say that right, Barb'ra?"

"Yes, dear," said his sister absent-mindedly. She was drawing out the little round mahogany table. "I'm going to put on the pink china," she announced, with a defiant toss of her dark head. The defiance was for the Honorable Stephen Jarvis.

"It's beginning to pop!" cried Jimmy excitedly, as he drew the corn-popper back and forth on the hot griddles with a busy scratching sound.

"Don't let it burn," warned Barbara. "How would you like some [18] little hot biscuits, Jimmy, and some strawberry preserves?"

“Strawberry ’serves?” he echoed. “I didn’t know we had any ’serves.”

“Well, we have. I’ve been saving ’em for—for your birthday, Jimmy.”

“Oh, I’m glad!” cried the little boy, redoubling his efforts. “See me work, Barb’ra. Don’t I work hard?”

“Yes, indeed, dear.” She hesitated, then added in a low voice, “You always will work hard; won’t you, Jimmy?”

The child watched her gravely while she shook the crisp white kernels into a bowl. He was thinking of her question.

“Do you think I’ll have to go to school much longer, Barb’ra?” he asked. “It takes such a long time to go to school.”

The girl wheeled sharply about.

“What put that notion into your head?” she demanded. “Of course you’ve got to go school till—till you’re educated—like father.” Her voice faltered a little, and a dark flush crept into her cheeks.

The boy’s eyes were on her face.

“Of course father was—he was sick, Jimmy, sick and unhappy. You don’t remember him as I do; but he——”

“Yes, I know,” the child said simply.

Then he threw his arms about Barbara and hugged her. He didn’t [19]
know why exactly, except that Barbara liked his rough boyish caresses. And he wanted to make her smile again.

She did smile, winking back the tears.

“I want you to study—hard, Jimmy,” she went on in a low tremulous voice; “and grow to be a good man—the best kind of a man. You must! I couldn’t bear it, if you——”

“Well, I won’t, Barb’ra,” promised the child gravely. He eyed his sister with a sudden flash of comprehension as he added stoutly, “You don’t have to worry ’bout me. I’m growin’ jus’ ’s fas’ ’s I can, an’ I know mos’ all my tables, ’ceptin’ seven an’ nine an’ some of eight.”

Barbara laughed, and there was the same odd ring of defiance in the sound. Then she opened a cupboard in the wall and took out a cake covered with pink icing.

Jimmy’s blue eyes grew wide with wonder. “What’s that?” he demanded.

Barbara was setting six small candles around the edge; last of all she planted one in the middle.

“You couldn’t guess if you tried,” she said gaily. “I just know you couldn’t. You’re such a dull boy.”

“I can guess, too!” cried Jimmy with a shout of rapture. “It’s a cake! It’s my birfday cake! An’ it’s got six candles on it an’ one to grow on. I ’member last year it had only five an’ one to grow on; but [20]
I growed that one all up. I want Peg to see it. Can I go out t’ the barn an’ get him? Can I, Barb’ra?”

The girl hesitated as she cast a troubled eye on the table set daintily with the pink china, and the few carefully cherished bits of old silver.

“You may ask Peg to come in and have supper with you, if you like,” she said slowly. “Just this once—because it’s your birthday.”

Jimmy didn’t wait for a second bidding; he dashed out of the back door with a boyish whoop, carefully studied from the big boys in school.

Peg (shortened from Peleg) Morrison had worked on the Preston farm for so many years that he appeared almost as much a part of the place as the shabby old house itself, or the rambling structures at its rear known indeterminately as “the barns.” He slept over the carriage-house, in quarters originally intended for the coachman. Here also he cooked handily for himself on a rusty old stove, compounding what he called “tried an’ tested receipts” out of a queer old yellow-leaved book bound in marbled boards, its pages written over in Peg’s own scrawling chirography.

“I wouldn’t part with that thar book for its weight in gold an’ di’mon’s,” he was in the habit of saying solemnly to Jimmy. “No, Cap’n, I reelly wouldn’t. I begun to write down useful inf’mation in it when I wasn’t much bigger’n you be now, an’ I’ve kep’ it up.”

“Vallable Information, by Peleg Morrison,” was the legend [21]
inscribed on its thumbed cover. Jimmy admired this book beyond words, and quite in private had started one of his own on pieces of

brown paper accumulated in the attic chamber where he played on rainy days.

“Hello, Cap’n!” observed Peg with a genial smile, as the little boy thrust his yellow head in at the door of his quarters. “Say! I do b’lieve you’ve growed some since I seen you last. It must be them popcorn balls, I reckon. Pop-corn’s mighty tasty and nourishin’.”

“I haven’t eaten ’em—not yet!” said Jimmy breathlessly. “An’, Peg, I’ve got a birfday cake—an’ it’s got six candles on it, an’ one to grow on; an’—an’ it’s all pink on top; an’ Barb’ra, she’s made a whole lot of biscuits; an’ we’ve got some strawberry ’serves, an’—an’ we want you to come to supper; jus’ this once, ’cause it’s my birfday. Barb’ra said to tell you. An’ she’s put on the pink dishes, too!”

“Wall, now, Cap’n, that surely is kind of Miss Barb’ry. But you see I ain’t got my comp’ny clo’es on. M’ swallow-tail coat’s got the rear buttons off, an’ m’ high collar ’n boiled shirt’s to m’ wash-lady’s.”

Peg winked humorously at Jimmy, in token that his remarks were to be interpreted as being in a purely jocular vein.

“We don’t care ’bout clo’es—me an’ Barb’ra,” said Jimmy, grandly. “An’ I want you to see my cake wiv the candles burning. [22]
I’m goin’ to blow ’em out when we are all through wiv supper; then we’re goin’ to eat the cake.”

“Wall, now I’ll tell you, Cap’n. I’ll mosey in ’long ’bout time you get t’ the cake. I wouldn’t miss seein’ them candles blowed out fer anythin’. You c’n tell Miss Barb’ry I’m obleeged to her fer th’ invitation—mind you say Miss Barb’ry, Jimmy. ’Cause that’s manners, seein’ I’m hired man on this ’ere farm.”

“Does Barb’ra pay you lots o’ money?” asked Jimmy, with sudden grave interest.

Peg puckered up his mouth judicially.

“You don’t want t’ git in th’ habit o’ askin’ pers’nal questions, Cap’n,” he said, with a serious look in his kind old eyes. “’Tain’t reelly p’lite, you know. An’ the’s times when it’s kind o’ embarrassin’ to answer ’em. But, in this ’ere case, I’m pertickler glad to tell you, Cap’n, that Barb’ry—I mean Miss Barb’ry—does pay me all I ask fur, an’ a whole lot besides. You see I hev special privileges here on this place that ain’t come by ev’ry day, an’ I value ’em—I value ’em highly. An’ that reminds me, Cap’n, that I’ve got a little present fer you, seein’ you’re six, goin’ on seven, an’ big an’ hefty fer your age. Jest you clap yer eyes onto that an’ tell me what you think of it. ’Tain’t what you’d call reelly val’able now; but you keep it fer—say fifty years an’ do what I’ve done with mine, an’ money won’t buy it f’om you.”

“Oh, Peg!” gasped Jimmy, in a rapture too deep and pervasive for [23]
words, “is it—a val’able inf’mation book?”

“That’s what it is, Cap’n,” chuckled Peg, holding off the book and gazing at it with honest pride. “Y’ see, I couldn’t find th’ mate to mine in looks; but this ’ere red cover beats mine all holler, an’ you see I’ve put ‘Vallable Information by James Embury Preston’ on it in handsome red letters. Take it, boy, an’ don’t put nothin’ into it ’at won’t be true an’ useful, is the prayer o’ Peg Morrison.”

The old man’s tone was solemn and his blue eyes gleamed suddenly moist in the midst of their network of wrinkles.

“The’s folks in this world,” he went on soberly, “’at would be mighty glad if they had a book like that, full o’ tried an’ tested rules—fer conduct, as well as fer hoss liniment an’ pies an’ cakes. In the front page o’ mine I put down more’n twenty years ago, ‘Never promise anythin’ that you ain’t willin’ to set ’bout doin’ the nex’ minute.’ That’s a good sentiment fer man or beast. Ye c’n turn to a rule fer mos’ anythin’, f’om what to do fer a colt ’at’s et too much green clover, up to how to set on a jury. But I’ve took my time to it, an’ ain’t never wrote anythin’ down jus’ t’ fill paper. Now you trot along, Cap’n; an’ I’ll be with you before you git them candles blowed out.”

“I—I’d like to shake hands, Peg,” said Jimmy fervently. “I’m too big an’ hefty to kiss people for thank you. But I like this book [24]
better’n anyfing—I mean anything.”

He put out his small brown hand on which babyish dimples still lingered, and the old man grasped and shook it solemnly.

“You’re more’n welcome, Cap’n!” he said heartily. “An’ thinkin’ y’ might like to set down a few sentiments I got you a bottle o’ red ink

an' a new steel pen. I like red ink m'self. It makes a handsome page."

"I never s'posed I'd have a whole bottle of red ink," said Jimmy, with a rapturous sigh of contentment filled to the brim and running over. "Don't forget to come and see my cake," he called out as the old man convoyed him to the foot of the stairs with a nautical lantern.

"I'm goin' right back up to put on m' swallow-tail," Peg assured him. "You'll see me in 'bout half an hour."

Barbara knit her fine dark brows a little over the birthday book with its quaint inscription.

"I shouldn't like you to suppose that was the way to spell valuable information," she said crisply. "Suppose we put another card over this one, dear. I'll write it for you."

Jimmy pondered this proposal in silence for a few minutes, then he shook his head.

"I want my book to be 'zactly like Peg's," he said firmly. "It's a val'able inf'mation book; that's what it is."

He kept it by him all the while they were eating their supper off [25]
the pink and white china Grandfather Embury brought from foreign parts, while the seven candles cast bright lights and wavering shadows across the table on the boy's rosy little face and the girl's darker beauty.

"Peg's comin' in's soon's he puts on his swallow-tail," said Jimmy placidly. "I like Peg better'n anybody, 'ceptin' you, Barb'ra. He's so durned square."

"You shouldn't say such words, Jimmy," Barbara said, with a vexed pucker between her brows. "You must remember that you are a gentleman."

"So is Peg a gentleman," said Jimmy, valiantly ready to do battle for his friend. "An' he says durned."

Barbara shook her head impatiently at the child.

"If you say that word again, Jimmy," she threatened, "I shall be obliged to forbid you going out to the barn at all."

"I guess you don't mean that, Barb'ra," the little boy said firmly. "Course I have to go out to the barn; but I promise I won't say durned 'cept when I plough."

A sound of hard knuckles cautiously applied to the back kitchen door announced Mr. Morrison, attired in his best suit of rusty black, his abundant iron-gray hair, ordinarily standing up around his ruddy, good-humored face like a halo, severely plastered down with soap and water.

"Good-evenin', Cap'n," he said ceremoniously, "I hope you fin' [26]
yourself in good health on this 'ere auspicious occasion, sir; an' you, too, Miss Barb'ry, as a near relation of the Cap'n's. I hope I see you well an'—an' happy, ma'am."

"See my cake, Peg," shouted Jimmy, capering wildly about the old man. "See the candles!"

Peg pretended to shade his eyes from the overpowering illumination. "Wall, now, I mus' say!" he exclaimed. "If that ain't wo'th coverin' ten miles o' bad goin' t' see. That cert'nly is a han'some cake, Miss Barb'ry, an' the Cap'n here tells me you made it."

Barbara smiled, rather sadly.

"Yes," she said, "I made it. If you'll blow out the candles now, Jimmy, I'll cut it and we'll each have a piece."

The little boy climbed up in his chair.

"I have to sit down when I blow," he said seriously, and sent the first current of air across the table from his puckered lips. "One of 'em's out!" he announced triumphantly.

"Give it to 'em agin, Cap'n!" cried Peg. "Give 'em a good one. That's right! Now the nigh one's gone; but that off candle's a sticker. I dunno whether you'll fetch that one or not, Cap'n."

The child drew in a mighty breath, his puffed cheeks flushing to a brilliant scarlet, and blew with all his might, the flame of the one lighted candle waned, flared sidewise, and disappeared, leaving a [27]
light wreath of smoke behind.

"There! I blowed 'em out, all by myself," he exulted. "I've got a strong wind in my breaf, haven't I, Peg?"

"I declar', I'd hate to have you try it on the roof o' the barn,

Cap’n. The loose shingles’d fly, I bet,” Peg assured him jocularly.

Barbara was cutting the cake, her troubled eyes bent upon her task. Mr. Morrison glanced at her anxiously.

“I seen a rig hitched out t’ the side door this afternoon,” he said slowly. “‘Twant a—a sewin’-machine agent; was it, Miss Barb’ry?”

“No,” said the girl shortly; her look forbade further questions.

“I’ll tell you who ’twas, Peg,” said Jimmy sociably, as he began to nibble the edges of his slice of cake. “It was the Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis. An’ his horse’s tail is cut off short so’t it can’t switch ’round, an’ it makes him cross. I guess it would make me some cross, too, if I was a horse. Wouldn’t it make you, Peg?”

“I reckon’t would, Cap’n,” said the old man, fetching a heavy sigh for no apparent reason. He turned to Barbara, whose red lips were set in an expression of haughty reserve.

“If I’d ’a’ knowed ’twas the Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis fer certain,” he went on, with an effort after careless ease of manner, “I b’lieve I’d ’a’ took the opportunity to talk over crops with him fer a spell. [28] We’re goin’ to have a first-rate crop o’ buckwheat this year, an’ winter wheat’s lookin’ fine. The’d ought to be plenty of apples, too. I pruned the trees in the spring an’ manured ’em heavy last fall.”

Barbara gazed steadily at the table. She did not answer.

“I was thinkin’ some o’ plantin’ onions in the five acre field this year,” went on Peg, an agitated tremor in his voice. “They’re a heap o’ work, onions is, what with weedin’ ’em an’ cultivatin’ ’em; but the’s big money in ’em; white, red, an’ yellow sorts. What would you say to onions, Miss Barb’ry?”

“There’s no use,” said the girl, “of our planting—anything.” She turned her back abruptly on pretence of pulling down a window shade. “I’ll speak to you to-morrow—about the work.”

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[29]

III

After Jimmy had said his prayers and was tucked up in bed, tired but happy, the book of "Vallable Information" under his pillow, Barbara sat for awhile by the open window in the dusk of the April night. The wind had gone down since sunset, and in the stillness she could hear the "peepers," singing in the distant marshes, and the soft roar of the river, filled to its brim with the melted snows from the hills. Something in the sound of the swollen river and the gleam of a single star, seen dimly between drifting clouds, brought the remembrance of other April nights to Barbara's mind.

Her thoughts went back to the day when her father, then a proud, handsome man in his prime, had brought his new wife to the farm. Her own passionately mourned mother seemed strangely forgotten in the joy of the home-coming and the girl had resented it in the dumb, pathetic fashion of childhood. After a little, though, she had come to love the gentle creature who had won her father's heart. There followed a few happy years, regretfully remembered through a blur of tears, when the little mother, as Barbara learned to call her, filled the old house to overflowing with sunshine. Then on an April night when the river lifted up its plaintive voice in the [30]
stillness that fell after a wild, windy day, Jimmy came, and the little mother went—hastily, as if summoned out of the dark by some voice unheard by the others. Barbara remembered well the night of her going, and of how, with a last effort, she had lifted the tiny baby and placed him in her own strong young arms.

"Love—him—dear," whispered the failing voice. Then she had smiled once, as if with a great content, and was gone.

Jimmy's voice broke sleepily through these bitter-sweet memories.

"Barb'ra!" he called, "are you there? I forgot somethin'."

"What did you forget, dear?" asked the girl, going to his bed.

"I love you, Barb'ra!" murmured the little boy, snuggling his hand in hers.

She stooped to kiss him all warm and sweet with sleep. Then drew the blankets closer about his shoulders.

"It was—a—a—letter," the drowsily-sweet little voice went on. "I —forgot——"

"Jimmy," said Barbara the next morning, as she brushed the child's yellow hair, "what was it you said last night about a letter?"

"Oh, I bringed—no, I brought a letter home to you in my coat pocket, and I forgot to give it to you."

"It isn't in either of your pockets, dear. I looked there last night. [31]
Try and think what you did with it."

The little boy looked troubled.

"The man gave it to me, an' it was blue. An' he said it was f'om way out west, an' he asked me who did you know out west; an' I said I didn't know; but I'd ask you. I put it in my pocket."

"Perhaps it wasn't anything important," Barbara said slowly, "but ——"

"No, I guess it wasn't," agreed Jimmy placidly. "Say, Barb'ra, can I have two popcorn balls to take to school?"

"But what do you suppose became of the letter?" persisted Barbara. "Which pocket did you put it in?"

Jimmy eyed the small garment uncertainly.

"It was in this one," he decided; "I 'member I put the letter in my pocket an' it stuck out, 'cause it was too long."

"Did you come straight home from the post-office?" demanded Barbara. "Did you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy reflected.

"I walked along," he said, "an' 'nen I looked in through the fence to see the deer an' the shiny blue round things—you know, Barb'ra, when the sun shines you c'n see——"

"I know," said the girl, with a touch of impatience.

"An' 'nen I saw the horse wiv a short tail come out, an' I p'tended I was drivin' an' goin' awful fast! But I couldn't trot real fas' because the m'lasses spilled. I had to stop an' lick it off lots of [32]
times."

"Why, Jimmy!" said the girl rebukingly.

“Wiv my fingers,” explained Jimmy mildly. “You know you have to do something when it comes out all bubbles ’round the edge; an’—an’ ’nen I——”

“You must have dropped the letter somewhere along the road,” interrupted his sister.

“Uh-huh! I guess I did,” assented the culprit. “But I didn’t mean to, Barb’ra. Truly I didn’t.”

His lip quivered as he looked up at her stormy face.

The girl controlled herself with an effort.

“Of course you didn’t mean to, darling,” she said, kissing the rosy mouth, which had begun to droop dolefully at the corners. “Perhaps it was just an advertisement, anyway, and not worth bothering over. I’ll walk along with you and see if we can find it.”

But the letter, snugly hidden under a clump of unfolding fern, gave no token of its presence as the two walked slowly past it, their eyes searching the road and the tangled growths on either side.

Barbara walked swiftly to the post-office, after she had left Jimmy at the schoolhouse. It had occurred to her that someone might have returned the missing letter to the office.

Al Hewett, when questioned, shook his head.

“Nope,” he said, “the’ ain’t nobody brought it here. ’Course I’d ’a’ saved it fer you if they had. I remember the letter all right, I happened to notice the postmark. It was fo’m Tombstone, Arizony. [33] Know anybody out there?”

The girl shook her head. “Was there any printing—or—writing on the envelope?” she asked.

“Not that I recall,” said Mr. Hewlett, mindful of his official state. “Of course you understan’ with the amount of mail we handle in this office that we couldn’t be expected to notice any one letter in pertickler. I’m real sorry, Barb’ra,” he added, with genuine good feeling. “Jimmy’s pretty small t’ deliver mail. He’s a nice little shaver, though. Anythin’ in the line o’ groceries to-day?”

“Not to-day,” said Barbara, her cheeks flushing.

Then she looked up with sudden determination. “Is your father here?” she asked, in a low voice. “If he is—I’d like to see him.”

“Pa’s in the back room makin’ up accounts,” the younger Hewett informed her. “I’ll call him, if you say so.—Pa!”

“No; don’t, please,” objected Barbara hastily. “I’ll go and speak to him there.”

But Mr. Abram Hewett had already appeared in answer to the summons and was advancing briskly behind a counter gay with new prints and ginghams. His face stiffened at sight of Barbara, and he darted an impatient look at his son.

“Could I speak with you—just a moment, Mr. Hewett?” asked Barbara, in a low, determined voice, “on business?”

The man coldly scrutinized the flushed face the girl lifted to his. [34]

“If it was ’bout the balance o’ that account o’ yours——” he began, “I was just lookin’ it over, ’long with some others like it. You c’n come in here.”

Barbara followed his short, bent figure, her heart beating heavily. But she had found a remnant of her vanished self-possession by the time Mr. Hewett had climbed to the high stool behind the long-legged desk, which represented the financial centre of the establishment. “Well?” he said interrogatively, fixing his lowering regard upon her.

Barbara glanced at the two fly-specked legends which flanked the desk on either side, reading respectively, “My time is money; don’t steal it,” and “This is my busy day.”

“I didn’t come to finish paying that bill to-day,” she said, a flush of shame mounting to her forehead. “But the hens are beginning to lay now, and——”

“Eggs is cheap an’ plentiful,” demurred Mr. Hewett, with unconcealed impatience. “I couldn’t agree t’ allow ye much on eggs.”

“It wasn’t the bill I came to see you about,” said Barbara, with a proud look at him. “I shall pay it in money as soon as I possibly can.”

“Oh!” interjected Mr. Hewett. Then he added sharply “Humph!” drumming meanwhile on the lid of his desk to denote the lapse of unfruitful minutes.

Barbara still hesitated, while she strove to find words to [35]

introduce the difficult business she had in mind.

Mr. Hewett cleared his throat suggestively.

"There's a mortgage on the farm," she said slowly, "and we're going to lose it, unless——"

"Unless you pay up," suggested Mr. Hewett briskly. "Yes; jes' so. I've been wonderin' how you managed to hang on to it s' long's you have."

"I've worked," said Barbara, in a low, tense voice. "I've worked early and late, ever since father died, and before that. But—there was unpaid interest, and interest on that; and last year the apples failed, and so——"

"He's goin' to foreclose on ye. Yes, yes; exac'ly. I s'pose likely Jarvis holds the mortgage?"

"Yes," said Barbara breathlessly. "But if I only had a little more time I could manage it—somehow. I must keep the farm for Jimmy. I promised father he should have it."

Mr. Hewett was silent, his plump face drawn into the semblance of a dubious smile.

"I've come to ask you to take up the mortgage for me, and give me more time to pay it. Will you do it?" asked Barbara, avoiding the man's look.

Mr. Hewett shifted his gaze to the ink-well, around the edge of which a lean black fly was crawling dispiritedly.

"W'y, no," he said decidedly. "I shouldn't like to interfere; I couldn't do it."

"Why couldn't you?" demanded Barbara. "If we have a good [36]
apple year, I could pay the mortgage in two years. It doesn't cost us much to live."

"If it's a good apple year, apples'll be a drug on the market," Mr. Hewett prophesied gloomily. "Nope! I'm sorry; but I guess you'll have to let Jarvis foreclose on ye. I shouldn't like to run up against Jarvis, y' know."

"But—there's Jimmy!" The girl's voice rang out in a sharp cry.

"Put the boy in an institootion, or bind him out," advised Mr. Hewett, drumming impatiently on the lid of his desk. "The's folk a-plenty that wouldn't mind raisin' a healthy boy to work."

Barbara turned swiftly.

"Say!" called Mr. Hewett; "hold on a minute!" Then, as Barbara paused, "This 'ere account's been standin' since long before your pa died. I've been pretty easy on you to date, but I guess I'll have to attach somethin' before Jarvis gits his hold onto things. You've got some stock, I b'lieve, an'——"

But Barbara was already out of hearing, hurrying as if pursued. Two or three women, looking over dress goods at the counter, turned to look after the slim figure in its black dress.

"She don't 'pear to see common folks any better'n her father did," said one, with a spiteful laugh.

"Well, I don't see's she's got much to be stuck up about," put in another. "What with her father drinkin' himself to death, an'——"

"Was that what ailed him?" inquired a newcomer in the [37]
neighborhood. "I remember he was buried a year ago last winter, just after we moved here. But I never heard he was a drinking man."

"None of us suspicioned it for quite a spell," explained the first speaker volubly. "Donald Preston was too awful stylish and uppity to go to the tavern an' get drunk like common folks; he used to sen' for his liquor f'om out of town. The best of brandy, so they say; then he'd drink, an' drink till he was dead to the world, shut up in his room. He kind of lost his mind 'long toward the last, they say. He lived more'n two years that way 'fore he finally died."

"She didn't take care of him like that, did she?"

"Yes, she did. Her an' the hired man; an' I guess they had their hands full part the time. He used to cry an' holler nights like a baby towards the last. Me an' Mr. Robinson heard him once when we was comin' home f'om a revival meetin' over to the Corners. Seth, he was for stoppin' an' seein' if there was anythin' we could do, but I says, 'No, I don't want to mix up in it,' I says. Afterwards I was kind of sorry; I'd like to have seen the upstairs rooms in that house."

The subject of these manifold revelations and censures was walking rapidly down the village street, her mind a maze of unhappy reflections. She stopped short at the end of the sidewalk, as Jimmy had done the day before.

"I don't suppose there's any use," she thought, her eyes fixed on [38]
the imposing front which the Jarvis residence presented to the public gaze. "But I'll try, anyway. If he'd give me a year—or even six months longer, I'm sure I could get the interest paid up."

Without waiting for her elusive courage to vanish into thin air the girl pushed open the front gate, which clanged decisively shut behind her. The harsh metallic sound appeared to pursue her relentlessly up the long gravelled walk, past the stiff figures of the cast-iron deer, past the blossoming shrubs and the glittering blue glass globes—quite up to the pillared entrance. A sour-faced woman opened the door.

Mr. Jarvis was at home, she informed Barbara. "But he's busy," she added importantly. "The' can't nobody see him this mornin', an' he's goin' away to-morrow."

"Then I must see him," Barbara said firmly. "Tell Mr. Jarvis that Miss Preston would like to see him—on—on business."

Stephen Jarvis had spent several hours shut up in his library that morning, during which period he had opened and examined his mail, read the morning papers, published in a neighboring city, and the county papers, one of which he owned, and whose editorial utterances he controlled.

The morning sun, streaming cheerfully through the clear windows, lay across his paper-strewn desk, bringing into prominence its handsome fittings and the large sinewy hand which [39]
reached purposefully for a pen. As he sat there in the revealing light Stephen Jarvis appeared very nearly what he had made of himself in the course of some thirty laborious years. Nature had provided him with a big-boned, powerful body, topped by a head in no wise remarkable for its beauty, yet significant as the compact rounded end of a steel projectile; eyes of no particular color, deep-set beneath penthouse brows; a nose, high in its bony structure, curving at the tip, with a suggestion of scorn; a jaw, heavy but clear-cut, well furnished with strong, even teeth. Jarvis was born a farmer's son, poor with the poverty of sparse acres, sparsely cultivated through successive generations of uncalculating, simple-hearted men, content to live and die as had their forbears. It was far otherwise with Stephen Jarvis. His initial conclusion, derived from keen-eyed observation and comparison, resulted in an active hatred of the grinding poverty his fathers had accepted with settled stoicism as the common lot. He would not, he resolved, remain poor. He would in some way—in any way—acquire houses, lands, money. This single idea, planted, rooted, and grown mighty, brought forth fruit after its kind. In ten years' time he had climbed out of the walled pit where he had found himself; in the decade which followed, having learned, experimentally, of the compelling power of the fixed idea doggedly adhered to, he had gone on, adding more houses, more lands, more money to what he already possessed; and [40]
this process having by now become somewhat monotonously easy, he had reached for and seized political power of the sort most easily grasped by the large hand of wealth. He still continued almost mechanically to loan money at a high rate of interest, to execute and foreclose mortgages, but there was no longer zest or excitement in the game. And there intervened disquieting moments like the present when he perceived that, after all, he was not successful, as the world counted success; nor rich, as the world counted wealth; moments when he realized his loneliness and the coldness of his hearth-stone, where neither friends nor children gathered.

His wife, dead more than two years, had been a dull, emotionless woman, with a flat, pale, expressionless face and a high-shouldered, angular figure. Jarvis had married her without pretence of passion because she had money, and in his poverty-pinched youth he had thought of little else. He had never been unkind to the woman who bore his name. He had, in fact, paid very little attention to her, and she had trodden the dull round of her existence unprotestingly and died as unobtrusively as she had lived. A portrait of the late Mrs. Jarvis in the cold medium of black and white crayons, hung above the mantel. The man's eyes rested upon it mechanically as he lifted them from the dull report of a dully rancorous speech delivered on a late public occasion by his political opponent in the county. The portrait failed to arouse memories either sweet or bitter; but Jarvis [41]
observed that his housekeeper in her annual spring cleaning had taken the pains to protect the picture in its showy, expensive frame. He frowned as he noticed the barred pink netting from behind which his wife's plain features looked forth with a suggestion of

pained protest. The effect was distinctly unpleasing. He caught himself wondering irritably why the picture should confront him thus; portraits were foolish, unmeaning things, anyway; shrouded with pink tarlatan they became impossible. His gaze still lingered frowningly upon the picture when there came a dubious tap upon the panels of the door.

"What d'you want?" demanded Jarvis sharply, as he recognized the intruder. "I thought I told you not to disturb me this morning."

"Well, I told her so; but she wouldn't go away," the woman apologized. "I guess 'f I let her stan' there till she's good an' tired o' waitin', she'll——"

"Kindly acquaint me with the name of the person who wishes to see me, Mrs. Dumser," he interrupted, with a quick, choleric lift of the hand.

"It's that Preston girl," the woman said sullenly. "I told her you was busy and——"

"Show her in at once," her employer ordered briefly. On the whole he welcomed the interruption. There was a certain excitement akin to that experienced by the sportsman when he subdues some struggling wild creature to his will. It was a species of weak folly, he told himself, to entertain anything like compassion [42] for borrowers of money who could not pay. And Stephen Jarvis was not a weak man. He was, moreover, thoroughly familiar with all the various excuses, subterfuges and pitiful expedients of such luckless individuals, as well as complete master of the final processes by which he was wont to detach them from their forfeited possessions. His mouth, long, straight, expressionless, and shaded by a closely clipped mustache, tightened as Barbara Preston entered.

He glanced at her sharply as the girl sank into a chair opposite the desk without waiting to be asked.

The light from the long French windows fell full upon the slender young figure in its plain black gown, and her face, seen against the sombre background afforded by rows of leather-bound law-books, appeared vividly alive, defiantly youthful, like a spray of peach blossoms against a leaden sky.

"You wished to see me, I believe," said Jarvis, perceiving that the girl was struggling with involuntary fear of him, a fear heightened by her surroundings. "What can I do for you?"

She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"I have come," she said, "to see if you will give me a little more time. It is going to be a good apple year, and—and I'll work—hard to save the farm."

Her eyes darkened and widened; a quick color sprang to lips and cheeks, as when a flag is suddenly unfurled to the wind.

"If you'll only give me a chance!" she cried. [43]

"What sort of a chance are you looking for?" he wanted to know.

Barbara's eyes fell before his steady gaze.

"I—want——" she began, and stopped, obviously searching for forgotten words and phrases.

He waited imperturbably for her to go on.

"I want you to let me stay—in my home."

He lifted his eyebrows.

"I thought we discussed that matter pretty thoroughly yesterday afternoon," he said. "I can think of nothing more to say on the subject."

"But," she persisted, "I don't intend to give it up. I—can't."

He was silent. But his look angered her unreasonably.

"You don't want the farm!" she burst out, with sudden hot indignation. "You've got most of the farms about here now, and you'll have the others in time, I suppose."

"You appear to know a good deal about my business," he said ironically. "But you're right. I don't want the Preston farm. I don't want any of 'em. Why should I? Most of them are like yours, worn out, worthless. But the owners want my money—your father did. And I let him have what he asked for. I might have refused. But I let him have a thousand dollars, and he took it, did as he liked with it—drank it up, for all I know. And now you come here begging——"

The girl sprang to her feet; her gray eyes blazed angrily upon [44] him.

"I'm not begging!" she cried. "All I want is the chance to pay you

—every cent, and I could do it—I will do it."

"Perhaps you will tell me how you are going about it," he said coldly.

She sank back into her chair.

"Yes!" she said slowly. "I am—begging. I am begging for time. Give me another year—give me this summer, and let me—try!"

He was studying the girl's passionate face with a curious interest. A singular idea had presented itself to him, and he was considering it half mockingly. Nevertheless it lent a human sound to his voice as he answered her.

"See here, Miss Preston," he said. "I admire your pluck and energy. But let me tell you that you don't want to hold on to that farm. The orchards are too old to be productive; the land needs fertilizers, rotation, all sorts of things that require brains and money. That old fool, Morrison, hasn't managed the place properly, and can't. It's a losing fight, and you'd better give it up—peaceably."

"But I want it," she urged, "for Jimmy. I want to hold the place for him. He'll soon grow up now, and—he's the last of the Prestons."

She stopped short and sprang to her feet, with a little gasp of angry protest.

"You are laughing at me!" she cried indignantly. "You have no [45]
right——"

She was mistaken; Stephen Jarvis seldom indulged in laughter; but his hard-set mouth had relaxed somewhat under his clipped mustache. His greenish brown eyes shone with an unaccustomed light. He was thinking his own thoughts, and for once, at least, he found a singular pleasure in them.

"Don't get excited," he advised her coolly. "Sit down and we'll talk this over. You want to keep the farm for that half-brother of yours, you say. Well, I'm disposed to give it to you to do as you like with, if you——"

She gazed at him almost incredulously.

"You'll give me time to try?" she asked breathlessly. "Oh, thank you!"

He answered her impetuous question with another. "Did you notice the person who showed you in? Yes; I see you did, particularly. Well, she's my housekeeper. She's been here since my —since I buried the late Mrs. Jarvis. But I—well; I'm tired of seeing the woman about. I shall need somebody to take her place, and—Stop! I want you to hear me out."

The girl had not resumed her seat at Jarvis's bidding. She retreated swiftly toward the door. The man's imperious voice followed her.

"Come back! I'm not done with what I had to say!"

But Barbara had already closed the door definitely behind her. [46]
The woman in black silk stood just outside. She had, in fact, been listening.

"Well!" she breathed explosively, staring at Barbara. Then she rustled toward the front door, her ample draperies filling the narrow twilight passage with a harsh, swishing sound.

"You better not show your face here again!" she said in a low, fierce voice, as she held the door wide for Barbara to pass out.

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[47]

IV

Jimmy Preston sat curled up on one foot by the table in Peg Morrison's loft. His yellow hair was damp and towsled, for he had run bare-headed through the rain, bearing his precious book of "Vallable Information" tucked under his blouse.

"I didn't bring my red ink," he explained breathlessly to Peg, "'cause I was 'fraid I'd spill it. I fought I could borrow some of yours."

"You can, an' welcome, son," agreed Peg, "but remember that'll give me an option on yours. Them that borrows ought to be willin' to lend. They ain't though, as a gen'ral thing. Borrowers is spenders, and lenders is savers, as a rule."

"I'll lend you my whole bottle of red ink an' I'll lend you my pen, too," said Jimmy magnificently.

The little boy spread his book open on the table for Mr. Morrison's inspection. "You see I've begun it already," he said with pride.

"Le' me see; what you got here?" and Peg traced the first wavering line with a horny forefinger.

"That's how not to lose a letter," said Jimmy proudly. "Barb'ra says sometimes letters are 'portant, an' you don't want to lose 'em."

"'Lev letters in the posoffis. They wil be saf ther,'" read Peg slowly. He paused and screwed his mouth in a noiseless whistle. [48]

"Don't you think that's a vallable inf'mation?" demanded Jimmy anxiously. "If I hadn't taken that letter and put it in my pocket, I shouldn't have lost it. Barb'ra could have got it herself, and maybe it was 'portant. You can't tell 'thout you read a letter whether it's 'portant or not; an' you can't read a letter when it's lost."

"So you lost a letter 'dressed to Barb'ry, did you? H'm! Where'd you lose it?"

"If I knew, I'd go an' find it," said Jimmy soberly. "I put it in my pocket, an' it was blue, an' it was f'om out west. Barb'ra doesn't know who it was f'om. But she'd like to know."

"H'm!" repeated Peg. "You'd ought to carried it all the way right in your han', where you c'd see it. Pockets are kind o' dangerous when it comes to letters. I know a whole row o' little boys 'at ain't alive at all, 'count o' a letter bein' lost. They never was born," he added by way of explanation.

Jimmy drew a deep sigh of sustained interest.

"You see it was this way," continued Peg circumstantially. "The' was a young feller 'at I used to know, an' he was workin' in a lumber-camp one winter where the' wasn't any pos'offis; one o' the men used to carry the letters in an' out, a matter o' fifteen miles. One time he lost a letter this young feller wrote to his girl, an' didn't think to say nothin' 'bout it; an' she got all worked up 'cause she didn't hear f'om him, an' after a spell she up an' married another man; an' so the young man I was speakin' of never got married, an' never had any little boys o' his own. He felt awful bad 'bout it fer a long time, but he ain't never los' a letter 'at b'longed to anybody else." [49]

The pattering sound of the rain on the barn roof increased to a steady roar as Peg related this short but instructive tale.

"I sh'd think those little boys would feel bad," said Jimmy sympathetically. "I'd hate not to be alive."

"Mebbe they do; an' ag'in, mebbe they don't," observed Peg cautiously. "Anyhow, some of 'em would be growed up by this time; farmin' it, mebbe, or keepin' store." His eyes wore a far-away look.

Jimmy dipped Peg's pen in the red ink bottle.

"How do you spell not, Peg?" he inquired.

"K-n-o-t," replied the old man, with a sigh.

Jimmy was silent for a long minute, his pen travelling slowly along the blue line and leaving a trail of wabbly red letters behind.

"'Hough knot to los a letter,'" he read aloud, with honest pride in his achievement. "What'll I say next, Peg?"

"Keep yer mind an' yer eyes onto it till you get it t' the person it's meant for," the old man said, with some sternness. "You've got to do that with ev'rythin' you do," he went on. "You can't go moseyin' 'long thinkin' 'bout ev'rythin' under the sun 'cept what you're doin'. If you're ploughin', plough, an' put all the grit an' gumption you've [50]

got onto ploughin'. Most folks ain't so smart 'at they c'n afford to run a d'partment store in their minds. Hold on! Don't try to write all that. Jus' say, pay attention to that letter. You know, Cap'n," he went on impressively, "you come of awful fine stock. The Prestons was always smart; your great-gran'father, he was smarter 'an all possess, an' your gran'father, he was jes' the same."

"An' my father was, too," interrupted Jimmy, eying the old man with a pucker between his brown eyes. "Wasn't he smarter'n all possess, Peg?"

"'Course he was, Cap'n," agreed the old man hastily. "Up to the time he was took sick, he was A number one. An' Barb'ry—I mean Miss Barb'ry, she's awful smart an' ambitious, too, fer a female. Oh, you'll get along in the world, Cap'n, 'course you'll get along! But losin' letters is like losin' other things, such as money an'—an' health, an' reputation an'—farms. It all comes o' lettin' yer mind kind o' wander. You won't do that, will you, Cap'n?"

The man's voice trembled; he seemed anxiously intent on the little boy's answer.

"I won't, if I can help it, Peg," Jimmy answered honestly. "But," he added candidly, "I like to think 'bout things in school—all kind o' things. When I look out the windows an' see the trees wavin' an' hear the birds I like t' p'tend I'm outdoors playin'."

"Don't you do it, Cap'n," Peg spoke almost solemnly. "You keep a [51]
stiddy holt on them thoughts o' yourn' an' nail 'em down to readin', writin', an' 'rithmetic. If you ketch 'em a-wanderin' out the window, you fetch 'em back an' make 'em work. You c'n do it, every trip."

"But if I don't want to——"

"There you got it! Struck the nail square on the head, Cap'n. You've got to make yourself want to. You ain't too young to learn, neither. Gracious! I wisht somebody'd told me what I'm tellin' you, when I was 'bout your age. I've kind o' reasoned it out, watchin' folks an' their doin's, an' noticin' how I try an' squirm out o' doin' things. The's two folks in ev'rybody, Cap'n; a lazy, good-fer-nothin' sort o' a chap, that won't do nothin' in school, nor anywheres else if he c'n help it, an' there's a smart, good, up-an'-a-goin' feller 'at's anxious to git along in the world. I know 'em both inside o' me. An' ol' lazybones come nigh onto ruinin' me when I was a boy. Lord! I jes' wouldn' work! Ust t' lie half th' day in the sun an' think o' nothin', when I'd ought t' been hoein' corn. Then I'd come in an'—say I had the backache, or th' headache or—mos' anythin' I could think of. Ol' lazybones is an awful liar, Cap'n. You don't want t' listen to anythin' he says. You want to shet him up an' keep him shet. He'll lead a man t' drink an' to steal other folks' time an' money; he's meaner'n pusley an' slyer'n—well, he's s' durned sly, Cap'n, that you gotta be on his track all the endurin' while."

