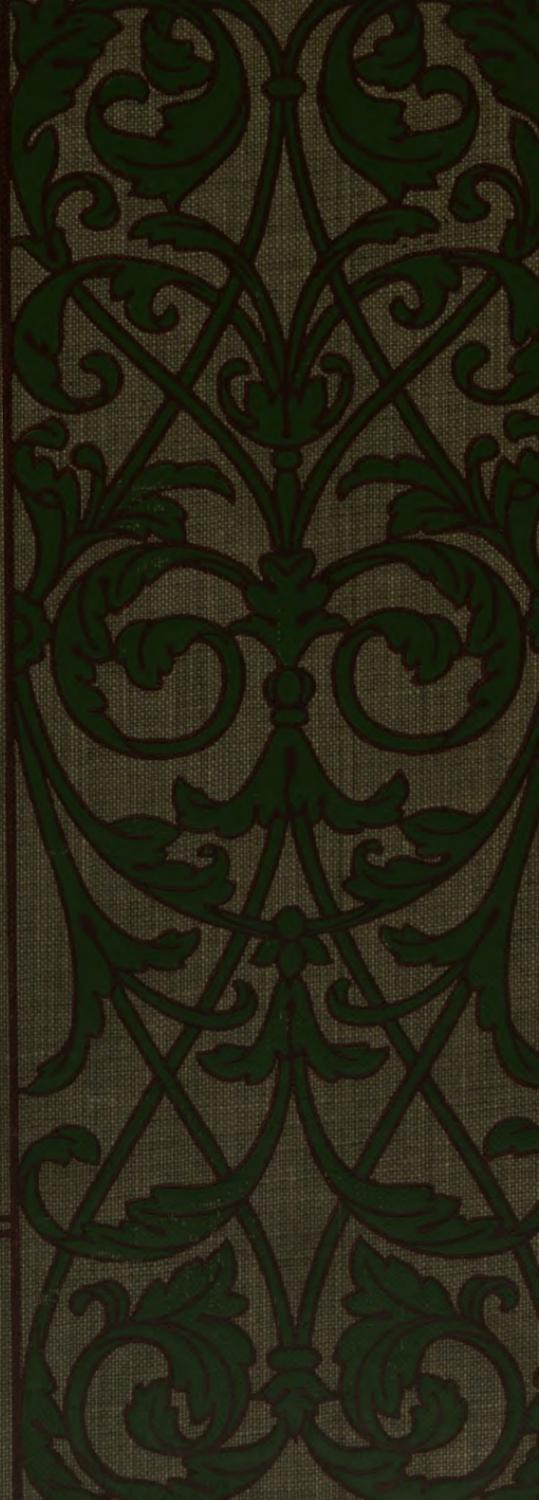


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BY MARION HARLAND

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“THE HOUSE WAS UNGAINLY IN EXTERIOR,”

In Our County

STORIES OF OLD VIRGINIA LIFE

BY

MARION HARLAND

AUTHOR OF "SOME COLONIAL HOMESTEADS"
"WHERE GHOSTS WALK," ETC.

(Ten Years in Mary Virginia - Harland)



ILLUSTRATED

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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PREFACE

As a dreamy, precocious child, it was my delight to listen to the talk of "grown people" with one another. My small personality was overlooked or forgotten by the gentlewomen whose tongues were busy in the Social Exchange of experience, anecdote, and opinion, while their fingers wrought upon "white work," embroidery, or knitting. I hung, un-reproved, upon the outskirts of the group gathered upon shady porches while summer weather lasted, and in winter about the hearth, on which

The fire, with oaken logs supplied,
Went roaring up the chimney wide.

Scott, Pope, Milton, Addison, and Young were read aloud in that charmèd circle and freely quoted. Shakespeare was a familiar authority. Most familiar of all was the Bible.

References to these classics were mingled with tales of everyday life that were no more and no less real to my childish apprehension than the story of *The Rape of the Lock*, *Constance*, *Ellen's Isle*, and *Sir Roger de Coverley*. In memory they are ranged side by side. The thought of one brings with it a reminiscence of the other. Upon all rests the same Indian summer haze, exquisite in loveliness, and in pensiveness that

resembles sorrow only
As the mists resemble the rain.

In the dream-world which was my dearest secret and most precious possession, I carried on the history of fictitious heroine and flesh-and-blood hero with absolute impartiality and equal enjoyment.

I have forgotten none of the traditions committed to my retentive memory by narrators who, as a rule, never concerned themselves as to the presence of children and of servants. Their little daughters, and the housemaids trained under the mistress's eye, and therefore always present, counted alike for nothing in their audience. Thus it came about that I

gathered into my mental garner great store of comedies, romances and tragedies pertaining to an age which exists no longer and which can never come again. It is of the Forever Past as truly as the feudal age belongs to ancient history. The Old Virginia of my childhood is so unlike the Virginia of the twentieth century that I could not hope to reproduce it for my reader were my own recollections of it less vivid. The stories of her social and domestic life collected in these pages are but a few of the many incorporated into a life that spans the great gulf fixed between the Then and the Now. My tales have naught to do with the mighty convulsion that opened that gulf. My business is with the days that are no more.

In writing down my recollections of those unforgotten days I have once again lived among the scenes and breathed the air of that far-away time. While I linger in the shadowy vistas, it is To-Day that seems fiction. That All-so-Long-Ago--the returnless Yesterday--is real and alive. More than once the true names of people and places have slipped from my pen, to be stricken out with a smile and a sigh.

It was a happy thought of the publisher whose tactful sympathy with authors is phenomenal and proverbial, that these stories of olden days (I had almost said of "the old world") should be illustrated by views of the actual scenes among which were enacted the aforementioned romances, comedies, and tragedies. For the carrying-out of the happy thought I am indebted to a well-beloved kinsman whose interest in the scheme led him to verify localities and to superintend the enterprise, *con amore*. Every photograph was taken "in Our County," and is authentic. The pictures are his contribution to what has been, throughout, a work of love, a glad exercise of memory, and not a draught upon imagination.

MARION HARLAND.

SUNNYBANK, POMPTON, N. J..
August, 1901.





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In Our County

Chapter I

Dodder

IT was only a coincidence. Circumstances precluded the possibility of any conjecture to the contrary.

It was, nevertheless, a strange happening that the head-waiter at The White Sulphur, should, on Margaret Armistead's birthday, design as the floral ornament nearest her place at the dinner-table a broad bowl, crowned and hidden by wild balsam, overrun with a close, golden mesh of dodder.

That was what the Northern professor opposite her called it. To Miss Armistead, as to other Southern women, it was "Love-vine," and intertangled with so many pretty superstitions

that the appearance of the novel "centre-piece" called forth a chorus of exclamations on both sides of the long board. A wave of colour rolled slowly over Miss Armistead's dark, mobile face on perceiving it. Then, catching the solicitous eye of the designer, as he hovered near, she bowed and smiled appreciation of the compliment she saw was intentional. A bouquet of forget-me-nots was already on her breast. She leaned forward to detach a thread of dodder, and twisted it among the blue-eyed blossoms.

"After to-day I ought not to wear wild-flowers," said she, in the bell-like tones, which, neither loud nor shrill, "carried well." "Perhaps no natural flowers at all—only French 'artificials' and feathers. This is my birthday, and I am forty years old."

The stunned pundit, to whom the observation was directed, bowed and murmured gallantly and inarticulately. The chorus took up and swelled the theme. Judge Mason, who sat next to the professor, promptly ruled out the testimony, in an orotund voice and with a smile that matched it.

“ It is only hearsay evidence, Miss Armistead. Hence, inadmissible in any court of justice. Moreover, all present will bear me out in the exception that the statement of the witness is confidently contradicted by a weight of proof collected from other sources.”

“ All the same,” persisted Miss Armistead, when she could be heard, and acknowledging the flattering denial with the gracious bend of head and neck that had thanked the head-waiter,—“ this is my fortieth birthday. I can no longer be considered young by the utmost stretch of an imagination as elastic as yours, my dear judge. I left off being a girl at thirty; put away round waists, and sashes, and blush-roses, and Swiss muslins, and a dozen other prerogatives of girlhood. I have reached the top of the hill, and I warn you all that I shall hereafter demand the reverence due to my position.”

They drank her health enthusiastically, the toast being offered by Judge Mason:

“ The bravest of her sex! In a minority of one against the rest of the world, she stands forth in defence of the truthfulness of Time! ”

The speaker was running for Congress that year, and the aforesaid neat thing told for him in the campaign.

Before Miss Armistead retired to her room for the post-prandial siesta, which is as much a section of the regimen of "The White," as the imbibition of four glasses *per diem* of limpid malodorousness, she had four invitations to drive, as many to walk, and was notified that the evening hop would be expressly in honour of her.

Nelson, the head-waiter, was at the door of the great dining-room as she passed out. She paused to speak to him.

"How did you find out that I am particularly fond of love-vine?"

"I jes' reckoned it, mem, knowing you was from East Virginny, whar thar's so much of it. I come from Glorster county myself."

"Thank you! Would it spoil your table if you were to send some of it to my room?"

"You shall have it all, Miss Armistead!"

It followed her quickly. While the calm of the sleep-hour reigned in the upper-story chambers and corridors, she was sitting still

in her rocking-chair, looking at the broad bowl set on a stand beside her. The succulent stems and smooth foliage of the balsam were hidden by the riotous reticulations of the lovely creeper.

The species of *cuscuta* known as the "golden dodder" may be, as botanists class it, a parasite, but it does not deplete the thing on which it grows. It would seem to partake rather of the nature of an air-plant, since if torn from the root, and cast upon a leafy bosom that it loves, it will at once begin to grow. The peculiarity supplies a fortune-telling medium to the romantic of both sexes.

One August afternoon, twenty years before the date at which this true story begins, Carter Branch had alighted from his horse while riding with his betrothed in a sequestered part of her father's plantation, and opened a thicket to show her a bit of love-vine he had picked a month ago. After naming it "Margaret Armistead," he had laid it tenderly on a wild-balsam bush. It had thriven marvellously upon the new resting-place. Translucent threadlets were shooting out from each joint

to coil over and catch at the edges of the leaves; compact clumps of small white blossoms imperaled the red-golden lines.

“ I might not have plucked up courage to ask you if there were hope for me, if the omen had been less distinct,” Carter said archly. “ But when I came to consult the oracle, a fortnight after I put it there, and saw that it was alive and growing, I did not draw rein until I got down at the door of Branksmere.”

No love-vine had grown at that bend of the creek within the memory of man until Carter transplanted the spray that looked like a strand of gold-coloured filosele. By another summer it draped the bank, rioted over the alder thickets, and spread patterns of glittering filigree over roots, fallen logs, and stumps.

The story became known by-and-by. For years and years thereafter, the bridle-road leading from the nearest highway was worn grass-bare by the pilgrimages of lovers—coming singly or in groups to get a bit of the enchanted wildling with which to “ try their fortunes.”



"WHERE THE DODDER GREW."

They expected, then, to be married at Christmas. That would be twenty years ago, next December! For a full score of summers they had said—she bravely always, he always mournfully, sometimes desperately,—“ Next year—perhaps!” Carter was forty-three now, and people were tired of wondering why they were not man and wife. Margaret’s father had died insolvent; the fine old homestead of Branksmere belonged to strangers. She lived a quarter of the year with each of her nearest of kin, her sisters and brothers. Her brothers made her an allowance for dress and other personal expenses. They were abundantly able to do this, and to take her in the winter to Cuba, to New Orleans, and to Italy, in summer to Saratoga, Niagara, or, as now, to “ The White.” She was rapturously welcomed in each of her four homes, but her position was extraordinary. The more as her betrothal was openly acknowledged, a thing unusual in that region and day. Carter Branch was a fairly prosperous lawyer, and, although still resident in the house of his widowed mother, was the owner of the adjoining plantation of

Oakhill, purchased by him in the sixth year of his betrothal.

The mail had not brought Margaret the birthday letter she expected, but it would come to-night or to-morrow. He never failed her, and they had never had a quarrel. The shutters were closed to exclude glare and heat, and as she leaned back in her chair, wrapped in a white dressing-gown, she looked her forty years, in the dim light, as she had not at the dinner-table. She was, in youth and middle age, handsome rather than pretty. Her full, dark eyes, her fine hair and teeth, and the flashing play of expression that almost atoned for irregularity of feature kept her comely. Her unfailing spirits, her fund of repartee, and generous sweetness of nature made her fascinating and popular. She might have had suitors by the dozen but for the frank firmness that forced them back from declaration of affection.

The ardent attachment of her sisters-in-law was a remarkable testimony to her charm of person and character. Mrs. Thornton Armistead, whose tap at the door ended a wordless,

and apparently a sombre reverie, was Carter Branch's cousin, the intimate of Margaret's girlhood, and the devoted friend of later years. She brought a birthday gift from herself and her husband, which had just arrived by private hand,—an elegant set of amber, necklace, brooch, earrings, and pins for the hair.

“ Very beautiful, but too fine for a sallow old lady! ” declared Margaret, smiling away a sudden tear-mist from her sparkling eyes.

‘ Age cannot wither her,
Nor custom stale her infinite variety! ’

the other quoted.

“ Still, my darling, I wish they were diamonds, and a wedding-present! ”

“ So do I, Heaven knows! ”

The fervour of the unguarded admission went to the sister-in-law's heart. Kneeling beside the passive figure, she put her arms about her waist and kissed her fondly.

“ Why should it not be so, dear? Why not reward Carter's constancy, and make him and yourself as happy as you deserve to be? He is not rich, but he can give you a good

home and every comfort. I thought when he bought Oakhill that the matter was settled."

Margaret's eyes danced; her mouth was curved in a saucy smile. She patted the pleader's head with her ringed fingers.

"My sweet sister! I have not an inordinate appetite, but I cannot sustain life on a brick house—empty at that! Do you know how much ready money would be needed to furnish and keep up a place like Oakhill? I do! and I have showed the figures to Carter. To his utter discomfiture—poor fellow!"

Mrs. Armistead interposed eagerly here:

"We, your sisters and brothers, will furnish your house when you are ready for it. As for the *trousseau*, Thornton and I would let nobody else give that!"

Margaret kissed the face flushed with generous emotion.

"I don't see how any woman who has such relatives can make up her mind to marry and leave them—ever! People talk of the bitter bread of dependence. You have fed me with pound-cake, iced half an inch thick! Listen, dear—the best and loveliest sister in the

world! Thanks to my bringing up and to all of you who have done nothing but pamper me since, I have *horribly* expensive tastes. Fine clothes, nice food, carriages and horses, jewelry, summerings and winterings at costly places, plenty of gay society,—a lazy, luxurious time generally,—are necessities of life to me. I am ashamed of it! I should despise another woman who confessed it. But it is the unflattering truth! It would make Carter wretched to see me in calico all summer, with a nine-pence lawn for Sundays, and cheap woollen in winter, and I should lose all sense of my own identity. I can't make bread, or soap, or pickles, or try out lard, or cut out servants' clothes, and know as little about farming as did the girl who asked which cow gave the buttermilk. Altogether, I am as unpractical as a canary-bird. You know this as well as I do, and so does Carter."

The pretty matron frowned, perplexed but not convinced.

"Don't be absurd, Margaret! A woman who is so clever in other things could easily learn how to keep house. Look at your

fancy-work, and how exquisitely you play and sing! And there is not a better-read woman or a more brilliant talker in the State!"

"Thank you, dear! But sonatas are not sausage-meat, and one can't cut up a winter's killing of bacon with scissors and needle and thimble. Carter likes books as much as I, but somebody must buy and fill and clean the lamps for our winter nights' reading. He and I have discussed the *pros* and *cons* of this matter a thousand-and-one times, and mourned like a pair of turtle-doves, together—each of us, "like to an owl in ivy-bush," apart—that the *cons* outnumbered the *pros* nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine to one. Another thing!" seriously. "While his mother lives he ought not to leave her. His first duty is *there!*"

"I deny it! She has married daughters who are anxious to give her a home. Poor Aunt Caroline! She feels that nothing could be much worse for her only son than this tedious, wearying engagement."

Margaret grew very pale. Her voice, as she began to speak, had an odd, stifled sound, which passed after a few words were uttered.