"Do you think I've got two folks in me, Peg?" asked Jimmy, laying [52]
his hand over the pit of his stomach with a worried look.

"I'm reelly 'fraid ye have, Cap'n," said Peg firmly. "I never see anybody 'at hadn't. But ef you git th' upper han' o' ol' lazybones now't you're small, you won't have much trouble with him."

"I'm not small, Peg," Jimmy corrected him. "You said I was large an'—an' hefty fer my age."

"Sure you be, Cap'n, but you ain't reelly a man growed. That's what I mean, an' I want you should grow up into an A number one man, full o' grit an' gumption. An' you can't do it unless you start right. You see, Cap'n, I'm gittin' 'long in life an' I've figgered it out 'at 'bout six folks out o' every ten kind o' see-saws back an' forth betwixt bein' lazy an' lyin' an' no 'count, an' bein' industrious an' truthful. Folks like that gits 'long so-so; they don't hev no partickler good luck—ol' lazybones keeps 'em f'om that; but they don't git nowheres neither, 'cause they don't stick to biz. Then the's 'bout three out o' ev'y ten thet gives right up to ol' lazybones f'om the start; an' he runs 'em right into th' ground 's fas' 's possible. The tenth man, he stomps on ol' lazybones ev'ry time he opens his head t' speak, an' bimeby he gits on the right track s' stiddy an' constant 'at nobody c'n stop 'im. An' he's the one thet gits thar! I want you should be that kind o' a man, Cap'n. An' that's one reason I give you that book o' Vallable Info'mation. It'll help you to kind o' think over [53]
differ'nt things that happens. Now I'll bet you won't lose another letter in a hurry."

"No, I won't," Jimmy said earnestly. "An' I'm goin' to try an' stomp on ol' lazybones."

“That’s right, Cap’n,” cried Peg. “You jes’ stomp on him hard an’ proper. You git th’ upper han’ o’ him b’fore he grows too big and hefty, an’ bimeby he won’t bother you.”

“Peg,” said Jimmy, after a period devoted to reflection, “the Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis is in our house.”

“Dear me! You don’t say so!” ejaculated Peg, with a frightened start.

“He makes Barb’ra cry,” said Jimmy, scowling fiercely. “I wanted to stay an’ keep him f’om doin’ it; but Barb’ra said for me to come out here and see you. I’d like to stomp on him—hard!”

The subject of these dubious comments and conjectures, more ill at ease than his worst enemy had ever hoped to see him, sat in the dull light of the rainy afternoon, looking at Barbara Preston with new eyes: to wit, the eyes of a man.

“I suppose,” the girl said steadily, “you have come to tell me that you will foreclose the mortgage.” She gripped her hands close in her lap.

“No,” said Stephen Jarvis, “that was not my intention. As I have already informed you, the mortgage will foreclose itself, when the time comes.”

He stopped short and narrowed his lids frowningly. [54]

“I have been thinking about you,” he said harshly, “since you left me so abruptly yesterday. Why did you do it? And yet, I am glad, on the whole, that you did. I want to tell you that I stood in my library door and witnessed my housekeeper’s dismissal of you from my house. Her own followed without delay.”

“I am sorry,” Barbara told him mechanically. She was noticing dazedly that Jarvis was dressed as she had occasionally seen him in church, and that his gloves and linen were quite fresh and immaculate.

“Why should you be sorry?” he demanded with a straight look at her.

“I—why, I think I should be sorry for any woman who had lost what she wanted to keep,” Barbara answered. “If you discharged her because I——”

“You were not primarily the cause of her dismissal,” he said coolly. “I had already told you that I was tired of seeing the woman about.”

He was silent for a long time, gazing frowningly at the floor.

Suddenly he looked up and, meeting Barbara’s astonished and somewhat indignant eyes, held them steadily with his own.

“You are wondering why I came here to-day. You are afraid of me, and you doubtless fancy with the rest of the world that you— [55]
dislike me exceedingly.”

Barbara opened her lips to reply.

“Don’t take the trouble to deny it,” he went on, with a faint sneer. “I know what most people think of me, perhaps with reason. But I am myself, not another; and so far, fear—dislike have seemed to me unavoidable.” Again his rigid lips relaxed into something like a smile, and he looked questioningly at the girl.

“It ought to be easy,” she said uncertainly, “to make people like you. You might——”

“I know what you are thinking of,” he interrupted rudely. “But it wouldn’t do. People fear and hate a hard man; they despise a fool. I refuse to be despised.”

He rose and walked up and down the room impatiently as if his thoughts irked him. Finally he paused before the window where a scarlet geranium blossomed on the sill, and turned a singularly flushed face upon the girl. For a dazed instant she wondered with a thrill of painfully remembered fear if he had been drinking.

“You will be startled at what I am about to say to you,” he said, in a changed voice. “I should have laughed at the idea if anyone had suggested it to me a week ago. But—I want you to marry me. I want you to be my wife. No! don’t answer; don’t refuse! You haven’t thought what it means. You cannot consider the matter so suddenly. But this much you can understand, I will give you this place on our [56]
wedding-day—to do with as you like, and I will attach no conditions to the gift.”

Barbara had not removed her fascinated gaze from his face. She felt like one dreaming fantastically and struggling unavailingly to awake.

“Perhaps you do not realize what you have asked of me,” she said at last. “But—I will not sell myself for this farm. That is what you have asked me to do.”

Her eyes sparkled blue fire; her lips curled disdainfully.

“Don’t be a fool,” he said roughly. “I want nothing of the sort. I want you—you! I need you. I am more sure of it now than ever.”

He took three steps toward her, his rugged face alive with determination—the grim determination which had wrested all that he possessed from the grip of a hostile world.

“When I want anything,” he said doggedly, “I always get it. Didn’t you know that? I want you.”

“You’ll not get me—ever!” cried Barbara.

She knew it must be war to the bitter end between them, and she flung the gage of battle full in his face with fine recklessness.

“You may take everything I have, if you can. But you’ll not get me!”

He stood up and buttoned his frock coat over his white waistcoat.

“I’ll not take your answer to-day,” he said, quite unmoved by her anger. “I had no intention of doing so.” [57]

He strode to the door without another look at her, signalled his coachman, stepped into his closed carriage, shut the door hard behind him and rolled away, with a smooth whir of shining wheels.

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[58]

V

"I'LL give her time to think before I see her again," Jarvis decided, as his swift-stepping bays carried him along through the April rain. He dropped the window of his brougham and drew in deep satisfying breaths of the moist air. He was glad that she had not yielded supinely, as a weaker woman might have done. There was to his mind something heroic, splendid in her attitude as she defied him. For the first time in his life, Stephen Jarvis felt the stir of half-awakened passion; and the savage within his breast, never wholly eliminated or even tamed by an imperfect civilization, exulted at the thought of the imminent conflict of wills, the flight, the pursuit, the inevitable capture.

"I'll give her time to think—to be afraid!" he repeated; "then——"

The blood hammered in his temples and involuntarily he clenched his strong hands, as if already crushing that weaker woman's will and subduing it to his own.

But Barbara Preston was not thinking of the fact that Stephen Jarvis had asked her to be his wife. Being a woman, and, moreover, hard driven by cruel necessity, she might have been pardoned, if for a moment she had allowed her thoughts to linger upon the interview [59] which had just ended. She might even have recalled with a certain speculative interest the luxurious interior of the carriage into which he had stepped and the smooth roll of the wheels which had borne him away, safe shut from the wind and the weather. So might she be lifted and sheltered from the bleak peltings of poverty, and life become a smooth progression instead of a painful pilgrimage. The girl sat quite still by the window looking out through misty panes into a mistier world, and only vaguely aware of dripping lilac sprays, ruddy with swelling buds, and of the flash of wet brown wings athwart the gray sky.

Stephen Jarvis, master of fate, and thrilling with the clash of his will upon hers, could hardly have known that the ghost of another man stood between him and the object of this new, urgent desire of his. He would have laughed the shadowy presence to scorn had he known it.

Yet it was this mere shadow of a man which chained Barbara's thoughts while the April rain softened the landscape to a soft green blur. After all it was but natural that her one pitiful little love story should come back to her now, even to a vision of David Whitcomb's eager face, his dark impatient eyes, and tossed hair, and the strong clasp of his hand upon hers in the dusk of the summer twilight.

It was Jimmy who had come between them; little motherless Jimmy, then a baby a year old, with big appealing eyes under a fluff of soft yellow hair, and a voice sweeter than any bird's. All the [60] woman's heart in her had gone out to the helpless little creature who nestled in her arms at night, and whose eyes and voice followed her as she went about her work by day. This in the days when her father, grown suddenly old and apathetic, had begun to shut himself up in his library, for what purpose Barbara did not guess, at first. When she did know it was too late. The leaves of the book had been long closed and sealed, but the heart within her shivered at the remembrance of what was written there.

"If you really loved me," David had said hotly, "you would not let anyone or anything come between us."

She told him that she could not go to him over the bodies of a sick father and a helpless child. And since he had asked this of her, she did not, indeed, love him.

After this stormy scene—the last between them, since David Whitcomb had gone away, no one knew whither, nor indeed cared, since he was young and friendless and poor—Barbara had cried herself to sleep for many successive nights, quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeping child. But one does not weep overlong at night whose brain and hands and feet are employed in the daytime. Only the beggared rich may give themselves to the indolent luxury of grief. After many nights of weeping followed by days of anxiety and uncounted labors, the pain of that parting subsided to a dull aching memory, which wakened once to cry out bitterly when she heard that he had been seen on a ship bound to the Yukon region in the [61] early days of the gold fever. Many perished along the trail that year. It was rumored that David Whitcomb was among the number. No word ever came back to contradict the rumor, which after the lapse

of months was accepted as a fact, and so—forgotten.

It was a long time—as youth measures time—since she had thought of David Whitcomb. Now she deliberately travelled back over the years between, and stood looking at her anguished young self, torn between love and duty, and at her one lover, who was not noble enough—she saw this with mournful certainty now—to help her lift and carry her heavy burden. Nevertheless she forgave him—as she had done hundreds of times in the past, excusing him tenderly, as a mother might have done, for his hot young selfishness, which refused to share her heart with a dying man and a helpless little child.

"I am glad," she said aloud to the shadowy presence of her one lover, "glad that I did not yield."

But her face was grave and sorrowful as she rose to answer a gentle knock at the kitchen door.

Peg Morrison stood there under the shelter of an ancient green umbrella, his puckered face smiling and healthily pink against the pale green of the outside world.

"I lef' the Cap'n a-studyin' over his book," he chuckled, as he stepped into the kitchen, carefully wiping his feet on the braided rug inside. "He takes to vallable info'mation as the sparks fly [62]
upwards, an' I'm glad to see it. Thinks I, as I looked at him settin' down improvin' maxims in red ink, this is a good time to talk over the situation with Miss Barb'ry."

Barbara drew a deep breath.

"Come in," she said briefly.

Then, as Peg seated himself in a wooden chair, ceremoniously arranging his coat-tails on either side, she added, "There isn't much to say."

"Wall, I've been thinkin' fer quite a spell back that mebbe you'd like t' lease th' farm to me, 'stid o' my workin' it on shares, as heretofore. I'm——"

"But you haven't had any share, Peg," Barbara said, with a shade of impatience. "And that is why I have felt so—so unwilling to have you stay here and work, when I couldn't possibly pay you what I knew you were earning."

Peg struck one heavy palm upon his knee before he answered, his kindly face drawn into myriad comical puckers.

"Now, look-a-here, Miss Barb'ry," he began. "You an' me's argued this 'ere question over more'n once. If I don't get my share I'd like to know who does? I git m' livin', don't I? An' I git free house-rent, don't I? An' them two items, livin' an' house-rent, 's 'bout all mos' folks git. W'y, Miss Barb'ry, I live luxurious to what lots o' folks do. And then ag'in you mus' remember that I ain't a reelly d'sirable farm laborer. I'm gittin' 'long in life, an' I can't put [63]
in the kind and description o' a day's work folks'll pay good wages fer. I'll bet you——"

And the old man raised his voice to the argumentative pitch commonly employed in heated controversies around the stove in Hewett's grocery.

"I'll bet you a dollar an' a half 'at I couldn't git a place on a farm 'round here to save my neck! I'll bet I'd git turned down quicker'n scat ev'ry place I'd try. 'What!' they'd say, 'ol' Peg Morrison wants a place? That ol' coot? Why, he ain't wo'th his victuals!' 'Tain't reelly fur f'om charity, Miss Barb'ry, fer you to keep me here, givin' me all the veg'tables an' po'k I want, with now an' then a fresh egg, er a—chicken. Sakes alive! I tell ye I'm grateful of a winter night when I creep under that nice patchwork quilt you give me 'at I'm workin' fer a lady—on shares."

Barbara laughed, an irrepressible girlish laugh, even while she shook her head.

"I couldn't pay you for what you've done for Jimmy and me since—since father died, and—before, too. And I can't thank you, either. I couldn't find words to do it if I tried."

"Thank me!" echoed the old man exuberantly. "Say, excuse me fer appearin' to smile, Miss Barb'ry." His voice grew suddenly grave. "I guess ther' ain't any pertickler use in quarrellin' 'bout it, after all. I'll do what I can fer you an' the boy—bein' a poor shakes of a laborer—jes' 's long 's I live, an' you c'n d'pend upon it. But now what do you think 'bout leasin' th' farm—say, fer a thousand [64]
dollars?"

Peg's eyes grew round, and he gasped a little at the magnitude of

the proposition.

"I've got a dollar or two laid by fer a rainy day, an' I'll put that down in advance," he went on, with a chuckle, "an' the way I've figgered it I'll make big money on the deal. W'y, look-a-here," and he drew a soiled newspaper from his pocket, "I come 'cross this 'ere article th' other day. I'd like t' read t' you what it says on the subjec' o' onions. 'Thirty-three acres o' land in onions netted John Closner of Hidalgo, Texas, 'leven thousan' dollars!' Hear that, will ye? He says he perduced thirty-six carloads off'n his farm—more'n a carload t' an acre!' Hold on! that ain't all—'course that's in Texas. But listen t' this, Miss Barb'ry——"

"But, Peg, there isn't any use of talking," interrupted the girl, "the mortgage is going to be foreclosed the first of June, unless I ——"

"Foreclosed—eh? Foreclosed!" echoed the old man. "Wall, I was 'fraid of it when I seen his buggy here yist'day an' ag'in t'-day. Farmers 'round here say they hate th' sight o' that red-wheeled buggy worse'n pison snakes. It gene'ally means business o' th' kind they ain't lookin' fer. Say! I wisht I'd got a-holt o' this 'ere article on onion-growin' before. I reelly do. Jes' listen t' this: 'Onions are profitably grown in th' north, also. Ebenezer N. Foote of Northampton, Mass., has perduced av'rage crops 's high es nine hunderd an' ten bushels t' th' acre! He says he expects to raise that to twelve hunderd! The annual value of his crop ranges f'om five hunderd to six hunderd dollars per acre!'" [65]

Peg's voice swelled into a veritable pæan in a high key; his face glowed with the ecstasies of his imaginings. He carefully folded the newspaper and stuffed it into a capacious pocket.

"Now, y' see," he went on oratorically, "exclusive o' the orchards, which had ought to net us at least five hunderd dollars this year, we could put in, say, twenty acres o' onions, at five hunderd dollars per acre, that would net us—l'me see, five hunderd dollars times twenty acres 'ud make. Here, lemme figger that out."

The old man fumbled in his vest pocket for a stubbed pencil.

"I ain't th' lightnin' calculator you'd expect fer such a schemin' ol' cuss," he murmured apologetically, as he wet the lead preparatory to computation.

Barbara smiled. "It would be ten thousand dollars," she said. "But, Peg, don't you see——"

"Ten thousand dollars! Whew! I guess that 'ud make a mortgage look kind o' sick, wouldn't it? We'd ought to hold on a spell longer an' give onions a try."

"But we can't, Peg. It's only six weeks before the first of June, and I've only twenty dollars in the world."

Barbara leaned back in her chair, her face relaxed and weary and unutterably sad. [66]

"You must look for another place right away, Peg," she went on, "I'll try and find one for you. Then, if I can get a school, or—some sort of work. I don't care much what it is, if it will keep Jimmy and me."

"The's a whole lot o' money in p'tatoes, too," grumbled Peg, his anxious blue eyes on her face. "I'd ought to 'ave sowed peas an' oats on that hill lot las' fall an' ploughed 'em in this spring. It says in this 'ere article on big crops that'll grow p'tatoes like all possessed. I wisht I'd come acrost th' inf'mation b'fore."

"Mr. Jarvis says the farm is worn out," Barbara said, a growing despondency in her voice. "He says the orchards are worthless, too; they are old."

"Shucks!" exploded Peg. "'Course Jarvis'd talk like that when he's gittin' it away f'om you fer nothin' like its value. I'll bet he'd have another story to tell ef anybody was to try 'n buy it of him. Values has a way o' risin' over night like bread dough once Stephen Jarvis gits a-holt o' a piece o' prop'ty."

"He asked me to marry him," said Barbara abruptly. Then bit her lip angrily at the old man's look of amazed incredulity. "I'm sure I don't know why I told you, only I—haven't anyone to speak to, and—no one to advise me."

Peg's face grew suddenly grave.

"Don't you be afraid I'll mention it, Miss Barb'ry," he said gently. "'Course I was kind o' s'prised—at first. But I don't know's I be, come t' think o' it. He asked you to be Mis' Jarvis? Wall! You goin' to do it, Miss Barb'ry?" [67]

“He said he would give me the farm,” Barbara went on slowly, “to do as I liked with. I could—give it to Jimmy.”

She looked at him with a child’s unconscious appeal.

“Do you think I ought to—to marry him, Peg?”

The old man was still eyeing her soberly, even wistfully.

“I’ve knowed you sence you was a little girl no higher’n my knee, Miss Barb’ry,” he began. “I’ve seed you grow up. An’ I’ve seed you go through some pretty hard experiences. Now, I ain’t the kind to talk very much ’bout my religion, an’ the’s times when I don’t ’pear to have a nawful lot of it; but the’s a God that hears an’—an’ takes notice. That much I’ve found out, an’ ef I was you I’d go to headquarters an’ git th’ best advice. But I’ll say this, ef the farm is wore out,—es he says,—it ’pears t’ me he’s askin’ a pretty high price fer th’ prop’ty. He wants your youth, Miss Barb’ry, an’ your pretty looks, an’ your life. An’ es fer the Cap’n—Wall, I’d ruther not d’pend too much on th’ Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis, when it comes t’ th’ Cap’n. That’s the way it looks to me. ’Course I don’t p’tend to be a good jedge o’ what’s best in th’ world. I don’t look like it, do I?” [68]

He glanced down at his patched and faded clothes with a cheerfully acquiescent smile.

“I’ve a notion,” he went on, “that the Lord’ll advise ye ’long th’ same lines ’s I hev. But don’t take my word fer it.”

“None of my prayers have been answered,” Barbara said, her red lips setting themselves in obstinate lines. “I’ve given up expecting anything so foolish. I prayed to have father get well, and he—died.”

“But he got well,” put in Peg quietly. “You c’n bet he did. Mebbe the Lord couldn’t fetch it ’round any other way. The’ was so many things ag’in him.”

Barbara’s delicate brows went up scornfully.

“I don’t call dying getting well,” she said.

“H’m!” murmured the old man gently. “Mebbe we don’t always call things by their right names.”

He got to his feet slowly.

“Wall, I mus’ be gittin’ out t’ the barn.”

He fixed his friendly, anxious eyes on the girl.

“I guess I’d figger a spell on that marryin’ proposition, ef I was you,” he said softly, and shook his head.

He turned, with his hand on the latch, to cast a dubious look back at the girl.

“It ’pears t’ me you ain’t cut out right for the second Mis’ Jarvis,” he said. “She’d ought b’ rights t’ be a big, upstandin’ female, with—with red hair.”

He shut the door hastily behind him.

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[69]

VI

It is a well-worn, yet none the less true saying that every human life is a chain of causes and effects; each effect a cause, and each cause an effect, stretching back to an unimagined and unimaginable First Cause; and on and on into endless, undreamed of vistas of the future. Yet the realization of this vague, yet tremendous fact comes but seldom even to the thoughtful mind, so busy are we forging link on link of the chain which binds us alike to past and future.

Barbara Preston, stopping aimlessly to read the notice of an auction of farm stock and household furniture advertised to take place in a neighboring township, could not guess that the trivial impulse that stayed her feet by the big chestnut at the roadside linked itself with events already slowly shaping in her future. The notice was printed in bold red letters on a buff background, calculated to seize and hold the eye of the passerby, and set forth the fact that one Thomas Bellows, Auctioneer, would, on the twenty-fifth day of April, sell to the highest bidder, on the premises of the owner, four milch cows, three farm horses, and sixty-four sheep. Also one young carriage horse, well broken, sound, kind, and willing. Other items relating to household gear and poultry followed, [70]
set down in due order of their relative importance.

The red letters on the buff ground passed into Barbara's eyes—as indeed they were purposefully intended—and impressed themselves on her memory. She considered them half angrily as she pursued her way to the post-office, picturing to herself the day when Thomas Bellows or another, would noisily exploit the contents of her own well-loved home. There was little there to bring money, and the mortgage covered stock and furniture as well as the land itself. She had learned this from a curt letter addressed to her by Stephen Jarvis in reply to questions of her own as concisely put.

Apart from her half-dazed recollection of the rainy afternoon a week since, their relations as ruthless creditor and hopeless debtor appeared to be unchanged. During the interval she had gone doggedly about her self-imposed labors, rising in the faint light of dawn to set strawberry and lettuce plants, wintered carefully on the south side of the big barns, with the vague unreasoning hope that somehow or other she might be permitted to reap the fruit of her toil. Between times she was casting about for another home and other modes of livelihood for herself and Jimmy. It would be difficult, if not impossible, she was told, to secure a position to teach. Only normal-school graduates stood any chance of preferment, and there appeared to be no prospect of a vacancy of any kind before fall. To become a dressmaker's apprentice was [71]
possible; but the woman who provided the opportunity offered instruction for the first six months in lieu of wages. And obviously one could not live on information alone, however valuable. Household servants were always in brisk demand, she had been reminded; but pride of race wrestled with the untold humiliation of such a lot. Besides, there was Jimmy. Her heart grew faint at the thought of the loving, carefully-shielded child in the cold shelter of an "asylum" or the bound property of some shrewd farmer, an investment involving a grudging expenditure of coarse food and scanty, insufficient clothing and forced to yield an ever-increasing increment of labor. Oh, life was cruel at its best. Her flesh and her soul cried out at the thought of what its worst might be. If there was a way of escape, why not accept it?

She was turning these things wearily over in her mind when the quick whir of wheels sounded at her back. She stepped aside to allow the vehicle to pass, without raising her eyes.

A harsh, domineering voice, the sort of voice to be slavishly obeyed, ordered the horse to stand still.

She looked up quickly to meet the eager gaze of the man who was in her thoughts. A vivid color, of which she was angrily conscious, rose to her forehead. She stammered some sort of greeting, her eyes drooping before the dominant insistence in his.

"I was just on my way to your house," he said.

His voice, as well as his eyes, was eager, insistent.

"Get in, won't you, and ride with me? I have something to say to [72]
you."

The girl hesitated, her cheeks paling. He sprang to the ground, speaking sharply to his young, restive horse.

“Allow me to assist you,” he said, with a politeness wholly unfamiliar to Barbara.

She gave him an astonished look, which he interpreted correctly, with the acumen of a trained politician.

“You have been thinking that I was exceedingly abrupt—even rude, in the way I spoke to you the other day,” he said, as he took her firmly by the hand and lifted her to a seat in the vehicle which was “dreaded more’n pison snakes” by the delinquent debtors in the countryside, according to Peg Morrison.

He bent to look keenly into her face, as he seated himself at her side. “Isn’t that so,—Barbara?”

At the sound of her name in that new, strange voice of his the girl started and almost shivered. She was beginning to be afraid of herself—this no less new and strange self, who was tired of being poor and hardworked and anxious, and who longed after comfort and ease and affection of some strong, compelling sort. She lifted her eyes to his.

“I have been thinking many things,” she murmured, “since—since you——”

He laughed under his breath.

“Yes; and you have been doing some things, too,” he said. “I heard you were looking for a place to teach, and—it didn’t encourage me to suppose that you were thinking very favorably of what I proposed. Did you secure a position?” [73]

“N-o, I didn’t,” she acknowledged. She hesitated visibly, then added, “They told me you were a school commissioner, and that I must apply to you.”

“Why didn’t you apply to me?” he wanted to know. “Didn’t you think I would be a good sort of person to help you in your desire for independence?”

“I didn’t ask you,” she said, “because——”

“Well?” he questioned sharply. “You didn’t ask me for help because——”

“How could I?” she demanded, with a spirited lift of her head. “I asked you for help before and you refused.”

He looked at her with piercing keenness.

“Did I?” he said gravely. “Well, I offered you—a position. You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

Barbara’s heart beat suffocatingly fast. His eyes were on her face, compelling her, mastering her.

“Would you—Could I take care of Jimmy just the same?” she asked, in a muffled voice.

He gave his horse a sharp cut with the whip before he answered.

“I can’t see why you should bring the boy into our affairs,” he said coldly. “But he can live with us—for the present, if you like. Then there is the Preston farm; as I’ve already told you, you may do as you like with it.”

Barbara looked mistily away over the fields past which they were driving, the sound of meadow-larks, calling and answering, and the soft jubilant gurgle of a bluebird on a nearer fence-rail reaching her like vaguely reproachful voices out of a dead past. Then as now had the meadow-larks called “Sweet! oh, my sweet!”—in the one spring-time when David Whitcomb loved her. [74]

“I shall have to—to think,” she murmured. “I am afraid——”

“Of what?” he demanded. “Of me?”

She did not answer, and again he cut the horse impatiently with his keen whip-lash, holding the spirited creature with a strong grasp on the reins as he did so.

“Well,” he said, after a long silence, “I’m afraid I can’t make myself over, even for you. But I’ll tell you something, my girl, there are worse men in the world than Stephen Jarvis, and perhaps you’ll fall in with some of ’em, if you turn me down. Look at me, will you?”

Unwillingly she turned her face to his.

“I shall not take a silly *no* for an answer,” he said under his breath. “I never have, and I shan’t begin with you. I need you, and you need me.”

His eyes held her powerfully.

“Do you love another man?”

“No,” said Barbara faintly. She could not bring herself to uncover her one dead love before those pitiless eyes, while the meadow-larks

were calling and answering with such piercing sweetness. David Whitcomb was dead. If she had ever loved him it was as another self in a dim past, growing ever dimmer. [75]

"Then," said the Honorable Stephen Jarvis quietly, "you will marry me." He broke into a short laugh. "Do you know I couldn't bear to think of your loving another man? Is that being in love? Tell me, Barbara."

He laughed again softly, as he bent to peer into her averted face. She felt herself yielding, her weak hold on past and future loosening.

She did not answer, but her red mouth quivered.

He experienced a sudden thrilling desire to touch the fresh innocent lips with his.

"It would be curious," he murmured unsteadily, "if I should learn what love is for the first time. Shall I tell you how old I am, Barbara?"

She looked up at him without curiosity.

"Well, I'm thirty-seven; and I've never loved any woman—I have never loved anything, except money and success. But now—Barbara!"

He bent toward her, his cold eyes alive with passion.

"No—no!" she cried, shrinking from him in sudden terror.

His face stiffened into its accustomed mask.

"You're thinking I've waited too long," he said bitterly, and the curling lash stung the bay horse in the flank.

Neither spoke again while the wheels spun dizzily along over the mile of road which brought them to the big stone gate-posts of the Preston farm. [76]

He drew up his foaming horse sharply.

"I won't come in," he said, "if you'll get out here."

She felt herself vaguely humiliated as she stepped down from the high vehicle without assistance.

"Stop!" he ordered as she passed quickly inside, as if in haste to gain shelter.

She looked up at him uncertainly, her eyes wide with an emotion akin to terror.

"I shall not humiliate myself by coaxing or cajoling you," he said haughtily. "You are best left alone for the present."

He lifted his hat with a sweeping bow, and the red-wheeled buggy dashed away.

Barbara drew a long, struggling sigh. She felt curiously light and free, as if she had made a breathless escape from some grasping hand, outstretched to seize her.

The sight of Jimmy running swiftly down the driveway toward her heightened the sensation to almost passionate relief.

"Hello, Barb'ra!" shouted the little boy. "I came home from school, an' you wasn't here. An' you can't guess what I've got for you!"

The child's face, glowing rosily with health and mischief, was uplifted to hers. She stooped and kissed it tenderly.

"What have you got for me, Jimmy?" [77]

"Guess!"

"I can't guess," she answered soberly. "You'll have to tell me."

"You ain't cross wiv me, are you, Barb'ra?"

"No, dear, of course I'm not. Why should I be cross? Why, it—it's a letter! Where did you get it, Jimmy?"

"It's the one I lost," said the child, puckering up his chin disappointedly. "I fought you'd be glad. Peg found it. He said he 'membered the wind was blowin' that day; so he looked all along the road on bof sides, an' he found it right under a bush."

Barbara hastily tore the sodden envelope apart. Her fingers trembled as she unfolded the large stained sheet.

"Is it all spoiled?" asked Jimmy anxiously. "Can't you read it?"

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[78]

VII

Barbara stared at the stained and defaced sheet with wide, frightened eyes. Her hands trembled.

"Can't you read it, Barb'ra?" pleaded Jimmy anxiously, standing on tip-toe to peep at the letter. "Peg said he was 'fraid you couldn't; but he said maybe you'd know who it was from, an' if it was 'portant."

Barbara did not answer. The rain-soaked paper in her trembling fingers faced her like a mute accusing ghost out of the past. The lines of writing folded close upon each other and soaked with rain and the stain of the wet brown earth had been completely obliterated; but two words of the many had escaped; her own name at the beginning of the letter, and another at its close.

"He is not dead!" she murmured. "He is not dead!"

Jimmy clutched her sleeve, dancing up and down in his impatience.

"Is it 'portant, Barb'ra—is it? Can you read it?" he persisted.

She faced the child, her eyes clouded with despair and anger.

"No, I can't read it!" she cried. "Oh! if you had only brought it to me!"

She turned swiftly and hurried toward the house, leaving the [79]
child lagging forlornly in the rear, his blue eyes brimmed with tears.

Peg Morrison, digging a patch of garden in the rear of the house, his battered straw hat drawn low over his eyes, his teeth firmly closed on a twig of apple-tree wood, became presently aware of a small dejected figure lurking in the shadow of the blossoming tree.

"Hello, Cap'n!" he called out cheerfully, relinquishing the twig in favor of a spent dandelion stalk. "Did ye find Barb'ry—heh? An' did ye give her the letter?"

"I gave it to her; but she—can't read it. An'—'n' I'm 'fraid it was 'portant. She's mad wiv me, Barb'ra is; 'n' I haven't had any dinner, either."

The child manfully swallowed the sob that rose in his throat. Then he selected a tall dandelion with a plumy top which he put in his mouth in imitation of Peg, who watched him with a dubious smile.

"Wall, now, that's too bad, Cap'n," sympathized the old man. "But ef Barb'ry can't read the letter it mus' be 'cause 'tain't best she should. Things don't happen b' chance, Cap'n. You want t' remember that. There's Somebody a-lookin' out fer things as don't make no mistakes."

Jimmy pondered this dark saying while the dandelion stem slowly uncurled itself into a dangling spiral.

"Then it was all right for me to lose that letter, 'N' you said——"

Peg frowned thoughtfully at the antics of a pair of barn-swallows [80]
swooping in and out from under the eaves.

"No; it wa'n't right fer you to be careless an' lose the letter, Cap'n," he said decidedly. "But the Lord—wall, you see, the Lord is consid'able smarter'n what we be, an' He c'n fix things up that go wrong. Kind o' arranges it so't the universe won't fly the track, no matter what we do. We ain't p'mitted t' disturb the gen'ral peace t' any great extent. You'll understan' these things better when you're growed up, Cap'n."

"Will I?" said Jimmy hopefully.

Peg thrust his spade into the ground.

"Guess I'd better walk over t' the house with you, an' see if the's anythin' I c'n do," he said briefly.

Barbara was setting the table with quick darting movements of her lithe figure when the two came in range of the kitchen door. She paused abruptly at sight of them.

"You must come in and eat your dinner quick, Jimmy," she called, "or you'll be late to school."

"You g'wan in, Cap'n," Peg urged in a diplomatic whisper. "I guess she's pretty nigh all right. But I wouldn't pester her none 'bout that letter ef I was you. Mebbe she'd ruther not talk 'bout it yet."

The child stole into the kitchen with hanging head and sat down at the table spread for two. He was very much ashamed of himself in

the stormy light of Barbara's gray eyes; but Mr. Morrison's remarks [81]
concerning the Maker of the universe appeared worthy of passing on. He fortified himself with a large slice of brown bread and butter, thickly overlaid with apple-sauce.

"It couldn't have been *very* 'portant, Barb'ra," he said blandly.

The girl faced about in the act of taking two boiled potatoes out of a saucepan.

"But it was, Jimmy. I know that much, and I can't read it."

"Peg says there's Somebody a-lookin' out for things, an' He made that letter fall out o' my pocket."

"Peg," interrupted Barbara wrathfully, "knows nothing about it."

"'N' He let it rain, too," pursued Jimmy determinedly. "'N' He let the ink run, 'n' the mud get on it. Do you want me to tell you who it was? Do you, Barb'ra?"

"Well, who do you suppose it was?"

"God!" exploded the child dramatically. "Peg said——"

"I don't want to hear what Peg said. He doesn't know."

"I shall put it," said the child, "in red ink, in my Vallable Inf'mation book. It's a vallable inf'mation."

"It would be, if it was true."

"An' if it isn't true, it's a vallable inf'mation. I'll put it down that way."

"I would," advised Barbara gloomily. Then she repented herself [82]
and stooped to kiss the child's quivering lips. "Anyway," she said, "I love you; and you didn't mean to lose the letter."

After Jimmy's inquisitive blue eyes were tight shut that night, Barbara examined the blurred sheet once more, holding it between her eyes and the bright light of the lamp. A word here and there appeared to emerge from the chaos, where the sharp penpoint had bitten the paper.

"... never forgotten," was tolerably distinct. Then followed a hopeless blur of brown earth stains and purple ink. But further down the page she read,

"Write—if you——"

That was all, except his name, "David Whitcomb," at the foot of the page.

The postmark had resisted the spoiling of both rain and mould, and read distinctly, as Al Hewett had declared, "Tombstone, Arizona," in a blurred circle, with the date "April 2" and the hour of stamping "2-P.M."

With a sudden glad impulse Barbara pulled a sheet of paper toward her.

"Dear David [she wrote], Your letter has just reached me, but I can only read a part of it, because——"

She paused and hesitated; then went on firmly:

"Jimmy lost it, and it lay out under a bush in the rain for more [83]
than a week. I can make out only a few words here and there, but those few tell me that you have not forgotten, and that you want me to write to you."

The girl paused to draw a deep, wondering breath.

"I can't tell you how strange it seems to be writing to you, because I have been thinking of you, David, for nearly three years as dead. They said you were lost on a trail in Alaska. And I thought it must be true. But your letter—even though I can't read it—has brought me the assurance that you are not in some far-away heaven, where I have tried to picture you, David, but on earth.

"This letter may never reach you, for I can only be sure that your letter to me was mailed in Tombstone; but I want to tell you that only Jimmy and I are left. Father died a year ago, and since then I have been trying to hold the farm for Jimmy. We are the last of the Prestons, you know, and I do want——"

She stopped short, laid down her pen and listened breathlessly. She fancied she had heard the child's voice calling her from the room above. She glided noiselessly to the foot of the stair, and listened, her slight figure seeming to melt, spirit-like, into the shadows. It was very lonely in the old house. The tall clock on the stair-landing ticked loud and solemnly in the stillness, and the wind in the budding trees without swept past the house with a long sighing breath. The girl shivered as she listened, then she went quickly back to the sitting-room with its cheerful circle of light and [84]

its drawn curtains, and paused to read the words she had written to David Whitcomb. They sounded stiff and trite after her brief absence in the shadowy hall. After all, was she not taking too much for granted? Perhaps he was merely asking for information, which he felt sure he could obtain from her on the score of old friendship. He had left some books in the bare little room he had occupied in the village for a year. The minister had them, she had been told. Her cheeks crimsoned slowly as she crumpled the half-written page and tossed it into the waste basket.

Then she chose a fresh sheet and wrote slowly, with frequent pauses: “Dear David: I was very much surprised to receive a letter from you after all these years. I must explain that though I received your letter to-day I have not been able to read it. It had been quite spoiled with rain and mildew. If this reaches you—and I cannot be sure of it, because I have only the postmark to go by—please write to me again, and I will answer at once.”

She signed the letter quite formally and simply with her full name, Barbara Allen Preston.

She mailed the letter the next morning, passing the great Jarvis mansion on her way to the post-office with averted looks. On the sixteenth morning thereafter she received back her letter written to David Whitcomb, with the words printed across the envelope, “Not called for.” She scarcely knew how much she had been expecting from David till her own unopened letter reached her with the effect [85]
of a door hard shut in the face of entreaty.

It was on that same day, as she walked slowly toward home, leaving her fruitless letter in a trail of tiny white fragments behind her, that the high-stepping bay horse and the red-wheeled buggy again passed her. She looked up involuntarily, her face white and sad, to receive a cold stare and curt nod from the man on the high seat. His whip-lash curled cruelly around the slender flank of his horse as he passed, and the sensitive creature sprang forward with a lunge and a quiver, only to receive a second and third stinging cut from the lash.

Barbara straightened herself as she watched the light vehicle disappear around a turn in the road.

She was thinking with a vague terror that so he would have tortured and driven her, cruelly, with no hope of escape. She was not prepared to see him return almost immediately at the same furious speed, and still less for his words as he pulled up his foaming horse.

“Get in,” he ordered her roughly. “I must speak to you.”

She looked up at him, her gray eyes sparkling defiance from under their long curling lashes.

“No,” she said loudly, “I will not.”

“Will not?” he repeated. “But I say you shall listen to me.”

She walked on quietly. He stared after her with a muttered oath, as if half-minded to go on. Then he leaped down, jerked his horse [86]
roughly to the fence-rail, tied him fast, and strode after the slim figure in the shabby black gown.

He overtook her in a few long strides. She turned to face him in the middle of the muddy road.

“I told you I would leave you to yourself. I meant to. I intended to let you be frightened, harassed, driven to the wall; but I can’t,” he said in a low, choked voice. “I—love you! I love you! Do you hear me?”

She shrank back trembling before the man’s white face and blazing eyes.

“I never knew before what it was like to—to love,” he stammered. “But I do now. What did you mean by saying that you would not—sell yourself for a worn-out farm? Sell yourself—to me? Why, girl, I’d give you all that I have—and my soul to the devil for—— I’ll do anything you say, if you’ll only marry me! I’ll give you a dozen farms. I’ll——”

“Stop!” cried Barbara, her face slowly whitening. “I—I am sorry I said that. I didn’t mean——”

“Do you mean that you’ll marry me, Barbara—Barbara!”

His eyes devoured her.

“Listen,” he went on. “I’ve put in ten such days and nights as I never expected to spend in this or any other world.”

He gripped her by the arm.

"You—must love me," he stormed. "I—I can't give you up!" [87]

His shaken voice dropped into a low, pleading tone.

"You'll not believe it, Barbara. But I—didn't know what it was like to love anyone. Why should I? I married for money—I'm not ashamed to tell you. But Barbara! Barbara!"

The words rang out in a stifled cry, as he read the fear—the aversion in hers.

She writhed out of his grasp, her breath coming and going in little gasps.

"Stop!" she cried. "I—can't listen!"

She clutched at the fence-rail as if she feared his violence.

He folded his arms quietly, his face grown suddenly rigid.

"Something has happened since the other day," he said. "What is it?"

She was silent.

He took two long steps and stood over her, big, powerful, threatening.

"You shall answer me. Who or what is it that has come between us?"

Again he waited for her to speak; but she stood mute with bent head.

His clenched hands dropped at his side.

"You'll not answer me," he said, in a cold, hard voice. "Well, be it so; go your way, and I'll go mine. But—I shall not give you up. You're killing yourself with hard work; it is I who force you to it. I [88] am your master. You can't escape me!"

"You are not my master!" she said wildly. "I'm free—free!"

He turned without another look at her, his savage heel grinding an innocent clover blossom into the mud of the road.

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[89]

VIII

Barbara stole softly down the creaking stair in the gray obscurity of dawn, her shoes in one hand, a smoking candle in the other. There was much to be done, much to be thought of, and Jimmy must not wake up to hinder for two full hours yet.

It was cold in the kitchen, and the faint pink light streaming from the east shone in uncertainty through misted panes. Barbara sat down, her red lips sternly compressed, her dark brows drawn in a frowning line above her eyes, and applied herself briskly to lacing up her shoes. It was a relief to be accomplishing something real, tangible, after the whirling mist of dreams from which she had emerged shaken and breathless. Dreams of any description seldom visited Barbara's healthily tired brain, but the vanished darkness of the past night had been haunted with confused visions. Now Stephen Jarvis was pursuing her through trackless forests, where long branches reached down like crooked, grasping hands. Always she managed to elude her pursuer and always he followed, his panting breath in her ears, till suddenly stumbling and falling through a vast crevasse in the darkness she found herself on a wide plain, starred with narcissus, swaying spirit-like in the bright air; [90] high overhead white clouds floated and the winds of May blew cool fragrance into her face. At first she was alone, seeking for something, she knew not what; then David Whitcomb stood at her side.

"Come!" he cried imperiously, and his blue eyes pleaded with hers. "We must make haste to escape before the child overtakes us!"

She turned to follow his pointing finger and saw Jimmy running toward them, his arms outstretched, his bare, rosy feet stumbling amid the folds of his long white gown. Then, with the wild irrelevancy of dreams she heard the raucous voice of Thomas Bellows, the auctioneer from Greenfield Centre, shouting something indistinguishable in the far distance. Instantly the wide plain, the impassioned lover, and the running, stumbling little figure vanished. She was at home now, hurrying in anxious haste from room to room to find everything empty and desolate and the sun shining in through dimmed window-panes on the bare floors. Outside on the lawn a confused pile of household furniture, books, and carpets, looking sadly worn and old in the pitiless light of day, were being rapidly sold under the hammer.

"Here you are, ladies an' gents," shouted the auctioneer, "lot number twenty-four, a strong, healthy young woman, kind an' willin'! A good cook an' housekeeper. How much am I offered? Come, ladies, let me hear your bids!"

The faint light of morning touching her closed eyelids like a cool [91] finger-tip suddenly aroused the girl to a consciousness of reality (if indeed the experiences of this mortal life be more real than dreams). She rose at once, dressed hastily, and having by now finished the lacing up of her shoes stood gazing out at the familiar door-yard with gathered brows.

"I ought," said Barbara half-aloud in the silence of the kitchen, "to be good for something." She looked down at her young strong hands; hands skilled in many uses, her forehead still puckered with unaccustomed thoughts.

Then she opened the back door quietly, for she was still mindful of the sleeping child above, and went out into the frosty dawn. A robin was singing loudly in the top of the budding elm down by the gate.

"Cheer up! Cheer up!" the jubilant bird voice seemed to be saying. Then the song ceased and the strong brown wings spread and carried the voice toward the dawn, which now flung long streamers of rose and gold athwart the frigid blue of the sky. A bright, cold moon swung low in the west and the distant houses of the village, huddled close among dark folds of the hills, began to send up delicate spirals of smoke which ascended and hung motionless in mid-heaven, like unshriven ghosts.

Peg Morrison was washing the mud off the wheels of the old buggy to the tune of Denis, lugubriously wafted to the winds of [92] morning through his nose.

"Blest be-hee th' tie-hi which bi-inds,
Aour ha-ur-uts in Chris-his-chun lo-ove;

Th’ fe-hell-o-shi-hip of ki-hin-dred mi-hinds,
Is li-hike to tha-hat above!”

“Peg!” cried Barbara, in her imperious young voice.

The old man stopped short in his rendition of Fawcett’s immortal stanzas, an apologetic smile over-spreading his features.

“Good-mornin’, Miss Barb’ry,” he said. “A nice, pleasant mornin’, ain’t it? Thinks I, I’ll wash up this ’ere buggy an’ make it look’s well’s I kin. Then, mebbe, ’long towards arternoon I’ll git ’round t’ call on th’ Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis. I reckon I——”

“No,” interrupted Barbara decidedly, “you mustn’t do that. It wouldn’t do any good,” she added, in anticipation of protest.

“It’s th’ matter o’ th’ onions I was thinkin’ o’ bringin’ to his attention,” said Peg, raising his voice. “‘F I c’n prove to th’ Hon’rable Stephen Jarvis that onions’ll raise that goll-durned mortgage within one year f’om date, I——”

“Peg,” protested Barbara indignantly, “how do you suppose I’m ever going to train Jimmy to speak properly if you persist in using such language?”

“Meanin’ th’ expression goll-durned, o’ course, Miss Barb’ry,” acquiesced the old man meekly. “You’re right, I ain’t no manner o’ [93]
business to use swear words b’fore ladies. But that consarned, measly——”

The girl stamped her foot impatiently.

“There’s no use talking to you,” she said sharply. “I’ll just have to keep Jimmy away from you.”

“Don’t do that, Miss Barb’ry; please don’t!” pleaded Peg. “I won’t do him no real harm. I ain’t no-ways vicious, ner—ner low-down; an’ that little chap—— Why, Miss Barb’ry, me an’ th’ Cap’n ’s been a chumin’ it sence he could crawl out t’ th’ barn on ’is han’s an’ knees. Ef he don’t fall int’ no worse comp’ny ’n Peleg Morrison’s, I guess the Cap’n ’ll come out all right. An’ you kin bet your bottom dollar onto it.”

Peg swashed the remaining water in his pail over the hind wheel of the buggy with an air of stern finality.

“Of course I know you’re good, Peg,” murmured Barbara contritely. “I didn’t mean——”

“Don’t mention it, Miss Barb’ry,” interrupted Mr. Morrison, with generous politeness. “Your tongue gits the start o’ your jedgment occasionally, same’s your pa’s ust to, but I shan’t lay it up ’gainst you. Any more”—and he raised his voice in anticipation of a possible interruption—“any more’n I done in the past.” His eyes twinkled kindly at the girl.

“I want you to harness the buggy for me after breakfast, Peg,” Barbara said soberly. “I’m going—somewhere on business, and I [94]
want to start early.”

“Blest be he th’ tie-hi which bi-inds.”

warbled Peg unmelodiously, as he stooped to apply his wet sponge to the rear springs.

“Did you hear me, Peg?” demanded Barbara.

The old man gazed reproachfully at the girl through the spokes of the wheel.

“W’y, I’m goin’ to use the horses fer ploughin’ this mornin’, Miss Barb’ry,” he said soothingly. “An’ they’ll be all tuckered out b’ night.”

“But there’s no use of doing any more ploughing. I told you that last week. Unless I can manage somehow to—to raise the money, the farm——”

“Don’t say it!” interrupted Peg. “I don’t b’lieve in namin’ troubles. It helps ’em to ketch a body, someway, to notice ’em too much. I b’lieve in actin’ ’s if the’ wa’nt anythin’ th’ matter ’s long ’s ye kin.”

“Yes, and while you’re doing it the mortgage will foreclose itself,” Barbara said, recalling Stephen Jarvis’ curt phrase with a thrill of anger. “You hitch up Billy for me and bring him around at seven o’clock. Will you do it, please, Peg?”

“The fe-hell-o-shi-hip of k-hin-dred mi-hinds!”

chanted Mr. Morrison, with entire irrelevance.

“Very well, if you won’t, I’ll walk. It’s ten miles there and back,

but you won't care, as long as you have your own way."

"Where was you thinkin' of goin', Miss Barb'ry?" demanded Peg [95]
cautiously. "Ye know I ain't set on anythin' that ain't fer your good—yours an' the Cap'n's."

But Barbara had already disappeared in a flutter of angry haste.

"Now, I s'pose," soliloquized Mr. Morrison, "that I'll actually hev to give up ploughin' the hill lot this mornin', an' all 'long o' that young female." He shook his head solemnly.

"O Lord!" he burst out, "you know Miss Barb'ry, prob'bly's well's I do. She's a mighty nice girl an' always hes been; but she's turrible set in her ways, an' I declar' I can't see what in creation she's a-goin' to do; what with everythin'—you know now—I've spoke 'bout it frequent enough. Then the's the Hon'rable Stephen Jarvis—him that holds th' mortgage—he wants t' marry her. But I don' trust that man, Lord. I don't know how he looks to you. But to me he 'pears hard-fisted, an' closer'n the bark to a tree, an' I c'n tell you he licks the hide off'n his horses right along. But the' may be some good in him. Ef the' is, bring it out, O Lord, so 't folks kin see it. An' fix things up with Miss Barb'ry, somehow. Kind o' overrule Jarvis an' the mortgage an' all the rest, the way you know how. Amen!"

Peleg Morrison was on intimate terms with his Creator, and on this occasion, as in the past, he derived such satisfaction from his converse with the Almighty that he was enabled presently to go on with his vocal exercises. The washing of the buggy was thus happily [96]
completed, the worn cushions dusted, and the horses fed and watered by the time the sun peeped over the fringes of dark woods. At seven o'clock, as he was tying the wall-eyed bay to the hitching-post in the side yard, Barbara appeared in the open door, a brown loaf in her hand.

"Here's some fresh bread for your breakfast, Peg," she said. She glanced at the horse. "I shan't be gone very long. You can plough when I come back, if you want to. It won't hurt the ground to plough it."

"The mare's kind o' skittish this mornin'," replied Peg, accepting the addition to his meagre bill of fare with an appreciative grin. "Mebbe I'd better go 'long an' drive." He glanced anxiously at the girl. "I wouldn't do nothin' rash ef I was you, Miss Barb'ry; like—like gittin' engaged to be married, or anythin' like that."

"Don't worry, Peg," Barbara said soberly, "that's precisely what I don't mean to do."

She felt entirely sure of herself now, even while her cheeks burned hotly at the remembrance of Jarvis' look when he said, "I am your master."

"I'll scrub floors for a living," she promised herself, "before I yield to him."

All the pride of a strong nature shone in her eyes as she stooped over Jimmy, sitting at the table, his short legs dangling, his slate pencil squeakily setting down queer crooked figures in straggling rows.

"I'm ahead in my 'rithmetic," the little boy announced [97]
triumphantly. "I'm doin' reg'lar zamples. I like zamples. An' bimeby I'll be all growed up, an' nen I'll take care of you, Barb'ra."

She kissed him underneath the short yellow curls in the back of his neck.

"Oh, Jimmy," she sighed, "I wish you were grown up now!"

The child straightened himself anxiously.

"My head's way above your belt when I stand up," he said, "'n' I ate lots of brown bread an' milk for breakfast. I'm growing jus' as fast's I can."

Barbara hugged him remorsefully.

"You're just big enough—for six," she assured him. "And—and we'll come out all right, somehow. We just will, precious!"

"'Course we will," echoed the child. He slipped from his chair and eyed his sister with a searching gaze.

"If you're scared of anybody, Barb'ra," he said valiantly, "I'll take a big stick, 'n'—'n'—I'll—I'll—I won't let anybody hurt you, Barb'ra!"

The girl laughed rather unsteadily as she hurried him into his coat and cap. "Learn a lot at school, dear," she murmured, "and you'll have the best kind of a big stick."

The remembrance of his warm little arms about her neck comforted her as she drove the wall-eyed mare along the road. She

was going to do a very strange thing. Something she had never heard of any woman doing before. Just how the idea had taken form [98] and substance in her mind she did not know. She appeared to herself to have awakened with the resolve fully formed, distinctly outlined, even to the small details, which she busily reviewed while she was tying the horse before the house of Thomas Bellows, auctioneer. There was a shop in the lower front story of the house, which had once been a piazza, but now protruded with two bulging front windows to the edge of the sidewalk. The windows disclosed a variety of objects in the line of household appurtenances, clocks, flatirons, a pile of tin-ware, likewise a yellow placard reading, "Auction to-day," surmounted by a professional flag of a faded red color.

Mr. Bellows himself, in blue overalls and a pink shirt, was occupied in wiping off an exceedingly dusty and ancient sewing machine with an oily rag. He looked up sharply as the discordant jangle of the bell announced the opening of his shop door.

"Good-mornin', miss," he said as Barbara entered. "If you don't mind shuttin' that door behind you. It beats all how cold the wind stays, don't it? You want to look over some o' these goods, heh? Household effects of the widow Small down to the Corners. Died las' week, an' her daughter don't want to keep none o' her things. They'll be sold at two sharp. It ain't a bad idea to cast yer eye around a little b'fore the biddin' begins. Things show off better. Now this 'ere machine——"

"I don't want to buy anything," stammered Barbara. "I—want you [99] to sell something for me."

"Yas," assented Mr. Bellows explosively, standing up and resting a grimy hand on either hip, the while he surveyed Barbara's slim figure attentively. "Jus' so! Well?" he added tentatively. "Sellin' things fer folks is my business. What d'ye offer: goods, stock, or real estate? It's all the same to me."

"It—it isn't—— Could you sell my work for me? I mean——"

The man stared hard at the girl, his squinting eyes puckered, his mouth drawn close at the corners.

"I'm a gen'ral auctioneer," he announced conclusively. "It's m' business to sell household effects, stock, or real estate, on commission."

"I want some money—a good deal of money," Barbara went on, "and I want it right away."

"I've seen folks in your fix before," commented the auctioneer dryly, as he again applied himself to the sewing machine. "I gen'rally make out t' sell what's offered. But I can't guarantee prices."

"You sell horses, don't you?" demanded Barbara.

"Horses? Sure!"

"And—and oxen. They're meant to work, and people buy them to work. That's what I want to do. I want to work for three—or four years, if I must; and I want the money all at once—in advance."

"I don't know as I ketch your idee," said Mr. Bellows. "You want money, an' you want it right away, an' you want me to sell——"

"I want you to sell my work—honest work, housework, any kind [100] of work that I can do, for—for a term of years."

Mr. Bellows abandoned further efforts at bettering the condition of the late Widow Small's sewing machine. He stood up and scowled meditatively at Barbara.

"Seems t' me I've seen you b'fore, somewheres; haven't I?"

"My name is Barbara Preston," the girl said haughtily.

"An' you want I should——"

"When people buy a horse they really buy and pay for the labor of that horse in advance," Barbara said composedly. "I am more valuable than a horse. I have skill, intelligence; I wish to sell—my skill, my intelligence to the highest bidder."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed Mr. Bellows. Then he fell to laughing noisily, his wizened countenance drawn into curious folds and puckers of mirth.

Barbara waited unsmilingly.

"Say! d'you know I've been asked to sell mos' everythin' you ever heard of," said Mr. Bellows, getting the better of his hilarity, "but I never was asked to sell—a girl. A good-lookin', smart, likely girl. I guess you're jokin', miss. It wouldn't do, you know."

"Why wouldn't it?" urged Barbara.

"Well, it wouldn't; that's all. I've got m' reputation as an [101]
auctioneer to think about; an'—lemme see, your folks is all dead, ain't they?"

"No," said Barbara. "I have a brother six years old."

Her dry tongue refused to add to this statement. She was conscious of an inward tremor of fear lest he should refuse.

"Whatever put such a curious notion into your head?" Mr. Bellows wanted to know.

"I may as well tell you," the girl said bitterly. "You'll be asked to sell me out soon. We're going to lose everything we've got—Jimmy and I; the farm, the—furniture—everything."

"You don't say!" Mr. Bellows commented doubtfully. "Well, that had ought to net you something—eh?"

"We shan't have anything; everything will be gone," the girl said coldly.

"Sho! that's too bad," Mr. Bellows said good-naturedly. He stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, and scowled absent-mindedly into space. Then he looked at Barbara again. "Mortgage—eh?" he suggested. "Coverin' pretty much everythin'—eh?"

"Everything," repeated Barbara, in a dull tone.

"Everythin'—save an' exceptin' one smart, willin' young woman—eh? You'd ought to bring a purty good figger—in the right market."

Mr. Bellows paused to give way to mirth once more.

"The matrimonial market's the one partic'lar field I ain't had [102]
much 'xperience in," he concluded. "An' auctionin' off goods of the sort you mention ain't 'xactly in my line, an' that's a fac', miss. So I guess——"

"You don't understand," Barbara interrupted quickly. "Let me explain. When I found that everything was lost"—her voice trembled in spite of herself—"I thought at first I would teach school—let the farm go and teach——"

"Well, why don't you do that?" Mr. Bellows inquired. He was a kind-hearted man, with sympathies somewhat blunted by his professional zeal in a calling which for the most part concerned itself with clearing away the wreckage of human hopes. "You'd make a right smart school-ma'am, I should say."

"I'm not a normal school graduate," Barbara told him. "Besides, they have no vacancies. Then I tried to get sewing to do. I can sew neatly. But I might easily starve on what I could earn with my needle. A woman told me she knew of someone who wanted—a—servant," Barbara's voice shook, but she went on bravely. "She said that people sometimes paid as much as twenty-five dollars a month for such work. And that it wasn't easy to find women who could do that kind of work well. I said I would not work in another woman's kitchen. But I—I am willing to do it, if I can sell my work for twelve hundred dollars."

"Whew!" ejaculated Mr. Bellows.

"It sounds like a lot of money, I know," Barbara went on; "but it [103]
is four years' service at twenty-five dollars a month. I want it all at once. Then I can pay the mortgage on our farm, and keep it."

"Huh!" commented Mr. Bellows explosively.

"I could lease the farm while I was working, and it would bring in enough money to take care of Jimmy."

Her face clouded swiftly at the thought of the possible separation.

"Wall, I don't know of anybody who'd be willin' to pay down any twelve hundred dollars spot cash for a *hired girl*," objected Mr. Bellows. "Y' couldn't get nobody to bid on a proposition like that. Y' might"—the man hesitated, then went on harshly, "y' might up an' die, or——"

"A man on the farm next to ours paid three hundred dollars for a horse, and it died the next week," Barbara said quietly. "Then he bought another. He had to have a horse."

"Well, he owned it for good an' all, an' you——"

"I'll work four years-or five for the money," said Barbara steadily. "And I shall be worth far more than an ordinary servant."

Mr. Bellows wagged his head argumentatively. "I'd hev to charge you five per cent.," he warned her. "An' you couldn't get any bidders, anyhow."

“That,” said Barbara, “would be my affair. What I want to know is, will you sell me?”

The blood hammered in her temples; her hands and feet were icy [104] cold; but she eyed the man steadily.

Mr. Bellows had been making a rapid mental calculation.

“W’y, I don’ know,” he said, scratching his head reflectively. “I don’t want to go int’ no fool job fer nothin’. M’ time’s valu’ble.”

“I’ll pay you—ten dollars, if—if—no one buys me,” said Barbara faintly.

Mr. Bellows bit his thumb-nail thoughtfully.

“All right!” he burst out at length. “You name the day, git th’ bidders t’gether an’ I’ll auction ye off. Gracious! It don’t sound right, some way.”

He looked at the girl carefully, real human kindness in his eyes and voice.

“Who holds your mortgage, anyhow?” he asked indignantly. “I sh’d think most anybody’d be ashamed o’ themselves t’ drive a nice young woman like you to——”

“If I can realize enough money to pay what I owe I shall be—glad,” the girl said. “I am obliged to work hard anyway. My plan will pay, if it succeeds; don’t you see it will?”

“W’y, yes; I see all right. I don’t b’lieve you c’n work it, though,” was Mr. Bellows’ opinion.

Barbara did not explain her intentions further. She requested Mr. Bellows to say nothing of what had passed between them, and this he readily promised.

“‘Tain’t a matter t’ make common talk of,” he agreed, with a [105] dubious shake of the head. “The’s folks that might not ketch the right idee. Sellin’ a pretty girl at auction ’ud draw a crowd all right; but I’d advise you t’ let me use my jedgment ’bout biddin’ ye in, if it’s necessary.”

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[106]

IX

As a man thinketh in his heart, so is that man, was the Nazarene's succinct announcement of a law as ancient and immutable as the correlated principles which govern gravity and motion. From the beginning of things visible, when the thoughts of the great I Am first began to fashion new and strange creations out of the whirling fire mist, until now, the thoughts of a God—of a man, continually and inevitably mould his appearance and the circumstances of his existence. As there can be no question as to the reality of this fundamental principle at the root of all phenomena, so there can be no evasion of its action and effect.

Stephen Jarvis, having successfully achieved wealth by a constant and unremitting application of his powerful ego to the thoughts of money-getting by any and all means, looked the part. No man can do otherwise. Having chosen his rôle, he proceeds to a make-up more skilful and complete than can be conceived by the bungler in the actor's dressing-room. Upon the plastic mask of the body his thoughts etch themselves, his habits paint themselves, his character blazons itself, till at middle age, he cannot longer hide himself from the observant eye of the world. He is, in appearance, in [107] reality, what his thoughts have made him.

If it be possible to imagine the havoc which the oft-quoted bull in the china shop would create by a sudden and unpremeditated use of his brute force, one may, perhaps, conceive of the inward tumult, the confusion, the very real loss, and consequent anguish entailed upon a man like Jarvis by the sudden invasion of a genuine passion.

A thousand times he railed at himself, profanely calling himself many varieties of a fool. Once and again he strove to restore to cold, passionless order the seething maelstrom of his thoughts. Why, he demanded fiercely of himself, should he long to possess this girl with every aching fibre of his being? The mere urge and fever of animal passion did not explain the matter; there was something deeper, more elemental still in the fury of the desire which possessed him, which drove him forth out of his comfortable house by night and by day as if pursued by the furies. Because Jarvis was a strong man, his nature hardened by years of stern, unrelaxing self-discipline, the utter rout and confusion of his cold, passionless self was the more complete and disastrous. He hated himself for loving a woman who disdained him, and hating himself, he loved her with a despair akin to torment. That she was poor, helpless, already fast closed in his savage grip, like a bird in a snare, he knew; and yet for the first time he dimly realized the illusive part of her which successfully evaded his grasp, defied his power, despised his [108] threats. He might, if he would, crush her by main force; he could not compel her to love him.

The thought of his own strength, helpless before her weakness, maddened him. Houses, lands, money, had become passively obedient to the power of his will. He controlled these things, did with them as he pleased, in effect an overlord, haughty, unbending, merciless; but this one thing which he had put out his hand to take —carelessly, as one will pluck a ripe apple from the bough at the languid prompting of appetite—this girl, who had for years been no more to him than the birds hopping in the trees outside his window, how and by what means had she suddenly contrived to gain this monstrous ascendency over him? What uncanny power in those clear gray eyes of hers had metamorphosed Stephen Jarvis, cool, middle-aged man of affairs, into the weak creature he had always despised in his saner moments?

During these days of inward tumult he carried on the dull routine of his business, forcing himself to the task with all the powers of a will suddenly turned traitor to its master. In spite of himself he seemed to see her there in his lonely house over against the sombre rows of books, her face vividly alive, defiantly youthful. Despite his resolves she perpetually came between him and the printed page which he strove to read; worst of all, she haunted his restless [109] slumbers by night, now pleading with him; now defying him; mocking him with elfin laughter, as she fled before him, the child in her arms; while he pursued leaden-footed through uncounted miles of shadowy country.

The two did not meet face to face, while the rains and chilling winds of April gradually spent themselves, and the grass, illumined

with a thousand cheerful sunbursts of dandelions, grew long under the blossoming trees. The mated birds sang only at dawn now, being too busy with the rapturous labors of nest-building to pause for vocal expression of their gladness. In the fields staid farm-horses indulged in unwonted gambols and nosed their mates with little whinnying cries; grazing cattle lifted their heads from the sweet springing grass to gaze with large wistful eyes at the widespread landscape. Once, long ago, they had roamed the unfenced pastures of the world in May, herded cows and yearlings, and the lordly bulls leading on, while the urge and rapture of the returning sun brooded the earth, compelling it to bring forth after its kind. Though she did not see him, yet none the less Jarvis obtruded his harsh visage into Barbara's thoughts by day and by night. Nor could a wiser man than Jarvis have guessed that the girl was literally enfolded in cloudy thought forms, projected toward her from his own brain, with all the accuracy and certainty of an electric current traversing the viewless paths of air between wireless stations. That we do not understand [110] these phenomena with any degree of accuracy does not render them the less effective.

It was still early in May when Jarvis drove over to inspect a wood-pulp factory in the neighborhood of Greenfield Centre. Its proprietor had borrowed capital heavily within the past year, and Jarvis had been narrowly watching the gradual ebb of the factory's output. It was the old story of misapplied energy, paralyzed into inaction by impending failure. Jarvis scored the luckless proprietor mercilessly during their brief interview; later he sought the services of Thomas Bellows, the auctioneer.

"You may sell him out, plant, machinery, and all; reserve nothing," Jarvis ordered; and, referring to his book of memoranda, added the date.

Another entry that he saw there met his sombre eyes. He stared at it frowningly.

"Anythin' more in my line in the near future?" Mr. Bellows wanted to know.

He rubbed his hands as he asked the question. The Honorable Stephen Jarvis was, as he put it, "a stiddy customer and a good one," being constantly in need of Mr. Bellows' services.

"Yes," said Jarvis, a dull red flush rising in his sallow face. "The contents of the Preston house, the stock, and implements, must be sold on June first."

Mr. Bellows struck one hairy fist into the other by way of preface to his words. He was not afraid of Stephen Jarvis, being sufficiently well provided with worldly goods, albeit these were for the most [111] part second-hand, and in the nature of left-overs from many auctions.

"It seems a pity," quoth Bellows, "to sell her out. Couldn't you wait till fall, say, and give the little Preston girl a chance? I ain't what you might call soft m'self; but I'm blamed if I could help feelin' sorry for the girl when she come in here one day last week t' engage my professional services."

"What is Miss Preston proposing to sell?" demanded Jarvis. Something in his voice gave Mr. Bellows a curious sensation. He gave Jarvis a sharp look as he answered.

"Nothing that belongs to you, I reckon."

"Tell me what it is," repeated Jarvis. "I'll be the best judge of that," His voice shook, and also the hand which held the leather book of fateful dates and occasions.

"I'm sorry; but I guess I can't 'commodate you," responded the other. "Perfessional etiquette, you know; in this 'ere case binding."

"You have no right to refuse," said Jarvis, and something of the real nature of his secret thoughts flared up in his eyes. "Everything that concerns Miss Preston concerns me."

Mr. Bellows was puzzled.

"Meanin', of course, that you hold the lien on her prop'ty," he hazarded. "But you don't"—and he paused to chuckle to himself —"hold no lien on what she's propos in' to sell to the highest bidder?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Jarvis. [112]

His tone was menacing, and he fixed angry eyes, red from sleeplessness, on the old auctioneer.

"You'll either explain yourself," he said, "or—you'll get no more business from me, to-day or any other day."

Mr. Bellows expectorated violently in the general direction of the opposite wall.

"I ain't," he declared valiantly, "afeard of no threats, nor yet of nobody. But I'm goin' to tell you, 'cause it's you that's drove her to it, an' you'd ought to know what sort of girl she is. I had three-quarters of a notion to tell you anyhow, an' I tol' m' wife so, when I found it was you that held the lien on her house an' furniture. Business is business with me as well as any other man; but I'd be ashamed to drive a woman to the point of sellin' herself."

"*Selling herself!*" echoed Jarvis.

The observant eyes of Mr. Bellows were upon him, as he fell back a pace or two and strove to steady himself.

"That's what I said. Yes, sir; she asked me right here in this shop to sell her at public auction. 'I've lost everythin',' she says; 'but I've got myself, an' I'll sell that, an' pay what I owe.'"

"My God!" breathed Jarvis. "I—drove her to it!"

"You're right, you did," agreed Mr. Bellows.

"You can't do it, man. I forbid it!"

"Oh, y' do; do ye? Wall, I don't see how you're going to make out [113]
to prevent it. The girl's got a right to herself, and I've got a right to ——"

"I shall prevent it," Jarvis interrupted fiercely. "It's inhuman—uncivilized, monstrous!"

"Well, that's the way it struck me—at first," acquiesced Mr. Bellows; "but the way she put it up t' me kind of won me over. She's a takin' sort of girl, kind o' good-lookin', an' innercent. W'y, Lord bless you, she's no more idee of the way a man—like you, for instance—might look at it than a child. She wants to work out—for a matter o' four or five years, she says; an' she thinks she c'n get some fool woman to bid twelve hunderd dollars spot cash fer bein' sure of a hired girl all that time—'W'y,' I says to her, 'you might up an' die,' 'Yes,' she says, 'so might a horse; but folks hes to hev horses!' I tell you she's cute an' bright, an' I'm goin' to sell her to the highest bidder, same's I agreed to."

Jarvis was silent for a long minute, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the miscellaneous collection of shabby and broken furniture in the rear of the shop.

"Is it to be a public sale?" he asked coolly.

"Well, as t' that, I can't rightly tell you. I left the advertisin' o' the goods, an' the date o' sale to the young lady. I reelly hope you will call it off. I s'pose you c'n easy fix things up so 't she——"

"Did she ask you to tell me this?" demanded Jarvis suddenly. "Tell me the facts."

"Did she ask me—to tell you?" echoed Mr. Bellows wonderingly. "You bet she didn't! You wasn't named betwixt us. I asked her who [114]
held the lien on her prop'ty, an' she didn't answer. Thought it was none o' my business, likely. I suspicioned it was you, though. You get most of 'em around these parts."

Jarvis made no reply. He closed the red leather book, slipped it into an inside pocket, then deliberately drew on his driving gloves.

"Can you tell me the date of this—this sale?" he asked.

"What you want t' know for? Thinkin' of puttin' in a bid?" chuckled Mr. Bellows.

Jarvis gave him a terrible look.

"I'd advise you to keep still about this. Don't attempt to interest anyone else in Miss Preston's affairs. Do you hear?"

"I ain't deef," responded Mr. Bellows in an aggrieved voice. "'N' I don't know's I see what business 'tis of yours, anyhow. Mebbe she'll get the money an' pay you. 'Twouldn't surprise me if she did. She's bound she will, an' where there's a will there's a way, I've heard tell."

"The date, man; give me the date!"

"Seein' I've told you so much, I s'pose you might as well know; the sale's set for the eighteenth."

"Where?"

"At her house."

"And you're actually going to—— No; she'll never do it. She won't be able to bring herself to it."

"Wall, I'll bet you ten dollars she will; d'ye take me?" [115]

Jarvis turned without another word and left the place. He

suddenly felt the need of the outdoor air. Barbara's desperate expedient convinced him as no words of hers could have done of the hopelessness of his case. "She hates me," he told himself; and for the first time he looked within for a reason for her aversion.

He drove slowly, his thoughts a mad whirl of fury and despair. For the first time he saw himself as he fancied he must look to her, a man past his first youth, cold, forbidding, harsh, unlovely. He perceived with a flash of prescience that she cared nothing for money, save as it signified the thing she held most dear; nothing for the position, power, and luxury for which he had sold his honor and his manhood. Stripped of these things, what must he appear in her eyes? A monster of selfishness and greed, no less; to be feared, detested, escaped by any means even to the sacrifice of brain and body. He groaned aloud in the scorching flame of his humiliation.

He told himself that he would go to her, beg her forgiveness, offer her all that she had asked for, and more. He would give her the farm free of all indebtedness. Then he realized, with sickening certainty, that she would not accept anything from him. He had told her that he was her master. To escape this slavery she was about to sell herself to another. The thought was insupportable. Even while he perceived her perfect ingenuousness and the practical realization [116]
of her own worth which lay beneath this fantastic and seemingly impossible plan of hers, he sensed its frightful danger. In order to attract bidders she would be forced to advertise her plans. Who would respond? Who would buy, and for what purpose?

He whipped his horse to a furious speed and soon reached his house. The newspapers, unread for days, were piled on a table near his desk. He seized one, turned to its advertising columns and rapidly reviewed their contents, then another, and another in rapid succession. At last his devouring eyes lighted and fastened upon a single paragraph, hidden among the miscellaneous advertisements where a puzzled proofreader had doubtless placed it:

> "For Sale at Auction [he read]: A young woman in good health, able and willing to do housework and plain sewing; or could teach a little child and care for it, would like to secure a position with a respectable family for a term of years. Her services will be disposed of at private auction to the highest bidder, for a term of three, four, or five years. Please communicate with B., *Telegram*."

Jarvis crushed the paper in his hands savagely, as though he would destroy the strange little appeal to an unfriendly world. Then he sought for and read it again, his eyes fixed and frowning.

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[117]

X

THERE are times when to the unintelligent observer the affairs of this world appear a hopeless tangle, a web without a pattern, a heap of unclassified material without an architect, a wild, unmeaning chaos of things animate and inanimate, all grinding, groaning, clashing together, sport of the gods or of demons, tending towards nothing, useless, hideous. But to one who views the world from another and higher level there sometimes appear illumining hints of harmony and completeness, tokens of a Master Mind working continually among the affairs of men and universes, setting all in divine order, either with or without the understanding and co-operation of the lesser intelligences.

Thus when Barbara Preston was impelled, she knew not how, to send forth her strange and piteous little appeal to the unknown, it found instant response, and proceeded to fit itself into the scheme of things as perfectly and as cunningly as a tiny bit in a picture puzzle. The paper in which it appeared passed into the hands of a great number of persons, who glanced carelessly at its glaring headlines or searched painstakingly through its losts and founds or things offered, or help wanted, according to their varied tastes or necessities. On the second day thereafter, as was also to be [118]
expected, the particular edition containing the queer little unclassified appeal, found its way to many ash-cans, waste-paper baskets, bureau drawers, and pantry shelves; in its progress it helped to build numberless fires, it wrapped parcels of every conceivable shape and size; it fluttered out of car windows, across decks of steamers and ferry-boats; it floated and dissolved in many waterways, and finally disappeared, swallowed in the abyss which appears always to yawn for all things of human creation. Having vanished mysteriously, unobtrusively, as must every printed page sooner or later, it nevertheless left its mark on the lives of many. Plans were changed, voyages undertaken or abandoned, marriages made and unmade. In a word, prosperity, ruin, joy, sadness, glory, despair—all came about through its appearance, and persisted in ever widening circles after it had passed from sight and mind.

Four men and ten women, to be exact, of those who chanced to notice Barbara's somewhat absurd little advertisement, cut it out of the doomed sheet, and placed it in securer quarters, for further consideration. Of the women four wrote to Barbara asking for references; of the men, one conceived it to be "a business opportunity," not to be written of here; one was a widower blessed with three small unruly children and little appetite for further matrimonial experience; another a rich, crabbed old miser, bent on escaping designing relatives, and the fourth an enterprising young [119]
mining engineer, very deeply in love with a pretty girl and anxious to marry her and take her with him to a region remote from civilization. The girl had sighed, demurred, wept—she was of the delicate, clinging vine variety, and totally unfit for the hard experiences of a mining camp. But to this fact the amorous engineer was quite naturally oblivious. He dilated glowingly upon the wonderful efficiency of Chinese servants, who could, he assured her, beat creation in the expert disguising of the inevitable "canned goods," which formed the staple of provision. Her questions and those of her mother elicited the fact that there were no women to be hired in any capacity, the wives of the miners, for the most part, being of a free and independent nature, and, moreover, entirely occupied with their own affairs.

Mamma looked at Ethel, and Ethel looked at Mamma; Mamma's glance being dubious and Ethel's timidly imploring.

"I couldn't think of allowing darling Ethel to go away out there to that dreary, lonely place, with no one to wait on her and take care of her except a Chinese man," Mamma said tearfully. She added that Ethel was delicate, very delicate.

"The mountain air will make her strong," declared the engineer enthusiastically. Then he gazed lovingly at the slight, pale, fashionably gowned young woman who somehow managed to hold the wealth of his honest affections in her small, highly manicured [120]
hands, and in whom he fancied all possible happiness was embodied "forever" (as he would have put it).

The end of it all was Mamma's ultimatum, strongly backed up by Ethel's dutiful acquiescence, to the effect that a suitable maid must

be secured; a person who would combine in one the capabilities of cook, ladies' maid, seamstress, and nurse, and who would accompany the timid bride on her long journey away from Mamma's side.

Imagine, then, the bridegroom's dilemma, and his anxiety to secure the advertising young person, who upon further inquiry promised so exactly to fill the conditions of his happiness.

These persons, therefore, or their representatives foregathered at the Preston farm on the morning of the eighteenth of May. With them also appeared a half dozen or so of neighbors, curious and prying, and the usual complement of shabby individuals, mysteriously aware of the unusual, and always to be seen at village weddings, funerals, and public auctions.

Thomas Bellows, alert, business-like, came early in the morning.

"Say, if you want to back out even now," he said to Barbara, "I c'n tell th' folks th' auction's off. I guess you're feelin' kind of frightened an' sorry you was so rash, ain't you?"

"No," said Barbara composedly. "I am not—frightened or sorry." But her face was unnaturally white, and her eyes, deeply circled [121] with shadowy blue, belied the statement. "Must I—stand up and be—sold, like—like——"

"No, ma'am!" exclaimed Mr. Bellows decidedly. "Not by a jugful! You've heard from some of the folks interested, you said?"

"Yes," said Barbara, "I've had a number of letters. Two women are looking for a girl to do all their housework; one needs a nursery governess—she is going with her family to South America to stay five years; another requires a reliable person to look after an imbecile child."

"Huh!" exploded Mr. Bellows, "that all?"

By way of answer Barbara produced the letter of the elderly man who required a competent housekeeper, and that of the widower, the engineer, and the type-written communication of the person who promised a luxurious home in exchange for "slight occasional services of a sort easily rendered."

"Huh!" commented Mr. Bellows, after a deliberate perusal of these epistles. "Did you tell 'em all to show up to-day?"

He looked sharply at the girl, as he tapped the rustling sheets with a blunt, tobacco-stained forefinger. "The sale 'll have to be made conditional on satisfactory evidence that the highest bidder is an honest, respectable sort of person.

"The's folks," he added darkly, "'at I wouldn't sell a cat to—if I cared shucks 'bout the cat."

"I'm not afraid," said Barbara, "to do any sort of work." [122]

"Mebbe not," Mr. Bellows acquiesced dryly. "Wall, guess I'll wait till I git a good look int' their faces. I'll bet," he added, "'at I c'n size 'em up all right. An' I'll see t' it 'at the right bidder gits the goods. An' now I'll tell you what to do. You set here inside the parlor, same's if you was the corpse, we'll say, at a funeral, an' I'll let the bidders come in one b' one an' kind o' size you up. 'Course they've got to know the general specifications, an' mebbe they'll want to ask a few questions. But you'd best let me talk up the article like I know how. That's m' business; an' I won't make no fool mistakes."

Barbara drew a deep breath.

"What," she faltered, "are you going to say?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry none 'bout what I'll say. I'll crack you up sky-high same's I would a first-class horse. All you've got to do is to set right still an' let me do th' auctioneerin'. I'll run you up to fifteen hunderd, if I kin."

"Tell them I—I'll work—hard and faithfully," faltered Barbara.

She choked a little over the last word, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"If I was you, ma'am, I'd put on a red ribbon or—or somethin' cheerful-lookin'," advised Mr. Bellows, with awkward sympathy. "I like a good bright red m'self. An' say, don't you worry none. You ain't 'bliged to accept anybody's bid, unless you feel like it. I'm goin' [123] t' bid ye in m'self, if things don't go right. Where's the little boy?" he asked suddenly.

Barbara controlled herself with an effort.

"In school," she replied briefly. "He—Jimmy isn't to know, till—till afterward."

"Mebbe you c'n take him along," hazarded Mr. Bellows, "to—

South America, say, or——”

“I shall leave him here,” Barbara told him with stony calm. “I have arranged everything.”

A stamping of feet on the porch brought a defiant light to the girl’s eyes and a scarlet flush to her cheeks; Mr. Bellows surveyed her with open satisfaction.