“ Because he *is* her only son, he must never let her suspect that the support of a wife would draw upon what he is now able to do for her. I know his circumstances better than she does, or ever can. If I had a fortune left to me to-day, every cent should be made over to him before to-morrow’s sunrise, even if I were certain that we could never be married. But I shall never be able to give him a stronger proof of my affection than by waiting for him—patiently and cheerfully—not twenty, but if need be, forty years. Is n’t it wonderful how Nelson has contrived to keep those wild-flowers fresh ? I suppose he puts them into water the minute he cuts them.”

Mrs. Armistead glanced slightly at the bowl. The mass of semi-aquatic herbage was tangled weeds to her practical senses.

“ I wonder why love-vine almost always grows on wild touch-me-not ? ” she said, carelessly, because she must speak or seem sullen.

“ Maybe because it needs it so much ! ” Margaret’s eyes glistened ; she bent forward to look more closely at the coils of the air-plant. “ The balsam looks hardy, but it is not. The

stems are juicy and brittle; the leaves droop if held in the hand a few minutes; the flowers drop at a touch. The dear little love-vine gives them shade, and a sort of protection. You would kill the balsam if you were to tear off the brave, clinging thing."

She passed her finger-tips gently over the ruddy, golden fibers, spoke softly and musingly, a smile, but half happy, yet not wholly sad, on her lips.

"The most charming and most exasperating of women!" Mrs. Thornton said to her husband, in describing the interview. "You would have thought the wild trash was of as much consequence as Carter's happiness and her own. She is the oddest mixture of sound common sense and fanciful nonsense I ever knew!"

Miss Armistead was queen of the revels that night. Radiant with the unlooked-for joy of her betrothed's arrival by the afternoon stage, she entered the ballroom on his arm. Old *habitués* of "The White" will still tell you, in voices husky with age and regret, of her appearance and triumph on "the occasion of the

celebration of the fortieth anniversary of her birth," and how, "the present age produces no such deucedly fine women, sir. A belle at forty, sir! Think of that!"

Her costume of black lace over amber satin, the birthday gift that harmonised perfectly with it, the arrangement of her dark hair into a coronal for her shapely head, her gleaming teeth and shining eyes, made her look not more than twenty-five years of age. She danced nearly every set, but waltzed with nobody except Carter Branch, as had been her rule ever since the beginning of their engagement.

He was a man of fine presence, courtly manners, and much easy grace of conversation, a general favourite in his circle. The mature lovers were the handsomest couple on the floor, and while the manifestation of their mutual devotion did not transcend the bounds of good taste, it was sufficiently marked to interest strangers and move friends to renewed sympathy and conjecture.

Ten years later, not long after the close of the civil war, the betrothed pair—still only

betrothed—were again together at “The White.” The stately woman who wore mourning for two brothers killed on the battle-field, and the gray-moustached colonel, whose slight limp did not detract from his martial bearing, attracted much attention among the few who remembered their singular history, and the many to whom it was now told for the first time. Miss Armistead’s abundant hair was silver-white, and heaped away from her forehead over a pompadour cushion. Her gowns were of inexpensive material, but fitted to perfection, and were in fashion so graceful that a New York heiress exclaimed incredulously on hearing from the wearer’s lips that they were made by herself. Her deft fingers, on which shone a single diamond-ring, clumsily set when compared with modern jewelry, were seldom idle. She crocheted baby-sacques, caps, afghans, lace, doylies—whatever would sell well in the Baltimore fancy-store that ordered her work. She made no secret of the circumstance that she maintained herself partially by these sales.

As of old, she had a court that grew hourly larger. Her piquante sayings were quoted

and applauded; her thorough breeding appreciated, even by some who were incapable of emulating it; her sweet thoughtfulness for others' comfort and enjoyment earned for her love in plenteous measure. She was a "feature"—and a charming one—of the Spa and season.

As of old, too, Carter Branch was as faithful as her shadow. They walked and drove together daily, and sat out long hours on the piazzas. A sheltered nook, safe from draughts and from glare, was presently given up to them, by tacit consent and courtesy. "Queen Margaret," as an enthusiastic young woman soon named her, had there her own chair, an ancient rocker, which she affirmed "had come down to her from a former generation of hotel furniture. She was positive that she recognised in it an old friend of forty years' sitting." Seated at her ease in this, her slim hands busied with crochet-hook and threads, she talked with her lover, or listened while he read aloud. Both used eye-glasses now, and, in all respects, adopted quietly and naturally the ways of elderly people. Most interesting fact

of all—both were as evidently and deeply in love as when the boy and girl had looked into each other's eyes over the transplanted dodder in the meadow-lands of Branksmere.

Some one described the betrothal one evening "as a life-long comedy which had ceased to be amusing." It was a fashionable rich woman, whose husband's money had bought her hand, and who had no heart to speak of. She aspired to be a wit as well as a leader of the plutocracy, but she would hardly have chosen this mark had she guessed that Colonel Branch and Miss Armistead were within easy ear-shot.

Margaret felt the arm on which hers rested shrink and shiver, as at a sword-thrust.

"Let us get out of this!" said Carter, brusquely, and she obeyed his impulse to withdraw by the nearest door.

The harvest moon was at the full; the piazzas were thronged with sitters and promenaders. Margaret, always mistress of herself, saluted group after group with bow, smile, or word; Carter strode straight onward, seeing and speaking to nobody until they were in the

comparative seclusion of the walk leading by a row of family cottages, Mrs. Thornton Armistead's being one of them.

“ A comedy! ” he burst out, then. “ This is what I have made of your life! Such patient heroism, such truth, such perfectness of trust and love as the world has never seen in another woman—are the laughing-stock of fools! ”

For the first and only time in their intercourse, he swore in her hearing—an oath so savagely bitter that her hand shuddered up to his lips.

“ My love! my love! ” she cried. “ We have borne it so long that we should surely have gained strength to carry the cross for the rest of the way! The end must be near! And—” her invincible playfulness asserting itself from the force of habit or from principle—“ every day is one less, you know. Nothing goes on forever in this world. Even the Thirty Years' War came to a close. What a pretty turn of speech that will be for congratulatory friends on our wedding-day, if we should be married next year, as I have a presentiment that we shall be ! ”

“ We may be married to-morrow, if you will say the word! ”

His widowed cousin, drawn to her window by the sound of familiar voices, heard his deep tones say it with a sullen, fierce cadence :

“ I am willing, for my part, to take the chances of ruin,—to let Fate, or anybody else, do her worst. My love is strong enough to brave and to endure all. It is for you to decide how much longer the comedy is to run.”

“ *Carter!* ”

A trail of moonbeams, shimmering between two cottage-roofs, showed the speaker's face, lit up the crown of silver hair, the depths of the eyes upraised in love unutterable, in divinest pity, in tenderest appeal.

“ Oh, my dear, how much better I love you than you love yourself! ”

She said no more. It was needless. As the repentant lover drew his betrothed nearer to him, the eavesdropper slid away from the post of observation.

While Thornton Armistead lived, he had believed that Margaret might marry Carter Branch whenever she liked, and, with his wife,

had sighed over the one weakness of her best beloved friend—the dread of comparative poverty.

“Which,” Margaret had once remarked philosophically, “is, like middle-age in china, furniture, and people,—vulgarly uninteresting. Very moderate means lack the picturesqueness of actual want and squalour, as things that are clean out of fashion, yet respectable, have not the flavour of the genuine antique.”

She had many similar shafts for such an estate as Carter had to offer her—too many for good taste, her sister-in-law was sometimes compelled to admit. After the terrible earnestness of that moonlight interview, the latter had but one reply when asked why Margaret had never married.

“I do not know. Only that she has done what she believes is right.”

“Do you suppose that they really mean to marry at all, at this late day?” a persistent inquisitor once added. “Is n’t the whole affair a bit of exaggerated sentimentality of the French school? Were they ever in earnest?”

The widow’s eyes blazed.

“ Their attachment is as earnest as their hope of heaven! Certainly they mean to marry! I should not be surprised to be invited to the wedding at any hour! ”

Hours multiplied by hours grew into days, days into months, and the months grouped themselves into years, and no summons to the bridal of the long-plighted pair went forth. The families were sadly thinned and impoverished. Of Carter's relatives there remained none nearer than Thornton Armistead's widow. He resided now at Oakhill, raising good crops and gathering together what was esteemed a tolerable law-practice in his own and the neighbouring counties. He “ ought to be doing well,” said well-wishers and gossips. Little by little, he furnished the dwelling-house, as if by stealth, fearing, it was surmised, that the proceeding would excite ridicule in a vicinity where the circumstances of his engagement were known.

One September afternoon, he welcomed to his home his widowed cousin, come in compliance with his written request that she would pay him a visit that day. He was sixty-three

years old, and might have been mistaken for a fairly well-preserved man of seventy. As soon as Mrs. Armistead caught sight of him standing on the porch of the old red brick mansion, awaiting her arrival, she was struck by a change in his appearance, an alertness and vigour she thought forever lost. He strode firmly down the path as her carriage stopped at the gate; his voice rang out cheerily with something of its old resonance; his bared head was erect, his threadbare coat brushed clean and buttoned over a broad chest.

“How smart we are!” was Mrs. Armistead’s second sentence. “You have almost a bridegroomly air!”

“It is the light of coming events, I hope!”—the tanned veteran blushing as the youth of twenty-three had not.

He had given her his arm in his quaint old-school fashion, and they were at the foot of the porch steps.

“Because,” he went on, meeting her startled eyes with a gravely sweet smile in his own, “GOD willing, we mean to be married on the first day of October!”

The impulsive little woman threw herself into his arms, then and there, and cried with joyful astonishment. Next, she found breath to scold because Margaret had kept it from her—of all people! Carter checked her.

“Come in and hear more before you complain!”

He led her into a big room, scantily furnished, got a chair, a glass of water, and a fan, and asked “what more he could do for her,” before he continued the story. Even true lovers are steady-going at sixty-odd.

“Margaret knew nothing of it, herself, until yesterday,” he said. “I overtook her upon her way to Mr. Wyatt’s, and we settled it. I took the liberty, by the way, Kate, of putting your carriage-driver upon my horse, while I took his place——”

“Liberty! Stuff! Go on!”

He was not to be hurried. His cousin remarked, as if it had never occurred to her before, his air of habitual repression; his way of talking as if each sentence were conned mentally before it was uttered.

“Thank you! We arranged the details, as

I have said. I stayed all night at Mr. Wyatt's and, as soon as I reached home, I wrote to you. I have no one else with whom to consult. All that has been done to make this house habitable was with express reference to Margaret's prospective occupancy of it. But now that her coming is so near and certain, I am painfully aware of the deficiencies of a bachelor establishment."

The stealthy little-by-littles had accomplished much, but the proprietor's eye had not erred in perceiving numberless defects. His cousin designated some and saw more as they went from room to room.

"If you had come to this point thirty years earlier," she mourned, surveying the bare walls and floors, "your wife would have been lodged like a princess. We were all able and ready to settle her handsomely then. Now—we are poorer than you."

"*My wife*"—he bent his head involuntarily, with a second's pause after the words—"will be content with her lot, because it is mine! She is heroism incarnate."

The auditor closed the lips opened to tell

him of the talk on an August afternoon, a score of summers ago. If Margaret were to blame then, she had expiated the folly over and over again.

“ It seems too good to be true that you are to live together, after all!” she said, instead. “ But I can’t forgive either of you for losing so many years of happiness.”

“ Don’t say, ‘either of us,’ Kate! She was not in fault, unless when she threw away youth in waiting for me. I have been busy this summer, laying out and stocking our flower-garden. Will you look at it ?”

It was a gentle slope at the side of the house, running down to a prattling stream. Choice roses were there, with some new and many old-fashioned flowers. At the lower end, a rustic bridge crossed the brook. Mrs. Armistead, stepping upon it, uttered an ejaculation at seeing that the banks were lined with wild balsam, overrun, looped, bound and screened by red-gold skeins of dodder.

“ Of all the romantic old couples I ever heard of, you two surpass! ”

Something she saw in his face broke off the

sentence. He walked a few steps down the stream, his head bowed, his hand pulling nervously at his moustache. Then he returned to her side, and stood, looking down at the glittering tangle.

“ Yes, Kate! ” The words came hard.

“ It is like us—her and myself! There are some things I can't talk of, even to you, cousin.”

Mrs. Armistead, driving home in the purpling sunset, full of happy schemes for adding from her scanty store certain comforts and touches of prettiness to the meagre plenishing of the house which was so soon to be a home, was met at her own plantation gate by a mounted messenger from Mr. Wyatt. Margaret lay very ill at the hospitable dwelling whither she had gone on the preceding day, for a week's visit.

“ A congestive chill, ” the doctor had named the seizure by the time her sister-in-law reached her.

Miss Armistead had told her hostess soon after Mr. Branch's departure that morning, of a wakeful night that had left her with a severe

headache. She " had not mentioned it to Mr. Branch, lest he might be uneasy. But, feeling drowsy and stupid now, she would go to her room and read herself to sleep. She needed nothing else."

Taking a volume from the book-case, she had gone off in apparently good spirits—humming a tune on the stairs. Mrs. Wyatt always recollected that the air was *Home, Sweet Home*. When dinner was ready, she did not answer the servant sent to summon her, and the hostess thought it best to let her " have her nap out." At four o'clock she went, in person, to her guest-chamber. Miss Armistead, dressed as she had been at breakfast, a rose at her throat Mr. Branch had given her, lay on her side, her face toward the window. The book she had been reading was shut upon her finger, her eyes were closed, and her face wore a placid smile that never left it until the coffin-lid shut its sweetness away from mortal sight.

Not once in the twenty-four hours of agony, during which love and friendship watched over her, did she open her eyes or give other token of consciousness,

Mrs. Wyatt, a sentimental matron, sent over to Oakhill, the day after the funeral, the volume of *Pendennis* on whose pages the last gaze of the dead woman had rested.

“Of course,” she confided to Mrs. Armistead, “it would have been more edifying if it had been the Bible or prayer-book, but it really matters little what is one’s dying exercises, so long as the life is all right. And dear Margaret was a saint, if ever one lived. I stuck a pin in to mark the place where her poor dear finger was, when I took the book from her, and wrote a note to tell Mr. Branch what the pin meant. I thought he might like to keep the place.”

For eleven months he never mentioned the gift or Margaret’s name to his cousin. He “broke fast,” after the sudden termination of his forty-years-long betrothal. When the tap-root of existence is severed, decay and dissolution are a mere question of time. Still, Mrs. Armistead, returning home after a three weeks’ visit to her married daughter, was shocked, one August morning, to receive a verbal message from the negro woman who was

maid-of-all-work at Oakhill, to the effect that her master was seriously ill, and wanted to see "Miss Kate."

The woman met the visitor at the door, and detained her to explain that "Mars' Cyarter suht'nly done took dat fever foolin' out o' do's so late o' nights.

"Many 's the time I see him a-trompin' up 'n' down th' flower-gyardin' 'n' settin' on that ar' little bridge 't one o'clock in th' mawnin'," she said, indignantly. "He 's acted like he was 'stracted 'bout dem flowers all summer long—a-diggin' 'n' weedin' 'n' plantin' in all sorts o' weather."

The face of an old man of eighty tried to smile at the lady from the soiled and wrinkled pillow. Medicines and remnants of food were huddled together on the table near him; the white August sunshine through the unshaded windows, the teasing hum of August flies, sickened her heart the more for the instant recollection of Margaret's delicately fastidious tastes and habits.

Summoning several negroes to her assistance, she went quietly but so energetically to work

that, in an hour's time, the patient lay in a clean, darkened chamber, and was so far revived by a bath and the nourishment she had brought from her home that she predicted a speedy recovery. He smiled again, an arch glimmer that recalled the young man's visage, and put his hand on hers.

“ No, no, Katy, dear! I thought you were my friend. We have loved one another as brother and sister for fifty years and more. We will have no reserves now. I must not waste time and force. I asked you not to take this book away when you found it under my pillow, just now.”

It was a shabby volume, and fell open of itself near the middle when he gave it to her.

“ That page was what she was reading when nature gave way under the reaction of hopeful happiness after forty years' strain. I know why she chose that chapter. Both of us knew every word of it by heart already.”

Wonderingly, his cousin read a passage to which he pointed.

“ Would to God that I had not been thus deceived! But in all these matters we are deceived

*because we wish to be so, and I thought I loved that poor woman. What could come of such a marriage? I found, before long, that I was married to a boor. She could not comprehend one subject that interested me * * * —”*

He turned a page:

“ I entered life at twenty, God help me ! hopeless and ruined beyond remission ! ”

The reader's blanched face, and eyes glazed with horror, returned to the sick man's, as his long, wasted fingers were laid upon the leaf.

Two vivid fever-spots glowed in his hollow cheeks, but he answered the mute query calmly:

“ Not quite so bad as that, Kate! But bad enough. It was when I was at Yale. She was a showy rattle, six years older than I. We met at a farmhouse where I spent one vacation—the year my father and mother were abroad. She was the niece of the farmer, and a saleswoman in a New York store. I met her in New York the next Thanksgiving day, and again at Christmas. We corresponded for a year. I was barely twenty when I first saw her. Like the child and fool I was, I called

her 'my wife' in several letters, and signed myself her 'devoted husband.' Don't shrink from me! Do you suppose I could have asked Margaret Armistead to marry me if there had been anything worse than folly?

"When I knew enough of people and life to be ashamed of the whole affair, she refused to return my letters, but made no overt threat. In some way she must have kept an eye on me, for I had not been engaged to Margaret two months when I had a letter containing a formal statement of her claim upon me as my lawful wife. It set forth that we were married the Christmas I spent in New York; that letters in her possession would prove the relation; finally, that, while she would never allow me to commit bigamy, she would not molest me if I would provide suitably for her support.

"I carried the letter straight to Margaret. She read it, and believed me—believed in me—God bless her! Oh, God bless her! My noble darling!"

As his voice shook and broke, Kate offered a restorative.

“ Don't try to tell the rest!” she sobbed, tears raining down her face. “ I see it all, now! Lie still and rest!”

Except for the soft swirl of the fan with which she cooled his face and hands, the room was still. Without, the midsummer sun pressed the breath out of Margaret's roses, and day-lilies, and lavender beds. In the noon-tide hush were audible the lap and gurgle of the little brook as it slipped away under the rustic bridge. The exhausted patient lay with closed eyes, motionless for some minutes. Only the scarlet stains on his cheeks told that he was not dying. His unshorn beard was white, his temples cavernous, yet, when the spasm of anguished recollection passed, the worn lines relaxed into majestic tranquillity that awed the silent weeper. Buffet and billow were overpassed. He felt the firm beach beneath him, rested beyond the reach of tide and undertow, the lighted windows of home near at hand.

Opening his eyes quietly, by-and-by, he smiled reassuringly into her anxious face.

“ I will make the rest as short as I can. I

went on to New York to see this impostor. Margaret advised it. She was always right.

“ ‘ Face the danger boldly ! ’ she said. ‘ The sooner we know the worst, the better. ’

“ The woman had a lawyer with her, a low pettifogger, who laid the case before me. She had her witness, too, a creature of her own kind. Both women swore that the ceremony was performed by a clergyman, since dead. The marriage certificate was lost in a fire at the wife’s lodgings, but there were the damning letters! Her lawyer, in a confidential interview with me, represented that his client was slowly dying of consumption, and her appearance bore out the statement. He told me, with a vulgar wink, that if I would allow her one hundred dollars per month for the rest of her life, I would not have to pay it half a year.

“ Kate Armistead! that woman died the first of last September. I paid her in all *forty thousand dollars* !

“ When I met Margaret in the road on her way to the Wyatts’, I had the letter, inclosing the doctor’s certificate of burial, in my pocket. The first words she spoke when she heard we

were free were: ' May the dear Lord have mercy on her poor soul!' I could not say, ' Amen!'

" She was very happy—peacefully, devoutly happy—after that. It was the only peaceful day I was able to give her in twoscore years. First and last, she shielded me from suspicion. My own mother and sisters—even you, Kate, found fault, in my hearing, with her for the luxurious tastes that unfitted her to be a poor man's wife. I might defend her, but she fostered the delusion. The plea was specious and safe. And, she never wearied in predicting that our enemy would soon repent or die.

" ' God is too merciful to let us suffer much longer,' she would say. She knows now why He did.

" Again and again, I tried to buy the swindler off. By the laws of her State, the letters were proof of the marriage. She was shrewd, long-sighted, unscrupulous, and as firm as a rock in her intention to be maintained by me. Had the matter been brought to law, I should have been wrecked in reputation and in fortune. Sometimes I urged Mar-

garet to marry me, and dare the cold, crafty devil to do her worst. She was more merciful to me than I was to her, and would not consent. When I have joined her, let those who blamed her know how it was—won't you? She exacted from me a promise never to tell the truth until I knew myself to be dying. 'People might not credit it, in other circumstances,' she said.

“ But you—believe me, Kate—don't you? Margaret did—always—always! ”

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I visited Oakhill last year. A rich citizen of Richmond, who had made his money in a distillery, bought it at Carter Branch's decease. The house is tight and trig, duly painted and unduly furnished. Sward as smooth as a green carpet stretched by an upholsterer has done away with Margaret's flower-beds (which she never saw). The rustic bridge has disappeared also. Poor Carter's essay at landscape-gardening met with little favour from his successors. They have not cared, however, to meddle with a narrow fringe of water-loving plants growing low down upon the bank.

Wild balsam is there, succulent and brittle, the orange-red flowers peering through the interlacing wealth of dodder—a golden coat-of-mail, the edges of which trail and swing in the running water.

“ Kind o’ sightly weeds—ain’t they ? ” commented the new man.





Chapter II

The Big Revival at Pine Creek

OPECANCAHOUGH County is creek-crossed into neighbourhoods. There is not a river in the length and breadth of it, although the noble James ("Jeemes's River," in the vernacular) bounds one side, and the Appomattox the other. Rough Creek, Deep Creek, Muddy Creek, Fighting Creek, Red Creek, Little Creek, Sally's Creek, Nigger Foot Creek, Clear Creek, Indian Creek, Pine Creek, and half a dozen more, empty into one or the other of the two major watercourses. A network of "branches" feeds the creeks. The richest plantations in the county lie along the James, the second-best upon the Appomattox.

The Pine Creek neighbourhood included five James River plantations. The fallow grounds, heavy with Indian corn, and the higher lands,

beautiful with billowing wheat and the finest tobacco crops in Virginia or any other State, were mines of wealth to the owners. Every man of them had "gone through college," some of them taking University degrees; they raised, rose, and drove blooded horses, worked — humanely and intelligently — hundreds of "hands"; attended court regularly once a month, and church once a week, and fared sumptuously every day. Five churches were scattered up and down the County, clapboards and shingles hanging more loosely to them than titles which were a reminiscence of the establishment overthrown by infidel and democratic Jefferson. Pine Creek Meeting-House had had no other name from the day the huge oblong pine box, wainscoted and ceiled with pine boards, and fitted up with planed pine benches overtopped by an unpainted pine pulpit, was dedicated by four ministers of as many different denominations to the service of the God all worshipped in sincerity and in truth.

The Presbyterians occupied the pulpit of the "free church" on the first and third Sun-

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days of the month; the Methodists on the second; the Baptists on the fourth. When a Fifth Sunday was on the calendar, the Episcopalians collected a priest and a responsive audience. The cordial amity that inspired preachers and people was the highest type of catholicity, prefiguring Evangelical Unions, which were not to be heard of until a quarter-century later than the date of the great arbour-meeting at Pine Creek Meeting-House, August 13, 184-

The pine parallelogram had been erected in the heart of the woods that gave name to the creek. Trees were felled, and some of the larger stumps grubbed up to make room for the building. Walter Harris, Esquire, whose property the woods and environing plantations were, had donated an acre of land, when called upon for a subscription to the much-needed house of worship, and furthermore cut, at his own expense, a road from the nearest highway to the door of the sanctuary. Other improvements there were none. The straight, naked trunks of the great pines shot up starward within ten feet of the north side of the

building; on that which was left clear for the passage of vehicles, the ground was littered deep with brown pine-needles, never swept away except when enough wind penetrated the phalanxed pines to drift the newest layers against the underpinning of the rude structure.

This was the fragrant carpeting spread under the vast arbour built against the Meeting-House to accommodate the crowd drawn together by the announcement that a protracted meeting would be begun on the second Sunday of August, under the auspices of Rev. Lycurgus Ross, of Richmond, assisted by several other ministers of lesser note, and a corps of efficient lay-members. Stout poles, set deep in the earth, supported a thatch of pine branches. On either side of the Meeting-House door were the preachers' stands. Directly in front of these were the railed-in "mourners' benches." The oblong box would have seated less than four hundred. Double that number found accommodations in the improvised wing. The dim recesses of the forest were filled with carriages, and the detached horses were tethered to the tree boles. The

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best people of the Pine Creek neighbourhood were in the audience in strength and beauty. Upon one side of the narrow aisle sat the men; across the way light muslins, sheeny silks, and fashionable bonnets were like a parterre of summer flowers; the flutter of fans was as the play of butterflies' wings above the gay array. The outer ends of the "ladies' benches" were guarded by a rough rail, and over this leaned emulous rows of the younger men, whispering, smiling, and flirting, as their descendants lounge and flirt in opera-boxes.

A hymn, raised by a leathery-lunged layman, seated below the preachers' stand, "sang the meeting in." The low hum of talk ceased; voice after voice took up the familiar air and words, and carried them with spirit until the lofty crowns of the trees were jarred by the cataract of song. The theme was the brevity of life, the certainty of death, the awfulness of eternity. A prayer followed from the circuit-rider of the district, who then read a chapter from the Old Testament. The preliminary work was wound up by a brief exhortation from the temporary master of ceremonies.

“ The month of August may be regarded as the harvest-time of the church,” he stumbled on to say. “ There are more souls born into the kingdom in this month than in all the rest of the year. Brethren! with this hint I leave the meeting in the hands of my eminent brother in the Lord, Reverend Lycurgus Ross, of Richmond, who will now address you.”

Dr. Lycurgus Ross was a mighty hunter of men’s souls. He had come to Opecanacough for a purpose, and was not inclined to fence with incidental circumstance, or to measure his, or other men’s, words. He arose slowly to every inch of his majestic height, his face, as swarthy as an Indian’s, was set sternly:

“ God’s harvest is every day—every hour—every minute in the year!” He projected the words to every part of the arbour and house, without seeming to raise his voice. “ In His book but one date is written, and that is *now*. The pointer of His sun-dial is set at that one word of three letters. I cannot give to one of you a guarantee that you will leave this place alive, or ever have another offer of salvation besides that I make to you

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this morning. Before beginning my sermon, I shall ask Sister Marion Leigh to sing a hymn. I also ask the brethren who are with me on the platform, and all Christians in the congregation, to lift their souls in fervent prayer, that the hearts of the ungodly and careless may be prepared by the solemn words to receive the message I am commissioned to deliver unto you."

A stir, like the souging of the wind in the pines, was heard, as the short line of preachers, the longer row of laymen under the altar, and at least a hundred of the audience, sank to their knees. Silence that might be felt lasted for a suspenseful minute, broken by a deep sigh fluttering forth, as from the breast of one man, when a slight figure, all in white, glided to the head of the long aisle, and faced the congregation.

Simultaneously with the apparition, a man sitting within three seats of the front got up hastily, strode down the aisle, and left the arbour. Many heads turned to look at him as he passed; meaning signals flashed from one battery of eyes to another. The girl's gaze,

steadfast and solemn, was directed above his head to the glimpse of blue sky visible between the trees at the end of the vista of faces. She was apparently not more than twenty years of age, with the face of a Madonna, the grave, sweet, pure eyes of a child. Laying her white-gloved hands together lightly in a gesture of unconscious grace, suggestive of devotion, she began to sing :

Eternity is just at hand !
 And shall I waste my ebbing sand,
 And careless view departing day,
 And throw my inch of time away ?
 We are passing away,
 We are passing away,
 Like a short winter's day.

Dr. Ross and another city minister joined, in subdued tones, a mellow bass and tuneful tenor to the chorus. Her voice went on alone with the body of the hymn :

Eternity without a bound !
 To guilty souls a dreadful sound,
 But oh, if Christ and Heaven be mine,
 How sweet the accents, how divine !

Dear Father ! Lord ! Thy grace impart !
 Fix deep conviction on each heart,
 Nor let me waste on trifling cares,
 The life which Thy compassion spares !

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Then the chorus, repeated with sad fervour that sent flicker after flicker of colour to the, until then, faintly tinted cheeks. Her voice was like her face—pure, sweet, and sympathetic, and had the clear, vibratory quality of a lark's carol; she enunciated each word with perfectness that was not precise. When her listeners' eyes were clear of mists that sprang thick and fast before she had sung three lines, the place where she had stood was vacant. She had passed out of view as noiselessly as she had come before them.

That one of the Richmond Leighs, the mainstays of the Monumental Church, should "profess conversion" at a Methodist camp-meeting was a sickening blow to family pride and precedent. That she should straightway become an exhorting, singing, and praying-in-public "sister" was a scandal. Up to the hour of her conversion, Marion Leigh was a belle among men, and yet beloved by the women in her circle. She lost caste unequivocally by the monstrous reversal of her views and habits. It could not be otherwise. She eschewed dancing and flirting; she read devo-

tional books in preference to novels; she was addicted to prayer-meetings, class-meetings, love-feasts—and the disgusted Episcopal clan did not know how many other varieties of fanatical conclaves. She visited the poor to the neglect of her legitimate social duties; she nursed the sick; taught a Sunday-School class of poor children, and denied herself new dresses in order to send the gospel to uninteresting heathen.

Still, she was the idol of her home, and won every heart subjected to her winsome ways and the influence of the exquisite gentleness, the active goodness that were pure womanly despite her unfeminine “Methodistical performances.”

This was her first visit to her sister, Mrs. Walter Harris, since the radical change I have indicated; this her first public appearance in county society, the preceding Sunday having been stormy.

She was dressed for church simply in white muslin, and, as he could not but confess to himself, was distractingly pretty, when her brother-in-law waylaid her upon the back

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porch that morning. He was as fond of her as of his own madcap sister, whom he lectured tri-daily, and to whom he had been used to hold Marion up as a model for her imitation.

“ I declare,—Marion,” he blurted out, in momentary forgetfulness of the mentorial intentions that had caused him to intercept her on her way to the parlour where his cousin, Dick Selden, who was to drive the fair guest to church, was waiting for her—“ I wish to goodness Clara had half your steadiness! She has just told me that she engaged herself again last week for the sixth time! and to that tipsy puppy, Jack Miller! She thought she ’d better tell me, lest I might think it strange if he were to come home with her this evening. I told her flatly not to ask him. I won’t have him around! She won’t marry him, of course. I ’m pretty sure of that—but——”

“ Not unless you oppose her too violently,” said Marion, sagely. “ Don’t be hard with her, brother! She means no harm. There is n’t a warmer heart in the world than hers. And she loves you too dearly ever to *do* anything to make you unhappy, whatever she may

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say. Was this what you wanted to talk to me about ?”

He fumbled with the handle of his riding-whip, and cleared his throat, avoiding her eyes. He wished, for this once, that they were not of such a limpid, honest blue, and were less fearless in their innocence.

“ Ah—yes! There was a little point I wished to set before you. You know that we are, all of us, mighty fond of you, Marion, and how we ’d hate to cross you. But country people are a *leetle* fastidious about some matters, you know, and don’t take readily to new-fangled ways—and our ladies have never done anything in the—ah—public line, you see—most of us being Presbyterians and Episcopalians, don’t you know ? And so I thought that perhaps you would n’t mind if Dr. Ross, knowing you personally, were to call on you to say something, to sing something, or to pray something, don’t you know ? Hang it all, Marion! I never could beat about the bush! The fact is, I can’t bear the idea of having you go in for that sort of thing! ”

She laughed outright, then grew suddenly

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very grave. The blue eyes were darkened by rising shadows. She slid her fingers—plump, white, and cool—into those that fidgeted with the whip-handle.

“ Ask me anything else, and I will do it, Walter, dear—to the three-quarters of my kingdom. I understand just what you mean. But if I am *called*, I must obey in the fear of the Lord. I accepted that possibility as a part of my cross, when I took His name upon myself, and began to follow Him. I have vowed unto Him, and I cannot go back. I wish—oh, *how* I wish that you and sister, and more of my friends, could see that in the right light! This is my constant prayer. . Try and believe that I would not grieve you, or anybody else I love, if I could help it.”