“That’s right!” he encouraged her. “Perk right up! You look wo’th th’ money now all right. I’ll open the front door and let the folks pass right in. Ye don’t need to do a thing but set right still an’ let me manage things. Biddin’ ’ll begin at ten-thirty, sharp!”

And he bustled away full of importance.

Barbara stood quite still in the spot where he had left her, her eyes fastened with a kind of fascinated terror upon the groups of persons coming toward the house. The day was bright and warm and the clumps of old-fashioned shrubs on either side of the driveway, lilac and bridal wreath and snowball, were in full bloom. On the other side of the fence long lines of apple trees laden with odorous pink and white bloom, lifted their gnarled limbs to the blue sky. Barbara saw a woman pointing out the trees to the man at her [124] side. She knew the woman, and fancied she might be speaking of the great yield of fruit to be expected that year from the once famous Preston orchards.

For two years past the girl had been toiling to bring the trees back to a thrifty condition; this spring for the first time they promised heavy returns for all her labors.

She clenched her strong brown hands in a passion of unavailing protest against the cruel fate which flaunted the myriads of blossoms in her face to-day.

More people were coming than she had expected. Her face burned with shame at sight of the two shabby hired hacks among the groups of pedestrians. A woman in one of them thrust her head out of the window and asked some questions of the driver. He nodded his head and presently drew up in front of the house.

“Well, I declare,” she heard in a high-pitched feminine voice, “this seems like quite a nice place. I thought——”

The buzzing of tongues in the rooms across the narrow hall increased; the people were congregating there. She could hear the occasional sound of Mr. Bellows’ creaking boots and his loud authoritative voice, as he answered questions and arranged the chairs, which two of the shabby men under his direction were bringing from various parts of the house.

There was something dreadfully suggestive of a funeral in the subdued hum of voices, the solemnly inquisitive glances levelled towards the house, and the active, creaking steps of Mr. Bellows. [125] Alone in the dim old parlor, peering through the shutters, alternately cold with apprehension and hot with shame, Barbara found herself threatened with hysterical laughter. They will come in presently and look at me, she thought, and stiffened into instant rigidity at sound of the creaking knob.

“Yes, ma’am,” she heard the old auctioneer saying. “You’ll find the young woman right in here. She’s ready t’ be interviewed, an’ I’ll guarantee she’s wo’th double the price anybody’ll bid for her. One at a time, if you please. An’ five minutes only allowed.”

The door opened, and a tall, showily dressed woman entered. She stared at Barbara through a lorgnette.

“Are you the young woman who is to be sold at auction?” she asked, in an unbelieving voice. “I am Mrs. Perkins, the housekeeper at Clifton Grange. I wrote you, with reference to a boy of six. He is large of his age, and not easy to care for. But his mother, who is an invalid, won’t hear to his being sent away from home. Yes; I received your references. But you don’t look old enough to attempt the position I speak of. But I shall have to bid, I suppose, for we can’t keep a nurse in the house. They simply will not stay through more than one of his fractious spells. And of course, if we buy you, you’ll be obliged to remain. Are you strong in your hands?”

“Yes, very,” said Barbara, conscious of the increasing dryness of her lips and throat.

“You have rather a nice face,” observed the woman dubiously. [126] “And I do hope you’re naturally lively and cheerful; you’ll get along better with *him* if you are. If he takes a notion to you, he’ll be pretty good most of the time. But if he don’t—— Are you used to children?”

“I have a brother.”

“How old?”

“Six years.”

“Well, I declare! Quite a coincidence. Is your brother an ordinary child?”

“He is perfectly normal, if that is what you mean,” Barbara managed to say. It was being harder than she thought.

“One thing more,” the woman was saying. “You didn’t answer one question I asked. How did you ever come to think of doing anything so strange as selling your services at auction? And why should you demand all the money at once? If your references—your pastor’s letter and others—hadn’t been so satisfactory, we shouldn’t have thought of considering you. But we do want to secure someone who will stay, and of course you’ll be obliged to; though I’m not allowed to bid above a certain sum. Now I shall expect a truthful answer to——”

Mr. Bellows obtruded his puckered face into the room.

“Time’s up, ma’am,” he said authoritatively. “Other bidders waitin’ their opportunity.”

[127] Barbara could not afterward recall all that passed during the intolerable period before the bidding began. She was vaguely aware of women, tall and short, curious, eager, clutching hand-bags, presumably containing large sums of money. There were men, too. The representative of the Boston widower, the young mining engineer, more eager and determined than ever after his short interview with Barbara.

“I’ll bid every cent I can on you,” he assured the girl, with boyish sincerity. “You’re just the one for us, and I know you’d enjoy the life out there. We wouldn’t treat you like an ordinary servant; you’d be more like a friend, I can see that, and I’m sure Ethel—Mrs. Selfridge [he blushed at his own delightful mendacity] will like you very much. She’ll want to see you at once, if I am the lucky winner.”

It was all strange, dream-like, and for the most part intolerable. Barbara raised her heavy eyes once more at the sound of the hard-shut door. Stephen Jarvis stood looking at her in silence. She felt rather than saw that some great though subtle change had come over him.

“Why,” he asked in a voice as changed as his looks, “have you done this thing?”

She did not answer, and he drew a step nearer.

“Tell me,” he said under his breath, “will you give it up? if I—agree to all that you asked for—time to meet the payments?”

He hesitated as if choosing his words with care.

[128] “You were right about the orchards,” he went on. “There will be a good yield—more than enough.” He stretched out his hands imploringly, “Spare me, Barbara,” he entreated. “Don’t put yourself and me to shame before them all!”

The door swung open a little way.

“Did you say the young woman was in here?” inquired a feminine voice, sharp with curiosity. Barbara caught a momentary glimpse of a militant-looking turban glittering with jet beads. Jarvis shut the door, and stood against it, a tall sombre figure of authority.

“Let me put a stop to it all, Barbara,” he urged. “Barbara!—in God’s name! I can’t let you do it!”

“It is—too late,” she said, speaking slowly because of the dryness of her throat and mouth. “Don’t you see—I must go on with it, and I—shall pay you—every cent!”

He drew a difficult breath that was almost a sob.

“You—will—pay—me,” he repeated, a dreadful self-loathing struggling with the despair in his eyes. Then he went away, quietly, as he had come.

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[129]

XI

Peg Morrison smote the rough brown backs of his horses with a practised slap of the lines.

"Y' remind me o' the sect in gen'ral," he observed, in a loud, critical voice, as the off member of the team backed and fidgeted uneasily. "When y' want a female, woman er hoss, to go, thet's th' pertickler time they elect t' stan' still, an' when y' want 'em to stan 'still—— Whoa, thar; can't ye?"

Mr. Morrison paused to wipe the moisture from his brow with an ancient handkerchief of red and white, while he gazed lovingly at the wide expanse of glistening brown earth which had been deeply ploughed, and more or less levelled into smoothness under the action of the harrow which the horses were dragging.

"Planted t' onions," he went on, still addressing his observations to the horses, whose heads drooped sleepily toward the fresh-smelling ground, "this 'ere ten acres 'll net, anyway you figger it, four hunderd an' fifty dollars t' the acre; an' that'll total—l'me see, somethin' like——"

Mr. Morrison's gaze being wholly introspective at this stage of the mental problem under consideration, he failed to notice the man who came swinging along the road at a smart rate of speed. At sight [130] of the old man leaning meditatively against the fence, a spent dandelion stalk in his mouth, the pedestrian halted.

"Why, hello, Peg!" he called out in a clear and somewhat authoritative voice.

The stranger wore a rough suit of weather-stained tweeds; and his felt hat, set at a becoming angle on his curly head, shaded a face bronzed by sun and wind almost to the color of the full brown beard curling away from his red mouth with a careless boldness repeated in the humorous blue eyes which roved over the shabby old figure by the fence.

He laughed outright at the puzzled look in Morrison's face.

Then he folded his arms on top of the fence.

"Well, how goes it, old man?" he inquired. "Same lazy old horses—eh? Same job, same season of the year, same old clothes, I should say—even to the red and white bandanna. Makes me feel as if I'd been dreaming. Maybe I have; who knows?"

"Who be ye?" demanded Peg. "Seems 's 'o I'd seen ye somewhars; but I can't think whar."

"Don't be hasty, my friend," advised the other, pulling his hat over his laughing eyes. "You've forgotten me, and so, apparently, has everyone else. I saw Al Hewett at the station and he told me Miss Preston was unmarried and still at home, and that old Don Preston had gone to his reward a couple of years ago."

"I c'n see you used t' live 'round here," hazarded Peg, shaking his [131] head, "but I can't seem t' rec'lect who ye be; 'nless—— If I didn't know he was dead I might think you was the young feller 'at used t' teach school in th' village. Whitcomb, his name was. But he's been dead a matter o' three years."

"That being the case," said the stranger coolly, "perhaps you'll tell me about the auction up at the farm. I heard some women asking questions about it at the station."

"Auction?" repeated Peg. "The' ain't no auction at our place—not yet. But you sure do remind me o' that young school-teacher feller. He got gold crazy, an' went off——"

"Yes, I know; and got lost on a trail and froze to death," interrupted the stranger. "So I heard. Sad, wasn't it? Did they find the body?"

"Not," said Peg, his puzzled eyes still searching the stranger's face, "as I heerd tell of."

"Then you think the coast is clear up at the farm? Is Barbara—Miss Preston—at home?"

"Miss Barb'ry was to home when I come away at six-thirty this mornin'. Say, are you——?"

"I'll walk over and call on her," interrupted the young man, with some impatience. "Perhaps Barbara will remember an old friend. Her eyes used to be bright enough."

Peg unhitched the harrow with fine deliberation.

"Hold on a minute," he requested, "an' I'll step 'long with ye. It's

gittin' 'long towards noon, anyhow."

He was furtively studying the younger man's face and figure, as [132]
he let down the bars and drove his horses through.

"B'en doin' any school-teachin' sence ye left these parts?" he drawled, as the two struck the road at a pace commensurate to the unhurried gait of the old horses.

"No," said the stranger. He plunged his hands deep in his pockets, the merriment suddenly gone from his face and eyes.

"Ye look consid'ble older'n ye did," observed Peg mildly, "an' the whiskers gives ye a diff'rent look; but come t' take notice, most anybody'd know ye, though ye must hev knocked 'round consid'able. Hev any luck minin'?"

Whitcomb laughed, throwing back his head as if the question afforded him a vast deal of amusement.

"Luck?" he echoed. "Certainly; a man's bound to strike luck of one sort or another."

"That's a fac'," agreed Peg sententiously, "an' you can't most always sometimes tell one sort f'om the other. What passes fer the worst sort o' luck 'll frequent turn out to be fust-rate. I knew a man once——"

He stopped short, his jaw dropping at sight of the numerous vehicles congregated near the house which they were approaching. "I swan!" he ejaculated. "It sure does look like—— But Miss Barb'ry never said nothin' t' me. She never tol' me——"

"I'm going in," said David Whitcomb, scowling.

Several women congregated near the door stared at him with a [133]
resentful air as he made his way masterfully among them.

At one end of the long, low room, his back to the open windows, stood Thomas Bellows, a small bare table in front of him, on which he rested the flat of his outspread hands while haranguing the company ranged on either side, the women for the most part comfortably seated, the men standing in the rear, as if half ashamed to be present.

"Eight hunderd, do I hear?" inquired the auctioneer in a tone of passionate protest, "it bein' understood there'll be a five years' lease on the prop'ty in question? Ladies an' gents, that ain't right! Eight hunderd ain't a patch on what she's worth. I've told you what sort of goods you're biddin' on an' you've had the opportunity to see fer yourselves. Eight hunderd ten, do I hear? Who'll make it a fifty? Eight hunderd fifty; who'll make it nine hunderd? Come! let me hear some good lively biddin' on the part of the lady in the green dress. This lady is lookin' fer an honest, permanent hired girl; she told me so b'fore the biddin' begun. She's had a terrible time with hired help; she's paid 'em high wages, an' they break her china dishes, steal her clo'es, an——

"That's right! eight hunderd sixty-five from the young man in the comer. That gentleman knows what's what; an' he's lookin' fer an A number one helper t' take west t' help his wife do the cookin'. W'y, [134]
this is the opportunity of a lifetime, an' if you let it pass—eight hunderd seventy dollars I'm offered, who'll make it nine hunderd? I'll tell ye, straight, ladies, this perfec'ly healthy, honest, willin', agreeable, faithful young woman ain't goin't' be knocked down t' any of ye at nine hunderd dollars. Don't think it fer a minute! She's goin' to git her price, an' I know what it is."

"For God's sake, what's going on here?" asked Whitcomb of a man in a fashionable light suit, with a diamond in his shirt-front. "What is the man selling?"

By way of answer the man held up his two hands, the fingers outstretched.

"There you are, ten hunderd dollars I'm offered; one thousand dollars! Who'll make it eleven? A thousand dollars may sound like a pretty good sum t' slap down all at once, ladies; but do a little figurin', if you please! You pay eighteen, twenty, twenty-five dollars a month for a raw, untrained foreigner; can't speak English, can't cook, can't do nothin', an' once you get her trained off she goes's lively's a flea. Five years of domestic peace in yer home! Five years of perfec' happiness! Ain't it worth more'n a measly thousand dollars? The gentleman in the comer says it is; he bids ten hunderd fifty. Ten hunderd fifty, ten hunderd sixty! Oh, come, let's run 'er up faster! I can't stan' here all day foolin'. The gentleman in the corner again. Yes, sir, eleven hunderd! Who'll make it twelve?"

"Stop long enough to tell me what you're selling, man," called [135]

the latest comer, in a loud, clear voice. “I didn’t get here in time to find out, and no one will tell me.”

A general murmur of protest arose all over the room. A tall woman, with a high-peaked nose set midway in a large expanse of purplish-red face, arose.

“I’m through!” she announced acidly. “Let me out of here.”

“No, you ain’t, ma’am. Kindly set down in that nice comf’table cheer you’ve been occupyin’ fer about ten minutes longer. I’ll answer this gentleman quick an’t’ the p’int an’ we’ll go on with the biddin’. I’m auctionin’ off five years o’ faithful work an’ service; I’m auctionin’ peace an’ happiness in the home; I’m auctionin’ the educated brains an’ han’s an’ feet of the smartest young lady in this ’ere United States of Ameriky! An’ that’s Miss Barbara Preston. Do you want to bid? Eleven hunderd dollars I’m offered; who’ll make it twelve?”

“It’s an outrage on civilization!” cried the man who had interrupted. “I protest against the sale!”

“Put him out! Put him out!” shouted a dozen voices.

In the midst of the tumult some one signalled twelve hundred, and Thomas Bellows caught the figures. Pounding on the table with his mallet, he commanded order.

“The sale will be continued, and I’m offered twelve hunderd [136] dollars; remember, gentlemen; remember, ladies, your bids will be cancelled if you do not live up to your part of the previous agreement. Spot cash before you leave the room, and a guarantee of honorable service and kind treatment. Gentlemen! Ladies! Your attention, please! Twelve hunderd dollars I’m offered! Twelve hunderd, going! Twelve hunderd dollars! Twelve hunderd, fifty? Yes, sir! Twelve hunderd, sixty! Thirteen hunderd dollars I’m bid by the gentleman by the door. Come down front where we can all see you, sir. Thirteen hunderd, going!—Fourteen hunderd! Now this is something like! Isn’t there any lady present who’ll make it fifteen?”

The woman in the green dress rose in her place.

“This is preposterous!” she cried. “No servant is worth——”

“Be quiet, madam,” commanded the auctioneer. “I’m runnin’ this sale. Fourteen hunderd dollars. Is there any lady or gent in the room who’ll raise it? Fourteen hunderd fifty. Fifteen hunderd!”

“Sixteen hundred!”

The young man in the travel-stained tweeds shook his fist in the face of the small, seedy man, who drawled out his bids in a hoarse, scarcely audible voice.

“Sixteen hunderd I’m offered by the gentleman who has just arrived. Sixteen hunderd, going!”

“Two thousand!” piped the little man in the creased checked suit.

“Twenty-one hundred!” shouted the latest comer, his eyes [137] blazing.

“Twenty-three hundred!” said the engineer in a dogged monotone.

“Twenty-five hundred!” wheezed the man in checks, squinting through his glasses at the paper on which he was setting down the bids with painstaking neatness.

“Twenty-five hunderd dollars I’m offered!” shrilled the auctioneer. “Do you raise it?” He turned to Whitcomb.

“Twenty-six hundred!” cried the engineer excitedly.

“Three thousand!” the hoarse voice of the shabby little stranger interposed.

“Three thousand, one hundred!” snapped Whitcomb.

“Three thousand one hunderd! Who’ll make it four thousand?” The old auctioneer’s voice trembled. He leaned far out over the table, brandishing his mallet wildly.

The man in the checked suit nodded.

“Four thousand dollars I’m bid; who’ll raise it to five?”

The young fellow who had tacitly acknowledged himself to be David Whitcomb groaned aloud.

“I can’t do it!” he said.

There was a general stir and turning of heads as Peg Morrison forced his way through the excited crowd.

“Hold on thar!” he cried, in a loud, tremulous voice. “I’ve been up [138] an’ got my money an’ counted it. I’ll bid on Miss Barb’ry myself. She ain’t a-goin’ t’ leave this ’ere farm t’ go with nobody, ’f I c’n help it! I

bid fifty-eight dollars an' sixty-five cents on Miss Barb'ry, an' it's all I've got in the world!"

"Four thousand dollars I'm bid!" cried Mr. Bellows, his professional tones easily dominating the babel of voices. "Four thousand dollars, going! Four thousand dollars, going! Four thousand dollars, gone! And sold to this 'ere gentleman. Your name, please!"

The small man, in the checked clothes, cleared his throat weakly and blinked, as he strapped the leathern memorandum book.

"My name's Smith," he said, in an apologetic whisper.

"Well, Mr. Smith, you c'n settle right here and now, an' I'll give you a signed receipt."

"Hold on!" blustered Whitcomb, his face flushed to a wrathful crimson. "Who is this fellow, and what does he mean to do with—Barbara?" The last word was a groan of rage and disappointment.

"Excuse me, sir; I've got a bad cold an' can't talk. I'll explain to Mr. Bellows here in private. Yes, sir; I've got the money all right."

The woman in the jetted turban and the tall lady in green advanced in a determined way, backed up by three women of the village, burning with neighborly zeal; the countenances of all five expressed blended curiosity and disapproval. The small man in the [139] checked suit endeavored to shrink behind Mr. Bellows' portly person, but the lady in the jetted turban fixed him with her glittering eye.

"I command you to tell me at once why you bid four thousand dollars for the services of the young person in the other room," said this person in a militant voice. "I suspect your motives, sir! I doubt your respectability." She turned to the other women. "Tell me," she demanded, "does this man look honest?"

Mr. Smith blinked weakly at his inquisitors.

"I'm all right, ma'am," he said hoarsely, "an' puffec'ly honest. An' I ain't biddin' for myself, but for another party."

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed the five women in unbelieving chorus. "Who is your principal?" snapped the indignant lady in green. "Of course we all know the girl can't be worth eight hundred dollars a year, in any respectable employment."

The little man coughed apologetically.

"She's wanted," he said, "by a responsible party to look after a little boy—a very nice, respectable little boy."

"Is he a widower?" shrieked the ladies in unison.

"No, ma'am," replied the little man, ducking his head fearfully and edging away. "He ain't old enough to be married yet."

"Not old enough to be married? Oh! you mean the boy?"

"Come on, sir, an' we'll settle," put in the auctioneer, taking Mr. [140] Smith by the arm, as if he feared he might be planning an escape.

But Mr. Smith appeared entirely ready, even anxious, to settle. In the privacy of the kitchen he counted off from a sizable roll four thousand dollars in bills of large denominations, repeating in a painstaking manner what he had already told the women.

"Yes, sir; the young woman's wanted to look after a child."

"Whereabouts?" inquired the auctioneer.

"W'y, I don't rightly know," wheezed Mr. Smith. "M' asthma's terrible bad this morning."

"So I see! so I see," observed Mr. Bellows, rubbing his chin dubiously. "An' you can't tell me——"

"The young woman is to stay right here till she's called for," repeated the gentleman in checks. "No, sir; I couldn't say when that 'll be. She must be ready to start most any day. But she's to stay right here till called for. You tell her. Yes, sir. I've got references. Everythin' O.K. Tell her that, will you? An', say, you'll pass the money right over to her, will you? To-day; yes."

"Less fi' per cent," said Mr. Bellows unctuously. "Pretty good mornin's work," he added, rubbing his hands. "I never thought o' such a thing's runnin' her up to such a figure. An' you'd 'a' bid more, I take it, if you'd had to? As 'twas, you was kind of reckless towards the last."

"Mebbe I did go a little higher'n I needed to," acknowledged Mr. [141] Smith mildly. "But I thought I might as well." He coughed and blinked weakly. "It didn't make no difference to me," he said. "I wuz prepared to secure the services of the young woman at any figure.

Yes, sir.”

XII

"I CONGRATULATE ye, ma'am, on the success o' your idee," Thomas Bellows said, when an hour later he handed to Barbara the roll of bills from which he had complacently peeled off his own tidy commission. "This 'ere 'll pay off the lien on your prop'ty, I take it, an' leave you a pretty good nest-egg besides."

"Who," said Barbara, her face pale and troubled, "bought—me?"

"W'y, as t' that," confessed the auctioneer, "I can't tell you exactly. I was asked to hand you this 'ere letter. It contains further perticklers, I persoom."

He produced a thick square envelope bearing her name and address in type-written characters.

"You was to stay right here on call, I was asked t' inform you. No, ma'am; it wa'n't any o' them folks that wrote t' you beforehand. A man, name of Smith; said he was the agent of the party as bid you in. You're to stay right here till called for."

Barbara had opened the envelope and was scanning the few lines of type-writing in the middle of the large square sheet.

> "Miss Barbara Preston [she read] will hold herself in readiness to enter upon the term of her service, previously understood to be five years. It is impossible, at the present instant, for the writer to state when the call will come; but the term of service will be reckoned from this eighteenth day of May, 19——. Miss Preston's duties will comprise the conduct of a home, and the care and guardianship of a little child."

[143]

There was also enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope, containing a paper drawn up in legal form, binding one Barbara Preston, spinster, for and in consideration of the sum of four thousand dollars (herein acknowledged), to a term of continuous service, beginning on the eighteenth day of May, 19— and terminating on the same day of the month in the year 19—. The document was duly witnessed and bore, in lieu of signature, the imprint of a seal, with a device of crossed battle-axes and the single word *Invictus*.

"You're t' sign right here," said Mr. Bellows, indicating with his blunt forefinger the space below the seal. "Me an' Peg Morrison 'll witness the signature. I told him to wait outside, in case the' was papers to sign. I'll see to forwardin' it for you. Le' me see that there envelope; likely it'll shed a little light on th' identity o' the party."

But the envelope bore merely the number of a post-office box, in a distant city.

Mr. Bellows scratched his head and squinted his eyes into puzzled slits as he surveyed this unsatisfactory bit of evidence from every possible angle.

"Wall, I don't know," he burst out at length, "es I'd trust that proposition teetotally, if it wasn't fer the references. The man as bid ye in satisfied me the party he was representin' was O.K. es t' character an' intentions."

[144]

He glanced shrewdly at the girl; but Barbara asked no questions. She was beginning to realize that while the shackles which had bound her to Jarvis were about to be loosed, this unknown master of her future had forged a new and perhaps heavier fetter. But her composed features betrayed nothing while she wrote her name clearly—Barbara Allen Preston—below the red seal, with its short but significant motto.

Thomas Bellows went away after a little, taking with him the contract, duly signed, sealed, and ready to deliver, and Barbara, left quite alone in the disordered house, quietly locked the money away in a drawer of her desk.

She turned to find Peg Morrison staring at her with eyes full of grief and consternation.

"Miss Barb'ry," he began, "why in creation didn't ye tell me what you was goin' t' do? Sellin' yourself—sellin' your own flesh an' blood, like you was an Aferc'n slave! What d'you s'pose your folks 'd a said t' what took place in this 'ere house t'-day—huh? I'll bet your grandmother Preston 'd think you'd gone crazy. Where be you goin'? What you goin' t' do with th' Cap'n? Whar do I come in in this 'ere deal? Them's questions 'at I want answered right now. I've a notion," he added darkly, "that you be kind o' cracked. 'N' I don't wonder at it much."

Barbara was putting the furniture in place, straightening the [145]
rugs, and otherwise restoring to its wonted order the scene of the recent auction. Her cheeks and lips were bright with color; her eyes sparkled as she faced the old man.

"You are entirely mistaken, Peg," she said impatiently. "Just listen, will you? If I had waited a few days longer we should have been sold out under the hammer—farm, house, furniture, stock. Now we shan't be. Do you understand? This very day I'm going to settle with the Honorable Stephen Jarvis [her red lips curled a little over the words], and I'll pay Abe Hewett, too, and all the others. Oh! I'm glad I did it—glad! Jimmy will have the farm, and there'll be plenty left to fix the fences, and buy the fertilizers we need and mend the broken roof and maybe paint the house. Don't you see, Peg, what a splendid thing it will be?"

"But where are you goin', Miss Barb-ry?" The old man's voice held the sound of tears. "An' who's goin' to take care o' the Cap'n?"

Barbara compressed her lips sternly.

"I don't know where I shall go," she said, "but wherever I am I can write to—to Jimmy; and Peg, I want you to stay, just as you have; only I shall pay you good wages. I shall pay up all that I owe you, too, and——"

"Will I hev charge o' the Cap'n?" inquired the old man anxiously. [146]
"Five years is a long time, Miss Barb'ry, he'll be—l' me see. W'y, the Cap'n 'll be 'leven years old time you're at liberty."

Barbara drew her fine dark brows together.

"I've engaged Martha Cottle to come here and keep house and take care of Jimmy," she said. "She's coming this afternoon."

Mr. Morrison's jaw dropped.

"Marthy Cottle!" he ejaculated. "W'y, that female—she don't know no more 'bout little boys 'an—'an a Holstein steer. She's an old maid schoolmarm, cut an' dried."

"She can help Jimmy with his lessons," Barbara said doggedly. "She's good and honest, and she'll do her best to——"

"Gosh!" murmured the old man, shaking his head. "She'll do her best, mebbe, but—wall, I'll do what I kin fer the Cap'n t'—keep him f'om gittin' too awful lonesome an' discouraged. Marthy Cottle! Huh! We'll hev t' make out the best we kin after you're gone. Does—the Cap'n know—hev you tol' him you're a-goin leave him?"

"No," said Barbara, in a harsh voice. "I haven't, and I don't intend to, either. I—I'll leave word. I—couldn't, Peg."

Her young voice broke in an irrepressible sob.

"Don't you feel bad, Miss Barb'ry," the old man essayed to comfort her. "You meant it fer the best, I know you did, Miss Barb'ry. An' mebbe it'll turn out all right. I wouldn't cross no bridges till I got to 'em, ef I was you. I s'pose," he went on, his shrewd eyes on her face, "'at you seen young Dave Whitcomb this [147]
mornin'—him 'at used to teach school in th' village?"

Barbara's face whitened.

"You don't mean——" she faltered.

"Dave was here t' the auction," pursued Mr. Morrison. "I heerd him put in two or three big bids on ye. He was ready to pass out his entire pile t'—save ye f'om bein' took away; I'll say that much fer Dave."

He turned, with his hand on the door.

"I didn't hev nothin' when it come t' biddin'," he groaned. "I might 'a' saved m' breath t' cool m' porridge. But I'd 'a' give the best fi' years off'n m' life t' 'a' kep' ye right here at home, where ye b'long. I swan I would, Miss Barb'ry."

"I know you would, Peg," Barbara said gently. Her eyes, the beautiful clear eyes of her father in his first unspoiled youth, were misty with tears, but she smiled bravely. "Five years isn't long," she reminded him. "It'll soon be over. And you can raise five crops of those wonderful onions while I'm gone."

Stephen Jarvis was at home and alone in his library that afternoon when Barbara asked to see him. It might even have been inferred that he expected her; but if he did, he made no sign. His manner was cool and calm, quite in keeping with the business of the hour, as he took pains to explain to her a number of details connected with the accumulated interest upon interest, delinquent tax accounts, and other matters pertaining to the estate which [148]
Barbara, in her poverty, had been forced to ignore.

“I can pay it all,” she said to him, the fruit of her triumph sweet upon her lips. “That is why I am here—to pay—everything I owe.”

He looked at her quietly.

“You are doubtless to be congratulated upon the success of your scheme,” he said. “I hear you realized quite a handsome sum on the sale of——” he hesitated for the fraction of a minute—“your future.”

“It will be only five years,” Barbara said defiantly. “I shall be glad to work—hard, for Jimmy.”

“When,” he asked, “do you expect to leave town?”

“To-day, to-morrow—I cannot tell. I am ready to go now.”

“To be gone five years,” he said thoughtfully. “Very well; we will finish this business at once. Let me advise you to attend to your taxes promptly hereafter; and if——”

“Thank you,” interrupted Barbara haughtily. “I shall be able, I am sure, to meet all obligations in the future. The farm may be worthless, worn out, but it will pay for itself.”

He did not appear to have heard her last words. He was busily arranging various papers. And presently he handed her the cancelled bond and mortgage, and the receipted tax bills, all neatly arranged. In return she counted out to him, with fingers which [149] trembled in spite of herself, the crisp bills for which she had sold her youth.

“There!” she said rather breathlessly. “Is that all?”

“All,” he repeated quietly. “And it is all quite right. Thank you.”

She looked at him uncertainly. His head was bent, his eyes fixed upon the pile of rustling bank-notes which she had just pushed toward him.

A sudden unreasoning sense of dismay fell upon the girl, shadowing the triumph in her face. She made swift retreat toward the door, casting a half-frightened backward look at the sombre figure behind the desk.

He did not lift his eyes from their unseeing contemplation of the money, even when the jarring sound of the hard-shut door told him she was gone.

Left quite alone Stephen Jarvis slowly folded the notes, sealed them securely in a stout envelope and locked them in his safe.

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[150]

XIII

Young Whitcomb sat quite at his ease in Donald Preston's big arm-chair, one leg flung carelessly over the other, his handsome head thrown back, its riotous curls shining in the lamp-light. His blue eyes, full of laughter, were set upon Barbara.

"So you thought I was dead, did you?" he asked, in a bantering tone; "but it didn't appear to bother you much. You're looking handsomer than ever, Barbara. I had an idea I'd find you—changed."

He waited for some sort of reply; but Barbara was trying hard to reconcile the ruddy, smiling man, who sat so unconcernedly in her dead father's place, with the pallid, serious, large-eyed phantom of her dreams. She had been looking at him in puzzled silence, and now her glance disengaged itself from his with an effort.

"I'll wager," he said, "that you have been thinking of me with 'a crown upon my forehead, a harp within my hand,' the way we used to sing in Sunday school when we were kids. Now own up! And you're disappointed to find that I'm such a commonplace, live-looking chap—eh, Barbara?"

"I find you—changed," she confessed, in a low voice, "greatly changed."

David Whitcomb laughed triumphantly. [151]

"Yes; I flatter myself that the pious pedagogue has been pretty well knocked out of me in the last five years. Good Lord! what a solemn, sentimental ass I must have been in those days. It was a lucky thing for me that you sent me about my business. Still,—Barbara, I'd give a gold nugget to know just what you thought when they told you I'd passed in my checks. Did you picture poor David lying cold and pale under some frozen cairn along the Yukon trail? That's the way they dispose of unlucky prospectors up north; just dig a hole in the snow and drop 'em in; then pile stones on top to keep off the wolves. Ugh! I can hear 'em howl, if I stop to to think, now. Did you drop a tear on that imaginary grave of mine up in the Arctic; did you, Barbara?"

Her eyes evaded his smiling blue gaze.

"Why should you ask?" she hesitated. "It was a great surprise—a great shock."

"You refer, of course, to the news of my death," he said. "But you survived the shock, as you call it, and—you are far more beautiful than I remembered you."

He leaned forward and rested his head on his clasped hands, his eyes searching her face with smiling boldness.

"There are not many men," he went on, "who come back from the grave the way I did to find—everything so unchanged."

He sprang from his chair and paced the floor excitedly. [152]

"If I'd only come yesterday!" he cried. "I had saved enough—I could have prevented that absurd fiasco."

He stopped in front of her.

"Why didn't you answer my letter, Barbara?"

"I couldn't read it," she murmured, a sudden vivid color fluttering in her cheeks. "Jimmy lost it on the way home from the office, and it lay out in the rain a week. I knew, though, that you were not—dead."

"And that I had not forgotten you," he urged. "You must have wondered, though, why I had not written before. But I couldn't. I swore when I went away that I would get money—somehow. That I would get enough to save you out of the slavery you were in then. I meant to hire a caretaker for your father, a nurse for the boy. But I had the devil's own luck. Three times I won, only to lose. Then I made a little pile—not enough; but still I thought—I hoped—— Do you want me to tell you what I hoped, Barbara?"

"No," she said faintly. "I—can't listen."

"Why?" he urged. "Do you—love someone else?"

She looked at him imploringly.

"You were here, and you know——"

"Yes," he said sharply. "I know what happened. You must have been out of your mind with anxiety, Barbara, to have thought of [153] such a thing. Why did you do it?"

“I wanted to save the farm—for Jimmy.”

He shrugged his shoulders, with a muttered exclamation.

“You got the money?”

“Yes.”

“And so you’re sold into slavery for five years?”

She made no reply.

“Now, see here, Barbara. I won’t stand for anything of the sort. It’s an outrage. I haven’t enough—quite—to pay the other fellow out; but I’ll arrange it with him—or her. Is it a man or a woman slave-holder, Barbara?”

She hesitated.

“I—don’t know,” she said, “not yet.”

“You don’t know?” he echoed. “Why, this is more preposterous than the other. Of course you’ll have to know.”

“It is quite true,” she said quietly. “I only know that I must be ready to leave home at a minute’s notice.”

He bent over her with sudden passion.

“Marry me, Barbara,” he begged in a low, shaken voice. “If you only will, I’ll manage it somehow.”

“I—can’t,” she murmured. “I am in honor bound. Don’t you see? I’ve accepted the money, and paid a part of it for debts.”

He threw himself down in his chair and pulled it toward hers impatiently.

“Let me think,” he said quickly. “You’ve paid off your mortgage. [154]
How much was it?”

She told him, and he set down the figures rapidly.

“Who held your mortgage?” he wanted to know.

“Stephen Jarvis,” she said, with a singular reluctance at which she wondered, even while she perceived it.

“Miserly old crab; I remember him,” said David Whitcomb.

His face brightened suddenly.

“Hurrah!” he cried. “I have it! With what you’ve got left and my little pile we’ve more than enough to buy you back. Don’t you see? Marry me, dear, and we’ll call the sale off, pay back the money, and ——”

He stopped short at sight of her unresponsive face.

“I’ve signed a contract,” she objected.

“What if you have?” he urged. “The contract can be quashed. You’ll give me the right to get you out of it, Barbara?”

She hesitated, her eyes averted from his anxious face.

“Do you mean that you don’t—that you can’t—? Barbara, do you prefer slavery—to me?”

“I mean,” she said slowly, “that I cannot—promise you anything until——”

“But don’t you see, dear, that it would be better, safer that way? As your husband—even as your promised husband—I could—Good Lord! what a preposterous situation! You must give me the right to [155]
get you out of it.”

She shook her head.

“I did it voluntarily,” she said, “and I must fulfil my agreement.”

His face reddened with quick anger.

“Then you will go peacefully away with this person—man or woman—and stay five years, when the matter might easily be arranged by paying back the money, and by proving a prior claim. My claim is prior, Barbara. I loved you five years ago. I love you now. Give me the right to break this absurd bond. Won’t you, Barbara?”

His lips, his eyes, pleaded with his eloquent voice. He dropped to his knees beside her chair; his arm stole about her waist.

“Barbara!” he murmured, his face close to hers.

She broke from him with a little shuddering cry.

“What is it? What have I done?”

“Do you know—did you hear how my father—died?” she asked, in a frightened voice.

He sprang to his feet, his face crimson with shame and fury.

“I drank a glass of wine before I came here to-night—a single glass,” he said. “Is it that you mean?”

His eyes demanded instant answer.

“If you had suffered what I suffered——” she began; then her voice broke. “I couldn’t help it, David; I—remembered.”

[156] It was the first time she had called him by his name. He looked at her in silence for a minute.

“I understand,” he said gently. “I won’t offend again. I promise you.”

“To-morrow,” she went on hurriedly, “I shall hear; someone will call for me. I am all ready—to go. But I will—try, I will explain——”

She put out her hand to forestall his quick protest.

“No; please. I—cannot promise anything—yield anything, until I have arranged the matter. If I succeed——”

He waited for her to go on.

“I must have time to think,” she murmured. “I—am not sure of myself.”

He went away, bidding her a brief good-night, his eyes hurt and angry.

Barbara watched his straight, lithe figure, as he strode away from the little circle of her lamp-light into the dripping gloom of the spring night. So had she sent him away from her long ago into the rain and the darkness. Then, as now, she was in honor bound to a lonely task.

She turned to find her newly engaged housekeeper standing behind her in the semi-obscurity of the passage. Martha Cottle was a tall, angular woman with a pallid, uncertain complexion, a long thin nose, and an air of perpetual inquiry.

“Was that the party you expect to work for?” she demanded. “I thought,” she added, with a slightly offended air, “that you’d call me [157] in and introduce me. I was waiting in the dining-room.”

Barbara wondered if the spinster’s large, flat ears had caught any of the conversation, carried on unguardedly on the other side of the door.

She shook her head. “That wasn’t the person,” she said. “Perhaps to-morrow——” She hesitated. “Of course it will be soon.”

Miss Cottle pushed authoritatively into the room where Barbara had been sitting.

“I haven’t had a real good opportunity to talk things over with you,” she said. “If you’re expecting to be called away sudden, perhaps this will be as good a time as any. I want to tell you what I think about that child.”

Barbara drew a deep breath.

“Well?” she murmured interrogatively.

“I see you’ve spoiled him pretty completely,” pursued Miss Cottle. “But I’ll soon get him in hand.”

She compressed her thin lips.

“He got into a regular tantrum to-night because I took a book of his to look at. ‘Vallable Inf’mation,’ he calls it. Nearly every word in it is spelled wrong. I wonder at you for permitting anything of the sort. I took the book away from him. Here it is.”

Barbara looked at the woman in a sudden panic of apprehension.

“Oh!” she protested, “you ought not to have done that. The book [158] was a birthday present. It is one of Jimmy’s dearest treasures.”

“I believe you said you wanted I should look after James’s education,” intoned the spinster. “If I am to stay here, I shall do it con-sci-en-tiously.”

She pronounced the last word with due regard to every syllable, it being a favorite adverb modifying every possible activity.

Barbara was turning over the pages of the book, several of which were quite covered with Jimmy’s scrawling characters in red ink.

“A Vallable Information ’bout getting mad [she read]. Dont get mad Ezy. It dont Do enny Good, an sum the tim it gets a fello in Trubble. Peg says this is portant.”

Barbara smiled as she shut the covers gently together.

“I shall give this book to Jimmy,” she said quietly, “and please, Miss Cottle, don’t take it away from him again. Jimmy is such a little boy, and I—he has always been loved. I hope you——”

“I don’t believe in sozzling over a child,” interrupted the woman severely. “I’ll see that the boy gets plenty of good bread and butter, and that he goes to school and Sabbath services regularly. By the time you get back I guess you’ll see quite a change in him. When do you expect to start, to-morrow?”

Miss Cottle's tone expressed a growing impatience.

"I supposed you'd get off this afternoon. I see your trunk is packed and all. There's no use of hanging back and procrastinating when there's work to do. That's one thing I shall teach James."

[159]

She compressed her lips severely, as if anxious to begin.

"I am ready to go," Barbara told her, with lips which trembled in spite of herself. "I hope you won't be too severe with Jimmy—at first; he isn't used to it."

"Yes," agreed Miss Cottle, with an acid smile, "it's easy enough to see that you've spoiled the child completely. But I'll soon straighten him out. My method with children has never been known to fail. Their wills want breaking the first thing; after that they'll mind, I can tell you."

"But I don't want Jimmy's will broken," protested Barbara, "please don't try to do that."

Miss Cottle tossed her head majestically.

"I shall use my own judgment," she said firmly, "and I don't expect no interference; and that reminds me, I want to speak about that hired man of yours. He's brought more truck into that back bedroom, where you said he was to sleep, than anybody could keep track of. I told him I wouldn't have it, and he answered back in a way I'm not accustomed to hear. You'll have to speak to him. Once you're out the house, I'll try to get things regulated. But if I should be sick—and I may as well tell you that I'm subject to bad spells of malaria—I shall have to send for my sister from New Hampshire. She's a widow with one daughter; of course she'd have to bring Elvira along. I thought I'd tell you, because once you're gone you won't be able to get back. I suppose your idea is that I'll do with everything the same as if it was my own for the five years?"

[160]

Miss Cottle's voice held a rising inflection, and Barbara murmured something vaguely acquiescent.

"Of course I couldn't do any other way," pursued the spinster; "having left my own nice home to come here and do for you. The butter and egg money will be mine, I suppose, and the young chickens? I couldn't think of doing any other way than what I've been used to. There! I hear that boy calling you. That sort of thing will have to be broken up, right in the beginning—once you're out of the house to stay. A great big boy like that!"

Barbara fled upstairs, the little red book in her hand, to find Jimmy, in his white night-gown, standing at the top of the stairs. She caught the child in her strong young arms, cuddling his cold little body against her breast.

"I wanted you," grieved the child, half strangling her with his eager kisses. "Why do we have that woman, Barb'ra? I don't like her. She took my Vallable Inf'mation book, 'n'—'n'—I scwatched her, 'n' she slapped me. Send her away, Barb'ra; we don't want her; do we?"

The girl wrapped a blanket warmly about the child and sat down with him in a chair by the window. The iron of her new chain bade fair to eat into her very soul as she soothed and rocked into forgetfulness of his troubles the beloved little cause of all her perplexities. Why, after all, had she done this thing? Was there not a heavier debt than could be paid in money? And was she not bankrupt still in love and peace?

[161]

In that hour of darkness all the terrifying consequences of her attempt to break away from Jarvis crowded upon her mind. Unless the person who had paid four thousand dollars for five years of her life could be induced to release her, she must indeed pay heavily for Jimmy's inheritance. Her baffled thoughts hovered about the unknown personality of this arbiter of her future.

"To-morrow," she thought aloud, "I shall know."

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[162]

XIV

The blossoms had fallen in showers of fragrant pink and white petals from the wide-spreading boughs of the Preston orchards and already Peg Morrison's dreams of a great harvest were beginning to show faint promise of fulfilment in long lines of slender green onion shoots; yet Barbara found herself still waiting the summons of her unknown master. Her little trunk, locked and strapped, stood in the closet of her chamber; her shabby travelling cloak, hat, and gloves lay ready for instant use. Each morning she dressed Jimmy, brushed his yellow curls, and saw him off to school with smiles and kisses, not knowing whether he would find her upon his return; and each evening she lavished upon the little boy the hungry affection hoarded for a lonelier night in some distant city.

"You love me more'n you used to, don't you, Barb'ra?" the child asked, puzzled by the look in her eyes. "You kiss me kind o' hard."

"I always loved you with all my heart, Jimmy," she answered. "I couldn't love you any more."

"An' I love you, Barb'ra," declared the little boy, "I love you more'n anybody. But," he added darkly, "I 'spise that Miss Cottle wiv all my insides an' all my outsides. Make her go 'way, Barb'ra."

"Miss Cottle is a good woman, Jimmy," the girl told him seriously. [163]
"She would take care of you if—I should be obliged to go away."

The child flung himself upon her with an inarticulate cry of protest.

"You wouldn't go away an' leave me, would you, Barb'ra?"

"I shouldn't want to, precious; but—something—might—happen. You will be a good boy, won't you, Jimmy? I want you to try and—love Miss Cottle."

The child considered this difficult undertaking in grieved silence for a minute. Then he manfully swallowed something that arose in his throat and threatened to choke him.

"I—guess I'll be pretty good, Barb'ra," he quavered, "if you want t' go off an' take a trip. She said you wanted to take a trip; but I told her you wouldn't go anywhere an' leave me. You wouldn't, would you, Barb'ra?"

"Not unless I was forced to," murmured Barbara, "for your sake, Jimmy; for your sake!"

She winked back the tears, smiling resolutely.

"Anyway, we won't cross any bridges till we get to them, precious."

"That's in my book of Vallable Inf'mation," Jimmy said proudly. "I copied it out o' Peg's. You have to get to bridges b'fore you cross 'em; you can't get over any other way. I told that to Peg, 'n' he said it was a Vallable Inf'mation, 'n' he wrote it down in his book in red ink. We tell each other things to write down. I like Peg, an' he likes [164]
me; but we don't love Miss Cottle. Peg says, in his opinion, she's an ornary female, even if she can spell. Peg says spellin' ain't everythin'."

As the days passed, this particular bridge of Barbara's own building loomed large in the landscape of her every day, always retreating mirage-like into the misty horizon of her to-morrow.

Martha Cottle was of the opinion that it was a mighty queer performance; she discussed the subject with Barbara with ever-recurring interest and poignancy in the intervals of her work. Miss Cottle was a woman bent upon an excruciating cleanliness and order, and the immaculate back steps and the painfully scoured kitchen floor uprose as altars upon which she daily offered oblations and sacrifices of all the gentler amenities of life.

"That young one," as she began to call Jimmy, together with Peg Morrison, appeared to vie with one another in wanton profanation of these hallowed precincts.

"It's enough," the worthy spinster assured Barbara, her nose and eyes reddened with animosity, "to make a saint mad clear through. Once you're out of the house for good I'll see to it that they wipe their feet *before they eat*."

The veiled threat in the last words was not lost on Mr. Morrison. "Me an' the Cap'n hes et our victuals together more'n once in the loft t' the barn," he observed placidly. "'N' we kin do it ag'in on a [165]
pinch. I kin cook 's well 's some others I c'd name, an' I will, if

necessary.”

Barbara, with one foot on her bridge of passage, strove to reconcile these opposing forces.

“Miss Cottle,” she assured Peg, “is really a very conscientious woman. She’ll keep everything clean and comfortable for you and Jimmy.”

“You bet she’s conscientious, Miss Barb’ry,” acquiesced the old man dryly. “So’s a skunk. Y’ reelly can’t beat them animals fer a conscientious pufformance of their duty, es they see it. But it ain’t what you’d call reelly pleasant fer the dog.”

“But you’ll try, won’t you, Peg, to get along with Miss Cottle?” implored Barbara. “If she should leave you after I’m gone, I can’t think what Jimmy would do.”

“Now, Miss Barb’ry, don’t you worry none. Me an’ the Cap’n an’ Marthy Cottle ’ll git along like three kittens in a basket. You bet we will. I’ll kind o’ humor her, come muddy weather; an’ I’ll see t’ it that she don’t aggravate the Cap’n beyond what he can make out t’ bear. Mebbe it’ll stren’then his char’cter t’ put up with her ways. Viewed in th’ light of a Vallable Inf’mation I shouldn’t wonder if both me an’ the Cap’n ’ud git consid’able profit out o’ the experience, even ef we ain’t exac’ly hankerin’ fer it. Meanwhile the onions is comin’ on famous, likewise the apples. I never see a finer crop o’ young fruit set.”

To await the slow unfoldment of events, cultivating the while the [166]
cardinal virtues of tranquillity and faith is the task set before each human being; but there are times when the lesson becomes poignantly difficult. As one who awaits the coming of a delayed train endures the unfruitful minutes with scant patience, so Barbara lingered on the verge of her unknown experience, alternately dreading and longing for the summons which would put an end to the painful suspense. She found the days speeding by, gathering themselves into weeks, and the weeks, in their turn, rolling themselves up into months.

“I guess you’ve said to me about all there is to be said on the subject of this house and the care of that child,” Miss Cottle observed in tones of exasperation. “I’d never have come when I did if I hadn’t supposed you were going right off. I didn’t bargain to be your hired girl.”

And David Whitcomb, who had taken up his quarters in the village inn with the avowed intention of “having it out” with the owner and arbiter of Barbara’s future, expressed himself with still greater frankness on the subject.

“Has it occurred to you,” he asked Barbara, “that perhaps you’ll not be sent for at all?”

The two were sitting in the long, sweet twilight of a June evening, on the narrow, old-fashioned porch. The giant locusts in front of the house were in full bloom and the clouds of fragrance from their pendant white clusters mingled with the odorous breath of the honeysuckles. There was a whir of humming-bird moths among the [167]
vines, and a song-sparrow intent upon feeding her young ones while the daylight lasted darted in and out with anxious glances of her bright eyes.

“Hush!” warned Barbara, wincing. “Don’t let Jimmy hear you speak of my going.”

“Pooh!” said David; “the little beggar knows all about it. Did you suppose he didn’t?”

Barbara looked at him indignantly.

“Did you tell him?”

“No; but I daresay the Cottle person has. Besides, the auction is town talk. Everybody is wondering, and some are saying—— Do you want me to tell you what old Hewett asked me to-night?”

Barbara’s face, burning with shamed crimson, was turned away from his.

“No,” she said frigidly. “I don’t want to hear it.”

David passed his fingers through his thick, curling hair, with an impatient gesture.

“I am sorry I spoke of it, Barbara,” he said seriously; “but the fact is, whether you know it or not, you’ve been placed in a very unpleasant position.”

He waited for her to speak; but she was obstinately silent, her eyes fixed on Jimmy, who was helping Peg load a wheelbarrow with

the dried grass left in the wake of the lawnmower.

"You are,"—pursued David, "—or think you are—unable to move hand or foot for five years. Meanwhile you are waiting, waiting for a summons which may never come. Barbara, is there anyone you [168] know who would be likely to—who might wish to help you, and who has taken this singular way to do it?"

She flashed a look of startled inquiry at him.

"The idea of the auction was your own—though how you came by it, I can't understand—and it succeeded perfectly, as far as the price paid in money was concerned; but you're likely to pay it out in something more valuable than money. You've grown thin and pale, Barbara; you're being worn out with this infernal suspense. Now, I think it's time we tracked your purchaser to earth; or else—look at me, Barbara! Why not marry me, and defy the fellow, whoever he is?"

"It wouldn't be honorable," she objected. "I've accepted the money."

"But if we paid it back?" he urged.

"How can I pay it back, if—I don't know who it is?"

David tipped his chair against the house with an impatient thud.

"See here," he said strongly, "I'm going to find out who the person is, either with or without your permission. You'd like to know, I suppose?"

She hesitated, evading his eyes.

"I think I'd rather wait," she said reluctantly. "Besides, you couldn't find out."

He watched her steadily for a minute, while she set half a dozen hasty stitches in the long ruffle she was hemming. Then he [169] deliberately put his hand over hers.

"It's too dark to sew," he objected, "and I can't talk to you when your eyes are glued to that piece of cloth."

Barbara folded up her work with quick motions of her slim brown fingers. Then she raised her eyes to his.

"Well?" she said interrogatively.

"It isn't anything new, Barbara," he said. "Just the same old request. When will you marry me, dear?"

"I've told you, David, over and over. I can't make any promises till—till——"

He frowned and shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I know," he interrupted quickly. "But why object on the score of that absurd contract? Why, Barbara, I'll go with you and work for nothing. Two slaves will be better than one. I'm a husky chap, capable of trundling the lawnmower, shaking down the furnace, shovelling snow, or any little job of the sort. Don't you think your widower would appreciate my free services?"

Barbara refused to smile.

"Why," she asked, "should you suppose it is a man?"

"A sad mixture of pronouns," he objected. "'It' might, as you suggest, as well be a widow or an old maid. But why 'its' waste of money and valuable service? That is what I shall set myself to find [170] out. But we'll be married first, and then I'll be in a position to defy him, her, or it, as the case may be. And if no one ever shows up, as I half believe—— Barbara, look at me!"

She obeyed, a mutinous pucker between her fine dark brows.

"There is no use," she murmured, "of your talking that way. I consider myself bound; and I cannot——"

His face softened as he looked at her.

"Poor little girl," he murmured, "it's pretty rough sledding for you, and has been all along. But I'd like to ask you one thing. Has any other man asked you to marry him since I went away?"

Her eyes fled into the distance.

"Will you tell me who it was?"

Still she was dumb, struggling to escape the sudden turmoil of her thoughts.

"Why," she stammered at last, "should you ask?"

"Is it a case of 'how happy could I be with either, were the other fair charmer away?'" he demanded, a wrathful crimson rising to his bronzed cheeks. "You've played fast and loose with me always, Barbara, first it was the brat and——"

He checked himself with an effort.

"Then you won't tell me?" he said sulkily.

"It—was nothing," she stammered. "I didn't——"

"You didn't accept him," he finished for her. "That's evident. [171]
Well, we'll call it square if you'll say to me, 'David, I love you, and I'll marry you as soon as we can straighten out this—what shall we call it?—this previous engagement.' Will you say that, Barbara? Will you?"

She trembled, shrinking into herself under the fire of his gaze.

"I haven't told you yet—what you asked."

"Never mind that. Come, don't put me off again!"

She looked at him, her eyes clouded with doubt and pain.

"You don't trust me, Barbara. I see that," he said bitterly.

"You—must make me—trust you," she murmured, after a difficult silence. "I don't know why—I can't say—yes. But—I can't—yet."

"I know," he said roughly. "You're half in love with the other man. Damn him!"

He sprang to his feet, upsetting his chair.

"No—no!" she denied breathlessly. "It isn't that. I refused him because"—her voice trailed off in a whisper—"I remembered you, David."

He caught her in his arms with a triumphant laugh.

"You can't escape me now, after that admission," he told her. "You shall marry me, sweetheart; no one shall prevent it."

She yielded to his eyes, his arms, his eager lips with a sense of mingled relief and terror.

"We must not speak of it, David," she warned him, "nor—take too [172]
much for granted, till after we have found out about the contract. We may have to wait till——"

"Oh, damn the contract!" cried David exuberantly. "I'll find that fellow Smith and make him tell me all he knows. I'll fix it up, sweetheart; you'll see!"

Jimmy's rollicking laugh floated across the lawn. Peg Morrison had stacked the last wheelbarrow with the sweet lawn grass, topped it with the little boy, and was trundling his load toward the house with great pretence of exhaustion.

"Now't I've got you aboard, Cap'n," Barbara heard him saying, "it's all I c'n make out. You're turrible big an' hefty."

"You won't ask me to leave him, David?" murmured Barbara. "I couldn't do that; unless—" she added with quick remembrance—"I am forced to."

"Little beggar!" quoth David good-humoredly; "he's always been a dangerous rival of mine. But I'll take him for a side partner this time, Barbara. How'll that suit you?"

He turned and crushed her roughly in his arms.

"I've waited long enough," he said, "now let everybody and everything get out of my way; I'm going to marry you within the month," and stopped the words of protest on her lips with his kisses.

That same evening Martha Cottle wandered forth under the soft [173]
light of the rosy evening. She was dressed in a full-skirted gown of lilac calico, sprigged with white, and starched to rustling stiffness; over it flowed the wide expanse of a freshly ironed white apron. The labors of the day were concluded and Miss Cottle felt herself attuned to the soft influences of the hour. So when she chanced to come upon Peleg Morrison reposing himself in a battered wooden chair tipped against the barn door, she addressed him in terms of surprising amity.

"It's a real pleasant evening," observed Miss Cottle, with an agreeable smile.

"Yes, ma'am, it sure is," replied Peg, in kind. In deference to the lady he shook the ashes out of his pipe, and rose from his chair.

"I suppose you and I'll soon be left in charge here," continued Miss Cottle, sighing. "For my part, I dr-read the responsibility."

"Hes—Miss Barb'ry heard f'om——"

"No; not that I know of. And I call it strange—very str-range. Don't you, Mr. Morrison?"

Peg removed his hat and thoughtfully fumbled the scanty locks behind his ears.

"'Tis kind o' queer; that's so," he agreed.

Miss Cottle bent forward, her lean features quivering with emotion.

“And to cap the climax,” she said, “the girl’s gone and engaged herself to be married.”

“Who? Not Miss Barb’ry?”

Miss Cottle nodded confirmation.

“To that young Whitcomb fellow,” she concluded acidly. [174]

Mr. Morrison resumed his hat, pulling it low over his eyes. From this familiar shelter he viewed his informant cautiously.

“Did she—did Miss Barb’ry tell you? Mebbe she wouldn’t care to hev me know.”

“She didn’t choose to make a confidant of me,” the spinster said, tossing her head. “I chanced to be passing through the hall, and I—overheard ’em—spooning.”

Mr. Morrison coughed deprecatingly.

“It’s a vallable idee,” he said slowly, “not t’ hear what you ain’t meant t’ hear. Young Whitcomb—huh? Wall! Wall!”

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[175]

XV

David Whitcomb sat in the dining-room of the Barford Eagle. It was fifteen minutes of eleven by the loud-ticking clock, with a calendar attachment proclaiming a new day, which hung against the wall in full view of the breakfaster, yet he appeared quite unabashed by the lateness of the hour as he attacked the platter of fried ham and eggs which the pink-cheeked waitress set before him. She was a pretty girl with curly light hair and wide open eyes of an innocent babyish blue.

"Here's your toast, Mr. Whitcomb, nice an' hot—jus' as you like it," she said, reaching over his shoulder to set a covered plate before him. "An' I tried the coffee m'self this morning. That ol' cook, she makes me good and tired! *She* don't care whether you like things or not."

David flashed a brilliant smile at the waitress.

"You're a nice little girl, Jennie," he said, and tasted the steaming cup which she handed him. Then he made a wry face.

"Isn't it good?" asked the girl, with a grieved droop of her full red lips. "I made it jus's you said, with the egg an' all, an' it jus' boiled up good once. I stood right over it for all o' that nasty Sarah. She [176] swatted me with her dish-towel, 'cause I wouldn't——"

"It's made well enough," interrupted David; "but it's a cheap brand of coffee, and—bring the coffee-pot here; will you?"

"The coffee-pot?"

"Yes. Bring it here; the one you make my coffee in."

The girl disappeared kitchenward with a hasty rustling of her crisp blue gingham skirts. David leaned back in his chair and thrust both hands in his trousers pockets while he eyed the table service of coarse crockery and cheap glass with a cynical smile. Three or four flies hovered aimlessly about the plate of buttered toast, and one crawled into the half-filled cream jug where it buzzed helplessly, its wings spattered with the liquid.

"Damn!" muttered David, pushing back his chair and yawning. There were shrill voices in loud altercation in the not distant kitchen, the sound of a hard-shut door, and the waitress reappeared, red-cheeked and breathless, bearing a large black coffee-pot in her two hands held far in front of her.

"Here it is, Mr. Whitcomb," she said. "That nasty ol' cook was bound I shouldn't bring it in 'ere. She threw dish-water on my clean apron. I could 'a' killed her!"

She held the coffee-pot for his inspection and David lifted the lid, peered in, and sniffed disgustedly.

"Ugh!" he said. "I thought so. Now I like decent coffee, and I'll [177] buy a coffee-pot just to make my coffee in. Do you suppose you could keep it, so that termagant in the kitchen wouldn't annex it?"

"You bet I can," giggled the girl delightedly, "an' I'll do it, too, jus' to spite Sarah. An' I'll make your coffee every morning. I'd love to, Mr. Whitcomb."

"Good girl," drawled David. He waved his hand toward the table. "You may as well take these things away," he said. "I'm—er—not hungry this morning."

The girl's face fell; her full lips quivered and pouted like a child's on the verge of sobbing.

"I made the toast," she said. "I made it jus' like you said. It—it's good."

David uncovered the plate hastily.

"It looks fine, Jennie; but you see it's so near dinner-time—see here, my girl, you buy the coffee-pot for me; will you?—just a plain tin one, mind. And—er—keep the change."

He threw a crisp bill on the table.

The girl took up the money and folded it together carefully. When she raised her blue eyes they were swimming in tears.

"I—I'll do anythin' you say," she whimpered, "anythin' you want me to."

By way of answer, perhaps, David pushed back his chair with a harsh, scraping sound that echoed dismally through the empty room. Then he rose, clapped his straw hat on the back of his curly head, searched for his cigarette case and matches and stalked out to [178] the piazza by way of the passage which, in country fashion, afforded

an easy mode of transit between the bar and the dining-room. At one side of the passage was set a high, ink-spattered desk, and behind it a long-legged stool, upon which perched a fattish, elderly man intent upon a ledger. This individual appeared to feel the heat of the June morning exceedingly, for he mopped his face from time to time with a large handkerchief, in the intervals of setting down laborious lines of figures. He looked up as David Whitcomb approached, and his large face creased itself into a dubious smile.

"Good-morning, Sutton," remarked David blandly. "Finding out how much the public owes you for your astonishing good cheer—eh?"

"Mornin', Mr. Whitcomb," mumbled the Boniface. "Um—yes; I was sort of goin' over m' books. Warm mornin', ain't it?"

He eyed David closely, taking note apparently of the heavy ring of virgin gold on the third finger of his left hand and descending slyly to the polished toes of his tan Oxfords.

"How much do I owe you?" asked the young man nonchalantly, allowing a thin wreath of smoke to escape from his lips.

"'Twon't break ye, I guess," hazarded Mr. Sutton, pushing a slip of pink paper across the desk with alacrity. "The's a few extrys on this week's bill," he added, breathing heavily as he indicated with the handle of his pen various items annotated on the account. [179]

David flung his half-smoked cigarette out of the open window and produced a roll of bills from his pocket, from which he detached one.

"Take it out of that," he said carelessly. "I need some change."

"Yes, sir; all right, sir. Thank you, sir," said Mr. Sutton effusively.

He sucked in his lips in a windy whisper as he counted out the change in bills of smaller denominations and topped them with a little pile of silver.

"Hope you find everythin' t' your likin' at the Eagle."

David shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it's all right," he said. "I'm used to roughing it."

The hotel-keeper signed his name to the receipted bill with a heavy flourish.

"Heh?" he ejaculated.

Then he climbed hastily down from his perch.

"Come across," he said hospitably, "an' have one on me. Anythin' you say, Mr. Whitcomb."

"Something cold, if you have it," David directed the bartender"—and bitter. No, no! not too much of that. Fill it up with water."

He drank thirstily and set down the glass, lifting his eyes to look out of the window at a passing vehicle.

"That's the Hon'rable S. Jarvis, *Es*quire," pronounced his host, [180] sucking his lips over the contents of his own glass. "Warm man, Jarvis."

"By that you mean?" queried David, strolling toward the door.

"He's got the rocks, Jarvis has; but my! ain't he the screechin' limit? I'll bet you——"

Mr. Sutton waddled heavily after David, and seated himself comfortably in one of the big splint-bottomed chairs ranged along the piazza for the convenience of patrons.

"I'll bet you," he concluded, "he's got half a million salted down, if he's got a penny."

"Is there a decent horse in the stable?" inquired David, after a silence, which Mr. Sutton filled in with various animal-like noises, expressive of his entire physical comfort.

"No; but I c'n git y' one over to the livery stable. I'll send over for it, if you say so," Mr. Sutton responded.

"I want to find Bellows," David said.

"Who? The auctioneer? Wall, y' don't need no livery hoss t' locate Thomas. He's over t' Henry Maclin's this mornin', sellin' out the stock. Hank's concluded to go west. Thinks there's more doin' out there. But I dunno 'bout that. You mus' know somethin' 'bout the West?"

David was smoking a second cigarette with short, impatient puffs.

"I've been there," he admitted, with a transient scowl.

"How'd you like it?" asked Mr. Sutton, folding his pudgy hands [181] across his protuberant front. "What sort of a place is it? Gamblers—

heh? Cowboys, shootin' parties, sage brush, prairie fires, etcetery—heh?"

"You've named the principal features of the great West," drawled David. "It's all there, more particularly the et cetera. There's lots of that roaming about."

He pulled his hat over his eyes and stepped down from the veranda.

"I may not be back to dinner," he said, "but I'd like a decent steak for supper, if you can get it in this centre of civilization."

Mr. Sutton watched the young man's muscular figure in its leisurely progress down the street. Then he went back to the barroom, where his underling, a slim, sallow young man, with oily black hair parted very particularly in the middle of his narrow head, was languidly arranging clean glasses on a tray.

"He's hot stuff, ain't he?" observed the bartender.

"Who?—Whitcomb?"

"Thinks he's the whole thing, don't he?"

Mr. Sutton frowned. "I ain't made up my mind 'bout that young feller," he said ponderously. "But I'm kind of watchin' him. It strikes me he'll bear—watchin'."

[182] David Whitcomb, walking slowly down the village street under the shade of the spreading maples, was experiencing that vague dissatisfaction which in individuals of his temperament is apt to follow the attainment of some hotly pursued desire. Barbara had long represented to his imagination the distant, unsealed peak, the untrodden wild, the unstaked, unexplored claim. He had come back from the West with no very fixed intention of marrying her; but with something of the languid curiosity the traveller feels regarding scenes long unvisited.

He had not felt at all sure that he would find Barbara the lovely vision that he had pictured her, in the infrequent intervals given to a vague remembrance of past days. But he had lost sight of his indifference in the excitement of the auction and his subsequent impulsive endeavors to break down the girl's scruples. Now he had won her, fairly or unfairly, and he was thinking with some irritation of the future to which he had committed himself. The dull vista of a married life, spent in hard work on a farm, which in the end could not belong to him, appeared more and more intolerable the longer he dwelt upon it. He was in a thoroughly bad humor by the time he had reached the scene of Thomas Bellows' latest activities.

Henry Maclin's hardware, flour, and feed store was situated on the outskirts of the village. As David approached it he could hear the loud voice of the auctioneer upraised in the raucous monotone of his calling, and the dull thud of his hammer, as he proclaimed the [183] sale of the various articles an assistant was rapidly passing up to him.

David sauntered up to the edge of the crowd and stood there, gloomily reviewing the events of the previous month. He glanced up suddenly to find a keen pair of eyes riveted upon him.

"Mornin', Mr. Whitcomb," called Peg Morrison, as if he feared the young man might attempt to avoid him. "Thinkin' o' biddin' in any o' the stuff? The best of it's gone b' now. I got a good cross-cut saw, though. B'en wantin' one fer quite a spell. The's quite a lot o' dead timber standin' on th' farm in diff'rent places 'at ought t' come down."

David was plainly indifferent, and after cautiously studying his unresponsive face Mr. Morrison went on.

"Miss Barb'ry, she leaves mos' everythin' t' me; but the's times when I feel as 'o I'd like a man t' go over the place with me. Course she's got her idees, an' some o' 'em's all right; but I d'clar' I hate t' see her botherin' with outdoor work. Females had ought to keep house an' sew an' look after the cookin', an' not be tryin' t' do men's work b'sides. That's what I tell her, an' I been thinkin' 'at some day you'd go 'round with me, since you're such a good friend o' Miss Barb'ry's."

David frowned in an irritated fashion.

"I don't understand farming, my good fellow," he said coldly. "So I'm afraid my advice wouldn't prove very valuable."

[184] "That's jus' what I was thinkin'," was Peg's incautious comment. "An' mebbe fer that very reason, you'd better——"

He hesitated and stopped short under the steady stare of

Whitcomb's blue eyes.

"Y'—see," he blundered on, "ef Miss Barb'ry hes to go 'way fer five years, I was thinkin'——"

"She won't go away for five years, if I can help it," said David. "I'm going to try and get her out of the mess she's made of things."

His eyes wrinkled at the corners and he laughed outright at the strange working of Peg's untutored features.

"Don't you bother your old head about Miss Barbara's affairs," he said carelessly, "nor"—his keen look threatened serious displeasure—"mine."

He turned decidedly and made his way towards Bellows, who had just disposed of the last lot of merchandise and stepped down from his perch among the rapidly dispersing crowd.

But the auctioneer could not, when questioned, furnish the address of the small man in checked clothes, who had paid four thousand dollars for a hypothetical term of Barbara's service. He shook his head vigorously when urged to a further explanation of what had immediately followed the event at the Preston farm.

"Nope," he persisted. "I can't help you none. I done all I was paid t' do an'——"

David whipped out a yellow-backed bill from his vest-pocket. [185]

"You had references," he said in a cautious tone, "for I heard you say so. Who figured as referee?"

Mr. Bellows waved David's hand aside.

"It'd cost me more'n you've got t' tell you," he said. "Nope. I ain't a-goin' t' say nothin' more. Anyway, what business is it of yours?"

David did not choose to acquaint the auctioneer with the reasons for his anxiety, and presently he found himself walking swiftly along the road leading to the Preston farm. He was uncomfortably hungry by this time, but with the unreason of the average man attributed his gloomy feelings to a higher source than his clamorous stomach.

Barbara met him at the door with an agitated face.

"I have heard from—the person who—— Oh, I was hoping you would come!"

"Do you mean the fellow who bought you?" he demanded sharply. Her apparent faith in himself he passed over without notice. "Has he been here?"

"No-o," murmured Barbara. "But I had a letter."

She put it into his hand, and watched him eagerly, timidly, while he read it. She had lain awake half the night, thinking of David, of his eyes, of the strong pressure of his arms, of the touch of his lips upon hers. Love had drawn near at last, and she bent her head meekly to his accolade, almost forgetting her chain in the rapture of [186] the moment. But with the morning had come the painful recurrence of all her doubts and fears; and later, as if in answer to her agitated questionings, the letter.

David read it with frowning brows.

"There's nothing in this," he said impatiently, "to show you who the person is, nor when you'll be called for."

"No," Barbara agreed faintly. "But you see——"

"It's some mean dog-in-the-manger, who is watching you in secret, and——"

He stopped short.

"The boy is coming," he said, and got to his feet.

"You'll stay to dinner?" she begged him timidly. "I made cherry pies this morning. I think"—humbly—"that they're that they're very good."

David put his arm around her, with a sudden untraced impulse of tenderness.

"Don't worry about the letter," he said magnificently. "I'll—think it over."

It was a very happy meal they ate together, in spite of the prying presence of Miss Cottle, who had assumed control of the teapot. There was stewed chicken, an abundance of fresh vegetables, strawberries and yellow cream, and, to top off with, the cherry pie of such unexampled excellence that David forgot the unpleasant doubts which had assailed him in the morning. As he sat, smoking a cigarette, on the shaded porch at the conclusion of the meal, it [187] occurred to him that the farm was not, after all, so bad a place to live. His eyes wandered dreamily across the broad fields to the blue

distance, and lingered there unseeingly.

Barbara came out presently and sat down at his side.

“I should be so happy,” she sighed, “if——”

“Eh—what?” he roused himself to say. He reached out and patted her hand. “Why be unhappy about anything—just now?” he murmured. He smiled dreamily into her eyes. “The dinner was perfect, sweetheart; as for the reminder from your unknown, why not be thankful that ’it’ contents itself with correspondence?”

Barbara turned her eyes away. An aching lump arose in her throat as if to choke her. When she finally answered him it was in a low, controlled voice.

“There will be other letters—other reminders; you saw that.”

David was at the moment languidly optimistic. It occurred to him to silence her grieving lips with a kiss; but he was too drowsily comfortable to move. He contented himself by again caressing her fingertips.

“Don’t poison our happiness by perpetual references to something neither of us can possibly help,” he murmured.

XVI

THERE is that which works secretly (call it what you will), everywhere transmuting the ugly into the beautiful, the seeming evil into acknowledged good, the mean and worthless into the rare and precious; moving upon the face of vasty deeps, upon inchoate planets; toiling in unknowable abysses, whirling in star-dust and nebulæ, and no less in the veiled darkness of the holiest place—the soul of man. And here, indeed, this pervasive life principle, this informing Mind, this toiling servant of universes and men (call it what you will), seeks chiefly to manifest its supernal powers. Give it entrance in any fashion; open to it the smallest crevice; entertain its mysterious presence ever so briefly, and in that lodgment it begins at once its wonder-working transmutations. For observe: this unseen, and often unsuspected, worker takes of the common things of life, of its base and ignoble things and turns them into shapes of imperishable beauty. And observe, also: this is accomplished without tumult of manufacture; neither smoke of his burning furnace, nor clang of hammer, nor noise of breaking stone is heard, though one listen with the fine ear of the magician in the fable. And observe for a third time (for all of this has to do with the tale that is told): that the blind desire of the one who is thus wrought upon in [189] some mysterious fashion relates itself to the will of Him who works, so that they are in a way one and indissoluble. For such is the law of growth in all the universe, and such will it ever be.

To Stephen Jarvis, pursuing to all outward appearance the even tenor of a way long trodden, came slight intimation of the changes in himself—the self deep submerged beneath the surface of everyday life. He still loaned money on bond and mortgage, exacting, as was his custom, the highest legal rate of interest. As in the past, he looked sharply after his investments, foreclosing when foreclosure had become due and inevitable, and manipulating such conservative purchases of stocks and bonds as his accumulating capital appeared to require. He was conscious of but one thing, and that was that these procedures no longer afforded him pleasure. They were, on the contrary, in the nature of labor. After a little, the labor became grinding in its demands upon him. Gradually, too, he found that the heavy looks and sad faces of certain of his debtors had the power to hurt him. One day he actually yielded to the importunities of a poor widow, not openly, indeed, but through a trusted agent of his, restoring to her the home she had lost. Once indulged, this folly (as he called it), grew upon him stealthily. More and more frequently he found himself giving; still secretly, because in his mind giving still appeared to him a despicable weakness. Yet he continued to impart (where he must) with that keen [190] discrimination and sound judgment which had always distinguished his operations in finance. As yet no one suspected him. To have incurred a suspicion of benevolence would have shamed him little less than a well-founded conjecture of crime on the part of those who had always known him.

Nevertheless, he who runs may read the legible handwriting of God on the faces of men. The cold, immobile features of the grasping money-getter changed subtly, as was indeed inevitable, into something more human; his eyes looked out from beneath his sternly modelled brows as keenly as ever, yet in their very penetration there was a veiled light not visible before.

Perhaps the creature who might have told the most unbelievable story of the change in Stephen Jarvis was his horse. He no longer drove under the lash and with the cowardly curb-bit. He simply did not care any longer for the sensation afforded by beating down an inferior intelligence with his own brute force. No other reason for this particular change in his habits had as yet occurred to him. He still used fast horses; but he ceased to abuse them.

Nearly two months had elapsed since his last visit to the Preston farm. On that occasion he had entreated Barbara not to shame him before the crowd assembled for the auction; and she had refused to listen. Then he had gone away. Something of what followed had been repeated to him. And since he had learned of the return of [191] David Whitcomb from the West; of his spectacular part in the bidding, and of his subsequent visits to the farm.

It was of David he was thinking as he drove along the country roads on a day in early August. The fields were yellowing to the harvest and a great peace lay upon the face of Nature, veiled lightly

with the long continued heat. When, therefore, he overtook the object of his thoughts walking along the dusty road with every appearance of discomfort, he drew up his horse and spoke to him.

"I haven't seen you to speak with you, since your return, Mr. Whitcomb," he said civilly. "Won't you get in and ride with me? I shall be glad to—talk with you."

David stared with undisguised astonishment; then a derisive gleam shone in his blue eyes.

"Why—er—certainly, Mr. Jarvis," he said, and sprang in and seated himself with cool assurance. "It wouldn't have occurred to me to ask you for a ride," he went on, "but I'm not sorry you offered to give me a lift. It's deucedly unpleasant walking."

Jarvis met his inquiring look gravely.

"You are making quite a stay in the East," he said. "Do you mean to settle here?"

The quick blood rose in David's face.

"I haven't made up my mind," he said. "I'm—er—just looking around a bit."

Jarvis was silent, casting about in his mind for a suitable opening for what he wished to say.

David spared him the trouble. With his usual sensitiveness to the [192]
moods of his companions—a sensitiveness which at times amounted almost to divination—he looked sidewise at Jarvis, a smile wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

"I've been to see Miss Preston," he said confidentially, "at the farm."

"Yes?" Jarvis observed non-committally.

"You know Miss Preston, I believe?" said David.

Jarvis hesitated.

"I have had business relations with Miss Preston," he said coolly. He was beginning to feel an exceeding dislike of the well-dressed, smiling young man at his side.

"Yes," agreed David, shrugging his shoulders. "she's mentioned the fact to me."

Jarvis tightened his grasp on the reins after his old choleric fashion, and the mare leaped forward as if expecting the cut of the ready lash.

"I understand Miss Preston has been relieved of—her anxieties somewhat," he said evenly. "I—was glad to know it."

David's lip curled.

"Indeed!" he syllabled with a touch of insolence. "Well, I've no doubt Barbara—Miss Preston—will be duly grateful, when—er—I mention the fact of your interest in her affairs."

"You'll not mention it, I hope," Jarvis said. After a brief silence he added, "You understand me, of course."

"Well, no," drawled David. "I don't believe I do." [193]

He looked whimsically at Jarvis, as if expecting further elucidation.

But the older man was paying strict attention to his horse, his lips set in forbidding lines.

David yielded to one of his sudden impulses.

"Of course," he burst out; "you won't care; you've got your money out of it; but Barbara is deucedly unhappy."

"Ah?"

Jarvis's note of interrogation was barely audible.

"You know, I suppose, for it's become town-talk long ago, that somebody bid her in—a thundering shame I call it—and then failed to show up. She considers herself bound, since she used the money—or part of it. I'd like mighty well to get hold of the person, male or female, who's skulking behind the contract—as she persists in regarding it."

"Why? What's wrong with the transaction?"

Jarvis's tone asked for information merely, but David flashed a suspicious look at him.

"Do you know anything about it?" he demanded.

"Do I—know anything about Miss Preston's affairs?" echoed Jarvis. "Isn't that a singular question for you to put to me?"

"It would be, if I hadn't run every possible scent to earth already. I want to find the fellow."

"For what purpose?" queried Jarvis, leaning forward to watch the even play of his mare's hoofs. [194]

"I want to pay him back and free the girl. It's a damned outrage to hold a woman bound in this sneaking, secret fashion. It doesn't give either of us any show."

Jarvis appeared to ponder this statement in silence for a while.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, at last.

"There's no 'perhaps' about it," said David excitedly. "Of course I'm right! Here I've been hanging about for months, waiting for the person—whoever it is—to show up. I'm ready to settle the business by paying back the money."

He met the other's sharply inquiring look with a boastful grimace.

"I can do it; don't make any mistake on that score!"

"And after you've made the transfer; what then?"

Jarvis's tone was icy; his eyes searched the handsome, flushed face at his side mercilessly.

David met his gaze readily enough.

"Why," he blustered, "you may as well know: I intend to marry Barbara. I'd do it, anyway; contract or no contract, and let that damned dog in the manger gnaw his bone till he's tired of it; only Barbara—Miss Preston—objects. She's like all women—sticks at a trifle, and yet is ready to swallow the earth, if you give 'em a chance."

"Miss Preston doubtless supposes that her honor is involved. I [195] can conceive that she might do so. A trifle, I believe you called it. And if you——"

"Oh, come; what's the use of talking like that!" David interrupted impatiently. "I'm sick of all that sort of nonsense." He pulled his hat over his eyes and stared morosely at the landscape. "If I didn't care as much about the girl as I do, I'd cut the whole thing and go west again. This is no place for a man like me."

"I'm disposed to agree with you," observed Jarvis calmly. "Shall I set you down here?"

David recognized his surroundings with a start. They had reached the outskirts of the village, and Jarvis had stopped his horse in front of his own house.

"Oh, I may as well get out here, I suppose," he said sullenly.

He turned and lifted his hat to Jarvis, with a sweeping bow.

"Much obliged for the delightful ride," he said, with a sneering upward quirk of the mouth.

Jarvis sat motionless in his carriage watching the easy swing of the arrogantly youthful figure, as it passed down the street. He saw David go in at the front entrance of the Barford Eagle, yet still he sat silent, his brows drawn over brooding eyes.

His man, lounging in front of the stables, caught sight of the waiting equipage, and hurried down the driveway.

"Any orders, sir?" he asked. "Shall I take the horse, sir?" [196]

Jarvis glanced at the man, something of his old irritability flaring up in his look.

"No," he said shortly. "I'm not coming in now."

He spoke sharply to his horse, turned abruptly, and drove rapidly away, past the pollarded willows, over the echoing bridge, and on into the country road beyond, muffled with the accumulated dust of a rainless midsummer. Presently he reached and passed the stone gateway of the Preston farm, and its orchards laden with unripe fruit. He looked at both with the sombre, unseeing intentness of a man who is at war with his deeper instincts.