The silenced brother-in-law could not be angry with her, then. He could, and he did, wax exceeding wroth at Dr. Ross's astounding and audacious introduction to his discourse. There was but one dignified course left to him, and he took it, if not in the fear of the Lord, in deadly dread of neighbourhood and county. He would not countenance this

abomination in the sight of right-minded conservatives. Heedless of his wife's imploring eyes—which he could not help seeing, determined though he was to look into nobody's face on his way out lest haply he might read pity in some glances, derisive contempt in others—he cleared the arbour, the encampment of vehicles and horses beyond, and plunged into the thickest part of the woods. He had walked himself into a drenching perspiration, with no abatement of internal fever, when he halted on the bank of Pine Creek, a mile away from the Meeting-House. There he sat down on a fallen log, threw his hat from his dripping forehead to the ground, knotted his fists upon his knees, and stared luridly into the muddy water.

He was a man who took things hard, and this was a hard thing to take. The New Woman was not then born, and no sign of her coming and sovereignty had jarred the steel-clad decorum of Virginian social manners and customs. For a woman to be eccentric was to be unfeminine; to be conspicuous in any public assembly, except by her beauty, her

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tasteful toilettes, and elegant carriage was masculine and unpardonable. He could hardly have been more offended had his wife's sister, in flesh-coloured tights and tossing tunic, bounded into the sawdusty arena of the circus he saw at the Court House last week.

Affection and hopes were dashed along with pride and prejudice. Dick Selden, whose fine plantation joined his own, had been obviously enamoured of Marion Leigh for a year; had visited her in town; had rushed over to Whitehall, the Harris homestead, the very day of her arrival, and almost lived there ever since. Walter had counted upon the match as an almost and highly desirable certainty. Now—rolling the acrid morsel under his smarting tongue in a perversity of self-torment—nothing was less likely than that Dick, handsome, overbrimming with natural spirits and fun, and with chivalric ideals of the dignity and delicacy of the womanhood his mother had illustrated and himself revered, would tolerate this outrage to the sex and the society she should have represented. The pretty Methodist, feeling herself “called” in the Gospel to

testify to her crazy convictions in season and out of season, at her downsitting and her uprising, (and *such* an uprising as this latest exhibition!) would never enter the Selden house a mistress and the wife of the master.

“ He ’ll shy and bolt, of course!” Walter soliloquised aloud. “ It ’s enough to make any decent Christian swear!”

The noon sun was hot, the creek wallowed and swirled between red clay banks stripped of herbage by late freshets. The murmur of the pines, as the glossy needles chafed one another in the weak wind, irritated, and their warm, resinous breath nauseated him. A mud-turtle, basking upon a snag in the middle of the stream, blinked insultingly in his direction. He shied a stone at the turtle with so true an aim that the creature was hurled against the opposite shore.

“ I wish it was old Ross and his dashed crew!” snarled the malcontent. “ If he thinks I am going near his sacred circus again, he ’s mistaken. I ’d rather sit here and rock mud-turtles all day. If Dick really cared for the girl he could n’t keep his hands off that



"THE CREEK WALLOWED AND SWIRLED."

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fellow, in spite of his straight-breasted coat and sanctimonious whine."

It was nearly two o'clock when he strayed sullenly back to the scene of action. Morning services were over, and the vast crowd had scattered picturesquely through the wood. All had brought luncheons to be eaten in the hour's intermission. These were generally distributed from hampers set upon the broad baggage-racks which were then an invariable appendage to family carriages. The Whitehall collation (snack) was spread upon a long table, improvised of boards and trestles provided for the purpose, and draped with snowy damask. Butler and footmen were in attendance, and a lively party of at least forty guests was gathered about the feast.

A sweeping glance told Walter that Marion Leigh was not there. The same took in Dick Selden, smiling, debonair, and comfortable in a suit of white grass-linen, fitted perfectly to a faultless figure, and strikingly becoming to his clear brown skin, dark hair and eyes. He was in gay and gallant attendance upon a dashing Lynchburg heiress, a visitor to the

neighbourhood, and had eyes and ears for nobody else. Walter seized a favourable moment for a word in his wife's ear.

“ Where is Marion ? ”

Mrs. Harris made a gesture of despair.

“ In there ! ” nodding backward at the Meeting-House. “ Think of it ! There were over thirty mourners after the sermon, and two more hymns from her sung right in the altar, or whatever they call it. So they were collected in the house, and there 's a prayer-meeting going on, while we are eating, and she could n't be persuaded to leave them, and not one blessed mouthful will she get all day ! I sent Dick for her, but she could n't be moved. I declare, Walter, I feel as if she ought n't to be allowed to go at large, while this sort of thing has possession of her. What are we to do ? And she 's losing Dick as fast as the minutes can fly and that Lynchburg girl can talk ! ”

Walter groaned anew in spirit. Not at the incongruity between the awful admonitions addressed two hours before to the imperilled souls of the men and women about him and

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the festivities now in progress. The scene was too familiar to tempt him into moralising. The Lynchburg belle was eating a philopæna with Dick Selden, showing her small white teeth and coral lips to advantage as she nibbled the kernel, her hazel eyes shining with appreciation of the undisguised admiration of the fine brown eyes looking down at her. Clara Harris, seated upon a stump covered by the white silk handkerchief of one adorer, was alternately sipping lemonade from a tumbler held by a second, and eating chicken cut up for her use upon a plate resting on the bended knee of a third, while a fourth fanned her. Motherly matrons were clucking contentedly together of their respective households and exchanging tid-bits of gossip ; florid fathers talked of crops and politics. Balsamic breaths from the sun-warmed pines were mingled with fruity odours from piles of grapes and peaches and gaping water-melons ; with savoury whiffs from mountains of fried chicken, rounds of ruddy beef and pink ham curling in thin, luscious slices under the carving-knife. If one person there recalled the portentous utterance,

"I cannot give you a guarantee that you will leave this place alive," not a motion or tone betrayed it.

The sylvan banquet came to a jovial end and still no sign of the missing Marion. Urged by his wife and goaded by the sight of Dick Selden's manifest indifference to their anxiety, the brother-in-law betook him to the house of prayer. All three doors were wide open; knots of spectators clogged the steps and hung upon the sill of each of the eight windows. A spruce negro, his tall shock of pepper-and-salt wool reverently uncovered, occupied a coign of vantage in the form of a pine-stump directly beneath one window. Walter recognised his carriage-driver, Peter Pindar,—thus distinguished from the head dining-room servant, Simon Peter,—straight-way dispossessed him of his pedestal, and, mounting it, had a full view of the interior. Four meetings of conference and prayer were going on at once; the murmur, not loud but remitting, was like the hum of a recitation-room occupied by several classes. In the corner nearest him, and close to the end door,

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five women and three men were kneeling at two long benches; between the benches, facing her brother-in-law, her muslin skirts lying in fleecy heaps upon the dusty floor, knelt Marion Leigh. Her clasped hands were raised high upon her breast; her eyes were closed, and tear-dew gemmed the lashes; her voice was so soft it did not reach the other groups of mourners, yet every syllable was audible to the penitents committed to her charge.

Involuntarily Walter removed his hat and lowered his head, as the gentle pleadings with the All-Merciful trembled upon his ear. Then, malignant fate contrived, before he fully gleaned the sense of a single sentence, that one of the men resting upon one bent knee, his arm lying horizontally upon the other, should shift his position slightly. Walter saw under the hand arched over his eyes the clear-cut features of Dick Selden's most formidable rival,—Tom Cocke, a promising county lawyer of good blood, good manners, and good temper, who had laid diligent siege to Miss Leigh's heart for two years. She had the credit of

having twice discarded his suit, but he was persistent, returning to the attack in fair order, and undaunted in intention.

“ You ’ll take him yet ! ” Mrs. Harris had warned her sister, not two days ago ; and Marion had smiled demurely without speaking.

If ever Walter wished for his “ rock ” and the right to throw it, it was at this instant. Literally afraid to trust himself in a longer watch, he stepped to the earth, jammed his hat fiercely upon his brows, and walked off, boiling and spluttering with rage.

“ The mean, underhand sneak ! The tricky puppy ! ” he hissed. “ *That ’s* what she gets by these low-lived notions ! It would serve her right if he got her ! ” And, as the disorderly aspect of grounds and grove appealed to his critical mood — “ A confounded mess this is altogether ! Talk of decency and order ! Ross and his gang outrage both. ”

A tumultuous stream of human beings was pouring toward the arbour, from which a shout of song pealed upward. He knew the chorus that swelled and swooped down upon the moving throng and swung outward again—the

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louder by hundreds of voices caught up by the rushing melody. The singers marched into their places, as to martial music.

For *soon* God's reaping-time will come,
And angels shout the harvest home !

Hurrying to get away from it—perhaps dreading lest he might be swept back by it, Walter Harris came suddenly upon his own carriage, a full hundred yards away from any other vehicle, and so secluded from the sight of the now distant congregation by a plantation of scrub-pines, that he did not see it until he was abreast of the front wheels. Not a creature besides himself was near; there were no hoof-marks about it, and he had passed his horses five minutes ago munching their oats from a box set upon the stump to which they were tied. He opened the door and looked in. The deep-seated, roomy chariot, padded to luxuriousness, was empty. It was also tempting. He got in, sank into a corner, put his feet upon the front seat, and wished he had not left his pipe in his every-day coat-pocket. The surge of song had ceased; he could hear again the susurrations of the pines,

and found them soothing now, instead of irritating. A cosier nook for a post-prandial nap could not be.

The next thing he knew—and that but vaguely—was that two people were talking behind him—he thought in his dream. Without raising his sleep-laden eyelids, he seemed to dream on—

“ I gave orders to Peter Pindar,” said heart-some accents. “ He selected a pleasant spot, did n’t he ? He borrowed the chair from somebody’s carryall, I reckon. I charged him to leave the choicest morsels of the snack in the hamper. Peter Pindar is an uncommonly sensible darkey. ‘ I onderstan’ jes’ what you mean, Marse Dick,’ he said, giving me a most knowing and ungodly grin. He signalled to me when it was possible for a fellow to get at you once more. He told me, too, that ‘ dat pore angel was clean wore out wid all dem mo’ners. ’T was time somebody took keer on her.’ Peter Pindar was right—as to the angel and the weariness. Is your biscuit buttered ? That’s all right ! When you have finished eating you are to get into the carriage and rest

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until Peter Pindar notifies us that the meeting is almost over.”

“ How good and thoughtful you are!” sighed a sweet, weary voice. “ And after I have been doing what you might have disapproved of! Indeed and indeed, Dick, it *hurts* me to go against your wishes and tastes.”

“ Wait until you do! Here; let me cut that joint for you! You would n’t drink wine if I had it, but here is iced milk. I have been very anxious for fear you would overtire yourself. The flesh is not quite up to the spirit with you, my sweet.”

“ And you are sure you really don’t mind my testifying in public? It is borne in upon me that I must do it when I am called upon. I consecrated all my poor little gifts when I took the vows of a Christian on me. Oh!” distressfully—“ I *wish* I could make you—and Walter—understand just how I feel about it!”

“ Walter be—kicked! He drives his coulter too deep sometimes. Don’t fret your darling soul over Walter’s prejudices.”

The individual objurgated, now aware that he was wide awake, raised himself cautiously

upon one knee and peeped through the little window in the back curtain. His sister-in-law, looking a little fagged, but decidedly happy, sat in a low, cushioned chair, a plate of chicken in her lap, a glass of milk upon a mossy stone beside her. Dick Selden reclined at half-length upon the brown carpet of pine-needles at her feet, basking his whole ecstatic being in the sunshine of her eyes.

“Walter is a good fellow, nevertheless,” he went on to say. “You must let me tell him and your sister everything to-night. You promised me, you know what, twenty-four hours ago, and if I keep it to myself six hours more, my heart will burst with happiness—‘Crack the hoops with a loud noise’—as Faithful John’s did in the fairy tale, you know.”

“Dick! Dick!” catching her breath in a frightened way, yet blushing and smiling divinely. “I’m *afraid* this is n’t Sunday talk!”

“You bet it is!” bawled Walter, dashing open the carriage-door. “The Sundayest talk I’ve heard in a month of Sundays!”

He caught the newly betrothed in his arms,

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whirled her off her feet, and kissed her a dozen times. Dick Selden leaned against a tree and laughed until his breath gave out.

.
The same whole-hearted, contagious laugh that set a company of young people a-going ten years later, when he told the story of the Pine Creek Arbour meeting upon his own portico, his wife sitting by, and blushing as beautifully as when Walter Harris broke in upon the Sunday talk.

“ Tom Cocke got through on the second day of the Big Revival. A good job it has proved, too. I'll say that for Tom and his religion. A man can't be a better thing than a consistent Christian. All the same, I must have my story and my laugh. I was putting Marion here into the carriage when Tom came flying up, brimful of happiness and hallelujah—

“ ‘ Dear Miss Marion; how can I thank you for all your goodness? I shall love you all my life—the dearest, sweetest, best of women!’

“ You may imagine that my little lady was disconcerted? Not a bit of it! She held out both hands to him as if he had been her

brother, and, said she, ' It is one of the touchstones of Christian experience to love the brethren, Mr. Cocke; and, as you say, to love everybody. I am very glad for you.'

" ' Yes! yes!' said poor excited Tom. ' The brethren, of course! but especially a sister like you, Miss Marion! I *do* love you from the bottom of my soul! '

" She turned as pretty a pink as she is doing now, and I thought it about time to put in my oar. So I just hurried her into the carriage where her sister was laughing herself to death behind the curtains, while Walter Harris was doubled up with a convulsion on the other side of the carriage—then I shook hands with Tom heartily.

" ' So do I, my dear boy,' said I. ' Who could help it? And I am going to keep up the habit until death us do part. God bless you! '

" With that I gave the word to Peter Pindar to drive on, and jumped on my horse and galloped after the Whitehall carriage.

" Ah, that Pine Creek Arbour meeting was *great!* The neighbourhood has been better for it ever since. So have I."



Chapter III

Our Family Skeleton

PROLOGUE

MY childish recollection of Miss Agnes Vining is distinct. She must have been seventy when she died, and her hair had been white for thirty years. The silvery abundance of her soft locks was the more remarkable because few ladies at that day wore their own hair in sight. At thirty-five they put on caps, and when their tresses began to whiten hid them under false fronts.

Miss Agnes Vining wore caps as long ago as I can recollect. Pretty constructions of fine lace trimmed with pale pink and pale blue ribbons. But she would neither hide her hair under a cap, nor behind a hideous frisette or braid of some other woman's hair. Her voice was soft; her complexion pure to the last; she

had exquisite hands and feet; everybody loved her and she was considered "literary." Not that she wrote for publication. No Virginia gentlewoman did that at that date. But she "composed pieces of poetry"—love-songs for the most part, and elegies, and epithalamiums that were sadder than the elegies. Girls copied the love-verses into their albums, and brides had the epithalamiums engrossed upon gilt-edged paper with a border of roses or lilies-of-the valley, or forget-me-nots, running around the body of the sheet, and kept them in locked drawers with dried orange-blossoms from the bridal bouquet scattered over them.

Everybody confided in Miss Agnes. I, at twelve years of age, was so wrought upon by her winsome sympathy with all young and ignorant and helpless creatures as to take her into the secrets of a certain fat and shabby portfolio I had never opened for another being. She listened, divinely patient, to the reading of rhymes, and what I mistook for reason in essays modelled upon Addison and Steele and Foster, and the stories which I could never tell as they had been telling themselves to me

ever since I began to think. She hearkened tenderly, her slender hand winding in and out of my curls the while, to my stammered outburst :

“ If I could only write books!—as Maria Edgeworth and Mrs. Opie and Hannah More did, I should be *perfectly* happy ! ”

“ Perhaps you may, one day, dear ! ” she said — more in consolation than encouragement, as I perceived even then. “ And I hope you will be as happy as God sees fit for you to be. That is all any of us can be—in this world. ”

I do not know what became of the Diary in which she was known to write every day, or of the store of other manuscripts she was believed to have in her desk and drawers. One bulky parcel was secured by three black seals, and addressed to me.

I give what I found within just as it was written, after waiting through all the years that have done away with the generation that produced her. There is no one now alive upon the earth who could be wounded by her revelation. The style is the style of her day.

They took time to say all they had to say then; to round periods and to revise phrases. They depended naïvely upon italics and exclamation-points for telling effects. Short sentences were hardly more decorous than the omission of "sir" and "madam" after "yes" and "no." Considering these and other things, I cannot but think Miss Agnes's narrative singularly straightforward and direct.

The heart throbbing through it all was hers, —true as steel, and as tender as it was sound,—pure womanly from first to last. The title is hers. I could not change it for the better if I had the heart to do it.