He had been prepared, he supposed, to judge Whitcomb fairly; but his late brief interview with his successful rival had left him bitterly antagonistic to the younger man. David's very physical beauty infuriated him. He recalled the level glances of his blue eyes, the curve of his lips, the carriage of his handsome head upon his broad shoulders, with a sense of blind, barbaric anger. His frequent references to Barbara, his cool assumption of triumph, his braggart self-assertion, his open disdain of concealment—all were abhorrent, intolerable to Jarvis. But none the less, he fought with and subdued himself.

"I am unjust," he told himself flatly, "because I am jealous."

And he despised himself the more, because recognizing the

patent fact he still hated David; still longed to fling him out of his [197]
path as he had flung many a stronger man in the past. For the first time in all the years of his life he had become dimly aware of the beauty of self-sacrifice, and of its relations to a pure and true affection. Even while the primal man within foamed under his iron grip, he compelled himself to think tenderly of Barbara, of her loveless youth, of her loneliness, of her heroism. Then he remembered with shame his own persecutions of her woman's weakness; for so it had come to look to him now. He recalled his brutal insistence, his threats, his unrelenting hardness, sparing himself in nothing, compelling his memory to flash before him every picture which contained them both.

He had travelled many miles before he roused to a realization of the lateness of the hour. The long summer twilight had fallen, like a roseate veil, over the rich landscape; the shadows had disappeared with the sun, and the great disk of a silver moon swam in the rosy light reflected from the sunset, which by now burned in crimson and amber splendors behind the misty purple of the hills.

His horse appeared jaded and weary, and Jarvis recalled vaguely that he had been driving at his old furious rate of speed. He leaned back against the cushions with a sigh, conscious of his own exceeding weariness, and allowed the mare to take her own gait. Out of the seething alembic of his thoughts had crystallized a single definite resolution. He would deal with Whitcomb as that son of God who was called Satan was permitted to deal with Job, and later with [198]
the recalcitrant apostle. He would sift David as wheat in the close-meshed sieve of his own love for Barbara. He would scrutinize his past, he would examine his present; he would hold him under the lens of purity, of probity, of honor. If Whitcomb stood the test, Jarvis swore by all that he held holy that he would stand back and allow him to marry the woman both loved. If not,—his strong fingers unconsciously tightened on the reins, and the obedient mare quickened her pace.

There was a light twinkling among the dark trees when at last Jarvis again passed the big apple-farm. He got down from his buggy, fastened the horse to a tree, and walked quietly toward the house. The long French windows stood open to the breeze, and within the lamp-lighted room Jarvis caught sight of Barbara. She was sitting close to the table reading aloud; at her side, leaning his yellow head against her knee, sat Jimmy, serious and intent. Barbara's pleasant voice rang out in the stillness:

> "Through all the pleasant meadow-side
> The grass grew shoulder high,
> Till the shining scythes went far and wide
> And cut it down to dry."

"That's haying," observed Jimmy, with satisfaction. "Ours is all in the barn now."

"Yes," said Barbara, "listen:

> "Those green and sweetly smelling crops
> They led in wagons home; [199]
> And they piled them here in mountain tops
> For mountaineers to roam.
> O, what a joy to clamber there,
> O, what a place for play,
> With the sweet, the dim, the dusty air,
> The happy hills of hay!"

Jarvis stepped boldly to the piazza, and tapped on the open sash.

"I guess it's David!" he heard the child say joyously. And saw the quick blush that rose to Barbara's cheek.

The blood sprang to his own temples and hammered furiously there for an instant as he looked at her in her diaphanous white dress. Then he entered at her quiet bidding.

"I was passing, and it occurred to me to stop, and—see you," he said awkwardly.

Jimmy had retreated behind his sister's chair and was gazing at him with frowning intentness. Manifestly the child was disappointed. Whitcomb would fit into the scene far better than himself, Jarvis was forced to acknowledge. He saw the wonderment in Barbara's eyes, and mingled with it he fancied he could detect cold dislike and fear.

"You were reading," he said, his eyes lingering on the hands which held the thin blue volume. "Won't you——" He hesitated; then went on boldly: "Don't stop because I am here."

She would have turned over the leaves and read other pretty trifles if it had been David instead of himself, he thought bitterly. He [200] waited for a cold refusal.

"You wouldn't like 'A Child's Garden of Verses,'" Jimmy said unexpectedly. He had not removed his inquiring brown eyes from Jarvis's face. Something that he saw there emboldened him. "It's for little boys, littler than I am; but I like it."

Jarvis smiled, the singular smile new to his lips and of which he was not at all aware, any more than of the elemental changes in himself.

"Perhaps I'd like it, too," he said. "Nobody ever reads out loud to me."

"Read the one about the wind, Barb'ra," urged Jimmy. "The wind and the kites. I like that."

Barbara turned over the pages slowly.

"Shall I?" she asked Jarvis.

Her eyes lingered irresolutely on his face for an instant. It was evident that she was wondering at the sight of him there, pale and grave, but with an unfamiliar gentleness in his eyes and about his unsmiling lips.

"If you will," he said.

Read Barbara:

"I saw you toss the kites on high
And blow the birds about the sky
And all around I heard you pass,
Like ladies' skirts across the grass—
O wind, a-blowing all day long,
O wind, that sings so loud a song!
I saw the different things you did,
But always you yourself you hid, [201]
I felt you push, I heard you call,
I could not see yourself at all—
O wind, a-blowing all day long,
O wind, that sings so loud a song!"

Her voice, flowing on like a brook over pebbles, fell to a sudden silence, as the wind of which she had been reading entered with a sudden rush, veering the yellow flame of the lamp to one side.

Jimmy laughed joyously.

"It's come in here," he said, turning a sleepily roguish face upon Jarvis, "to hear what you're saying, Barb'ra."

She closed the book and laid it quietly upon the table.

"You must go to bed now, Jimmy," she said.

The little boy whispered in her ear, his hands clasped about her neck. Her arm stole about his small body as she bent her head to listen. Jarvis watched the two hungrily—the child and the woman, and the eternal, unfading beauty of the picture smote him with almost intolerable poignancy. All that was best in life he had missed, blunderingly, blindly, and for what?

"I go to bed all by myself now," the little boy said proudly.

He walked toward the door; then turned, hesitated, and flung himself upon Barbara.

"I guess I'd better kiss you good-night, Barb'ra," he cried. "Just think, I pretty near forgot!"

He beamed shyly upon Jarvis.

"Shall I shake hands with you?" he inquired, with a friendly little [202] smile. "I b'lieve I'd like to."

Jarvis held out his hand and Jimmy laid his own in it gravely. Barbara stirred uneasily in her chair.

"Jimmy, dear!" she murmured softly, deprecatingly.

"I never s'posed I'd be shakin' hands wiv you," the child went on calmly. "Did you drive that short-tailed horse?"

"Yes," said Jarvis, something swelling strangely within him as he looked down into the upturned face of the child, with its candid brown eyes.

"What made you cut his tail off?" demanded Jimmy. "Peg says it's a mean trick to cut off horses' tails, 'cause they need their tails to brush off the flies."

"Jimmy!" called Barbara again, her face crimsoning.

"I didn't cut it off," Jarvis replied, with every evidence of sincerity. "I bought the horse just that way. I don't like it myself."

He glanced at Barbara with a quiet smile.

“I’m afraid I’m very much in the way,” he said. “But I wanted to talk with you—on a matter of some importance.”

XVII

A SILENCE, difficult to break, settled upon the man and the maid, as Jimmy's plodding feet toiled up the stairs.

"Good-night, Barb'ra," his wistful little voice called from the top of the stairs.

"Good-night, Jimmy dear," she answered.

Her eyes, clouded with pain, sought Jarvis's face. She had suddenly leaped to the conclusion that he had come to tell her something concerning the contract; perhaps to inform her that her prolonged furlough was at an end.

His next words confirmed this.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that you are under bonds to leave your home for a considerable period. Five years, or thereabouts, to be exact. Am I right?"

"Yes," faltered Barbara. She had grown very pale. "That is why," she said bravely, "I have taught Jimmy to go upstairs alone. But he doesn't like it—yet."

Her eager eyes were fastened upon his face.

"Did you come—to—tell me? Must I go—now?" she asked.

He waved his hand deprecatingly.

"Oh, no," he said. "It isn't that—exactly. In fact, I have nothing to [204]
do with the matter; only——"

He paused, as if to choose his words with care.

"I happen to know the person concerned in the transaction, and ——"

"You know him?" breathed Barbara. She leaned toward him eagerly, the color coming back to her face in a swift flood. "Then won't you tell me——"

He shook his head.

"I'm under bonds to preserve my client's incognito," he said. "But ——"

He looked at her compassionately.

"Are you finding the delay very hard to bear?" he asked. "Is there ——" Again he hesitated. "Is there any particular reason why you should wish to know more about the matter?—any reason why you cannot wait my client's pleasure?"

She was silent.

"It is that I should like you to tell me," he went on deliberately. "I am instructed, by my client—to find out—to—er—ascertain, in short, if you are in any way dissatisfied with the present status of the affair. If you will be quite frank with me I shall greatly appreciate your confidence, and so will—the person I have the honor to represent. Of this I can speak very positively."

"Why," asked Barbara, her words coming with a rush, "do I wait at all? If my time is worth—all the money your client paid for it—why am I not working? That is one thing I want to know."

"As to that," Jarvis said quietly, "I can assure you that your time [205]
is worth all and more than you receive for it. But——"

He looked down and fingered his driving gloves absent-mindedly.

"There have been certain events, transpiring since the date of your engagement—your agreement, I should say better—with the person of whom we are speaking, which would seem to indicate that possibly—mind I say possibly, I cannot speak certainly as yet—but possibly your services may not be required at all."

"What must I do? Of course the money——"

"Naturally, a part of it will be forfeited to you," said Jarvis coolly.

To all outward appearance he was the hard-headed man of affairs discussing a disputed contract.

"I attended to that for you," he went on. "It is nothing more than fair, since you still hold yourself in readiness to fill your part of the contract."

Barbara was gazing at him with parted lips.

"I chanced to meet an acquaintance of yours this afternoon," Jarvis went on, his observant eyes on her face. "A—er—Mr. Whitcomb."

Her look puzzled him.

"He informed me that he wished to marry you."

The girl's eyes sank in shamed confusion.

"I—said I could not promise until—unless——" she faltered.

He arose, gripping his chair-back with tense fingers. [206]

"It will be impossible to learn the ultimate intentions of my client at present," he said.

He continued to look at her as she sat in the soft radiance of the lamp-light, her head bowed, her slender hands, browned and roughened by the labors of sorrowful years, tightly clasped in her lap; and a great compassion for her friendless youth, her woman's tenderness and weakness, swept over him like a flood. He longed to take her in his arms, to comfort her unforgotten griefs and forever to shield her from the coldness of an unfriendly world. She seemed so slight, so fragile a creature in her thin dress of faded muslin, with the heavy masses of her hair knotted low against her slender neck.

"You say you cannot tell me who it is?" she murmured. "It is so strange not to know—to wait, being afraid every day. Why, any time Jimmy might come home and find me gone."

Her voice trembled into silence.

He bent toward her, his face transfigured with love and pity.

"Barbara!" he cried, in a low voice of yearning.

She looked up at him, startled, afraid. He perceived this, and the next instant his features had resumed their expression of cold serenity.

"I was about to tell you that any excessive anxiety on your part is wholly unnecessary," he said. "You will certainly be notified at least a week in advance. And—as my client is situated at present—I think [207] I may predict with tolerable certainty that the call will not come before—autumn."

Her face brightened.

"In October," she said, "we shall harvest the orchards. Then I could pay back the money."

A swift shadow crossed his face.

"Money; is it of that you must always be thinking?" he asked.

"You know that I must," she said proudly. "I could not rest under so heavy an obligation to—anyone."

"No," he agreed. "I see that—I understand."

A melancholy smile touched his lips.

"Do not be alarmed as to the obligation," he said quietly. "My client is a man who is accustomed, like Shylock, to exact the last penny—even to the pound of flesh. He will not let you off easily."

Barbara drew a quick breath.

"It is a man, then?" she asked. "I—hoped——"

"You were hoping it was a woman," he said dryly. "I have committed an indiscretion in telling you so much. But—conceive, if you will, a man, well along in years, the—guardian of a child, who requires——"

"Is the child," asked Barbara, "a boy or girl?"

He hesitated.

"Er—I cannot tell you as to that. Let us suppose for the moment that it is a boy."

"Have you seen the child?"

He looked at her with what she would have called in another a [208] bantering tenderness in his deep-set eyes. In connection with Stephen Jarvis the suggestion was untenable—absurd.

"Do you know you are cross-examining me with considerable adroitness?" he said. "I must be on my guard, or you will force me to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"And why should you not tell me the truth?" she urged. "I think I have the right to know it."

"Not at present," he said coolly. "I am in honor bound to my client, you should remember. I may lose my—er—commission, if I am not careful."

"I should be glad to know that the child is—that he is not an imbecile."

She answered his amazed look with swift explanation.

"A woman who saw my advertisement wanted me to take charge of an imbecile child; that is why——"

"And you would have done it, Barbara? You were ready to commit yourself to such a future, just because I——"

He stopped short with a visible effort.

"No; the child is—— He is a very dear and lovable little fellow, I should say. And he needs—you. He is—quite alone in the world."

"So," she murmured, "is Jimmy. And when I am gone there will be no one——"

"You will not be obliged to leave your brother right away, you know," he suggested. "And—possibly not at all."

Her face became illuminated with a sudden inspiration. [209]

"Why shouldn't the man—this client of yours—bring the child here for me to take care of? I should be so glad to have him right away. This is a healthy spot. I could make him very comfortable."

Jarvis shook his head.

"I shouldn't like to suggest such a thing," he said slowly. "It might savor of impertinence——"

Her face crimsoned with mortification.

"I didn't mean——" she stammered.

"Not on your part," he amended hastily; "understand me, please. Your idea is—quite like you; quite what I should expect, knowing you as I do. But—I fear it wouldn't do. My client——"

"He must be a peculiar sort of person," hazarded Barbara.

"He is," agreed Jarvis. "So much so that—I feel I ought to warn you in one particular."

Barbara waited in expectant silence.

Jarvis hesitated, studying her downcast face.

"I want you to promise me," he said slowly, "that you will not yield to the importunities of—of Whitcomb. No; don't interrupt me. Hear me out. He will urge you to marry him—soon. He will tell you —— But you must not listen—yet. Do you hear me? You must—put him off. You must wait—till——"

"I shall wait," she said coldly, "till the man—your client—is satisfied, or paid, in full."

"Will you promise me this?" [210]

She looked him full in the eyes.

"Why should I promise you?" she demanded haughtily. "I have signed a contract. I am in honor bound to stand by it. I shall keep my word—fulfil the letter of my bond; but not because you have asked me to do it."

He turned abruptly and took up his hat.

"That is all I have to say to you," he said in a business-like tone.

He stopped, hesitated.

"If I do not see you again——"

"But you will be obliged to see me," she objected, "—to tell me."

"No," he said, and smiled slightly. "I shall not need to see you again; and—I may not——"

He held out his hand.

"Will you forgive me, Barbara?" he asked humbly.

"Forgive you?" she echoed.

"God knows I have need of your forgiveness. If I do not see you again—and it is quite possible that I may not. I am thinking of going away, of closing my house here. I may never return. But I want—I need to carry with me the certainty that you will sometimes think kindly of me. Not that I deserve it, but——"

His eyes, dark with pain, searched her face.

"I cannot bear to remember all that has passed between us. I know now that I was less than a man to threaten you—browbeat you, as I did. I hope you will believe me when I tell you I am hoping for your best—your truest, and most lasting happiness." [211]

His voice, shaken with the solemn passion of renunciation, died into silence.

She put her hand into his.

"I—am sorry," she faltered.

"For what, Barbara?" he asked.

She drew a deep sigh that was half a sob.

"For—everything," she said.

Her mouth quivered like a grieving child's.

"And you do forgive me, Barbara?"

"Yes."

He raised her fingers to his lips.

“Good-bye,” he said.

She heard his rapid step on the gravel without, and later the whir of wheels, faint and fainter in the distance.

Barbara did not tell David all that had passed between Jarvis and herself, when on the following day he unburdened himself of the multiplied conjecture and complaints which had occurred to him since his briefly renewed acquaintance with the lawyer. In some uncomprehended way their past had acquired a new significance in Barbara’s eyes, almost sacred in the light of Jarvis’s difficult confession. As she had, through some deep, delicate instinct, hidden her early romance from Jarvis, she now shielded from David’s scrutiny his rival’s unavailing passion and pain. David would not [212] understand, she knew; he would laugh and toss his handsome head, secure in his own easily won triumph.

“I suspected the old fox knew more than he owned up to me, though when I taxed him with it he was ready to lie out of it,” David said.

He drew Barbara to him and kissed her carelessly full on the mouth. Then when she would have withdrawn herself from his arms, he laughed, and held her strongly to him, looking deep into her eyes.

“You don’t want to get away from me,” he said. “You are mine; didn’t you know that?”

He kissed her a dozen times, hotly, eagerly, holding her breathless, crushed against his breast, releasing her at last, flushed and tremulous, her heavy hair loosened on her neck.

David watched her with amused eyes, as she restored the hairpins to place, following the curving lines of her young figure appreciatively.

“You need some handsome gowns, Barbara, to set off your good looks,” he said. “You’ll have them, too, when you’re my wife.”

He took her hand.

“I’ll wager you’ve been wondering why I didn’t bring you a ring,” he went on exuberantly. “Girls always like rings, and I see you don’t wear anything but that plain one. Here, I’ll——”

“Don’t take it off,” implored Barbara. “It was my mother’s. It was her wedding ring.”

“That’s all right, dear. But you must take it off, just the same. You [213] can wear it on the other hand, if you like—or put it away; a keepsake like that is best locked up in some box. I’ll give you all the rings you’ll need to wear from now on.”

He snapped open a tiny case of white velvet and flashed its imbedded jewel in her averted eyes.

“Do you like it, dear? Do you think it’s pretty? I couldn’t get anything decent in this hole, of course, so I sent to the city for it. It just came by express, last night. I found it when I got back from my delightful ride with that old crab, Jarvis.”

“It—it’s beautiful, David, but——”

“I hope it’ll fit; let me put it on, dearest.”

“David—I—can’t; don’t you see—I am not free to—to——”

“What in Heaven’s name are you talking about? Aren’t we engaged?”

“I—don’t know,” the girl said slowly. “No,—not till fall. You mustn’t——”

“Damn old Jarvis, if he’s been putting any such notions into your head!” cried David. “Why, Barbara, you’re talking nonsense. Didn’t he tell you you could get a release? I’ll buy the fellow off. I told Jarvis I would.”

“You told him?”

“Why, of course, I did. And I mean to. We’ll be married by that time. Now, don’t say *no*. Just give me a show to prove what ought to need no urging on my part to make you see. If we are married hard and fast there’ll be no back talk coming from Jarvis or anybody else. [214] Can’t you see that, dear? I dare say the fellow is only waiting for a good excuse to demand his money back, and we’ll give it to him. Come, sweetheart, let me put this ring on your dear little finger, and next month I’ll add another of a different sort. Then I’ll be in a position to talk business with old Jarvis, or his client, whoever he is. I’ll say, ‘Here’s your money, sir,’ short and sharp; ‘take it or leave it,

as suits you best. My wife doesn't go out to service with any man.' That's my sensible girl!"

He would have drawn her again into his arms. But she resisted him tensely.

"You don't understand, David, and you must understand," she said slowly. "I—promised I wouldn't—till——"

"You promised! Who in the devil did you promise? You promised me, and I'm going to hold you to it."

"No; not till after I was bound, and I—only promised you conditionally. Don't you remember, David?"

"I only remember what I choose to remember," he said superciliously. "And all I know, or care to know, at the present moment, is that you're mine—mine, Barbara! Haven't I waited for years and suffered—Barbara!"

His voice vibrated with passion; he reached out for her hungrily, irresistibly, and held her fast in the clasp of one powerful arm, while [215] with the other he sought for her elusive hand.

"One finger is just as good as another for me," he laughed as he slipped the ring into place. "There! Isn't that handsome?"

But she hid her troubled eyes against his shoulder.

"Not on my ugly brown hand, David," she murmured. "And I cannot wear it—yet. I promised."

"That's twice you've mentioned the fact that you promised," he said, scowling. "Did Jarvis have the brazen nerve to come between you and me with any of his cut and dried legal business?"

"He—reminded me of my contract. He said——"

"Well, I'll fix that up with Jarvis. Say, do you know he makes me tired? I told him we were engaged, and if he had any such line of talk to pass out he might have come to me. I'm the one for him to do business with from now on, and I'll let him know it, too."

He released her, suddenly.

"You can do as you like about the ring," he said in an offended tone. "Most girls would jump at the chance to wear a two-hundred-dollar diamond. I'll chuck it into the waste-basket, if you say so."

"Oh, David!" breathed Barbara, "did you spend all that money—just for me?"

"Yes, I did; and I supposed you'd be pleased. I never dreamed you'd refuse to wear it."

"But—it isn't that I don't love you," she faltered. "Indeed I——"

"Well, if you love me, you'll do as I say," interrupted David, with [216] an arrogant toss of his handsome head. "Will you, Barbara?"

"I will in everything but—you know, dear, I—I can't."

He stared at her in angry silence.

"You appear a soft enough little thing," he said at last, "but you're as infernally obstinate as—— Here, give me the ring. I'll not force it on you."

She slipped it from her finger in silence, and he took it, restored it to its velvet nest, and dropped the case in his pocket.

"The next time I ask you to wear that ring," he said, "you'll either do it, or——"

"David!" cried Barbara faintly. "Please—please don't be angry. Try to—understand."

"Try to understand—eh? Well, I'm not so dull as some; but you've got me stumped all right. Maybe that's what you're trying to do."

She put out her hands to him pleadingly. But he did not choose to see them.

"I'll talk with Jarvis," he said roughly. "And in the meantime you keep away from him. Just let me manage for a while. A woman isn't up to business, anyway. Why, it makes me hot to think of his coming here and talking you to a finish the way he did. I wish I'd caught him at it, that's all."

"David!" Barbara's voice was low and urgent. "I wish you wouldn't——"

"Wouldn't what?"

She clung to his arm; but his look did not soften. [217]

"Please don't—say anything to Mr. Jarvis. He—meant to be kind. He——"

David turned suddenly and caught her by the shoulders.

"See here," he said. "I'm beginning to see a glimmer of light

through this particular millstone. Is *Jarvis* the man who tried to get you to marry him while I was away? Answer me!”

“He asked—me—to marry him, and I——”

David burst into a great laugh.

“Well, well!” he cried, “that was a conquest. Old Jarvis, of all men! Why, Barb, you’re a wonder. Ha, ha!”

She trembled before his loud laughter as she had not beneath the weight of his displeasure.

David suddenly became grave, his brows drawn in thought.

“That puts a different face on things,” he said.

XVIII

Hewett's general store, with its official annex, the post-office, occupied a prominent place in the social as well as the economic system of Barford. Not even the aisles, sheds, and steps of the Presbyterian church afforded so convenient and popular an arena for the interchange of items of general interest as did "Hewett's." There appeared to be something suggestively cheerful and enlivening in the sagging piles of fruit and vegetables, something friendly and hospitable in the boxes, barrels, and kegs open to public inspection and exploring fingers. Even the curious and all-pervasive odor compounded of prunes, pickles, yellow soap, and tobacco, with an occasional aromatic whiff of freshly ground coffee, seemed to lend itself to a pleasantly open frame of mind, conducive to an unreserved expression of opinion concerning the church, the state, and the social whirl, as evidenced in the varying currents and eddies of village life.

As in other similar emporiums devoted to the display and sale of such commodities as were in general demand "the store cat" might be seen guarding inconspicuous rat-holes, or curled up in peaceful slumber in the cracker barrel, or in close proximity to the whity-brown loaves of bread destined for private consumption and [219] handled with easy familiarity and a total lack of ceremonial cleanliness by the driver of the baker's cart, the Hewetts, father and son, and by such tentative customers as elected to test the freshness of the product with doubtful thumb and finger.

It was at Hewett's, as might have been expected, that the singular event of the auction at the Preston farm had been discussed in all its different aspects. The amount of the mortgage held by Stephen Jarvis, the various expedients resorted to by the daughter of Donald Preston, and the events leading up to her desperate and successful coup had all been reviewed circumstantially and in order. The continued presence of David Whitcomb in the community furnished a welcome variation to the subject; and inasmuch as David was found not averse to talking of himself, there was little mystery about his return to Barford and its object.

Opinions as to the personal appearance, probable resources, and moral character of the ex-schoolmaster were found to be as varied as the new and somewhat showy raiment in which he appeared from day to day.

"Thinks he's too good to walk now 't he's got them shiny pointed shoes," observed Hank Smith, whose footgear was of the square-toed variety, presumably inherited from a deceased relative. "I seen him drivin' a rig out t' Preston's to-day."

"Yas," corroborated the local liveryman. "He's took it b' the [220] week. Says he's thinkin' of buyin' a good horse."

"Huh! you don't say," drawled a farmer from the hills, who had dropped in for his week's supply of groceries and his mail. "I s'pose he done pretty well out west? Mebbe I c'd sell him that bay mare o' mine."

"He spen's lots of money; I don't know how much he's got," was the unchallenged opinion put forth by another.

There followed a general oscillation of heads about the empty stove, a round-bellied affair, capable of fierce white heats in the winter time, but abandoned to rust in summer and habitually diffusing a clammy scent of chimney soot and damp ashes.

"I guess the' don't anybody know 's t' that; I heard him speak o' minin' prop'ties kind o' careless like. He sure does carry a big wad."

"The table board over t' the Eagle's called pretty fair; but 'tain't good enough fer Whitcomb. He pays extry fer dinner at night."

"Jus' so; an' Sutton's cook left after he'd been thar a couple o' weeks. She said she wa'n't a-goin' t' put up with Whitcomb."

"Wall, I'll give that young feller about four months t' run through what he's got," the elder Hewett observed, in the intervals of passing various purchases of coffee through his grinder. "I'll bet I c'd carry all the minin' prop'ty he owns in m' vest pocket, an' hev room fer m' han'kerchief."

"'Twon't take him that long if he keeps on as he's goin' now. I [221] heerd"—and the speaker leaned forward, bringing the legs of his chair to the floor with a thump—"'at he's pretty fast; drinks

consid'ble an' plays cards fer money. Wonder if she knows?"

"Barb'ry'd ought t' look out, if he's that kind," observed another, wagging his pendulous chin-whiskers. "Her pa'd ought t' be a serious warnin' t' her."

"Shaw! 'tain't so," put in a third. "Dave's all right. He ain't so slow's to be actually mossy; but he's all right. I'll bet you——"

What the speaker was about to wager on his charitable opinion was lost to the public as Peg Morrison stubbed noisily up the steps, and entered the door, swung hospitably wide to dust, flies, and the travelling public.

"Hello, Peg; how's your folks?" drawled Al Hewett, presenting his round, solemn face at the square aperture devoted to the delivery of mail. "Le' me see; here's a paper fer you, an' a circ'lar,—one o' them phosphate ads you've been gettin' lately. An' a letter fer Miss Barb'ra. Do you want I should forward it—eh?"

"Forward it—no; give it t' me."

Mr. Morrison's voice held an exasperated note discouraging to those in quest of information.

"Then she ain't left yet?" queried an individual, comfortably seated over the cool recesses of the pickle barrel. "Somebody was sayin'——"

"No, sir," said Peg, facing about and addressing the inquiring [222]
circle of eyes as one man. "No, sir; Miss Barb'ry ain't gone, an' as fer 's I know, she'll be home, anyhow, till after the apples is picked."

Mr. Morrison would have warmly disclaimed any intention of discussing his mistress's business with outsiders; but he felt it incumbent upon himself, as the surviving feudal representative, as it were, of the Preston family, to correct erroneous public opinion.

"Goin' t' gether a pretty fair crop this year, I see," observed the village veterinary, who combined the business of livery and sale stable with his more learned profession.

"You bet," chuckled Peg. "W'y, them apples 'll beat anythin' in the county. We're goin' t' exhibit at th' fair, same 's we ust to."

"Apples is goin' t' be so cheap y' can't git nothin' fer 'em," said a farmer pessimistically. "Ef they don't all drop off the trees come September, it's bein' s' dry."

"Our apples won't drop, I'll bet you," bragged Peg. "We've kep' th' ground in our orchards ploughed an' cultivated all summer. Miss Barb'ry, she kind o' got that notion las' spring f'om readin' some gov'ment report, an' jus' to humor her I done 's she said."

"'Tain't no way to do," put in another. "The grass prevents th' [223]
roots f'om heavin'; keeps 'em cool in summer an' warm in winter. Y' don't ketch me payin' any 'tention to them blamed gov'ment reports. Now the Republicans is in, y' can't b'lieve a word 'at comes f'om Washin'ton."

No one being immediately minded to disprove this sweeping statement, there was brief silence for a space. Then a new topic was introduced.

"Say, Peleg, when's the weddin' comin' off to your place?"

"The weddin'? what weddin'?" parried Peg cautiously. "I ain't heerd o' no weddin'."

"You hain't—heh? Well, you're kind o' behind the times."

"I heerd the' was to be two weddin's out your way come fall," cackled the horse doctor. "How 'bout Marthy an' th' onions?"

Peg turned an angrily bewildered face upon the speaker.

"Th' onions," he said, "is O. K.; but I dunno what you're drivin' at."

"Well, I'll tell ye; Marthy Cottle told Elviry Scott, an' she tol' my wife's sister that you was payin' her marked attention. She said she hadn't made up her mind whether t' marry ye or not. But she thought mebbe she might, ef the onion crop turned out all right. I sez t' m' wife——"

A roar of laughter drowned the end of the sentence and Peg's indignant denial.

"I ain't done no more," he averred, "than t' wipe m' feet careful [224]
on th' door-mat on the kitchen-stoop when the's mud on the groun'. An' I only done that t' keep th' peace."

"Wall, Peleg, ef you c'n make out t' keep th' peace with Marthy Cottle, I reckon you're the man fer Marthy," was the opinion of the senior Hewett, delivered over the top of a tall bag of sugar which he

was weighing.

A chorus of loud laughter greeted this sally; when it had died away a late comer announced impersonally that the county fair was going to be the finest in years.

"That's so," confirmed a visitor from the county seat, distant some five miles. "The'll be horses f'om all over the state, 'n a b'lloon ascension, b'sides the usual features."

"Any races?" inquired the farmer from the upper hill road. "'Cause I've got a colt, Black Hawk blood, 't c'n run like a streak o' greased lightnin'."

"Races? Well, natu'ally. The'll be races every day after the fust, an' on Sat'day, the closin' day, the stakes 'll be a hunderd dollars fer two-year-olds, an' up fer hosses o' all ages. I wouldn't miss it fer more'n I gen'ally carry in loose change. The'll be some tall bettin', I persoom."

"They say that young Whitcomb feller's quite a sport when 't comes t' puttin' money on any ol' thing," drawled young Hewett, who had laid aside his official gravity as he emerged from behind the post-office.

Mr. Morrison looked troubled.

"I guess I'll be goin' 'long," he said, and cast a defiant look [225]
around the circle. "Ef I was you," he said, "I'd keep my mouth shet 'bout things I didn't know anythin' 'bout."

No one answered; but there was a general laugh as his heavy boots were heard to strike the sidewalk.

"Poor old Peleg!" said one. "Them Prestons has kep' him pretty busy cookin' up excuses. An' ef she marries Whitcomb I guess Peleg 'll be up against it a while longer."

"'Twon't be any time b'fore Jarvis gits another mortgage; mebbe he'll fetch it this time. 'Tain't often the 'onor'ble gent gits left. I hed t' laugh when I heerd she'd paid him off."

"The's somethin' mighty queer 'bout that business, anyhow. Who d'ye suppose anted up with the money?"

"Some fool, like 's not. A fool an' his money's soon parted. Now like's not it was Dave Whitcomb. Mebbe he——"

"Get out, man! What'd be the use o' that, if he's goin' t' marry her?"

"He wa'n't engaged to her when he fust come back; mebbe he thought——"

"Thought nothin'! Dave wouldn't pass over no four thousand dollars b'fore he knew she'd have him, would he? He'd be a bigger fool 'n he looks to do that."

"Say, Hank," drawled young Hewett, "which 'd you druther be, a [226]
bigger fool 'n you look? or look a bigger fool 'n you be?"

"I dunno," said Hank, thoughtfully expectorating in the general direction of the rusty stove. "Guess on the hull, I'd ruther look a bigger fool 'n I be, b'cause——"

"That's impossible!" quoth the genial Al, with a snigger of amusement.

"Pooh! that's a dried-up chestnut, Hank," interposed the liveryman, "f'om five years b'fore last; don't you let Al get a rise out o' you that easy. He'd 'a' said the same thing whichever way you'd answered."

"Darn!" vociferated Hank. Then he joined in the general laugh.

In the silence that followed the subsidence of mirth a small, spare individual, wearing a gray linen duster, buttoned to the throat, and carrying a suit-case and tightly strapped umbrella, entered the store. He gazed inquiringly at the assembled circle, his eyes wrinkling pleasantly at the corners.

"I just blew in," he observed to nobody in particular, "and I'm going to hang out for a few days at the best hotel in town."

"The' ain't but one," volunteered the voluble Smith, stealthily moving his chair that he might get a look at the stranger's feet. They were neatly covered with tan Oxfords, he satisfied himself; but the toes were not pointed.

"Where'll I find it?" asked the stranger. "I'm an inspector from [227]
the Phœnix Fire Insurance Company," he added, correctly interpreting the suspicious glances levelled at him and his sparse belongings. "Expect to be in town two or three days, looking over our risks and correcting a map of the town. I do a little life insurance business on the side."

“Takin’ on any new risks in buildin’s?” inquired the man on the pickle barrel.

“W’y, yes; I ain’t a regular soliciting agent for the Phœnix; but I’ll be mighty glad to write any persons desiring insurance,” replied the stranger. “My name,” he added pleasantly, “is Todd, Albert Todd, at your service, gentlemen.”

Mr. Todd bowed and smiled expansively.

“Wall, ye want t’ cast yer eye over Hiram Plumb’s prop’ty, fust thing you do,” advised the liveryman, with a facetious grimace toward the individual on the pickle barrel. “It’s in a fierce condition.”

The gentleman in question slowly descended from his perch, thoughtfully caressing the seat of his trousers, as he replied in kind.

“Y’ don’t hev to worry none ’bout me, Mister Todd—if that’s your name—I don’t insure in the Phœnix; but Bud Hawley, him that keeps the liv’ry-stable, is a teetotally bad risk. He’s been takin’ au-to-mo-beels t’ board lately, an’ they sure do kick up a powerful smell o’ gasolene.”

“I’ve got a permit,” hastily interposed Mr. Hawley. “I c’n show it to you.”

The stranger waved his hand deprecatingly. [228]

“Oh, that’s all right,” he said gently. “I have nothing to do with that class of business. But if Mr. Hawley has a good horse and buggy to hire, I’ll be glad to talk business. How about it, Mr. Hawley?”

Mr. Hawley favored the stranger with a comprehensive stare.

“Guess I got a rig ’at ’ud suit,” he admitted. “Fi’ dollars a day an’ up, ’cordin’ t’ the sort o’ rig you’re lookin’ for.”

“I want,” said Mr. Todd, “a good smart horse; one that can cover considerable territory in a day, and a buggy; nothing fancy, you know; but neat and comfortable.”

“All right,” said Mr. Hawley slowly. “I’m goin’ along t’ my place now; ’tain’t fur from the Eagle.”

“Many folks stopping at the hotel?” inquired Mr. Todd briskly, as the two men walked along the village street under the heavy noonday shade of the big maples.

“Not s’ many,” replied the liveryman non-committally.

He scowled as a smart, yellow-wheeled trap whizzed past.

“I dunno what sort of a driver you be,” he said. “Most anybody wants t’ git over the ground these days; but the’s some folks ’at thinks they c’n drive a horse like it was an automobeel. That’s one o’ my rigs an’ one o’ my best horses,—or was till that chap took t’ [229] drivin’ it.”

Mr. Todd stretched his long neck after the yellow-wheeled trap, which had stopped in front of the Barford Eagle a little further up the street.

“You don’t say!” he observed mildly. “Kind of a young feller, too. They say a merciful man is merciful to his beast.”

“Dave Whitcomb must be a hard case, ’cordin’ to that,” was Mr. Hawley’s opinion. “Y’ seen him get out an’ go in; did you? Wall, that young chap used t’ teach school here. Fact; he was principal of our union school, an’ considered a smart enough chap, though quiet; didn’t cut much of a swathe, even with the young folks. But all of a sudden he up an’ went west! an’ we heard after a spell he was dead. But he turned up a while ago, live as ever, an’ consid’able changed. He’s quite a heavy swell now; they say he owns a mine, or suthin’, out west. He’s stayin’ t’ the Eagle; ’n’ say, if you’re one of the sort ’at likes t’ put on style ’n’ eat your dinner at night mebbe you c’d chum in with Dave.”

“What’s the young man’s line of business?” asked Mr. Todd. “I’d like to interest him in a little proposition——”

“Business?” echoed Mr. Hawley, and he chuckled as he drove his hands a little deeper into his trousers pockets. “Dave’s principal business around these parts is courtin’, I sh’d say. I guess he don’t do much else these days. Girl out in the country; got a big apple [230] farm. If you git acquainted with Dave he’ll tell you all about it.”

To make the acquaintance of the ex-schoolmaster appeared to be exactly what the energetic Mr. Todd was seeking. He put up at the Eagle, where he made a point of asking for a six o’clock dinner.

“I am told,” he said to Sutton, the proprietor, “that this is one of the few properly managed hotels in this part of the country, with

evening dinners, breakfasts *à la carte*, and so forth!”

Sutton silently shook his heavy body, his wide mouth turning up at the comers, an exercise which passed with him as a laugh.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “we’re stylish an’ up t’ date all right, when it comes t’ ’leven o’clock breakfasts an’ six o’clock dinners. We’ve kind of changed our day around here t’ ’commodate our patrons. We calc’late t’ please.”

And so it came about that young Whitcomb sat down to dinner that night with Mr. Albert Todd. The latter individual was quite the gentleman in his manners at table, David observed. Little by little the two fell into friendly conversation, and David, at first irritable and silent, passed all at once into his alternating mood, when he desired nothing so much as to talk about himself. He had found few he cared to talk to in Barford, except Barbara, and there were things one could not mention to a woman.

Not once did the tactful Mr. Todd allude to the subject of life [231] insurance, and he appeared wonderfully interested in David’s account of his life in the West; of his failures, few and far between, and of his successes, social and otherwise which, according to David, had been many and remarkable. Mr. Todd was a man of the world, that much was clear, with no foolish or fanatical prejudices. After dinner the two in a state of post-prandial amity strolled across to the barroom, where they partook of various cooling drinks, compounded, under David’s direction, by the alert young person behind the bar. And when later they strolled out to the piazza and David produced cigarettes, they had fallen into relations of such exceeding friendliness that David reopened the conversation in a more intimate tone than he had yet taken.

“This is the most confoundedly stupid hole a man ever dropped into,” he observed through the fragrant smoke wreaths.

“It looks kind of peaceful and soothing,” agreed Mr. Todd, with a chuckle; “I guess I can stand it for a few days, though.”

He looked away up the dusty street where an occasional pedestrian enlivened the solitude. “Thinking of settling here?” he asked.

David scowled.

“Yes,” he said. “Out in the country a mile or so.”

“Then you’ll have hopes of striking the metropolis here occasionally?” queried Mr. Todd facetiously. “I wouldn’t want to get too far away.”

David’s eyes were still fixed and frowning. [232]

“What do you think of a man of my experience settling down in a place like this to raise apples?” he asked. “Sometimes I think I’m several kinds of a fool for doing it.”

Mr. Todd spat thoughtfully over the rail.

“That depends,” he said tentatively, but with a keen look at the other.

David flicked the ash off his cigarette, then flung it impatiently away and lighted a fresh one.

“Yes, of course,” he said; “but take it anyway you like, is the game worth the candle? Once I’m tied up here, I suppose I’ll have to stand by the rest of my life. Do I want to do it? Would you want to do it? Honest now.”

The small spare gentleman who had introduced himself to Barford society under the name of Albert Todd smiled thoughtfully.

“Well, it strikes me as a bit slow for my taste. What do you say to a game of cards to pass away the time?”

David shook his head.

“I don’t take much to cards,” he said. “The other chap generally wins, and I like to be on the winning side.”

He tramped up and down the piazza a few times; impatiently kicking at the railings as he paused to turn.

“There’s a man in this town I’ve got to see on rather disagreeable business,” he said at last. “I’ve been putting it off for several days; [233] but I believe I’ll do it now. So long. See you in the morning.”

Left to himself Mr. Todd elevated his feet to the railing, as if to indulge in a prolonged period of post-prandial meditation. In the gathering twilight he watched David’s muscular figure swinging along the street. He was walking like a man with a purpose. After a minute or two of keen-eyed watchfulness Mr. Todd quietly arose, clapped his hat on his head, and strolled toward the steps.

“Goin’ out t’ take in the town?” inquired a voice from the rear.

The insurance man glanced at the slim youth in the rather untidy white apron who stood in the doorway.

“W’y, yes,” he replied, very pleasantly indeed. “I thought I might as well.”

“I’d advise you not to have much to do with that fellow you was talkin’ to,” pursued the youth sulkily. “He’s one of our customers, but I don’t care. Talk ’bout cards; he cleaned me out of a month’s wages one night last week; then laughed at me for bein’ mad. I ain’t got no use fer him.”

“I don’t know about that,” Mr. Todd said pacifically. “He seems like a nice sort. Nothing really vicious, or——”

“He’s a durned, good-fer-nothin’ blowhard; that’s what he is,” said the bartender rancorously. “An’ that’s what I tell Jennie. But she—— I’d like t’ punch his head; that’s all!”

“Who’s Jennie?”

“She waited on your table t’ supper. She’s the prettiest girl in this town.” [234]

“Oh,” said Mr. Todd understandingly.

“She’s prettier ’n that Preston girl ever thought of bein’—that’s his girl. He’s engaged t’ her. But some folks want the earth.”

“That’s so,” observed Mr. Todd smilingly. “And sometimes,” he added, with a wink, “they get it, too!”

This speech appeared to irritate the youth exceedingly. “Huh!” he exploded violently. “Well, I’d like to punch his head; that’s all.”

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[235]

XIX

David's suddenly formed resolution carried him swiftly to the one big house of the village, where he rang the bell. The night being warm the outer door stood open and he could look through the screen into the dimly lighted hall. To the left of the passage was Jarvis's library, and David, waiting impatiently before the outer door, perceived that the master of the house was within, quietly reading by a shaded lamp. Somehow the sight stirred the unreasoning anger within him to a hotter glow. His unanswered summons appeared in the guise of a deliberate insult. Raising his walking-stick he smote the door. He saw the man within raise his eyes from his book, as if to listen, and repeated his knock smartly; then as Jarvis rose and came hastily toward the door, he spoke:

"Good-evening, Mr. Jarvis," he said, mumbling the prefix so that it was little more than an inarticulate sound. "Guess your door-bell isn't in working order."

Jarvis recognized his visitor with an involuntary start, which David perceived with ill-disguised triumph.

"The fellow's afraid of me," he told himself, and hung up his hat on the rack as if quite at his ease.

He followed Jarvis into the library and sat down, looking about [236]
him with cool curiosity.

"You've been expecting to see me, I dare say," he began, his eyes returning from their tour of inspection to the other man's face.

Jarvis returned the look doubtfully.

"It occurred to me that you might wish——"

"Yes; I do," interrupted David. "You're entirely right, sir."

Having said this much in a loud, aggressive tone, David stopped short. He had become suddenly aware that Jarvis was looking at—or rather, through—him, in a way which made him irritably conscious of his hands, his feet, the set of his collar, and the material of his light summer clothes. Then those strange eyes went deeper; they were busying themselves with his thoughts, his motives, they even saw his fears, which crowded forward, a cloud of gibbering shapes, out of his past.

He spoke again, hurriedly, and backed up his words with a laugh, which sounded foolishly loud in the quiet room.

"Well," he said, "now that you've had time to look me over, how d' you like me? Think I'll do—eh?"

"No," Jarvis said quietly, almost sadly. "I'm afraid not. But I don't intend to trust my own judgment—entirely."

He sighed deeply and looked down, as if there was nothing more to be seen or said.

David straightened himself in his chair with a jerk. [237]

"See here," he said truculently. "I was joking, you know; you were staring at me as if you'd never seen a human being before. But now I'd like you to answer me straight. What d'you mean by saying I 'won't do'? What business is it of yours what I——"

He choked a little with the rage that was consuming him.

"Why, confound your impudence!" he cried, his face flaming with anger.

"I owe you an apology, sir," said Jarvis, with stately composure. "I ought not to have spoken as I did. But there is much at stake."

"Not for you," said David insolently.

He fell to staring at Jarvis, striving to imitate the other's disconcerting look.

"She loves me, you know."

He had not intended to taunt his rival, but the words slipped out without volition. He was glad of it, in view of the blighting change that swept over the other's face.

"Yes," Jarvis said dully, "I know that."

He was realizing all at once that the blow that felled Whitcomb must reach her tender breast also.

"There's no use of beating about the bush," David went on. "She told me about your visit to her the other night. At first I didn't catch on about that remarkable client of yours and the care of the interesting child and all that. But when I got out of her the fact that [238]
you had been courting her while I was away, of course I was on to

your little game."

He paused to allow his words their full weight, exulting in the look of quiet despair that appeared to have settled upon Jarvis's face.

"You thought if you couldn't catch and hold her one way you would another. You planned to keep her from me! Deny it if you dare!"

Jarvis looked up, opened his lips as if minded to reply; then his head drooped, and again he sighed deeply. He was striving to master himself; that self which even now struggled like a leashed hound under his iron hand.

"I must be fair," he groaned half aloud. "I must—I must, for her sake."

"What's that?" inquired David smartly. "We may as well have it out first as last, you know."

"Yes," agreed Jarvis, rousing himself. "I didn't mean to—yet. But ——"

He looked calmly at David.

"Can we not talk this over in a reasonable way?" he asked. "There is really no need of anger or——"

"Oh, come, man; let's get down to business!" cried David, vastly pleased with himself and his own acumen.

He had not been at all certain as to the money, which he was now convinced Jarvis had given Barbara out of his own pocket. That he had surprised, compelled, browbeaten Jarvis, in what he was pleased to call "the fellow's own game," was a matter for pride, [239] exultation. Who was Jarvis, anyway, that a whole countryside should stand in awe of him and his achievements? He, Whitcomb, had met the man and conquered him on his own ground. He even began to feel a sort of complacent pity for his abased rival, as his spirits rose from the depths of the humiliation falsely put upon him by Jarvis.

"'You can fool some of the people all of the time,' you know," he quoted, with a confident laugh; "and you did succeed in fooling Barbara nicely; but the minute I heard you were in love with her, of course I——"

"One thing first," interrupted Jarvis; "did she tell you—what had passed between us of her own free will?"

David burst into a laugh.

"Oh, that's where the shoe pinches, is it?" he said good-humoredly. "Well, I don't mind informing you that Barbara didn't tell me a single thing about you—not at first. She's a good little scout, Barbie is, and she saved your pride all right for you. She'd never have told me, I guess; but I taxed her with it, and, of course, she couldn't deny it. Some girls would have snapped you up quick, with all your money and everything, and with me supposedly buried up in the Klondyke. But not Barbara. She's worth while, that girl."

"Yes," mused Jarvis, "she is—worth while."

"You wouldn't catch me loafing around this dead and alive hole for many women," David went on, drumming with his fingers on the [240] edge of his chair. "As it is, I've had about all I can stand of it; and she won't give in and marry me—won't even wear my ring, till that client of yours—that peculiar, hard-to-get-along-with individual you're representing—can be either bought off, or disposed of in some way. Naturally, neither of us want to be under obligations to —*you*!" he finished dramatically.

"Does she—suppose that I——"

David laughed again.

"No," he said. "Oh, no! Barbie isn't gifted with a very keen imagination. She swallowed all you told her about that singular, out-of-town client of yours. She seems to have implicit faith in you."

A subtle lightning flash leaped from Jarvis's eyes.

"She's quite right to trust me," he said calmly. "I'll be glad if you can do the same."

"Oh, come now, it's too late for any more joking between us!" cried David roughly. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes. You gave her that money, Jarvis, you know you did. And you did it just so as to tie her down. It's a damned shame!"

Jarvis had risen, and David sprang eagerly from his chair to face him. The two men were of equal height, and for an instant David's boyish blue eyes strove to master Jarvis, glance to glance. Then he drew back, baffled, furious.

“You aren’t going to stick to that cock-and-bull story a minute longer with me,” he blustered. “You know very well where the money came from!”

Jarvis bowed ceremoniously. [241]

“Certainly I know,” he acknowledged.

“Didn’t you give it to her?”

“I shall not answer you.”

“Well, you did, and I can prove it.”

“How?”

David sprang forward with a triumphant laugh and snatched a small object from the desk.

“I have been sitting where I could look at your writing traps,” he exulted. “And I saw—this!”

Jarvis appeared quite unmoved.

“That is my seal,” he observed, “with my family crest. What of it?”

“What of it?” shouted David. “Why, it’s the thing that was used to sign that damned contract. It’s proof positive. That’s what it is!”

“My client,” said Jarvis coolly, “did not wish to use his own name. I suggested the seal. He used it—at my request.”

“Well, you’re the man, anyway,” David retorted violently. “I insist that you release her—at once. Do you hear? At once!”

“So that she can be free to marry you?” Jarvis asked. His eyes were fixed and glittered strangely.

“Yes! Why not? She’s my promised wife.”

Jarvis stood silent for a long minute, as if considering David’s words. Then he looked up, moving a little toward the door with the manifest intention of bringing the unfruitful interview to an end.

“I cannot say more at present than that I will endeavor to so [242] arrange matters with my client as to meet Miss Preston’s wishes,” he said.

He looked calmly, dispassionately at David, and again the young man felt himself vaguely humiliated. He had meant to say more, much more; but quite unexpectedly he found himself bidding Jarvis good-night. The door closed quietly upon his wrath and discomfiture.

Stephen Jarvis did not at once resume the reading of the thin blue volume which lay face down in the bright circle of lamp-light. Instead he walked slowly up and down the room, his brows knit, his sinewy hands locked behind him. He was trying as conscientiously as possible to look at the situation from the view-point of the young man; to find, if possible, in his own conduct some valid excuse for the (to him) intolerable behavior of Whitcomb. While he yet strove with himself a second visitor was announced.

Jarvis received this person with visible reluctance, bade him be seated, and sat down himself, before he opened the conversation with a tentative, “Well!” rather impatiently uttered.

“I arrived this afternoon, Mr. Jarvis, and quite fortunately fell in at once with the person in question,” the newcomer said.

“Yes,” said Jarvis dryly.

“As I understand my commission,” pursued Mr. Todd, “I am to inform myself as to the person’s past, his present occupation and habits, and——”

Jarvis made an impatient gesture of assent. [243]

“I want to know all about him,” he said. “It is important that I should be informed as to whether he is fitted for a position of trust.”

The other man nodded.

“I understand,” he said.

“I want to know,” pursued Jarvis in a harsh voice, “if the man is truthful, honest, temperate. If, in short, he is the man to be implicitly trusted with—interests of the highest value and importance.”

Mr. Todd again assented, his sharp ferret eyes taking in the details of his employer’s face and person with professional acumen.

“Mercantile?” he asked briskly, “or professional? There’s a difference, you know. Now a man might be something of a braggart, addicted to cigarette smoking, not averse to a temperate use of intoxicants, an occasional—er——”

“Do you see all this in him already?” demanded Jarvis.

Mr. Todd considered.

"I dined with the young man," he said slowly, "and acquired certain information which may or may not have a bearing on your case."

Jarvis leaned forward, glistening drops of moisture starting out on his forehead.

"Is the man merely a weak fool—weak because untried by any of the deeper experiences of life, and foolish only because he is young? or is he—worse?" he asked, in a low voice; "that is what I want to [244] know. Temperamentally the person in question is at odds with myself. I—don't like him. But, understand, I must not rely on my likes and dislikes in this matter. I—am obliged to be—fair to him, at all costs."

"I understand, Mr. Jarvis," assented the detective. "And I will tell you frankly that my own initial impressions—and I have learned to rely somewhat on first impressions as being in the main correct—are that the person referred to is somewhat inconstant, easily led, excitable, with all the faults of youth and—quite possibly"—he paused to again study the face before him, "—many of its virtues. He is, on his own testimony, selfish, extravagant, passionate." He shook his head slowly. "I should not," he went on, "care to trust such a man with interests calling for a high degree of business sagacity or—er—let us say sober industry. I believe it was something of the sort you questioned."

Jarvis threw himself back in his chair. His haggard eyes met the detective's squarely.

"Is the fellow fit to marry a good and pure woman?" he asked. "Could he command her respect and hold her affection? That's test enough for me."

Mr. Todd moved uneasily in his chair.

"Oh, as to that," he hesitated, "there are all sorts of women, you know. Some of 'em like a man all the better—or appear to—if he—well; if he isn't too good, you know. I've known a woman," he went on strongly, "to marry a man who'd drink and abuse her, and yet [245] she'd love him and stick to him to the last. There's something queer about women, when it comes to loving a man. His character doesn't seem to count for so much as you'd suppose."

Jarvis assented dryly.

"You think the person in question would be likely to—do as you suggested?"

"It would be a toss-up," said Mr. Todd thoughtfully, "as to whether he'd settle down into a steady, respectable sort of a citizen, or—" he paused to button his coat painstakingly "—the opposite. I'll follow him up a while longer," he went on, "and report from day to day. In a case like this, where you don't feel like trusting your own judgment, it's best to let facts talk."

Mr. Todd looked searchingly into the depths of his hat.

"Facts will talk, you know," he said confidently. "They're bound to. Sooner or later, something comes along that tells the story. I've shadowed many a person in the past as could tell you that, sir, from behind prison bars."

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XX

Peg Morrison emulating (through the long summer months) the shining examples reported in the agricultural papers, found himself half-owner of a prodigious yield of onions in the early autumn. Day after day he had toiled amid the long lines of odorous shoots; weeding, when weeding was a back-breaking task under pitiless summer suns, and early and late stirring the baked soil—for the onion specialists laid great stress on intensive cultivation. Viewing the great heaps of shining bulbs, red, yellow, and silver-hued, spread out in the various barns to dry, Mr. Morrison felt inclined to break forth into singing, moved by something of the same exultant spirit which has prompted successful agriculturists from the days of the first harvests, reaped from the bosom of the virgin earth.

> "Let everlastin' thanks be thine,
> Fer sech a bright displa-a-y [he chanted]
> Es makes a world o' darkness shine
> With beams o' heavenly da-a-y!"

Martha Cottle, her maiden countenance coyly shaded by a ruffled pink sun-bonnet, and bearing the egg-basket ostentatiously in one hand, paused on the threshold of the barn.

"Why, Mis-ter Morrison," she exclaimed, "what a wonderful harvest of onions! I never saw anything like it." [247]

"This ain't all of 'em, either," quoth Peg, pausing long enough in his labors to wipe the beaded perspiration from his forehead. "The only thing that gits me is what to do with 'em, now 't I've got 'em. The' ain't a quarter of 'em out the ground yit."

"You should have thought of that before," Miss Cottle said wisely. "If you keep them too long they'll rot or freeze out here."

"They sure will," agreed Peg, with some anxiety. "I've got to do somethin' with 'em quick. I'll bet," he added, "that I've got nigh onto three thousand bushels—two, anyhow. The'd 'a' b'en more, only part of 'em didn't come up, an' some was spoiled b' the dry weather. I didn't put in more'n half I intended to, neither. I d'clar I don't see how that thar John Closner of Hidalgo, Texas, made out to plant an' cultivate thirty-two acres of onions; an' what in creation he done with twenty-eight thousan' eight hunderd bushels when he got 'em raised beats me. The's an awful lot o' onions in a hunderd bushels, seems t' me."

Miss Cottle reflected, her eyes on Mr. Morrison's heated countenance.

"I don't suppose," she said, "that you'd care to take any advice from *me;* but I know what *I'd* do, if I'd raised all those onions."

"I ain't proud," Mr. Morrison confessed handsomely. "I'd take advice f'om a Leghorn hen, ef it p'intedly hit the nail on the head. Fire away, ma'am. Ef you've got any good idees, it's reelly wrong t' keep 'em to yourself, they're kind o' scurse these days." [248]

He looked whimsically at the lady, whose earnest attention appeared to be divided pretty evenly between the shining heaps of vegetables and himself.

"I don't believe I shall ever smell onions again without thinking of you, Peleg," Miss Cottle observed sentimentally.

"'"Tis sweet to be remembered,'" quoted Peg gallantly.

Miss Cottle sighed deeply; then started as if suddenly frightened by her own thoughts.

"What," she demanded, dropping her basket, which was fortunately empty, "did I say?"

"W'y, nothin' in pertic'lar, ma'am," replied Peg. "You was speakin' o' disposin' o' th' onions, an'——"

"Yes; but I called you by your Christian name. I called you —*Peleg!* What *must* you think of me?"

"Ev'rybody mostly calls me Peleg, er Peg. I ain't pertic'lar es t' that. But how 'bout them onions? You was sayin'——"

"I was about to inform you that my brother-in-law's nephew is connected with the Washington Market in New York City," said Miss Cottle, with a long, quivering sigh. "I had thought of writing to him, if you cared to have me. I should be *glad* to do *something*—for you, Peleg. There! I've said it again." [249]

"It's mighty kind of you to write t' your relation. I'm bleeged t' you, ma'am. Washin'ton Market, Noo York City, soun's good t' me.

But d'ye s'pose the's folks enough thar t' eat all them onions?"

He shook his head doubtfully.

"The loft t' the kerridge house is full of 'em, an' the hay barn floor's covered, an' the's a lot more in the ground, es I was sayin'."

Miss Cottle seated herself on an upturned bushel-basket and gazed earnestly at the successful grower of onions.

"I wish to talk to you *seriously*, Mr. Morrison, on a subject *very near my heart*," she said. "Will you not sit down on this box"—indicating a place at her side—"and listen?"

"I'd ought t' be gittin' them onions out th' groun'," protested Peg, with a wary glint in his eye. But he sat down gingerly on the edge of the box.

"I've been thinking *deeply* on the situation here on the farm," pursued Miss Cottle. "I do not feel that I am doing *right* to remain here longer, *under the circumstances*."

Peg fumbled the rampant locks behind his left ear, in a fashion he had when perplexed.

"Under the circumstances," he repeated dubiously. "The circumstances is all right; ain't they?"

"I appear to have dropped into the position of hired girl to Barbara Preston," pursued the spinster acidly. "She did her own [250] work previous to my coming; now I do most of it. But that isn't all; I was engaged as housekeeper and caretaker for that boy. She was to go away and *stay* for five years."

"Mebbe she'll go soon now," hazarded Peg. He shook his head slowly. "Kind o' funny 'bout that business," he murmured. "I dunno who in creation bid her in."

"I shouldn't mind that so much," pursued Miss Cottle, "but——"

She paused dramatically to allow the full force of her remark to fall on the unsuspecting man.

"There's been considerable talk in the village lately—*about you and me*. It's come to me straight."

"No!" exclaimed Peg, hastily gaining his legs and feeling for his pipe in his rear breeches pocket with agitated haste.

"Don't you believe it, ma'am."

"Can you deny," intoned Miss Cottle strongly, "that the subject of your attentions to me was brought up and discussed in Hewett's grocery store less than a week ago?"

"I said it wa'n't so, ma'am; I told 'em the' wa'n't nothin' in it."

"*You* told them, Peleg Morrison? *You* denied that you intended to marry me? How could you?"

"W'y, ma'am, you know——"

"You should, at least, have afforded *me* the opportunity of denying the report—if it was to be denied."

Miss Cottle buried her face in her hands.

"I supposed," she went on, in a smothered voice, "that you had [251] more regard for the sacred feelings of a good woman. I thought, Peleg, you—cared—a little—for me."

"Oh, my! Gosh—goll—durn—what—in—thunder——"

Miss Cottle's strong, determined hand shot out and fastened tentacle-like upon the unfortunate Peleg's sleeve.

"I shall leave this very day—*never* to return," she said, in a hollow voice, "unless you and I come to an understanding. I cannot endure it longer."

"O Lord!" exclaimed Peg prayerfully.

"I *love* that *dear* little boy as if he was my *own*," pursued Miss Cottle sentimentally, "and I *feel* that my *duty* calls me to remain and care for him; but——"

"I reelly hope you won't go on my 'count, ma'am," faltered Peg, moved by these protestations and once more mindful of Barbara's exhortations.

"*Peleg!*" exclaimed Miss Cottle beatifically, and instantly relaxed upon his shoulder.

"Say, ma'am! You know—reelly, I——"

"I am *so* happy, Peleg!" gurgled the spinster.

"Wall, I ain't; I——"

"I knew you would understand my feelings."

"But I don't, ma'am. Kindly set down, an'——"

"I shall remain *now* and do my duty with a *light heart*. I feel that

the arrangement will be *much better* for *all* concerned, and I can make you *so* comfortable, Peleg. You need half a dozen new shirts, [252] and shall I confess it? I have them nearly completed already."

Mr. Morrison, looking wildly about for a means of escape, caught sight of Jimmy running past the door, a brace of puppies frolicking at his heels.

"Hello, thar, Cap'n!" he called, "don't you want t' step in here an'——"

"The *dear* child," murmured Miss Cottle, wiping her eyes on her apron. "He shall be the first to share our happiness. I am going to be married to your kind old friend here, James; aren't you *glad*, my boy?"

Jimmy gazed doubtfully at the pair from under puckered brows.

"Married?" he echoed. "What for?"

"Say, Cap'n, you've struck the nail on the head, es usual!" cried Peg, regaining his composure with an effort. "I guess the lady don't altogether know her own mind. She was kind o' calc'latin' on bein' married t' me. But she's thought better of it b' now, an' I'm bearin' up es well es I kin under the circumstances. The' ain't goin't' be no weddin'. No, sir! She's changed her mind sence she come in here. D'ye hear, ma'am? You couldn't put up with ol' Peg Morrison. Y' tried to, f'om a strict sense o' duty; but y' reelly couldn't do it."

"*Peleg!*" exclaimed Miss Cottle sharply. "You must have taken leave of your senses!"

"No, ma'am, I ain't. The Cap'n here'll bear witness that I said [253] you'd give me up. That'll put a stop t' the talk—ef the' is any. You c'n tell 'em that. I won't deny it. I c'n stan' it."

A light as of tardy victory dawned in Miss Cottle's eyes.

"You won't deny that we've been engaged to be married?" she said slowly.

"No, ma'am; you c'n say anythin' you've a mind to. It's all the same t' me, now 't you've give me up. I feel turrible bad—all broke up; but I'm a-goin' t' stan' it the best I kin. Religion 'll help some, I guess. It gene'lly does. I'll try it, anyhow."

"I might reconsider," observed Miss Cottle, "before"—she added darkly—"the affair becomes public. I fear the notoriety will be very hard for you to bear, Peleg."

"It will, ma'am," replied Peg with alacrity; "but I'm goin' t' try an' endure it."

Miss Cottle meditatively stirred the onions with one foot clad substantially in rusty leather.

"I shall hold you to the engagement which you have acknowledged," she said firmly, "unless——"

"What? Fer goodness sake don't keep me on tenter-hooks, ma'am! W'y, say, you don't want me! I ain't fit t' wipe m' feet on your door-mat; you've said so lots o' times; ain't she, Cap'n? I'm an ornary cuss; more ornary 'n you hev any idee of; an' I'm humbly's a hedge-fence, 'n'—'n' bad-tempered; m' disposition's somethin' fierce. The Cap'n here c'n tell you that. W'y, land, I dunno but what I'd be drove to drink, ef I was t' git married! I'll bet I would. An' [254] what with my t'bacco—y' know y' hate that like pison, an' m'——"

"If my brother-in-law's nephew should make you an offer for these onions, I feel that I ought to have a share in the proceeds," said Miss Cottle, suddenly abandoning sentiment for business. "If we were to carry out our engagement of marriage, of course I should reasonably expect to profit by the arrangement."

"No, ma'am; you wouldn't, not whilst I was alive. I'm downright stingy. That's another thing I fergot t' mention. Stingy? W'y, I'm closter 'n the bark t' a tree. 'Nough sight closter, 'cause the bark'll give when the tree grows. But not Peleg Morrison; no, ma'am! I'll bet you wouldn't git 'nough t' eat, with me fer a pervider. An' I've made up my mind long ago to leave ev'rythin' I've got t' the Cap'n here. M' will's all made. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you—a hunderd dollars cash, ef I sell the onions, 'n ef you——"

"Make it two hundred, and I'll agree to let you off. You couldn't do me out of my widow's third, anyway you'd fix it."

Peg stared at the determined spinster in silence for a long minute. Then with a muttered exclamation, he dashed out of the barn and disappeared.

Miss Cottle's eyes sparkled with animosity.

"If I was to sue him for breach of promise, and I could do it, too, I

guess he——”

She paused in her meditations to stare wrathfully at the [255]
spectacle of the recalcitrant Peleg returning at full speed, a small, yellow-leaved book in his hand.

“Here we be, ma’am!” he exclaimed. “Now we’ll see whar we’re at. I gene’lly find somethin’ t’ fit the ’casion, an’ I’ll bet I kin this time.”

He rapidly turned the pages with a moistened thumb and fingers.

“‘Receipt fer horse liniment.’ No; that won’t do. ‘Foot an’ mouth disease,’ ‘How t’ git fat; an’ how not t’ git fat,’ ‘Blind staggers, ‘n’ how t’ pervent,’ ‘Jell-cake—— ’”

“What,” demanded Miss Cottle sharply, “is that book? And what possible connection does it have with our affairs?”

Mr. Morrison paused, his thumb in his mouth.

“W’y, this,” he explained, “is my book of vallable inf’mation. It’s got ev’rythin’ to do with ’em, ma’am. I ain’t never be’n exactly in this ’ere fix b’fore; but I’ll bet the’s inf’mation in this ’ere book ’at’ll fit the case all right. You jus’ set down, ma’am, an’ make yourself comf’table, while——”

“This is outrageous!” snapped Miss Cottle.

“Maybe I’d better run and get my book, too,” volunteered Jimmy, who had been an interested but sadly puzzled spectator of the scene. “P’raps there’ll be somethin’ vallable in mine.”

“All right, Cap’n; run ’long,” said Peg briskly. “Now, listen t’ this, ma’am. ‘The sleepin’ fox ketches no poultry.’ That’s good; but the trouble is you ’pear to be wide-awake. Hold on; don’t git ’xcited. [256]
Here’s a little inf’mation on the subjec’ o’ fools. I copied it out the almanac nigh onto twenty years ago, an’ it can’t be beat. ‘’Xperience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other.’ An’ this, ’t I got out o’ a story book, ‘The’ ain’t nothin’ so becomin’ t’ a fool es a shet mouth.’ An’ mebbe this here has some bearin’s on the case: ‘Don’t meddle with these three things: a buzz-saw, a kickin’ mule, an’ a woman’s ’at’s mad clear through.’ They’re all alike in one pertic’lar ——”

“I shall certainly sue for breach of promise!” announced Miss Cottle, treading recklessly among the onions on her way to the door.

“No, ma’am; you won’t,” quoth Peg placidly. “‘Whar the’s be’n no promise thar c’n be no breach.’ I wrote that down ’bout the year fifty-nine. I wa’n’t ’s old’s I be now; but I’ve kep’ it in mind pretty constant. You fix it so ’t I’ll sell them onions at a fair profit ’n’ I’ll give ye a hunderd dollars. ’N’ you c’n tell your lady friends that ol’ Peg Morrison’s sech a scalawag ’at you couldn’t hear t’ marryin’ him, not ef he was the las’ man on earth. An’ that’s the truth. You couldn’t hear t’ it, an’ you c’n bet I wouldn’t.”

“I shall leave this house to-day.—*To-day*, Peleg Morrison; do you *hear*?”

Peg glanced up from his anxious scrutiny of the pages of accumulated lore with a look of deep thankfulness.

“Sho! you don’t say so?” he exclaimed. “Wall, take this ’long with [257]
you t’ med’tate over: ‘A blue-bottle fly makes a turrible sight of loud buzzin’, but take notice ’at it don’t git anywhar.’ An’ this: ‘Run your head into a stone wall, ef you feel like doin’ it; but don’t blame the wall none fer what happens.”

Jimmy running blithely toward the barn with his book of Vallable Inf’mation in one hand and his cherished bottle of red ink in the other, met the irate Miss Cottle on the way.

“I’m a-going to do *once* what I’ve been simply *achin’* to do ever since I set foot onto this place!” she cried shrilly; and seizing the child by the shoulder she gave him a violent shaking, concluding with a hard-handed slap or two over the ear.

“Take *that*, you little tyke, you! If I’d ’a’ had you in hand for five years steady, with her gone, I’d ’a’ taken some of the laugh and smartness out of you! But now I wash my hands of you and her and him!”

The child, too astonished to cry out, writhed out of the spinster’s bony grip.

“I ’spise you,” he sputtered, “you ol’—ol’—Cottle woman! ’n’—’n’—I’ll put it in my Vallable Inf’mation book ’at you—slapped me when I was good!”

Miss Cottle made another dive at him, and was met by a copious shower of red ink from the loosely corked bottle, which Jimmy

discharged at his assailant with the practised aim of the small boy. Then he took to his heels, to be received into asylum by Peg Morrison, who was watching the proceedings from the barn-door. [258]

“Wall, Cap’n,” he said, “you sure did put that red ink to good use. Don’t you cry, son; I’ll git ye another bottle twict es big b’fore sun-down.”

He chuckled deep within his capacious chest as he smoothed the little boy’s ruffled curls with his big, horny hand.

“You an’ me’ll hev to write out a little vallable inf’mation on the subjec’ o’ females,” he said slowly. “The’s all kinds an’ varieties of wimmin-folks; ’n’ t’ git ’em all sorted an’ labelled, so ’t ye won’t git teetotally fooled ’ll take the better part of a lifetime.”

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[259]

XXI

Barbara was shut into her chamber looking over her wardrobe with a view to approaching winter. In the autumn the call would come, Jarvis had told her. Already the ripening apples glowed like live coals along the laden orchard boughs, and the brisk September winds scattered drifts of yellowing leaves about the feet of the early dying locusts below her windows. Martha Cottle was gone, after a stormy scene in which she had exacted redress and largesse of the most lavish description. Barbara had drawn a long breath of relief when the last echo of the spinster's strident voice and the last militant thump of her flat-heeled shoes had died away.

Peg and Jimmy had openly exulted in the final retreat of the enemy; and Peg took occasion to exhort his dearly beloved mistress anew concerning the inscrutable yet invariably benevolent workings of Providence, as signally evidenced in the hasty departure of Martha Cottle.

"Ef it hadn't be'n fer them onions," he declared, "she'd never have took a fancy t' me. 'N' ef I hadn't 'a' heard o' John Closner of Hidalgo, Texas, 's like's not I'd 'a' never took t' raisin' 'em. Them onions kinder drored Marthy's 'tention t' me—she thinkin' 'at mebbe I'd git a heap o' money fer 'em, 'n' then be accommodatin' 'nough t' [260] die an' go t' heaven immediate. Yes, ma'am, she'd got it all worked out in her own mind, even t' widow's thirds. Then, y' see, the Cap'n's red ink fitted right in t' the scheme o' salvation; an' here we be. I figger it this way: the Lord hes be'n 'quainted with Marthy Cottle fer a spell longer'n we hev, an' *He* knew she wa'n't fit t' b' left in charge o' the Cap'n, t' say nothin' o' things in general."

"But what shall I do with Jimmy?" murmured Barbara, wrinkling her forehead perplexedly. "It won't be long now before I shall be obliged to leave him."

"Don't you worry none 'bout that," advised Peg. "Everythin's a-comin' out all right. I'll bet a dollar'n a half," he went on, raising his voice to a high argumentative pitch, "that the Lord hes got his plans all made a'ready. W'y, Miss Barb'ry, it'll do you a heap o' good t' jus' take notice o' the way the Lord kind o' fetches things 'round in this 'ere world. I've got so 't I don't put in a minute worryin'. Daytimes I'm too blamed busy, an' nights I'm too sleepy 'n' tired; 'n' I've learned f'om a long life of experience 'at worryin' ain't no kind o' use, anyhow. Things is bein' worked 'round fer you, nigh an' fur, an' the fust thing you know you're gittin' 'long all hunky-dory. Mebbe doin' the very thing you wanted to do all the while, but thought you couldn't, nohow you'd fix it."

"I wish I could believe it," sighed Barbara.

"All you've got t' do is t' begin t' take notice," urged Peg. "You [261] don't have t' make no speshul effort. Keep yer eyes peeled an' watch out. I ain't worryin' none 'bout the Cap'n. You bet I ain't."

Barbara was thinking about Peg's homely and comfortable philosophy as she laid the last neatly folded garment into the till of her trunk; and mingled with her dubious musings on the scope and nature of that mysteriously active power, known in current phrase as "Providence," and as commonly reckoned hostile, in the world's judgment, were thoughts of David. Not altogether happy were these uppermost reflections in Barbara's mind, as evidenced by her brooding eyes and the downward droop of her red mouth. She loved David (she assured herself) yet she could not but be conscious of inward reserves, tremors, even resentments. She constantly caught herself explaining, excusing, defending him before the bar of that clear-eyed self which had never yet yielded to his hot kisses and close embraces. She loved him (she was sure) but she also pitied him, for his evident weaknesses, his frequent deflections from her own high ideals of manhood, for his multiplied offenses against her maiden modesty. Almost insensibly she had been forced into an attitude of watchfulness, guarding herself against his too ardent and careless approaches, soothing the gloom and irritation which alternated with not infrequent periods of coldness and neglect, when he chanced to be feeling sorry for himself, in view of what he [262] was pleased to regard as the sacrifice of his future.

David had not acquainted Barbara with the result of his latest interview with Jarvis. He hated Jarvis, and he took small pains to conceal the fact; but he jealously hid his unshaken conviction with regard to the money, which he had made up his mind Jarvis had

given to Barbara. After a little he even concluded that it need not be repaid.

"Miserly old crab," he told himself. "It won't hurt him to let Barbara have that much out of his pile."

Something of this thought colored his words when he discussed the question with Barbara.

"You'll marry me in November, won't you?" he pleaded, "if the fellow doesn't show up before then? We can pay him all right—if we have to."

"If we have to?" echoed Barbara, with a straight look at him. "Why do you say that?"

"It's a good bit of money—four thousand dollars. Perhaps some—er—philanthropical jay gave it to you outright, Barbie. I shouldn't be so very much surprised."

He laughed at the proud curl of her lips.

"You wouldn't care, would you?" he persisted, "if some old duffer had taken it into his noddle to do a good deed? Once we are married, I shan't bother to unearth him, you'd better believe. I'm in favor of letting sleeping philanthropists lie—eh, Barbie?"

"We'll not be married," Barbara said, in a low voice, "till——" [263]

He caught her suddenly about the waist and stopped her words with one of his close kisses.

"You shan't say it," he murmured, his lips still on hers.

She twisted sharply out of his grasp, her face crimsoning slowly.

"I wish—you wouldn't, David."

"Wouldn't what, little wife?" he drawled, reaching for her lazily from his comfortable seat in the corner of the sofa.

"I am not your wife," she said coldly.

"Pretty near," he laughed; "too near for such little exhibitions of prudery."

His eyes, vividly blue and sparkling under their long curling lashes, met hers with a look which she silently resented.

"I have sold the apples on the trees," she said presently, seating herself near the window, under pretence of getting a better light on her sewing.

David yawned audibly, and thrust his hands into his trousers pockets.

"You have—eh?"

"Yes; and for a good price, as prices go, Peg says."

"How much?" he wanted to know.

She told him, and he shook his head.

"Do y' know, that old Morrison is a fool. I mean to get rid of him, when I take charge here."

Barbara was silent. [264]

"The old chap doesn't know enough to last him over night," pursued David. "I don't believe you'd ever have gotten into such a hole financially, if it hadn't been for his running things into the ground. What you want is a couple of capable young men about the place. Of course we'll keep some decent horses. I've bought one already, a beauty! Come out and look at him, Barbie. Or, say, put on your hat and I'll take you for a spin. We'll take in the county fair, if you say so. It's in full blast to-day."

She arose and folded her work.

"Not to-day, David; I've bread to bake. But I'll come out and look at your horse."

"You're getting so confoundedly difficult, Barbara. I never know how to take you," complained David, as they walked, a little apart, along the gravel path.

He turned to look at her and was struck afresh by her beauty. During the long days of the summer that was past, she seemed to have bloomed into a new and more vivid loveliness. He drew his breath sharply as his eyes lingered on the rich red of her mouth, the full column of her round white throat, and the soft undulations of her figure as she moved slowly under the dazzling light of the September sky.

"If you weren't such a tearing beauty," he said, under his breath, "I don't know as I could stand for it long. You're forever treading on a fellow's toes; did you know it, Barbie? Now, I like a woman to be [265] sweet and—er—yielding."

He smiled at the vision of Jennie, the pink-cheeked waitress at the Barford Eagle, which chose to obtrude itself at the moment. The humble, almost suppliant look of adoration in her childish blue eyes had lately, afforded David a vast amount of indolent amusement.

"A woman," he went on, didactically, "ought not to be always thinking of herself."

"I know that, David," Barbara said meekly. "I try not to. But——"

"That's just it!" he broke in quickly; "there's always a 'but' in your mind and in your attitude towards me, and always has been. You needn't deny it," he added, openly complacent, in view of his own cleverness. "I know women."

The girl looked at him in silence, a mutinous question behind her closed lips.

David smiled down at her brilliantly, his eyes, his tawny hair, his white teeth, and his ruddy color suggesting the magnificent youth and virility of a pagan deity, newly alighted on the common earth.

"The fact is, Barbara," he went on confidently, "you've lived here so long practically alone that you're a bit spoiled. What you need is to give up trying to control everything and everybody and just be a sweet little wife. Didn't you know that?"

Her eyes drooped under the blue fire of his gaze. David laughed aloud.

"I'll make you happy," he said, possessing himself of her hand. [266]
"You won't know yourself a year from now, little girl. All this worry will be over; and I'm never going to allow you to bother your dear little head again over farm-products and such things as cows, pigs, and chickens. I mean to give up a lot of that sort of farming. It doesn't pay, and it's a whole lot of useless bother and expense. There! what do you think of my horse? Isn't he a beauty? Look at his head and eyes, will you? and the build and color of him? There's blood for you, and I tell you he's a hummer on the road!"

Barbara passed a knowing little hand over the satin neck, and the horse turned his large, full, intelligent eyes upon her with a whinny of welcome.

"He likes you, Barbie; first thing. Perhaps you can drive him after a while. But just now he's like a certain little woman I know, a bit restive and needing a strong hand to guide and control. You don't mind my seeing it so clearly, do you, dear?"

Barbara threw back her head and looked at him from under lowered lashes.

"I mind your saying it," she said. "And I may as well tell you—now—that I don't intend to discharge Peg; and I must always have a voice in the management of the farm. It is Jimmy's farm, you know."

"I've heard you say so before," he said sulkily. "But why isn't half of it yours, I'd like to know?"

"Because Jimmy is the last Preston, and father wanted it so. I [267]
shall have all that comes off of it till Jimmy is of age. We——"

She hesitated, with a doubtful look at him. "There is other good land near. We shall, perhaps, be able to acquire it; start fresh orchards, and——"

"Perhaps—perhaps!" he echoed irritably. "I'll tell you straight it's all nonsense. Under the law you're entitled to half. Ask old Jarvis, if you don't believe me."

He watched the quick color rise in Barbara's face, with a low laugh of arrogant amusement.

"Jarvis is a curious old duffer," he added, lazily stroking the smooth shoulder of his horse. "But he knows rather better than to tackle me on certain subjects."