PART I

Our mother was a Vining. There is no better family in Virginia than hers. It has come to be the fashion in these fast days to laugh at the pretensions of the old cavalier houses and their pride of ancestry. It does seem, at the first careless glance, a queer graft to set upon a Republican stock. But to my apprehension and taste it was, in its time, a worthier, more dignified emotion than the

pride of money felt by those who have scraped it together and the respect paid to it by poorer people; less pitiful than the worship of golden calves — sometimes donkeys — one sees going on about him now. I have never been called haughty. I am too painfully conscious of my drawbacks—mental and spiritual—to set myself up as a model for anyone. But I am glad I had a grandfather and a great-grandfather; and—I may as well be frank now I am upon the subject—glad that we can trace our lineage back for ten generations and more, to a noble English house, the head of which displayed a coronet upon his panels. Other people who are far better in every way than I cannot do this, and would not care a fig for it if they could, so you may call it one of my weaknesses if you like.

My father was comparatively “a new man,” his father having removed from Pennsylvania to our State when a boy. But he was intelligent, energetic, and well-bred, and by the time his children grew up they were admitted to a place in the best society the county afforded. That is saying much, for the

community in which we lived was made up of gentlemen planters and their families, and had a reputation for refinement and exclusiveness enjoyed by few other sections of the State. I have heard it whispered that a coterie of antiquated spinsters, who were walking genealogical tables, looked askance at Doctor Ernest Elmer when he began to pay open court to the elder and fairer of the two Misses Vining of Brierly, and inquired, smelling-bottle at nose and red lavender within reach, if anybody could give them any *reliable* information concerning his pedigree. They were among the most complaisant of the wedding-guests, however, and loud in their praises of the handsome couple and prophecies of their happy future. My father *was* a handsome man, but those who knew him intimately rated his physical attractions as the least of his recommendations to their favour. My mother I remember as a slight, beautiful woman with a singularly sweet yet pensive expression of countenance. There was something mournful even in her smile, and I do not remember that she was ever merry or active. She was dependent,

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when she took exercise in the open air, upon her carriage and horses, and generally walked from room to room with the aid of my father's arm. Her health was always delicate, and but for her husband's care and skill she would probably have died before she was twenty-five years of age. As it was, she lived to be thirty, and left two children, my sister Alice and myself. Our two brothers had preceded their mother to the grave.

I was five, Alice two, when we were thus thrown entirely upon our father for protection and guidance. The change was not so great or trying as it would have been in many households. Our father's supervision of us had always been peculiarly close and tender. We understood, in early babyhood, that we were never in his way, no matter how busy or tired he might be. Our childish ailments, with all our joys and troubles, were attended to promptly and kindly, as if he felt his ministry to be a privilege no less than a duty. He was our playfellow and guardian—in all things our strong, unfailing friend. When we lost our other parent, we were drawn nearer to his

heart; his loving smile was none the less ready because it was compassionate. In all respects he was the same that he had always been. He never married again. We had a governess when he adjudged us old enough to learn from books, but he visited the schoolroom several times each day, examined us himself every night, and assumed the direction of our English and Latin studies as we advanced in years and knowledge. French and music-lessons were given us, at a heavy expense, by professors from a "Young Ladies' Seminary," several miles distant. We never entered the institution as pupils. Our father did not approve of girls' boarding-schools. In the matter of physical education he was methodical to strictness. We were trained to walk for hours through the woods and over the hills, botanising and collecting insects for microscopic examination, and rode on horseback ten or twelve miles a day whenever the weather permitted, in company with him, a faithful groom, or one of our cousins from Brierly.

That was the next plantation to ours, and belonged to our mother's only brother, Rich-

ard Vining. He had married Sophie Elmer, our father's eldest sister, and the dearly beloved aunt of his motherless babes. It was she who looked after our clothing and other matters in which men are usually most helpless from their ignorance of feminine mysteries. She had but one daughter of her own, and three manly sons who adored her. Two were older than Alice and I, one younger; and, as was right and fit, they were our constant play-fellows—"the next best thing to very own brothers," Alice used to say. "*Double* cousins, don't you see? and *so* convenient! We could n't live without them."

They were more and more useful as we neared womanhood. The departure of Rick and Will, the elder sons, for college, was bewailed by us as a personal affliction, and vacation was one long, glorious holiday. It was, therefore, joyful news to us when Rick announced his intention of reading medicine for a year with his uncle. He was our favourite of all our boy relatives. In appearance, his resemblance to my father was remarkable. He was a genuine Elmer, too, in temperament—

sanguine and energetic, and, with all his sweetness and geniality of disposition, very firm of purpose when he had once made up his mind to do or to obtain.

“If my boys had lived, perhaps my partiality for him would not be so decided,” said my father, with a half-sigh, one morning, near the close of the twelvemonth of Richard’s pupilage with him. “He ought to go to Philadelphia, or, better still, as I did, to Paris, next session, but I am foolish in my unwillingness to part with him. You will miss him, too, girls. Now that you have been accustomed to expect his escort everywhere as a matter of course, do you think you can content yourselves with sober, diffident Will and little Ernie?”

“Nobody can take Rick’s place,” I began, when Alice astonished us by rising hastily from the table and flying out of the room.

“Eh! what ails the child?” said my father, alarmed. “Go after her, daughter, and see if she is ill.”

Women’s perceptions are keener in certain matters than are those of the wisest men. Up to this instant I had never suspected that

Alice's love for Rick differed in kind from mine. They had a way of pairing off together in our walks, rides, and sports. They liked the same songs and the same books, and never quarrelled. If there were a battle to be fought in defence of what he conceived to be her right, he went into it with a will, as a simple duty he had neither the desire nor ability to evade. "Rick and Alice," was a received phrase in both families. The names went as naturally together as hand and glove. And why not? Were they not almost as near akin as children of the same mother? And what was there strange in her grief at the approaching separation? She was scarcely more than a child — just eighteen — and very much addicted to having her own way. A very pretty way it was, for her heart was in the right place, whatever freaks her judgment might play. She did not like the idea of Rick's going North—was totally averse to the Paris scheme. She thought his absence unnecessary; maintained stoutly that her father was competent to instruct him in all the branches of his profession, and she was not

pleased that we did not sustain her opinion. This was what I said to myself as I went to look for the runaway, and I was vexed at the unreasonable tremour that shook my limbs under me.

Alice was lying upon the bed, her face hidden by the pillows, crying. But when I spoke, she sprang up and put both arms about my neck.

“ Oh, Agnes! I am so happy, and yet so miserable!” she said, kissing me, while she laughed and cried alternately.

“ You little goose!” answered I, trying to jest, my heart dropping down, down, like a stone, until it seemed as if I should never find it again. “ What nonsense you are talking! What has got into you this morning? First, you rush off like a whirlwind from your untasted breakfast, and when I run after you, expecting to find you half-dead, or fainting at the least, you cry to prove that you are happy, and laugh to assure me of your unspeakable misery. This is terrifying to a sedate elder sister.”

And all the time I was dreading to hear the

explanation I pretended to seek, and was a more contemptible craven than ever when she clasped my neck still tighter, and, whispering in my ear, "Can't you guess it? Rick loves me, dear!" laid her burning cheek to mine, and her head upon my shoulder.

I only kissed her in reply. I had no words for her. I foresaw trouble for them, and she had never known a care or a grief that the next hour could not cure. My pretty, tender blossom! the pet and the pride of our home! Could I, could the father who idolised her, bear to see her droop, maybe fade? For the girl-heart was warm and deep, and her loves were not summer fancies, but a part of her being.

"Won't you say you are glad, Agnes, and ask Our Heavenly Father to bless us?" she queried, looking up, amazed and pained at my silence. "He made us for, and gave us to one another, you know."

"God bless you, my precious child!" uttered I, earnestly.

No need of effort to say that. It was a prayer too often upon heart and lip.

“ And Rick ? ” she persisted, in gentle reproach. “ Why, Aggie! I thought — we believed you would be delighted to have him for your *real* brother.”

“ I do love him, dearly and truly. But this is all so sudden, pet, and so strange — unnatural, I was about to say — that I do not quite know how to take it. I have always looked upon Rick and Will as too near of kin to be regarded in the light of lovers, and I imagined—— ”

“ That I did too ? ” she laughed, mischievously. “ Rick and I have n't called one another ‘ cousin ’ this great while, but we never said a word of the difference in our feelings until we were riding home last night from the picnic. He was talking about going away, and—and—never mind what else.”

“ Yes — never mind,” I said, seriously. “ But, Alice, sweet, you *are* cousins for all that. Have you thought what papa will think of this turn of affairs ? He does not approve of such intermarriages, you know.”

There! it was said, and my heart began to beat again, when she smiled fearlessly. Per-

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haps I had been scared out of my wits by a bugbear of my own creation.

“ I know he says so. The sagest and best of men have their prejudices. But he cannot refuse me anything — certainly not that which will make me happy for life. Wait until Rick comes to-day. He can do anything with his uncle. You 'll see! ”

I had not to wait. Alice did not want any more breakfast. I was to excuse her to my father as best I could, but I must go back to the dining-room, and finish the meal with him. She had an imperious but winning style of managing everybody in the establishment, and down I went with my story but half made up. I lost the thread altogether when I met my father's anxious eyes.

“ I was about to come up to you, ” he said.
“ Is Alice ill ? ”

“ No, papa, not at all. We got to talking and—I am sorry I stayed so long. Let me give you a cup of hot coffee; yours is cold. ”

“ It will do very well. What is the matter ? Has anything happened to trouble your sister ? ”

I could not help smiling, perturbed though I was, at the recollection of her "so happy and so miserable."

"Not exactly, sir," for his eyes were reading me through and through. "She is grieved at the prospect of Rick's leaving us. You will know all about it by and by."

There was not a tinge of colour in his cheeks. "You do not mean—it cannot be! Tell me, now, child. I cannot endure suspense."

"She and Rick are very fond of one another, papa," I could do nothing but get on with the story as fast as possible. "He told her last night of his wish to marry her."

"Heaven help me! Have I been a blind idiot not to foresee and prevent this?" He got up with a look of misery that bowed him into an old man, and walked unsteadily across the floor. "Heaven help me!" he repeated, "I would sooner bury her alive!"

"Papa!" I ejaculated, shocked; "Rick is worthy of her, if any man can be. You said this morning you loved him as a son."

"But never as a son-in-law. You are old

enough and sensible enough to understand this. You told her — did you not ?— that I would never give my consent ? ”

“ I said that I feared as much.”

“ Tell her, now, that you *know* it ! ”

With that he left me.

I described the scene and repeated the message faithfully; but Alice’s love for her betrothed, her confidence in his powers of persuasion, and, should these fail, in her own, were proof against discouragement.

“ Wait until Rick comes. All will be right, then,” was her re-assurance, and she laughed in my woebegone countenance. “ We anticipated a bit of a skirmish, for papa’s notions on this subject were known to us, but we shall come out victorious. Dear, blessed papa! Does he imagine for a second that he can withstand us both ? ”

“ He is very resolute when principle is involved,” I reminded her.

“ Yes, dear, but this is a professional crotchet unworthy of him. It will go down before the united forces of love and reason.”

Our sewing-room adjoined my father’s office,

and I was in my accustomed place at my work-table that forenoon, when my father came in, equipped for his day's ride, and handed me his glove to mend. He was silent and so grave that I did not speak as I performed the little task, he standing behind my chair. As I was setting the last stitch, I saw through the window Richard Vining dismount at our gate. My father drew back—a wince of pain that showed he had observed him also. Rick came up the walk with his free, easy stride, swinging his riding-whip, and Alice met him upon the front steps, putting her hand in his as a sister might. Have I told you what a fine-looking man he had grown to be? He bared his head at his cousin's approach, and the fresh wind played with his chestnut hair which had the very shade and curl of hers. His full hazel eyes, ever ready to dance into a smile, his pure Greek profile, and the mouth bent into firm but never unkindly lines had their softened reflection in her lineaments.

He listened attentively to her few hurried sentences, said something in rejoinder that brought a more vivid blush to her face and

deeper light to her eyes; glanced at my window with a smiling nod I mistook for a salutation to myself, and which I returned. My father moved away into his office as I bowed.

“ He is coming to see you,” I said, rising to withdraw.

“ Stay where you are!” he ordered, peremptorily, but, as I remembered afterwards, in an absent-minded way.

I sat down again just as a knock upon the door of the outer room was answered by my father’s “ Come in.”

There was neither bravado nor shyness in Rick’s demeanour, and his smile was hardly less sunny than usual.

“ Good morning, Uncle!” he said, walking up to him with outstretched hand. “ Are you very angry with me ?”

My father stood in the middle of the floor and had not stirred to meet him. His gaze was stern, his brows knit. I feared he would refuse the proffered hand or break into angry denunciation. But at the clear tones, the sight of the frank innocence in the boy’s face and bearing, his features relaxed.

“ Not angry, Rick, but grieved — more distressed than you can conceive, or I describe. Sit down!” He drew him to his side upon the lounge and put his arm affectionately over his shoulder. “ This thing must not be, my boy. I blame myself for not foreseeing the possibility of such a calamity as your mutual attachment, and I do censure you—if you will let me say it—I do blame you for not bearing steadily in mind what would be the folly and the wrong of a marriage with either of your cousins.”

A red tint crept up to Rick’s temples; but he had marvellous self-control for one so youthful. Alice had prepared him to expect opposition and rebuke, and he had brought to the ordeal the determination not to damage his suit by an intemperate word or act.

“ My feelings must alter materially before I can regard my love for your daughter as foolish or wrong,” he said, with gentle dignity. “ If you imply that I am not worthy of her affection, I grant it.”

“ We will not fence at arm’s length, Rick. My only objection — mark it, for this shows

that I consider the object insuperable—my sole objection to your marriage with my child is the closeness of your blood-relationship. You are but one remove from brother and sister—nearer than first cousins, and, were you that, I should still have serious scruples as to the expediency of your union. We have studied physiology and the laws governing the well-being of the human race together long enough to understand one another on this head.”

“ I was not wholly unprepared to hear this, sir, for, as you say, I was acquainted with your theory respecting intermarriage. But let me be plain, too. Does it seem just or rational to destroy the happiness of two whom you love, and who love each other, for a mere professional scruple, one which is not shared by the majority of the best medical men in the land ? I have looked into this subject of consanguineous marriages within the past year. I am forced to the conclusion,” smiling again, “ that it is a hereditary habit. I find, upon inspection of the ‘ Family Record ’ in my father’s possession, that the first Vinings who emigrated to America were two brothers, John

and Richard, who built Brierly and Longridge. John's eldest son married Richard's second daughter. In the next generation there was a marriage of second cousins; in the third, still in the direct line of my ancestry, one between Richard's great-grandson and John's great-granddaughter; and in the fifth my father's parents were also first cousins. It is a family trait, you see, sir,—I will not say a failing. And, having shown your appreciation of the excellence of the stock by espousing a daughter of our house, you will allow me to say that we have cause to be proud of our name and our forefathers. They were upright and thoroughbred gentlemen, honoured in Church and State, who kept their record clean, and transmitted to us, as a priceless inheritance, the memory of their virtues and worthy deeds. This is not gasconade, uncle, but simple truth, so well known I am ashamed to repeat it. Where do you discern any proof in our family history of the deleterious effects of intermarriages, even when continued, as these have been, for a long succession of generations ? ”

“ In the insane asylum ! ” My father’s voice was low and discordant. His arm had fallen from the young man’s shoulder, his eyes were fastened upon the ground, his visage was gloomy. “ You have looked into this matter during the past year, you say. It has been my study for twenty years. You have perused the bald statistics of such a ‘ Family Register ’ as men are willing their children and neighbours should read. I have a record of such facts as people—fathers, husbands, and sons—keep out of writing, out of sight,—and, when they can,—out of mind. Insane people are not remarkable for longevity. There are certain affections of the brain that terminate in death as surely as in mental decadence. Do you know how many of your kindred are at present in the State lunatic asylums ? ”

“ I have heard of but three, and their lunacy was ascribed to accidental causes. ” Rick, startled for a moment by his uncle’s abrupt enunciation, had regained his air of hopeful composure.