His eyes were fastened on Barbara, narrowly watching her.

"He's tried it once or twice; but I called his bluff each time. He hasn't been here lately, has he?"

"No," said Barbara faintly.

"Well, he'd best keep his distance; that's all."

He turned quickly at sound of a boyish whoop from behind.

"Oh, hello, Jimmy!" he said carelessly. "How's your majesty's highness to-day?"

"I'm pretty well, 'xcept that bof my front teef are loose," replied the little boy seriously. "I can't eat corn or apples, 'cept wiv my side teef."

"Don't you think it's about time you taught that boy to speak the

English language, Barbara? It's *teeth* and *with*, my boy. Don't let me hear you make that babyish blunder again." [268]

The child hung his head, his face flushing to a shamed scarlet under his thatch of yellow hair.

"I'm going to try," he said manfully.

"Want to take a ride with me, old man?" asked David. "Your sister says she can't."

Jimmy looked up eagerly into Barbara's face for the coveted permission.

"I'm going to drive over to the fair," pursued David. "I'd like to take my best girl along pretty well; but you'll do, Jimmy."

Barbara hesitated, her eyes averted.

"Of course, if you're afraid to trust him with me——" mocked David. "I've a tolerably fast horse here, and I'm supposed to be a reckless——"

"It isn't that," she interrupted hurriedly. "He may go, if he'd like to."

Jimmy burst into a shout of joy.

"I guess I'd better brush my hair," he exulted, "and put on my best clo'es! Shall I, Barbara?"

"You're well enough as you are," David said peremptorily. "Jump in, boy, and we'll be off!"

She stood watching them as they drove away, the little boy's yellow hair blowing about his rosy face.

"Good-bye, Barbara!" he shouted. "We're going awful fast!"

David's attention seemed centred upon his horse. He did not once look at the girl, as she waved her hand in token of a cheerful good-bye.

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XXII

David was quite his expansive, good-humored self again by the time he and Jimmy reached the fair-grounds. He joked with the little boy about his capacity for pink lemonade and peanuts as he drove his spirited young horse carefully into the crowded enclosure; and Jimmy, all eager and glowing with joyous anticipation, gazed with round eyes at the stirring scene. Everywhere flags fluttered merrily in the wind, and the crash and blare of band-music mingled with the shouts of vendors, the trampling of feet, and the hum of many voices.

"Hello, Dave! Goin' t' trot that nag o' yourn?" called a voice from among the crowd of men and boys lined up along the race-track.

"Oh, hello, Bud Hawley! That you?" responded Dave, pulling in his horse. "Why, no; I hadn't thought of it. It's too late to enter; isn't it?"

The Barford liveryman, tipping a solemn wink at the men near him, slowly advanced and stood, his hat pulled low over his eyes, examining David's horse. He passed an experienced hand over his withers, felt his hock-joints, lifted his feet, and stared critically at the frogs and the setting of his shoes. Then he sauntered around in front and looked the animal full in the face, his cautious hand still feeling, caressing, sliding from neck to powerful shoulder, from [270] shoulder to slender foreleg.

"Say, Dave," he drawled at length, "that ain't a half bad horse. 'F I was you, I'd enter him. Like 's not you'd pull off some money; mebbe enough t' buy a new buggy. The's a free-fer-all comin' off 'bout four-thirty. I'll see t' enterin' him fer you, if you say so. 'N' I dunno but what I'd back him t' the extent of a few dollars. What d' you say t' lettin' me drive him, 'n' go shares on possible winnin's?"

David laughed arrogantly.

"I'd say 'no' to that last," he said. "I'll drive him myself, if I enter him at all. Where's the office?"

Mr. Hawley thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, where he thoughtfully jingled some loose silver.

"Better let me handle the ribbons," he advised. "I c'n git the paces out o' him without ha'f killin' him, 'n' that's more'n some folks c'n do. I ain't anxious, though, 's fur's that's concerned. But you'd have the fun o' lookin' on from the grand stand."

"There's something in that," admitted David.

"If y' never drove in a race," pursued Mr. Hawley, "y' don't want t' begin t'-day. There'll sure be a ruck o' horses in that free-fer-all."

David glanced over the rail at the spectacle of half a dozen horses hitched to light sulkies and driven at a furious rate of speed, which at that moment dashed past.

"Them's the two-year-olds," vouchsafed Mr. Hawley. "I ain't [271] speshully int'rested in seein' 'em go it. Don't b'lieve in racin' colts m'self. It's too much like givin' a man's work t' a boy. Breaks 'em down, like es not, b'fore they've had a fair chance."

He glanced kindly at Jimmy.

"Well, son," he went on, "how d' you like the fair?"

"I like it," Jimmy said shyly. "I like the music an' the horses an' the flags 'n'—'n' everythin'."

"Want to get out, old man, and take in the side-shows?" asked David.

"What are side-shows?" Jimmy demanded guilelessly.

Mr. Hawley laughed heartily.

"A little bit of everythin'," he answered. "The's the agercult'ral exhibit—I seen some o' your apples an' a pile o' them onions Peg Morrison's be'n raisin' in there. An' there's the woman's tent, with the bigges' lot o' patchwork an' jell'-cake an' canned fruit y' ever saw. I jus' come f'om there. Y' c'n hitch over yonder, if y' wan' to, Dave."

David's eyes had been roaming somewhat impatiently over the gay scene. He thrust his hand into his pocket.

"See here, boy," he said to Jimmy, "you take this small change and go around to suit yourself. I don't care anything about all that sort of thing. But you can take it in as long as you've a mind to."

"What! All b' my lone?" asked Jimmy, a frightened look in his [272] brown eyes. "I guess I'd rather stay wiv you, David."

“Nonsense!” said David sternly. “You’re not a baby, are you? Can’t you walk around and look at pigs and chickens and patchwork quilts without a guardian? You’ve got to quit being such a molly-coddle, my boy, and we’ll begin right now. Come! jump out, and I’ll look you up after a while. You couldn’t get lost, if you tried. Run along now and have a good time.”

“Her brother, ain’t it?” inquired Mr. Hawley, as David lifted the child to the ground.

“Get in, won’t you?” David said, ignoring the question. “We’ll look into that race proposition. I don’t know but what I’ll go in for it. I wouldn’t mind making a little money on the side.”

Mr. Hawley accepted the invitation with a backward glance at Jimmy, who stood watching them forlornly, his rosy mouth half open, the silver pieces tightly clutched in one moist little hand.

“Kind o’ small, ain’t he, to be goin’ ’round by himself in a place like this?” he ventured. “I’ll bet his sister wouldn’t like it over an’ ’bove.”

“He’s been pretty well spoiled,” David said sharply. “I intend to make a man of him, and this is as good a way to begin as any. There’s nothing to hurt him around here.”

“You may ’xperience some trouble in locatin’ him after a spell,” opined Mr. Hawley, shaking his head. “I remember m’ wife let me bring one o’ our boys t’ the fair once, a number o’ years ago, when [273]
Lansing, our oldest boy, was ’bout five. I was lookin’ at the live-stock, an’ Lance, he got kind o’ tuckered out, an’ I sez to him——”

“Oh, cut out the details,” David interrupted. “You didn’t lose the kid for good, did you?”

“No; I got him after a while; but it pretty near scared the life out o’ me an’ him both, I remember; ’n’ m’ wife——”

“Come,” said David, with some impatience, “and we’ll enter the horse.”

He turned and stared sharply at the other man.

“You ought to know what you’re talking about, Hawley, when you say my horse stands a good show to win. Suppose I change my mind and allow you to drive him, and you let him be beaten. What then?”

The liveryman shrugged his shoulders.

“You ain’t no sport, Dave; it’s easy t’ see that,” he drawled. “If I drive your horse, I’ll do my best, o’ course. I dunno what sort o’ horses ’ll be entered in that free-fer-all. But judgin’ from past seasons and what I seen outside in the way o’ horseflesh, I sh’d say ——”

He paused and winked solemnly at David.

“Try me an’ see,” he advised. “’F I lose, I won’t sen’ you no bill fer las’ month’s liv’ry. An’ it ’u’d naturally be a stiff one.”

“All right,” said David. “Done! and we’ll have a drink on it.”

“Lemonade fer mine, ’f I’m a-goin’ t’ drive,” said Mr. Hawley. [274]

But David drank something stronger. He felt the need of it, he said.

Later, having settled the preliminaries of the race, David sauntered forth with a hazy notion of looking up Jimmy and taking him up to the grand stand. To this end he walked slowly through the agricultural “pavilion,” with its exhibits of mammoth vegetables and pyramids of red, green, and russet fruit; but nowhere did he catch a glimpse of Jimmy’s yellow head topped with its scarlet tam. There was a crowd of women in the next place of exhibition, where the pine and canvas walls were covered with quilts of wonderful and complicated design, varied with areas of painted tapestries, home-made lace, worsted and crochet work; while the narrow shelves below were occupied with brown loaves, raised biscuit, and frosted cakes, interspersed with jellies of brilliant hues and luscious fruits preserved in lucent syrups. There were many children here, clinging to maternal hands and skirts; but no Jimmy.

“Little nuisance,” muttered David irritably. “He ought to have stayed where I told him to.”

He was elbowing his way through a group of women engaged in an excited discussion concerning the merits of two rival lace counterpanes, when a small figure placed itself directly in his path.

He stopped short and looked down into the babyish blue eyes uplifted timidly to his.

“Why, hello, Jennie!” he said, smiling. “Where did you come [275]
from?”

The girl was very becomingly dressed in dark-blue serge, the jacket thrown jauntily wide, revealing a waist of cheap white lace, which in its turn permitted glimpses of the pink skin and rounded contours beneath. A hat of dark-blue straw, wreathed with small pink roses, rested coquettishly on her light-brown curly hair. At the moment of meeting David thus unexpectedly, the light of youth and love shone vividly over the girl's insignificant face and figure, irradiating them into a beauty almost noble.

David could hardly help noticing the half infantile, wholly adorable curve of her young brows and the clear blue light of the eyes beneath. Then his curious eyes slowly swept the soft oval of pink cheek and the rosy mouth, parted a little to ease the tumultuous heart-beats which shook the transparent stuff at her throat.

"I didn't know as you'd want to speak to me, Mr. Whitcomb," murmured the girl.

Her eyes wandered uncertainly past him into the crowd.

"I s'pose," she added, thrusting out her pink lips in a pout, "that *she's* here somewheres."

"No," laughed David. "'She' doesn't happen to be along to-day."

A wayward impulse prompted his next words.

"What do you think, Jennie? I asked her and she wouldn't come with me."

"Wouldn't come—with you?" [276]

The girl's voice held wonder, incredulity, longing. Her eyes said more.

"You wouldn't treat me that way, would you, Jennie?"

The girl looked down, an unsuspected delicacy sealing her lips.

David looked at the pretty shadowy circle of the long lashes on the smooth pink cheek.

"You wouldn't; now, would you, Jennie?" he persisted.

The girl glanced at him sidewise, and tossed her head.

"What do you want t' know for?" she demanded. "If you don't like the way she treats you, you c'n tell her so, can't you?"

David bit his lip.

"Don't you want some ice cream, Jennie?" he asked.

The girl hesitated.

"I came t' the fair with Gus Bamber," she said. "An' what do you think, we hadn't no more'n got here when Sutton got after Gus t' help him in the refreshment booth. Said the other fellow he'd hired wasn't no good at mixin' drinks; an' so nothin' would do but he must have Gus t' help. Both of us was awful mad; but we didn't das' say so to old Sutton. He's somethin' fierce if you don't do 'xactly as he says."

"Who's Gus?" asked David.

"Well, that's pretty good!" giggled the girl. "I guess you'd ought [277] t' know Gus Bamber b' this time. He waits on you often enough at the Eagle."

"Oh, you mean Sutton's barkeep—Gus; yes, that's so. I didn't know his name was Bamber, though."

"It is," the girl said. "Augustus Bamber. I think it's a real nice name, too. But I don't like it 's well's I do yours."

"That's kind of you," drawled David. "*Mrs.* Augustus Bamber sounds pretty well, though—eh, Jennie?"

The girl moved her shoulders gently.

"Not on your life!" she said positively. "'N' I've told him so more'n fifty times already, I guess."

She lifted her eyes to David's with innocent coquetry.

"I don't b'lieve in gettin' married t' anybody 'nless you're awfully in love with 'em. That's what I keep tellin' Gus, but he says——"

"Are you coming with me to get that ice cream?" asked David, stifling a yawn.

"I dunno whether I've got the nerve," murmured the girl. "The ice cream's in the same booth where Gus is; it's right acrost from where Sutton's got his concession. 'F he should see me—with you ——"

"What do you suppose he'd do about it?" inquired David. "Gus—er—went off and left you, didn't he?"

He paused to laugh sourly; then added, "And my girl wouldn't [278]

come with me; so I guess it's up to us to do the best we can to have a good time, Jennie. If you'll come along with me, we'll take in the whole darned show."

"If you think it would be all right, Mr. Whitcomb."

"Why shouldn't it be all right, I'd like to know?"

"I don't know, only——"

"Only what? Out with it, little girl."

"I—I'm kind of scared of you, Mr. Whitcomb," faltered the girl. "You—you're so—tall—'n'—'n' handsome, 'n' you——"

David laughed outright. The girl's eyes and voice conveyed so delicious a flattery that he could not help the tenderness that crept into his words.

"Why, you dear little goose, you," he said in her ear, "I won't hurt you, and nobody else shall, either, when I'm around. Come, we'll go and eat that ice cream, right where Augustus Bamber, Esquire, can see us; then we'll take in the other attractions. Have you seen anything yet?"

"Only the cake an' jell' an' canned peaches an' stuff, an' those stupid ol' quilts an' things," said the girl, with spirit. "Those women are all 's mad as wet hens because the quilt with red stars got the blue ribbon over the one with yellow moons on it, an' they pretty near come to a scrap over those two big fruitcakes. One of 'em's got white roses made out o' tissue paper round the edge, an' the other's got a bride on top made out o' sugar, with a real veil an' bouquet. [279] It's awful cute."

"A bride made out of sugar must be pretty sweet," said David, smacking his lips and smiling down into the pretty, foolish face at his side. "But I know somebody that'll be a heap sweeter—when she's a bride."

"Oh, Mis-ter Whitcomb!" breathed the girl, the pink brightening in her round cheeks. "But, of course, you meant—her. She's awful good-lookin'."

"No; I didn't mean—her," said David, laughing outright. "I meant you, Jennie."

The girl looked down and bit her lips in pretty confusion. Then she sighed.

"I shan't never be a bride, I guess," she said mournfully.

"Why not? I'd like to know."

"Because—I—— If we're goin' out o' here, I guess we'd better be movin'. Folks is lookin' at us."

"I have no objections," David said coolly. "Let 'em look."

"It was that insurance man that's stayin' t' the Eagle," whispered the girl. "I don't like him a bit. He was right behind us; but he's over there now, lookin' at those sofa-pillows."

"You mean Todd? Oh, Todd's all right. He's a good fellow."

"I don't like him snoopin' 'round, just the same. He's got eyes like a gimblet; 'n' he looks at you like he was tryin' t' find out what you had fer breakfas'. Gus says he's a tight-wad, too. He don't spen' [280] nothin' at the bar, 'xcept you or somebody treats him."

"He's welcome to all he gets out of me," drawled David. "Do you like your ice cream mixed or straight, Jennie?"

"I guess maybe you'll think I'm kind o' funny, but I like those little round pancakes, folded around like a cornucopia with v'nilla ice cream inside. They're awful good."

"All right; we'll partake of cornucopias, to begin with. Perhaps we'll work around to the other kinds after the races."

"Oh, are there goin' to be races?" asked Jennie, nibbling prettily at the edges of the cone sparsely filled with vanilla ice cream, which the scarlet-faced man who presided over the gasoline stove and its adjacent can of cold stuff, handed her with a wipe of his sticky fingers on a long-suffering apron-front.

"Get onto Gus, will you?" she whispered, as she bridled, laughed, blushed, and giggled by turns, under the baleful light of Mr. Bamber's pale-green eyes. "I 'xpect he'll kill me jus' the minute he gets a chance. Gus hates you; did you know it, Mr. Whitcomb?"

"Hates me? Why should he? I'm sure I've given the fellow tips enough," David said arrogantly.

All the light went out of the girl's blue eyes.

"You've given me 'tips,' as you call them, too," she said soberly. "Do you want to know what I've done with 'em? I jus' hated to take [281]

money from you; but I didn't know what else t' do; so I——"

"Well, what did you do with the munificent sums I've bestowed on you from time to time?" inquired David good-humoredly. "I'd really like to know."

The girl had finished her ice cream, leathery receptacle and all. She began pulling on her white cotton gloves.

"Let's go outside, where Gus can't see us, an' I'll show you," she whispered.

"We'll go up to the grand stand," David proposed. "One of my horses is going to race," he added magnificently, "and you shall bet on him. Would you like to? I'll pay, of course, if you lose."

"Isn't betting kind o' wicked?" asked the girl innocently. "The Meth'dist minister said it was. Me an' Gus went t' church an' heard a sermon las' Sunday night."

"Nothing would be wicked for you," decided David, "except to throw yourself away on that greasy little cad, Bamber. Promise me you won't, Jennie. You're about ten times too pretty and good for such a chap."

"I told you I wasn't goin' t' marry him b'fore," murmured the girl. "I—I couldn't."

She pulled off her white cotton glove and spread her short-fingered, blunt little hand for his inspection.

"There!" she whispered. "I didn't never 'xpect you'd see it. But that's what I've bought with all the money you've give me for makin' [282] your toast the way you like it an' your coffee an' all. I'm goin' t' keep it always, t' remember you by."

David glanced carelessly at the pink little hand, with its close-clipped, shallow nails and stubbed fingertips.

"Do you mean—that?" he asked, touching the trumpery little ring with its circle of blue stones, which glittered speciously on the third finger.

"Yes," breathed the girl. "You—you ain't—mad, are you? I—wanted somethin' t' keep always, t' put me in mind o' you, when—I can't do things f'r you no more; I love t' do things f'r you, an' I don't s'pose I'll always have the chance, after—after she——"

David felt a sudden moisture in his eyes. There was something touching, lovely, pathetic about this innocent, unasking love. He felt a little proud of his own understanding of it. Almost unavoidably, too, there came to his remembrance Barbara's proud refusal to wear the costly ring he had urged upon her acceptance.

"I am not angry, dear little girl," he said gently, "But I wish the keepsake was better, more worth while."

"One of the stones did come out," confessed the girl; "but I had it put back in, 'n' I'm only goin' t' wear it f'r best."

David's hand was fumbling in his pocket.

"I bought a ring for—a certain young lady," he said bitterly, "and [283] she didn't like it—or me—well enough to wear it. I wonder what you'd think of a ring like that?"

He thrust the white velvet case into her hands with a carelessly magnificent gesture of disdain.

"Do you mean for me to—to look at it?" asked the girl uncertainly.

"Yes, of course; look at it and tell me what you think about it."

The girl's face was a study as the sunshine leaped in a burst of dazzling colors from the imbedded gem.

"Oh!" she cried passionately. "*Oh—my!*"

"Do you like it?" asked David morosely. "Do you think it's pretty enough for a girl to wear?"

"Pretty enough? Oh—I——"

She snapped the case shut.

"Take it, please. I—I'm sorry you showed it to me."

"Why?"

"Because—I shan't like this—this cheap thing any more. It—isn't fit to remember you by. It—isn't like you, the same's this one is."

His face flushed. He bent toward her eagerly.

"Give me the little blue ring, Jennie; I'd like to keep it—just to remind me that there is a woman in the world who loved to do things for me—— That's what you said, and I shan't forget it in a hurry."

She pulled the ring from her hand with a listless gesture.

"You c'n have it, if you want it," she said.

She swallowed hard, her childish lips trembling piteously. [284]

"I shan't care 'bout it no more."

"Try the other one on and see if it fits," said David. "I've been carrying it about in my pocket for a couple of months. She wouldn't have it, and I swore I wouldn't offer it to her again. Take it, and wear it—or sell it; I don't care what you do with it."

The girl trembled, her round blue eyes on his face.

"Honest and truly, do you mean it?" she whispered. "I'm almost afraid; it—it's so—lovely!"

"Put it on," ordered David, frowning.

He was thinking confusedly of Barbara, of her coldness, her capriciousness, her bad temper, as he chose to term her rather pitiful attempts to curb his own lawlessness. It suddenly appeared to David that he had been abused, made light of, almost insulted, of late. What other construction could be put upon Barbara's behavior that very afternoon? He still loved her, of course; but her treatment of him certainly merited this tardy reprisal.

"You ain't had a scrap with her, have you?" Jennie asked timidly, "an'—broke off th' engagement?"

"Well, not exactly," he muttered, with a frown.

"Anyway, don't—show her that ring o' mine, please. I'm 'fraid—she'd laugh."

"She won't see it, ever. Don't worry about that. And she won't set eyes on that diamond again in a hurry. Take good care of it, little [285] girl. It's good for a house and lot—that ring."

"Is it a real di'mon'?"

"Of course, goosie; you didn't suppose I'd buy an imitation, did you? I guess not. It's yours to do what you like with. But——"

He stared dubiously into her pretty, flushed face. "Keep it to yourself that I gave it to you, will you?"

"I—won't tell," she faltered. "I'll do jus' as you say, Mr. Whitcomb."

"All right. Now you sit down here, and I'll be back in a few minutes. I've got to look around a bit, and put some money on my horse. I'll buy some candy, too, while I'm gone."

The girl sat, where he had left her, in a daze of happiness. All about her the seats of the grand stand were filling with people for the afternoon races; but she did not see them, nor the arid stretch of the race-course, around which were circling various experimental trotters under the guidance of hunched men in two-wheeled vehicles. The subdued light of the shaded place brought out new and more vivid flashes of color in the marvellous white stone on her little pink hand—scarlet and green and blue. Jennie twisted it slowly on her finger, her eyes riveted upon its alien splendors.

"To think she didn't like it!" she whispered to herself.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Jennie," murmured a carefully modulated [286] voice at her side. She turned with a start to gaze into Mr. Todd's smiling face.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the girl petulantly. "How you made me jump!"

"You were thinking about that new ring of yours, I suppose," said Mr. Todd, blinking pleasantly.

"Who told you I had a new ring, I'd like to know?" the girl demanded coldly.

"I don't have to be told," Mr. Todd said facetiously. "Say, but it's handsome! I shouldn't wonder if it cost as much as two hundred and fifty."

"Not dollars?" exclaimed the girl, in an awestruck voice.

"Sure! He must have thought a lot of you to give you that—eh, Miss Jennie?"

The girl did not answer. She was putting on her gloves with an air of offended dignity.

"I guess it ain't any of your affairs," she said, her lips trembling, "if I've got a friend or two."

"Don't sit on me too hard," begged Mr. Todd. "I didn't mean anything out of the way. I couldn't help noticing the sparkler on your hand. Most anybody would. Get it to-day?"

"Yes, I did," admitted the girl. "But you don't need t' ask me who

give it t' me, for I shan't tell; so there!"

"I wasn't going to ask," asserted Mr. Todd truthfully. "I—er—congratulate you, though. You'll let me do that, won't you?"

The girl hunched the shoulder nearest him and eyed him sulkily [287] over its slender defence.

"I ain't engaged; if that's what you mean."

"Not engaged—with that ring? Come, you're fooling!"

"It does look some like an engagement ring," said the girl, stealthily feeling her new treasure, "but it—it's only an offerin' o' friendship. He—he's got another girl. But I guess he don't care s' awful much 'bout her. She's good-lookin'; but she don't treat him right, an' that makes him mad. I don't blame him, neither."

"Do I know the party?" inquired Mr. Todd, affecting a consuming curiosity.

"I ain't a-goin' t' say, whether you do, er don't," and the girl tossed her head. "I wisht you'd let me alone."

"W'y, I ain't sayin' anything out the way. What's your hurry to get rid of me, I'd like to know?"

The girl moistened her red lips, with an anxious glance at the stair.

"The's a party bought that seat you're in. I got t' save it fer him."

"That's all right, too," said Mr. Todd affably. "I'll get up an' vamoose the minute you tell me he's coming."

"He's cornin' now," said the girl anxiously. "He won't like it, if he sees me talkin' with you."

Mr. Todd arose. [288]

"He must be a great chap," he said carelessly. "Well, so long. Hope you'll treat him better'n you have me."

Mr. Todd did not turn around to glimpse David seating himself in the vacant place at the girl's side. He was whistling softly to himself as he wandered idly about the enclosure below where the last bets were being registered. The interest in the free-for-all race appeared to be rather languid; but he looked over the entries carefully; then fell into a desultory conversation regarding the event with the gate-keeper.

"'Tain't a-goin' to be much of a race; never is," opined that individual sagely. "The's a lot o' Rubes that like to speed their horses 'round the course; but it's gen'ally a walkover fer one hoss. Bud Hawley's drivin' the winner t'-day."

"No, he ain't," interrupted a raucous voice from the rear. "Bud Hawley's a-goin' t' git left this time."

"That so?" queried Mr. Todd. "Who's goin' to win?"

"I be," said the owner of the voice. "Say, I've seen you somewheres b'fore, ain't I?"

"W'y, yes," agreed Mr. Todd cordially. "But your name's gone from me just now. Let me see——"

"I know now who you be," put in the farmer. "You're the fellow 'at come int' Hewett's grocery a spell back one day when I was [289] there. My name's Plumb—Hiram Plumb."

"And your horse is going to win—eh, Mr. Plumb?"

"Yas, sir. He'll win, hands down. You'll see!"

"Pretty tough on Whitcomb, if he does," laughed the gateman. "He's put quite a wad on his own horse."

"He's goin' t' part with his wad all right," said the farmer, wagging his head. "I ain't a bettin' man m'self; but I'm willin' t' put down fi' dollars on it."

"I take you," said Mr. Todd, with an agreeable smile.

This small matter being adjusted, the genial insurance man walked quietly away through the crowd, humming a little tune to himself. Among the vehicles drawn up inside the enclosure roped off for teams, he caught sight of Jarvis, sitting alone, in his usual red-wheeled sidebar. Mr. Todd made his way among the crowd and presently paused at Jarvis's side.

"Our young friend is here to-day," he observed, in a low voice.

"Yes, I saw him come in with the boy," Jarvis replied.

"Since then he appears to have got rid of the boy and acquired a girl."

"Where is the boy?" demanded Jarvis sharply.

Mr. Todd shook his head.

“I wasn’t looking after the boy,” he reminded his patron. [290]

“What’s Whitcomb up to?” asked Jarvis after a silence.

His face was gray and set and his weary eyes wandered impatiently over the dusty race-track.

“Horse-racing, for one thing,” replied the detective. “He’s backing his own horse heavily; but there’s more doing than that. Do you want to hear it now?”

“No,” said Jarvis, “not here.”

Mr. Todd gathered his lips into a noiseless whistle.

“Our young friend,” he said slowly, “has appropriated about all the rope he needs. All you’ve got to do now is to let him alone.”

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[291]

XXIII

It was well on toward evening before Barbara found herself watching with strained attention for the return of David. Late in the afternoon she had been visited with tardy contrition, which concerned itself more particularly with the coldness of her refusal to accompany him. For the moment she refused to go deeper, and consoled herself with careful preparation for supper. She would urge David to stay, she told herself; he would be hungry after the long drive. But at twilight the delicate biscuit and boiled ham, that David loved, and the yellow squares of sponge cake and the rich home-made preserves, which he had approved, were all ready. The small round table was set daintily for three, with shining silver and napery and the long-cherished pink china.

The sun had set cold and still after a brilliant day of high winds and flying clouds, and the big yellow moon slowly shouldering itself from behind the dark woods looked in at her festal preparations like an inquisitive face. Barbara shivered a little in her loneliness; then thinking still of the belated merry-makers, she fetched firewood and kindled a blaze on the hearth. The leaping light flickered over the waiting table and cast warm, life-like reflections on the dim old portraits on the wall.

They would surely come soon, she concluded, with a glance at [292]
the tall clock in the corner. But this faithful monitor of dead and gone generations of Prestons presently became quite intolerable, so loudly did it proclaim the lagging minutes. There seemed to be vague stirrings, too, in the shadows, like whispers sunk below the rim of sound. The painted eyes of father and grandfather, preternaturally wise in their perpetual mute observance, appeared to be pitying her young ignorance. They drove her forth at length into the chill of the autumn moonlight. Down by the stone gateway she could see the empty road winding away into obscurity on either hand, like a gray ribbon unbound and flung carelessly across the valley. A faint wind shook gusts of fragrance from the cone-laden pines, and away off among the orchards a little brown owl gurgled a mocking defiance to the moon.

She would have said, perhaps, that she was worried because David had not brought Jimmy home early, as he had promised. The child would be cold, hungry, tired; his little jacket was too thin; his limbs unprotected; but beneath these quasi-maternal misgivings lurked a keener anxiety, a more consuming fear. This it was that held her there, listening, listening—her whole being an insistent question, which would not be denied. This clamorous doubt had long been slowly growing in the mind which lies directly beneath consciousness, stirring now and again, like a child unborn, to lapse once more into quiescence. To-night, grown big and lusty, it thrust [293]
itself upon her, a full-grown conviction.

She could have told no one, least of all herself, how long she remained alone in the wan darkness, fighting her losing battle; but her hair and clothing were wet with frosty dew when at last she heard in the far distance the unbroken beat of hoofs. It was a fast horse, driven at furious speed; yet long before the vehicle drew up with a muttered exclamation from its occupant, at sight of her standing there in the moonlight, she knew it was not David.

"I've got the boy here, and he's all right," Jarvis said. "Get in and I'll—explain."

But he said nothing further in the brief interval that elapsed before they reached the house. Barbara had drawn the sleeping child into her arms, and held him jealously close to her numbed breast. She felt strangely still, unnaturally composed, as Jarvis took the child from her and helped her to alight.

"I'm coming in," he said. "I want to tell you how it happened that I am bringing him home."

"Is David——?" she managed to articulate.

"Oh, nothing has happened to Whitcomb—no accident, I mean. Go in; you're chilled through."

She had taken off Jimmy's coat and cap, and the child, half awake, was nestled in her arms, when Jarvis followed her into the lighted room, with its table daintily set for three, and its cheer of burning logs, which Barbara had stirred to a blaze.

She looked at him in piteous silence as he stood, a tall, sombre [294]

figure at her fireside, looking down at her with eyes full of a brooding tenderness of which he was only half aware. He was anxiously searching for words which would hurt least; for a balm of comfort which, he knew, did not exist.

Jimmy, rubbing the sleep out of his brown eyes, sat up suddenly in Barbara's lap.

"David didn't let me stay wiv him," he quavered. "He—he made me det out 'n'—'n' he dave me some money; 'n' a big boy pushed me over and took it away. I ran after David 'n' called him loud; but he didn't hear me. 'Nen I got lost."

"I found him," said Jarvis, "asleep on some straw in the comer of an empty stall."

He smiled reassuringly at Barbara.

"The boy appears to need a general washing and putting to rights, I should say; but he isn't hungry."

"Where," asked Barbara, in a stifled voice, "is David?"

"He's gone wiv the pretty lady, I guess," said Jimmy sleepily. "She had roses in her hat. Why don't you have roses in your hat, Barbara? I like roses."

The little boy suddenly opened his eyes very wide; his mouth followed suit.

"Look, Barb'ra," he shrilled excitedly. "A man dave me a sausage in the middle of a biscuit, 'n' I was awful hungry an' I fordot—I mean I forgot—t' bite wiv my side teef—'n'—'n'—'n' one o' my front teef came right out. I lost it on the ground."

Barbara's questioning eyes were on Jarvis's face. He turned [295]
abruptly as if unable to bear them.

"I called loud to David; but he was drinkin' somethin' brown out of a tumbler 'n' he didn't turn around," chattered Jimmy, "but the lady, she looked at me, 'n' she said——"

He broke into a nervous laugh.

"It feels funny in my mouf," he complained. "Will my new toof come in right away? Will it, Barbara?"

Jarvis drew a deep breath.

"If you'll put the boy to bed," he said, "I'll—wait."

He sat down by the fire, a grim look of patient endurance on his face. In the room above he could hear the light tread of Barbara's feet, and Jimmy's high, childish treble upraised in excited speech.

"He's telling her all he knows," muttered Jarvis, a sick distaste for his own hateful task coming over him.

It was long before Barbara returned. Jarvis had decided that she wished him to go away without speaking, when he heard her re-enter the room.

He sprang to his feet.

"Sit down, won't you? And let me—explain."

Barbara lifted her head proudly.

"I think I—understand," she said.

He gazed steadily at her, a frown of pain between his brows.

"I have known for a long time," she went on, "that it was all a [296]
dreadful mistake; that he—did not love me."

"And you?" leaped from his guarded lips.

She looked away, a slow crimson staining her white cheeks.

"I could not bear it, if——" she murmured, and was silent.

"I hope you will believe me," Jarvis said gravely, "when I tell you that what took place was not intentional on Whitcomb's part. I know him, perhaps, better than you think."

A shadowy smile touched Barbara's tense mouth.

"Nothing—was ever—intentional with David," she said.

After a long silence she looked up at him, her eyes dry and bright.

"Will you tell me," she asked, "just what happened?"

He drew a hardly controlled breath.

"I will tell you what I know," he said reluctantly. But he seemed unable to go on with his shameful story in the light of her proud eyes.

"I already know," she said quietly, "that he abandoned Jimmy early in the afternoon, and that later he was seen with——"

"The woman was a waitress at the Barford Eagle," Jarvis admitted reluctantly. "She has attended Whitcomb at table during

his stay there; and so, of course——”

“I know who the girl is,” Barbara told him, in a low, hurried voice. [297]

“He met the young woman on the fair grounds quite by accident,” Jarvis went on quickly. “You ought to believe that; and what followed was also, I am convinced, wholly unpremeditated.”

“Well?” urged Barbara steadily.

Jarvis clenched his strong hands on his knees and bent forward to stare frowningly into the fire.

“Whitcomb backed his own horse heavily and won,” he said slowly. “Shortly afterward an altercation arose between himself and —a young man, who had previously been interested in the girl, Jennie Sawyer. This person Bamber, became very abusive, and——”

Jarvis’s voice, which had been dry and caustic, as if he were reviewing unsavory circumstantial evidence, suddenly broke.

“Barbara!” he cried. “My poor girl, must you hear it all?”

She was looking at him, her eyes burning beneath her long curved lashes, the red of her under-lip caught in her white teeth.

“Go on,” she said quietly. “Someone will have to tell me. I—would rather hear it from—you.”

The sweat of agony glistened on Jarvis’s forehead.

“If I must,” he said hoarsely. “It was an accident, Barbara. It would never have happened if David had not been excited, wild with success; Bamber attacked him first, without due provocation, it would seem, and Whitcomb retaliated—struck him, in self-defence.” [298]

Barbara heard his voice as if from a great distance. She seemed to herself to be drifting away on a sea of strange dreams. Then she roused suddenly to find herself supported by Jarvis’s arm. He was holding a cup of water to her lips. She sat up, her face white and wan, her hands clutching the arms of her chair.

“You were saying——” she murmured.

“I ought to have told you in the beginning,” he reproached himself, “Bamber was not killed by the blow; but he fell and—struck his head against the edge of a stall.”

“And David?” she breathed.

“The girl dragged him away from the scene of the accident, and he—escaped. You know he had a fast horse.”

She was looking at him dizzily through a mist of pain.

“The girl went with him,” he said, reading aright the question in her eyes. “There was talk of a pursuit, of an arrest. But unless Bamber should—— I think I may assure you that David will not be molested.”

He did not tell her that he had used all the official power at his command to shield the fugitives from the fury of the crowd, and further that the injured man had already received the best medical attention procurable in the county. Barbara learned these things long, long afterward, when the pain of that hour had been assuaged. [299]

It was more than three months afterward, and the first snow was flying past the windows in big, feathery flakes, when a letter came to Barbara from a town in the Far West. It was from David, she saw, with a painful throb of surprise, and postponed the reading of it for a difficult hour, during which she reviewed once more and for the last time all the futile anguish and passion of a love that had bruised and hurt her from its beginning. Then she opened the letter with fingers that trembled not at all.

> “Dear Barbara [he wrote]: I suppose by this time you have set me down as a poor skate of a fellow. It probably hasn’t occurred to you that it is entirely your own fault that you will never see me again. If you had gone with me to the fair that day, as I wanted you to do, I should not have met Jennie, nor gotten into a squabble with that unutterable cad, Bamber. I hear he got off with nothing worse than a crack in his foolish skull to remind him what it is like to try conclusions with a gentleman.
>
> “I want to tell you, Barbara, that I’ve married Jennie, and so far, neither of us is sorry. She is a dear little wife, sweet-tempered, and entirely devoted to your humble servant. And I don’t find myself so deucedly uncomfortable in her company as you used to make me feel sometimes. Let me tell you, Barbara, that you’ll never succeed in making any man happy till you get off that high horse of yours and stop trying to run the universe. But I don’t suppose you’ll care for what I say, any more than you cared for me, and I don’t flatter myself that was a little bit.
>
> “Just one thing more before I say good-bye for always. If you want to know who your master is, I’ll tell you. *It is old Jarvis.* I knew it all

along. But I let you go on deceiving yourself, since you seemed to prefer doing it. You can settle it with him any way you see fit and I shall be satisfied. [300]

"With best wishes for your future happiness, I am, my dear Barbara,

Yours faithfully.

"David Whitcomb."

Barbara read this letter once; then she thrust it deep down among the burning logs and watched it blaze and shrivel into a black and scarlet shred, which flitted stealthily up the chimney and out of sight, like a wicked wraith.

She was still thinking soberly rather than sorrowfully of David, when Jimmy dashed into the room, his yellow hair standing up around his rosy face like a halo as he pulled off his warm cap and threw his books and mittens on the table.

"What d' you think, Barb'ra," he exulted. "I had a reg'lar zamination in my 'rithm'tic to-day, 'n' I passed it a hunderd and fifty. My teacher said I did. I did a whole lot o' zamples an' wrote out all the sevens an' eights an' nines, an' didn' mix up seven times nine and eight times eight, or anyfing—I mean any-th-ing."

"You're home early, aren't you, precious?" asked Barbara, glancing at the clock.

"Yes, 'course I am; I met Mr. Jarvis, Barb'ra. He was drivin' that horse wiv a short tail, 'n'—'n' he asked me did I want to get in and drive him, 'n'—'n' he let me, Barb'ra; 'n' I don't believe that horse cares if his tail is short. He's comin' in the house now."

"Who—the horse?" asked Barbara, in pretended alarm. [301]

"'Course not!" shouted Jimmy, in fine scorn. "Mr. Jarvis is. He said he was bringin' you a book to read. I like Mr. Jarvis, don't you, Barb'ra? *Don't* you?"

Jarvis himself, entering at the moment, heard the little boy's insistent question. He stood before the fire, tall and grave, drawing off his gloves and looking keenly at Barbara. She had grown only more beautiful in his eyes, since the day when he had first noticed her youthful loveliness, like a wind-blown spray of blossoms against a dark sky. Now he perceived that something untoward had happened to disturb the quiet friendship which had been slowly growing up between them in the peace of the past months. Her candid eyes avoided his, and a fluttering color came and went in her soft cheeks.

"What is it, Barbara?" he asked, when Jimmy had gone exultantly forth to boast to Peg of his initial victory in the difficult warfare of education.

"I have just been reading a letter—from David," she said, without attempt at postponement or evasion. "He is married."

"Well?" said Jarvis gravely.

"I was glad to know that," she went on. "I have been afraid—for that poor girl."

She was silent for a long minute, while the logs purred comfortably together in the fireplace.

Then she met his questioning eyes, her own filled with a deep, mysterious light. [302]

"He told me what I had sometimes—thought might be true," she hesitated; "that you—were the unknown person, who—— that I really—belong to you."

Then the significance of her words flashed over her, and her face glowed with lovely shamed color.

"I am quite rich now," she went on hurriedly, "and you must let me give you—pay you——"

"I will, Barbara," he said, with a quiet smile. "If you will only give me—what you have acknowledged really belongs to me. Will you, Barbara?"

She turned to him, all her woman's soul in her sweet eyes.

"To the highest bidder," she murmured, and laid her hand in his.

THE END

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