“ Accidental causes which developed, not implanted, germs of madness. Fifteen unhappy

beings whose veins are full of the *pure*—Heaven save the mark!—Vining blood are enrolled among the patients under treatment for insanity in the two principal asylums of Virginia. Six I have accompanied to these retreats since my connection with the family. Shall I tell you what the physician-in-chief in the Staunton Asylum said to me when I took your cousin, Thornton Vining, to him two years ago? ‘Another from your county,’ he remarked, reading the certificate of lunacy I presented. ‘Humph! Give my respects to the citizens of that aristocratic section, and tell them, instead of crowding our institutions with their crazy people, to build a wall around the county itself.’ Coarse trifling, you may think, with a subject so sad and sacred, but the truth it enforces cannot be misinterpreted. ‘Accidental circumstances’ will hardly explain the decimation of a family by the various forms of lunacy. Nor is this the only baneful fruit of the system of intermarriage by which your noble house has kept up its dignity. There are upon my register the names of six half-witted children—three of them in one family;

three deaf and dumb, and two who were utterly idiotic from their birth."

"Impossible!" burst forth Rick, impetuously. "You have been grossly imposed upon by your informants. I have never heard a breath of these horrible tales, yet they should have reached me as readily as you. Do not believe them, sir! Ask some intelligent, truthful person, whose opportunities of inquiry and knowledge have equalled yours. Ask my father if these are not gross slanders. Why, your record would make us to be a race of mental monstrosities."

"I have not said so. But it would be hard to find another person whose facilities for gaining information upon a theme so delicate surpass mine. I have been the confidential physician of the Vining connection for twenty-five years. The race is prolific. Large families of children have been born to the heads of the various branches. It is a numerous tribe now; but — and look at this, my boy! — two-thirds of them have died in infancy and childhood! The mother of the three half-witted boys buried them all before they reached the

age of fifteen, and two scrofulous daughters at eighteen. There were four other children who still live, and fill respectable positions in society. One of them is a member of Congress, another an eminent clergyman. All of them rank decidedly above the medium grade of intellectual ability. Death has been very merciful to the Vinings in covering up some of the traces of the violence they have ignorantly or presumptuously done to Nature. But there are enough left to sicken one's soul. A family trait! Call it unreasoning infatuation unworthy of the age in which we live, or, indeed, of any civilised era! Yet the men who practise it are renowned for their blooded horses, their fine stock of cows and pigs. The least intelligent of them can discourse by the hour upon the manifest evil of 'breeding in-and-in!' I shock you, I see, Richard, but this is not the hour for prudish reserve. It is time the spread of this plague was stopped. I, for one, will war against it while I can speak or write. This is my decision, and it is unalterable."

He arose, and Rick with him.

How alike they were as they faced one

another, with the steady resolution that be-tokened the same spirit in both! The idea crossed my mind then and there, as a comfort-ing gleam, that the Elmer blood was rich in its freshness. Might it not be an element of strength in the effete Vining organism? Had my father thought of this? Would not the suggestion temper his opposition?

Richard took different ground. "I cannot accept it, Uncle! I respect your sincerity and the learning that has combined with patient research to form your views. But I do not adopt them. On the contrary, I should be disposed, were you any other man, to regard the acceptance and defence of them as an idiosyncrasy, the hobby of one whose attention had been given too long and closely to one branch of his professional studies. You told me, only yesterday, that every third person in the community is a monomaniac. I do you the justice to believe that this decision has cost you real and great pain. It grieves me to re- flect that our union may be a sorrow to you, instead of the abiding joy we would make it, if we could. But your disappointment will be

as nothing compared with ours, should you adhere to your purpose of dividing our lives. There is more at stake on our part than the establishment of the truth or falsity of physiological theory. You know Alice — that she does not give her love lightly; that in disallowing it you may crush her heart, blight her existence with it. She has ever been a dutiful and fond child. Would she cross your wishes now save for a matter of vital interest to her and to him whom she has chosen as her life long mate? As for me, I have loved her, her alone, and with a full heart, fervently, since I was a boy who could just lift her over the puddles and climb trees to throw down fruit and nuts into her apron.

“Loved her, Uncle Ernest,”—with a rapid change from the argument he tried to keep unimpassioned to pleading that brought the tears in thick, hot clouds to my eyes,—“as you loved sweet Agnes Vining when she was called ‘the rose of the country-side.’ She—my mother has told me with prideful affection—would not listen to the objections of her ultra-patrician relatives who demanded investigation

into your claims to aristocracy, declaring that any woman would be ennobled by your preference, and that if she did not marry you she would go down to her grave unwed. Will you deny the child the happiness the mother knew as the wife of him, her heart — not expediency — elected as her husband ? Can you show her displeasure because she is likewise faithful in love—staunch in purpose ? ”

“ Displeasure ! My poor stricken girl ! Richard, you do not understand what you are doing. Would I not cut off my right hand to insure her happiness ? Could I refuse her what she asks were I not morally certain that consent would work her misery ? ”

“ I question even the probability of that, sir ! I have said that I respected your scruples, but I do not recognise their relevancy to our case. There is no suspicion of insanity in our immediate family connection. If there were——”

My father had turned away from him, but I had a glimpse of his features, convulsed and dark.

“ If there were,” resumed Rick, who had

paused in the belief that the other was about to speak, "there would be force in your objection. I should, perhaps, bow to your decree."

"You acknowledge this, do you?"

The voice was constrained, and, with the singular attitude of the speaker, who stood still with his back to his nephew, his arms folded and head depressed, evidently affected Richard unpleasantly, if not excited his uneasiness. He hesitated before replying.

"I cannot deny it. However we may differ respecting the lawfulness and prudence of marriage between blood-relatives, there can be no doubt in the mind of the candid student of our profession that insanity in certain forms, and under certain conditions of mind and body, is hereditary. Like consumption and scrofula, it is a transmissible taint."

"Such as you would avert from your children by every possible precaution?" questioned my father, with a keen, sudden glance.

Rick coloured high. "Precaution in such a case would be but common humanity," he confessed.

“ You are right,” the uncle went on, rapidly. “Common humanity, then,—putting paternal regard out of the question,—long ago led me to compute my grandchildren’s chances of life and reason. To insure their well-being as far as mortal can, I made up my mind that my children’s marriage with any one of their own blood would be an evil, if not a crime. Such it is my duty, according to your own showing, to hinder by every means in my power.”

And here my argument came to Richard’s lips.

“ But I am not a full-blooded Vining. I do not recollect that I was ever glad of it before. I am young and strong, and never had a sick day in my life. So much for the deteriorating effects of repeated intermarriages upon my father’s offspring. As to mental calibre,”—laughingly,—“ since modesty will not allow me to speak, I must refer you to my college reports and the more valuable testimony of my present preceptor. My spirits are uniformly good. They match my digestion, in fact. Alice—I say it without flattery to either—is your other self, sound in mind and body.

She has inherited the constitution of the Elmers, and their energy." Then, archly—"Their will, also, it would seem."

I could just hear the response. "She is, nevertheless, her mother's child."

"You, of all men, would be the last to object to that, sir," retorted Rick, lightly, yet with the unvarying respect that had marked his manner throughout the trying interview.

"I, of all men living, know what it signifies."

With a mighty effort, my father mastered his voice and resumed something like his accustomed manner—only so solemn and mournful I trembled before he laid both hands upon his nephew's shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

"My boy, I will confide to you the one fearful sorrow of my life—a grief so terrible I have not been brave enough to name it to another mortal in sixteen years. Alice's mother never knew a really sane moment from the hour her youngest child was born. She had had a fright before the baby came. My horse broke his bridle one night when I was visiting a

patient three miles from home, and galloped to his stable riderless. She thought he had thrown me. The nervous disorder—that was what I, with everybody else, chose to call it—induced by her agitation did not wax to its height until her confinement. When her mind went utterly astray, we gave out—her sister and I—that she was suffering from a low fever, and so secluded her from observation. It was four months before she could receive her friends. She was apparently rational, but so wan and dejected as to excite universal pity.

“The first open manifestation of the disease was startling and, from the attendant circumstances, so revolting, that I could not refer to it even at this distance of time if less depended upon frankness.

“I was taking a short cut through the woods near the river one day, when I spied a free negro—a notoriously bad fellow—in the act of pushing one of my boats out into the water. I reined up and watched him. It would be easy to hail him should he try to make off with my property. The next minute my wife—who had not walked a half-mile in six

months—appeared, half running down the bank. The fellow was helping her into the boat when I came upon them. She screamed and fainted. The man had a purse she had given him. She had hired him to row her down the river to Richmond—fifty miles! She had contrived to see him when he brought fish to the house—Heaven knows when or how. But she had bribed him. She “must get away, somewhere!” she pleaded, when she came out of her faint. ‘Would n’t I let her go?’

“Nobody wondered when I left the six-months old infant with her Aunt Elsie and took my Agnes abroad. She was a prey to a grave type of hysteria, said Rumour, and what so beneficial in that malady as foreign travel in cheerful company? I countenanced the report, for it diverted people’s minds from the truth; explained her strict seclusion and my close attendance upon her. Elsie Vining, who lived with us after her parents’ death and our removal to Longridge, was my only confidante, and she alone ever relieved my watch. For watch Agnes we did, continually, when the paroxysms were upon her. I had been



“ THE FELLOW WAS PUSHING ONE OF MY BOATS INTO THE WATER.”

visited for five years by occasional presentiments of the coming horror—fits of nightmare that were more frequent and prolonged as I gained in knowledge of the symptoms and cause of mania. I had practice enough of this kind among my wife's kindred. When my boys—true Vinings, both of them—died, I thanked God. Day by day—after awhile, hour by hour, I could see that the shadow was creeping on apace. The accident I have alluded to accelerated its progress, but it must have overtaken her all the same. It was but a question of time."

He traversed the room several times, poured out a glass of water, and drank it before he resumed the story.

"You have said truly that I loved her, and referred to her attachment for me. There was never a moment after our marriage when I would not have opened my veins, and let out every drop of my blood, if by so doing I could have averted sorrow and calamity from her. Man never had a truer and more devoted wife than she was in her lucid moments. Yet the time came when, as I dropped the

opiate which was to purchase sleep for the wasted frame and temporary stupor for the tortured brain, I had to fight with the temptation to make the draught so powerful that she would never awake again in this world. Two years—two centuries!—of untold agony to her and to us were passed in this way. I said that I took her abroad, but it was to a noted foreign lunatic asylum, where I might have advice and assistance in my work from those who would not gossip about her 'misfortune' in the neighbourhood over which she had queened it as belle and beauty. I screened her from prying eyes and tattling tongues to the last. She was dying of consumption when I brought her back, and her mind was calmer, although at its best feeble almost to imbecility. Your parents could not but notice this, still we hid the worst from them. Her mother's last days had been marked by similar symptoms. They were not uncommon, said her relatives, frankly, without guessing the significance of the admission. 'Softening of the brain,' they denominated the state into which she at length sank. Elsie Vining sick-

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ened and died suddenly a month before her sister's decease. But the latter had grown so weak I could manage her alone. The devil, that at certain periods had possession of the beautiful body, could no longer nerve her arm to attempt my life. You know *all* now!"

He sank upon the lounge, and hid his face in his hands. In the midst of my amazement and anguish, I did not lose sight of Rick's deathly face—felt, in some imperfect sort, that he needed pity even from me, to whom the story I had heard revealed and portended so much. Was I not the maniac's daughter, the bearer of her name, and, as I had often been told,—but, as I now recollected, never by my father,—the child who most resembled her in person? Alice was her father's image. If this tale meant danger to her, it was something frightfully akin to doom for me.

The time for the full comprehension of my share in the heritage of woe came to me afterward. I do not trust myself to write or think of that hour of sacrifice. I have never regretted my action. I have often returned thanks to Him from whom I received the

strength to stand fast in my determination not to ruin another's life. But this has nothing to do with my story.

How still the office was! I could hear the ticking of the clock and the lazy hum of a great bee singing in the heart of an October rose outside the window. After a minute—it seemed much longer—there was a heavy breath drawn fitfully, as if broken by stabs of pain, and Rick moved a step nearer the bowed form that had not sighed nor stirred.

“ Uncle, what you did for the mother I am ready to do for the daughter, should need arise, which God forbid! But I cannot give her up.”

“ I will not take your answer now. I did not hope to convince you at once. Think of what I have said until to-morrow. It may be that, for her sake, your resolution will change. Do not see her again to-day. She must never hear what I have told you. It would drive her mad.”

My father said this wearily, and Rick obeyed his look toward the door as a signal of dismissal. But upon the threshold he halted, glanced wistfully back, and returned.

“ Believe that my warmest sympathy is yours, Uncle. Forgive me for having caused you this unhappiness, and let me serve you in some way. Ask anything of me short of resigning Alice, and I will do it. For Alice herself can hardly love you better than I do, doubt it as you may.”

“ I do not doubt it, my son. And it is I who have been most in fault. In all my dealings with her and with you—poor children! I shall never forget this!”

He wrung the youth's hand, and they parted without more words.

Left to himself, my father leaned back in his seat with a groan of wretchedness that brought me to his side.

“ Agnes! Agnes! forgive me!”

But when, believing his appeal was to me, I hastened to him, clung weepingly to his knees, and besought him to be comforted, he recoiled with horror in his face and tone. Then I saw that he had designed to keep back the truth from me too—that he had forgotten until I spoke that I was within hearing.

PART II

Talk ran high in the Vining family when it was known upon what grounds Doctor Elmer refused his consent to his daughter's union with his sister's son. He had struck a blow at prejudices and usages venerable with age, and made respectable by their practice. Democracy was rampant, indeed, if they were to be judged by the rules of health and life governing common mortals. The gist of their arguments reminded me of a plea for suicide I had read somewhere: "What Cato did, and Addison approved, cannot be wrong."

What Vinings had done, and never thought of repenting and censuring, should be above the reach of other men's criticism. Indiscriminate marriages had long been adjudged by them to be confusion, destructive to the best interests of the best society, and, for their custom of straining their blue blood yet thinner and finer through a succession of sieves of like tissues and make, they have the precedent of royalty itself.

The lovers were everywhere pitied, and the inexorable parent was blamed by his warmest

friends. Even my aunt took him roundly to task for his eccentric opinion and barbarous persecution of two people who were made for each other, while her husband quarrelled outright with the bold alien who dared cast discredit upon the customs and principles of his honourable house. I was surprised that my father stood his ground. Not that the cavils of neighbours and the reproaches of relatives failed to stir his resolute soul, but that he bore up against Alice's sorrowful eyes and waning bloom.

They had one talk—a long one—the particulars of which I never learned. But my father renewed his caution to me, when it was over, not to betray to her the secret of her mother's misfortune. She went about the house very quietly after that; not mopingly,—she had too much spirit to play the languishing maiden,—but with a sober mien and a slower step than her old light bound from stair to stair and fleet tread through the rooms. Her ripening had come suddenly.

Rick still visited the house, although he seldom saw her alone. They were too honourable

for clandestine interviews, and it was my father's command that their betrothal should be ignored by the household and our visitors. He had a difficult part to perform, but he did not shirk it. His demeanour to Rick was, if possible, more affectionate than ever. At all seasons and in all companies he treated him as his best-beloved nephew and as a pupil of whom he was very proud, yet, with respect to his pretensions to his daughter's hand, he was inflexibly dumb. Rick made a last attempt to move him to a reconsideration of his sentence when the time came for him to go to Paris, for it was thought good in the family council that he should study in that city. I could not but sympathise with the poor fellow when he declared the prohibition of a cousinly correspondence unkind and unworthy of his uncle.

“The utmost concession I could win was the remark that, should our feelings and intentions remain unchanged at the end of two years and a half, we could do as we pleased, since his legal authority over Alice would be at an end. This is a sorry preparation for exile and hard work.”

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This was told me in Alice's presence, and when she came toward him with swimming eyes and a would-be hopeful smile that was yet more eloquent of heartbreak than any other expression I had ever seen upon her face, and he opened his arms involuntarily, I ran away and shut the door behind me. I was a coward, and to my father a traitor, but I could not help it. They should have the memory of this sadly dear parting to live upon during their separation. I think Alice always loved me better thereafter, but we never referred to my breach of faith.

Rick wrote to me every few weeks, and I invariably handed his letters to my father, then to Alice.

Her name occurred now and then. "My love to uncle and to Alice." "Tell Alice I wish she were here to see the Louvre." "I visited the Place de la Concorde last night by moonlight, and longed for you and Alice to enjoy the scene with me."

Nothing more pointed and tender ever crept into the brotherly epistles, and in the two years of his transatlantic life, he did not see

a scrap of her handwriting besides the mementos he took with him.

“ They have behaved well, father,” I said, on the day of his return to Brierly.

“ You take it for granted, then, that their purpose is unaltered ? ” he said, quickly, understanding my meaning, although we had not named the subject to one another in eighteen months.

“ I do,” I answered.

“ Has your sister told you this ? ”

“ Never. As you desired, we have refrained from talking about Rick or their prospects.”

He breathed more freely. Did not I say awhile ago that women’s instincts are to be trusted rather than men’s ? Of course I was right in my prognostications. Rick preserved a profound silence with regard to his love and his intentions until Alice’s twenty-first birthday. Then he walked into his uncle’s study, and informed him respectfully that he meant to be married in a month. My father bore the blow like the great-hearted man he was.

“ You take this step under my protest,” he said, firmly. “ But, since resistance is useless,

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I shall make none. You must live here, and I now offer you a partnership in my practice. It is a fair opening for a young man."

Rick broke down at that. He sobbed like a child in telling me the story, and I can well believe that he spoke the simple truth in describing how he knelt, at the feet of his more than father, and besought his forgiveness before he asked for his blessing.

Well! they were married, and the Vining clan turned out *en masse* to the wedding. Congratulations rained upon the happy pair in a jubilant shower, and the whole affair was discussed as a romance with the legitimate ending, "and they were happy always afterward." Not a misgiving was hinted, not even when the extraordinary resemblance of bride and groom was the theme of remark. On the contrary, the circumstance that they might be mistaken for twins made the affair all the more interesting. According to the Vining code, marriage within all lawful degrees of consanguinity was accounted a safe investment of affection and reputation. In these degenerate days, the escutcheons of many so-called good families

were wofully in need of scouring, while theirs remained untarnished.

For my part, I was heartily glad Alice had married the man of her choice, pleased to have Rick for a brother, and I know that my father was measurably comforted for the miscarriage of his plan for sundering them by the sight of their domestic felicity. Their tempers were too generous for resentment, and the most vindictive of beings could not have studied revenge, subjected, as they were, to his ceaseless benefactions — the loving kindness that surrounded his children like an atmosphere at all times and places.

The first cloud in their sky lowered suddenly and blackly when they had been married ten years. Their third child, a healthy, handsome boy of two years old, sickened at the close of a summer's day, and died in forty-eight hours, almost before we could feel alarmed at symptoms which, to my inexperienced eye, menaced nothing more serious than a brief and not painful illness, such as is common to children of his age in warm weather.

“ It is unaccountable to me that he, with his

splendid constitution, should have made so little resistance to the disease," I remarked, when left alone with my father beside the beautiful clay. " He succumbed with scarcely a struggle."

" Splendid constitution!" retorted he, bitterly. " He had *none!* How could he have ? His noble physique was nothing better than a brittle shell. Nature is implacable."

I asked no explanation. I understood him but too well, and—may I be forgiven!—I thought him cruelly harsh in judgment, rough in speech. Yet he mourned the boy as if he had been his own, and, when the next babe born to the bereaved parents, after lingering through five months of sickly infancy, let go its feeble grasp upon a life that had been all anguish, and his successor was seized with violent and fatal convulsions after a slight fall that would not have drawn a cry from a robust infant, the grandfather was the wisest and tenderest earthly comforter the mourners had.

Four years elapsed between the death of the fifth and the birth of the sixth child, a hearty girl, whose rapid growth in strength and size

was a continual solace to the anxious mother. Not that she imagined, in her day of darkest despondency, that there could be any connection between the fact that she and her husband were not only blood relations, but the offspring of a long, unbroken line of intermarriages between the nearest of kin whom the law permits to wed with one another, and the succession of afflictions that had changed the summer of her existence to a dreary autumn. But the frequency of sorrow's visits had made her timid. Baby Sophie brought back the faded light to the mother's eyes, the glad ring to her voice. For three years the patter of her feet, her laugh and her prattle, her winsome and her saucy pranks filled the house with music, and supplied an endless theme of talk and encomiums to her elders.

She had never been prettier or more engaging than when she climbed upon "papa's" knee one winter afternoon as we all sat about the parlour fire, and, after exhausting her repertory of tricks and caresses, and exciting many a laugh by her merry and intelligent repartees, fell asleep upon his shoulder. He

let her rest there until supper was announced, then moved to lay her upon the lounge. I saw him start and bend over her as her cheek touched his hand, and, unperceived by Alice, he motioned me to get her out of the room. I easily succeeded by naming some household errand, accompanying her myself, and leaving my father with Rick. The result of their consultation was not long kept secret. Our bonnie birdling was in a high fever, which, from the hour of its development, laid a hold upon the brain never relaxed until the tortured, tossing head, and the writhing limbs were frozen in death.

Four short graves in the family burying-ground under the willows, and in our hearts a great stillness, an aching not to be told! Yet I have wished since that the mother had died then, while the woe was fresh upon her, and gone to keep her darlings company in that happy, dreamless sleep. I think she could not have lived through the year succeeding baby Sophie's departure but for the love that bound her heart to those of her living children. Any parent might have been proud of them. Agnes

—we believed in family names, you see, after the manner of other noble houses, and Alice would bestow her mother's and sister's upon her first-born—was nineteen when her little sister was taken from our arms.

“A Vining, every inch of her,” said the scores of elderly relatives, who considered themselves set for the defence and glorification of the ancient name. I could not see her with impartial eyes, but those who did declared that in beauty she had no peer in the county, and it was renowned for the number of fair women within its borders. She had the clear-cut features and large, liquid eyes, the blonde complexion, and bright chestnut hair which had made her grandmother the belle of her day, but in vivacity, as in depth of mind, she far excelled her prototype. These were her own mother's gift, and an unspeakable comfort to my father's boding heart, when it thrilled with unspoken fears awakened by her marvellous resemblance to her he had mourned for almost forty years. Ernest, Alice's only living son, was strongly stamped with the Elmer traits, and, although but seventeen, gave

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promise of eminent scholarship and a career worthy of his lineage. We had abundant reason for rejoicing in these thrifty young branches of an ancestral tree, and our love had thus much of selfishness in it that, when Beverly Randolph, one of the down-country family of that name, and the heir of a fine estate, followed our girl home from her first season at the White Sulphur, we were for a time ill-pleased. All the influence of his personal attractions, which were not few, and the well-substantiated reports of his goodness of heart and unblemished character, were needed to reconcile the quartette of guardians to the prospect of losing our treasure.

I marvel now, in looking back, that my father held his peace, when, at Beverly's third visit to Longridge, the engagement was announced, and in solemn conclave—as was the Vining custom—we seniors made the young man welcome to the inner circle of our home sanctuary.

Such a radiantly happy couple as they were then, and upon their bridal eve, one seldom sees twice in a lifetime. I will say, for the

credit of the connexion, that love-matches were the rule among the Vinings, and marriages of convenience regarded with marked disfavour. It may have been the spectacle of this perfect bliss, moving my father's heart to boundless pity, that wrought with his love to seal his lips and induced him to withhold the warning he had not scrupled to sound when Richard had wooed his daughter. Perhaps he argued that, since the Randolph line had, nowhere in the past, intersected ours, there was less to be dreaded in the possible results of this union. Or, it may well have been that he hoped the curse had worn itself out, or that, having slumbered through one generation, others might pass away without its reappearance. It is certain that neither he nor Richard ever intimated to the exultant bridegroom what might be his wife's inheritance, or their children's.

They were married in June, and, in place of their coming to us at Christmas, we accepted their pressing invitation to pass the holidays at Riverdell—the old Randolph homestead, a hundred miles distant from our plantation. It

was no trifle to any of us—sober, quiet-loving, elderly people that we had come to be—this winter journey. But we were more than repaid for fatigue and inconvenience by the sight of our darling's delight at the meeting, and the pleasure of seeing her in her own house—the graceful mistress, the worshipped wife, and yet our own affectionate, unspoiled child.

I love to remember how she flew down the broad flight of stone steps when our carriage stopped at the foot, unmindful of the fast-falling snow-flakes that powdered her sunny hair and silk dress; how she hung about her grandfather's neck, and called me "Dear, dear old auntie!" in a laughing sob, and how, while Beverly, with the punctilious courtesy that gave a charming flavour of old-time gallantry to his manner, escorted his mother-in-law—his proud young head uncovered, as in the presence of royalty—up the steps, across the broad portico, and so on, up the staircase to the door of the chamber prepared for her, Agnes and Ernest, their arms intertwined, brought up the rear of the little procession,

chattering gleefully as when they were respectively eight and six years old.

We had a quiet, happy evening. Beverly was a thought graver than are most Southern youths, but he appeared to relish the more, on this account, his wife's unflinching flow of spirits, her lively rattle, and frolicsome ways. I caught him several times that night watching her with a delighted fondness that was to me additional surety of the continuance of her domestic blessedness. He lost nothing, not the lightest word, that fell from her lips, and basked in her smile with a supreme content that would have been amusing had it not been beautiful. She sat upon a cushion at her father's feet, her arms crossed upon his knee, her eyes, wide with pleasure and soft with love, passing from one beloved face to another; her every feature and gesture so expressive as to prepare us for the fervent exclamation that broke from heart and lips when someone made a motion to retire.

"Oh, dear! I wonder if it is a sin for any one to be as happy in this world as I am! Why, papa,"—as his hand was laid among her curls, and he smiled down into the face flushed

into tearfulness with the earnestness of her emotion,—“ I think God never blessed another mortal as He has me. I have not an ungratified wish, not the shadow of a care, and such plenitude of mercies that I am frightened, sometimes, in numbering them over. God make me thankful enough for His marvellous kindness! ”

With that the head dropped upon Richard's breast, and she lay in his arms, crying heartily, like an overexcited child. We all crowded about her—Beverly nearest, as was his right—and, with tender chidings and playful fondling, checked her hysterical weeping.

“ *Is* it hysterical, really ? ” she said, in such comic distress as made us laugh, when she was somewhat composed. “ I would rather you would tell me that I have the smallpox, papa. I shall never respect myself again ! ”

She was as bright as an April noon, as, leaning on her husband's arm, who seemed afraid to let her quit his side for an instant, she kissed us all “ good-night,” and went away to her chamber, still supported by him. Upon the first landing she stopped to throw us a kiss,

as we stood below in the hall, and repeating, with a droll grimace of vexation and shame, "Hysterical! think of it!" vanished from our sight.

We heard Beverly laugh after they reached their room door. His admiration and loverly assiduity of attention satisfied even us who thought nothing too good for her.

She was all right again next morning, so far as we could tell. It was Christmas day. The storm had ceased, and the sunshine lay brightly upon the snow that covered field and road, and bedecked the trees in holiday garments. There was a general distribution of presents to high and low. The servants received theirs in the dining-room from their mistress's hand, and she accompanied each with some pleasant word, some assurance of kindly feeling or commendation, worth more than the presents, well-chosen and valuable as they were. We had a social breakfast—just ourselves—at which Agnes amused us by sporting her husband's gift, a diamond brooch and earrings — her mother's, a lace shawl — and Ernest's, a pair of bracelets, in whimsical de-

fiance of fashion's laws controlling morning costume. She looked very bewitching, however, in her blue cashmere wrapper, her pretty trinkets hung about her. She was not to exert herself that day, Beverly ordered, as the gentlemen went off for a forenoon's partridge-shooting, and her mother and myself were not backward in impressing the injunction upon her.

There was to be a large party at Riverdell that night, but with her efficient corps of servants there was really nothing more for her to do than there was for us. The housekeeper had been an *attachée* of the Randolph family for fifteen years, and was thoroughly competent for her work. We would have had Agnes lie upon the sofa and chat with us until she got tired, then doze until it was time to dress for dinner; but there was no such thing as managing her, we soon discovered. She behaved, as the saying is, like a witch, and a very erratic witch. Up-stairs and down she roved and ran: to the kitchen to direct the cooks and consult with the housekeeper, who humoured and petted her, as did everybody else; to the green-house,

where she drove the gardener out of his senses by breaking off armfuls of fragrant and blossoming boughs—lemon, verbena, geranium, and orange—to decorate the parlours.

“ Nothing is too good or precious to be used in your honour,” she pleaded, when we expostulated with her upon this wasteful and needless spoliation. “ Then, it was such fun to see poor Johnson’s face! I thought he would have dropped dead when I refused his knife and *bit* off the branches. I believe he would have preferred to have me gnaw at his fingers instead.”

“ It was very foolish and unkind, dear child,” replied Alice, seriously.

Whereupon the offender made a saucy mouth, and flew off “ to apologise to the king of the conservatory,” she called over her shoulder as she went. Three minutes later we saw her walking the piazza, carolling a popular song, bareheaded, and without a shawl. Alice called her in and began to scold in earnest, but was assured that “ the day was as mild as May, and the house like a furnace for heat.”

“ I am afraid we have not controlled this

madcap as we should have done," said her mother to Beverly, upon his return. "But she is sadly spoiled, I find—far less tractable than she used to be."

"If I am, I know who is responsible for my degeneracy in morals and manners. Fie! Bev! I am ashamed of you!" she cried, running up the stairs before him, although he begged her not to go so fast.

"What an impish thing she is to-day!" said Alice, laughing. "She is fairly intoxicated with happiness, the darling girl! And she grows more beautiful every day, does n't she, Papa?" as they sought their dressing-room.

It adjoined mine, and the murmur of their cheerful talk came pleasantly to me while I made my toilet. I knew the theme was the same that occupied my thoughts, and that their hearts were, like mine, full of thankfulness for the unbroken flood of sunlight poured over one rich, beautiful life.

Agnes was queenly in apparel and figure that night, very lovely and gracious in demeanour while she stood to welcome her

guests to her husband's homestead. The wild merriment of the morning was chastened into matronly vivacity; the mischievous, elfish expression had given place to a smile that was winning without being gleeful. We—her admirers, *par éminence*—encountered one another by adroit accident, in corners and other retired places, and exchanged whispered praises of her mien and conduct, agreeing—it is superfluous to say in what verdict. It was the hour of our triumph, because it was hers. When the arrivals were over, she moved through the crowd, tactful and vigilant, dropping a lively sentence here, proffering an introduction there, and, it was easy to see, converting new acquaintances into friends rapidly and completely, as she had done in her childhood's home.

Then, a Christmas reel was formed, and she was led out by a distinguished Congressman, with "a front like Jove's," the particular star of the occasion. She enjoyed the compliment of his homage,—delicately yet unequivocally expressed,—enjoyed it as she did most other agreeable things, heartily and with the *naïveté* of a girl of fourteen. She did not dance in the

next set, nor yet in the third, lest she might seem negligent of her guests' pleasure in seeking her own; but she took the floor for the fourth, having, as her partner, a gallant ex-governor, who had not hesitated to pronounce her the finest woman he had ever seen between tide-water and the Alleghanies. People looked hard at them as they stood up together—he courtly and handsome, despite his whitening locks, and she—I will use the term that came into my mind as the music called them to their place—*fearfully* beautiful. Her eyes were glittering globes, so brilliant were they; her complexion was heightened as by a burning fever; her lips parted in eager curves they did not lose even in her smile.

“ I never beheld the evidence of such intense vitality in another creature,” said a gentleman—a doctor, by the way—to me. “ Existence is unmixed happiness to her. It is a luxury to her to be and to breathe.”

Richard was standing by me, and although he smiled at the praises of his daughter, he moved uneasily as the other physician walked off.

“ From what Alice tells me, I doubt the prudence of all this excitement,” he said, aside.

I was past the age of prudery—a grey-haired auntie, to whom doctors and mothers spoke freely.

“ She certainly ought not to dance again, the giddy puss!” added the father.

The set over, she promenaded directly by us, hanging on the arm of the venerable beau, talking with much animation of countenance and action. Her tone struck me disagreeably. It was shriller than usual, and her articulation so hurried as to be, at times, unintelligible. Rick noticed it, too, for he arrested her with an apology to her cavalier which was nearly as peremptory as polite.

“ My child,” he said, in a low voice, but audible to me,—“ this is not wise. You will injure yourself, and you distress us. You must not dance another set.”

She looked up at him in bewilderment.

“ For your husband’s sake I say this,” he subjoined. “ You are risking his peace of mind and your own health. Sit down in some quiet corner and rest.”

“ Rest ! ” with a singular laugh that stopped the blood in my veins and heart. “ I will ! By-and-by, by-and-by. ”

She sang the words to a wild, fantastic air, and stooped, as I imagined, to kiss her father’s hand ; then swept on, throwing a salute to us from her gloved fingers.

I was shocked to see how pale Richard was, and half exclaimed at it, but he hushed me instantly.

“ Not a word here ! But when you can leave this, come to my room ; I must speak to you. ”

I rejoined him in less than five minutes. He sat in an arm-chair, faint and ghastly, and was only able to hold up to my view his right hand, *bitten to the bone !*

I bathed and dressed it as well as I could, without inquiry or comment, brought harts-horn and cologne, and lastly a glass of wine.

“ Did you see her eyes when she did it ? ” he said, when this was swallowed. “ Oh ! that she, too, had died in her cradle ! ”

How it all rushed back upon me ! That autumn morning, twenty-three years ago, and

another father's moan: "Heaven help me! I would sooner bury her alive!"

This was the echo, long delayed, but terribly distinct and faithful.

There was no time for mourning, little for consultation. She must be watched, and by us. Husband and mother should be kept in ignorance, if possible, with the rest of the crowd below, until this miserable farce was played through. Then—but of that when the duty of the hour had been fulfilled.

How he went on with it I cannot tell. It is a shuddering dream in the retrospect, with one wildly beautiful face and its gleaming eyes as the central point of thought and vision, and, close beside it, the pale, high-bred physiognomy of the father, smiling at her jests, while he dexterously covered incoherent and extravagant sallies, his bandaged hand thrown carelessly behind him. I am sure that I chatted, and, I believe, laughed,—and suffered,—until the last adieu was said, the last carriage had driven from the door. I fancied the ground sounded hollow under the wheels, and that, now and then, the floor was sinking beneath my feet.

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“ Our child is not quite well, love,” Richard said to Alice, in his gentlest accents. “ Auntie and you must get her to bed without delay. Good-night, my darling!” taking her in his arms, and kissing twice the mouth that had wounded him. “ Be a good girl, and do as papa bids you.”

She obeyed meekly and silently. In quitting the room, I heard Richard’s next words:

“ Ernest, you had better leave us. Your grandfather and I want to speak to your brother.”

Dazed as I was, the conviction darted through my brain that the parent’s torture had just begun.

“ Was it wise or kind to break the awful truth to Beverly last night ? ” I said, reproachfully, to my father, on the morrow which was as the night to yesterday’s sunlight.

“ It was *necessary!* ” was the short reply. “ He must be continually upon his guard. He blamed us very severely—poor fellow!—for not having told him everything before his marriage. And he is right.”

Nevertheless, I never loved Beverly Ran-

dolph so well after I heard it. He was very kind to our afflicted one, very solicitous, very wretched. I know his heart wellnigh broke when the two physicians advised her return with us to her old home, and he owned that the pressure of other duties would keep him upon his plantation during much of the time they decreed she was to spend with us. She "did not care," she said, wearily, when appealed to as to her willingness to leave him. The reaction from the excitement of the Christmas festival was a sullen melancholy, so opposed to her temperament and habit, we could hardly believe the object of it our docile yet spirited pet.

She did not weep when, after spending two days at Longridge, her husband bade her farewell in the very room in which they had been married six months before.

"I shall see you again in a fortnight," he faltered, still holding her to his bosom, and covering the impassive face with kisses. "Shall you be glad to have me back?"

"I don't know. Let me go! You squeeze me too hard," she rejoined, fretfully.

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And when released, she seated herself on the side of the parlour that did not command a view of the drive where the carriage awaited him.

Nor did she appear to miss him in his frequent absences. She said but little at any time, and that only in reply to our questions, and Beverly's name—once forever upon her lips—never passed them now.

It was seemingly less than nothing to her that he was with her during the physical agony and mental perturbation of the long, long June day, in the twilight of which the weak wail of their baby vibrated upon our ears. By a pre-concerted arrangement, it was he who took the little creature to her bedside, unfolded her arms that he might lay it within them, and begged her—his voice choked and changed by tears—to look at it and speak to him.

“It is ours, my sweet wife! Our dear and beautiful little son. You hoped it would be a boy, you remember.”

We drew closer, yet keeping out of range of her eyes, holding our breaths in the intensity of our suspense, and praying, as people never

pray save in extremest peril and dread, that God would take pity upon him, upon us, upon her—the blinded, distraught lamb of His fold and ours. For this was the crisis, in the opinion of all the medical authorities we had consulted. There was a possibility—a slender chance, but precious beyond all other earthly hopes—that, with the mystery of birth, the light might dawn upon the darkened mind.

As I have said, we had arranged this little scene beforehand—ordering the minutest details with thoughtful care, saying to ourselves tremblingly, but with a brave show of hopefulness to each other, that the sight of the baby, whose coming she had anticipated as a new and crowning glory to her wealth of blessings, would restore the wandering reason, awaken the dormant affections. We had heard of such instances, studied and talked them over until we were almost persuaded that her insanity was but one feature of an abnormal state of body. One and all, we had counted the days, then the hours, prior to the event which was to return our beloved one, clothed

and in her right mind, to our waiting hearts and desolate home.

It was dusk, and we had set a lamp where the light showed us the figure upon the bed and that which bent over it. One could hear the deep of silence answering unto deep in the room as the husband's broken petition for more than life sank and died into them.

It was not faintness or syncope that delayed the wife's reply. My father signed as much to us when he had stolen behind her and laid his fingers upon her wrist. Her pulse was even, her colour good, her breathing regular. But her eyes roved unmeaningly over him and other objects in the apartment, without reverting to her child. One hand toyed with a fold of the coverlet, and her lips moved whisperingly. They were not often still while she was awake, but we could distinguish nothing she said.

"Agnese!" repeated Beverly, more distinctly, laying his hand upon the restless fingers, "do you know me?"

I shall always believe that the beaten, straying reason, guided, perchance, by some pitying

angel, essayed at that instant to regain the home from which it had been driven. Her eyes steadied themselves upon the face above them in dire perplexity and in trouble that was compounded of amazement and fear. Still it was Agnes's look, and it was her voice that replied :

“ Yes! You are Beverly Randolph, the man who married poor Agnes Vining, are you not ? But—but—” the perplexity deepening—
“ then, who am I ? ”

Beverly controlled himself manfully.

“ Darling! ” He spoke gently and lovingly, although the surges of passionate emotion—hope, fear, rapture, and anguish—threatened to suffocate him. “ You are my wife, the dearest being in the universe to me. We love each other, Agnes. You recollect and believe this now, don't you, my blessing ? ”

Just then, while the scales of fate were beginning to turn under the priceless burden of our newly found hope, the baby—he who was to have been the saviour of his mother, and to us the bearer of exceeding joy—began to cry. Red fire blazed in the wistful orbs, the

lurid gleam of angry astonishment. A bitter and blasphemous execration fell from her tongue, and, gnashing her teeth like a wild beast, she seized the infant with both hands, and would have hurled it against the opposite wall, had not my father, more watchful or expectant of evil than her husband, caught it as she let it go. Then she began to rave.

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It was midwinter before we could gain our own consent to place her in a public asylum for the insane. The glimmer of consciousness we had seen sustained our false hopes against the evidence of sense and sight. She grew worse daily—less amenable to control, more violent in language and conduct—but we clung to one idea with the tenacity of drowning wretches. Granted that there was but one chance in a thousand of her recovery. Should she have but a single lucid interval, we ought to be near her at the auspicious moment. Grief and horror at finding herself in durance under paid guardians would terrify her into incurable madness. We kept her securely, then, in her old home, watching her by day and by night, never

leaving her alone for a second. Beverly transferred his plantation to the care of his youngest brother, and lived altogether with us.

It is not so easy to be quite just to my nephew-in-law as I could wish it were. To be frank, I rather resented his behaviour to us after that fatal Christmas night. He dealt no recriminations upon those who had, as he considered, deceived him. Indeed, he clung to us and to his wife with the dumb patience of one stricken beyond the power of healing, yet who must live on without comfort as without hope. Our compassion for him helped us to bear with his reserve, his fits of coldness, and moody reveries. I suppose we should have been grateful for his forbearance and so much of forgiveness as was evinced by his residence under our roof.

At least, so my father said, and he was the wisest of us all.

It was Beverly's turn to watch in Agnes's chamber on Christmas Eve. He had been greatly depressed all day, and at supper complained of headache and a heavy cold as an excuse for not eating. Nevertheless, he would

not resign his task to another, although plied with importunities to do so. He was sternly conscientious in every respect, and I fancied—it may be uncharitably—the more inexorable in the discharge of the duty he owed his wife because it was so irksome; because he shrank from seeing or taking care of her, as from handling the mouldering remains of one formerly beloved and fair. The Agnes he had wooed and who had slept in his bosom for a brief half-year, was utterly and forever dead to him. The wreck he tended was a hideous caricature.

She was sleeping when he entered upon his vigil, and, seating himself by the shaded lamp in the chimney-corner, he tried to forget the misery of memory and bodily indisposition in the perusal of a new book. He had pretended to read for perhaps two hours, during which the patient had not stirred, when sleep fell irresistibly upon him. It was two o'clock when he was aroused from the slumber of fevered exhaustion by the touch of a cold, wet hand. His wife stood before him in her night-clothes, dripping with water, her teeth chattering in a chill.

“ I ’ve been in the well! ” she said, hollowly, but without agitation. “ I thought the time to die had come, so I jumped down. But then they told me I was mistaken, and I climbed out upon the stones. I was n’t ready to be judged, they said. Look at my hands! ”

They were cut and bruised by the sharp rocks, as were her feet; her stockings and gown were stained with moss and mud. She had feigned slumber, watched her husband lock the door and secrete the key, and, while he was unconscious, possessed herself of the latter.

The next week her grandfather and her father took her to the asylum. Her mother and I went with them. I have been there three times a year since to see that she is comfortable and properly looked after. For the past ten years I have gone alone. My father and Richard Vining are dead. Alice is a confirmed invalid—childish in mind, almost helpless in body. Ernest is married, prosperous, and happy, doing well his part in his day and generation.

I seldom see or hear from Mr. Randolph. He is a rich man and fond of his only child.

His sister keeps his house and takes care of little Beverly. My heart yearns over the boy as it does not over Ernest's three healthy, merry children, although they are very dear to me, and will inherit my property at my death. But his father objects to his visiting us often.

"It will have an unfortunate effect upon his spirits," he fears, and he lives in constant fear lest the lad should learn that his mother is alive. "Nothing could be more inexpedient," he urges upon us.

We cannot gainsay it. His marriage was the ruin of his life. He knows it, and so do we. Yet nobody else dreams of blaming us for allowing the marriage. Least of all do our kinspeople. And the Vinings are an honourable race.





Chapter IV

Samuella

BY the time she knew her right hand from her left, the child comprehended that her mother had got her from the Lord in direct answer to the fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous woman.

Mrs. Major (Myra) Meade of Valley View was married at twenty. Within the next score of years she presented her husband, whom nobody miscalled her lord and master, with seven fine sons. In all that time not even the genial, tender-hearted Major suspected that the sex of each child was a cumulative disappointment to the yearning mother-heart. He therefore shared in the amazement of her attendants at the rapturous ascription of praise to the Hearer and Answerer of prayer that broke from her lips at the announcement that she had a daughter.

“ Thou hast indeed looked upon the affliction of Thine handmaid, and remembered and not forgotten me ! ” was the prelude to a *Magnificat* that none who listened to it ever forgot.

The recollection sealed the Major's lips when she informed him that there could be but one name for the infant who was the visible fruit of the travail of her soul.

She was baptised “ Samuella.”

As the little one grew and bloomed like a lily in his home, the fond father comforted himself by calling her “ Sam,” secretly grateful, every time the diminutive was used by himself and the doting brothers, that his wife allowed the liberty. In the mother's mouth, the name was always “ Samuella ” in full. She might be the father's idol, the plaything and pride of the seven boys, three of whom were in college when their sister was born. She was the light of her mother's eyes, the pulse of her heart.

Everybody said “ Mrs. Major Meade,”—some thought to distinguish her from her widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Mary Meade of Melrose. Others, that, after the marriage of

her eldest son, John, Junior, to Miss Betty Selden of the Pine Creek neighbourhood, it was necessary to employ some distinctive appellation for the senior matron. Among the younger men it was slyly—never maliciously—whispered that the military title was consonant with the fact that the shrub known at the South as *calycanthus*, and which is fabled never to grow upon a place where the wife does not bear rule, flourished so rankly in the Valley View grounds that the gardeners dug up, pruned, and threw away bushels of it every year.

Dispute the attribute of masterfulness as we may, we cannot ignore the existence of an indefinable native power in certain people who, in all things else, would seem to be mediocre in mind. Many sway; few are absolute, set apart from their fellows as rulers; and those few are mighty and will prevail. Mrs. Major Meade was not habitually ungentle; she was of too fine a strain ever to be violent, much less coarse. She feared God and did her duty to her fellow men, especially to such as were of her household. In that household she was,

nevertheless, a despot, and her tyranny was of the most refined order, compelling faith with obedience. Her husband knew her to be the wisest of women; to her manly sons "Mother" was always in the right. The only daughter, who had inherited her father's blond comeliness and sunny temperament, was trained from the first month of her existence to merge her will in her mother's, to adopt her mother's beliefs, and, as faithfully as the difference in materials would allow, to shape her whole character according to the model woman of church and county.

Reverend Mr. Courtney of Mt. Hermon—the Presbyterian Church on the other side of Sally's Creek from Valley View—was wont to allude to Mrs. Major Meade and Mrs. Mary Meade of Melrose, as "Jachin and Boaz," the twin-pillars set up by Solomon in the first temple. The day on which Samuella united with the church—it was her twelfth birthday, by the way—he mentally compared the pretty, graceful thing, shrinking to her majestic mother's side, to a young vine climbing about the shaft of Jachin.

It was an open secret in the family that Mrs. Major Meade expected, because she had asked it in prayer, nothing doubting, that Samuella should, in the fulness of time, marry a minister. At fifteen, her governess was dismissed and the girl was sent to Mr. Root's excellent School for Young Ladies in Prince Edward County. The Root School was but one mile distant from Hampden Sidney College and Union Theological Seminary. The young ladies under Mr. Root's care attended the College Church. The To-be-Reverend Abner Nash, a native of Buckingham County, was studying divinity in the Seminary, and sat, every Sunday, in full view of the bevy of charming girls marshalled into their allotted pews by the teachers. There were opportunities of meeting some of the fair students at the hospitable Presbyterian houses on College Hill that were ever cordially open to the budding theologues. Young Nash stood high in the regard of his often hosts, and Mrs. Major Meade's reputation as a leader in church circles was patent in every Presbyterian community. The young couple were well acquainted with one another

when the nascent Reverend was sent to supply the Mt. Hermon pulpit for three Sundays one August, Mr. Courtney being down with bilious fever. It was the young man's last year in the Seminary, and he was allowed to try his 'prentice-hand upon prayers, hymns, and sermon, but *not*, of course, to pronounce the benediction.

He was licensed to preach at the May meeting of East Hanover Presbytery the next year, and,—as he phrased it in a letter to Mrs. Major Meade, whose guest he always was when he visited the county—“by a most blessed dispensation of Providence,” that meeting was held at Mt. Hermon. The Reverend Abner Nash preached his trial sermon before the Presbytery at eleven o'clock A. M. on Tuesday. At nine o'clock P. M. he asked Samuella Meade to marry him.

She was now eighteen, and, if possible, fairer to the eyes of her suitor in the moonlight flooding the broad portico where they were walking than she had been while listening, with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes, to his discourse that morning. He was a slim

young man with black hair that never got out of order. His eyes were black and well-opened; his teeth were regular and white; his lips very red. He had a straight nose, a round chin, and a good deal of complexion. Most of the elderly ladies and all of the young, thought him handsome. He would have been handsomer had not his upper gums been slightly visible when he smiled. In common with numerous men of his craft, his verbal approaches to the Court of Heaven were by way of the nose, a professional trick that would, in the course of a few months in the active pastorate, also tincture his speech with mankind, especially with womankind.

He had a call to a church in the Valley of Virginia in his pocket while he was explaining the state of his affections to the lady of his choice. When she had said "Yes" under her breath, and he had expressed his satisfaction with the result of the interview, he pulled the call out of his pocket and spread it upon the flat top of the railing for her inspection.

"The salary is eight hundred and a Parsonage," he said. "I have given the subject

much prayerful consideration and talked it over at length with your mother, of whose judgment I have the highest opinion. I have, likewise, consulted Dr. Plumer, Dr. Leyburn, and several other distinguished brethren of the Presbytery. They coincide with Dr. Graham and Dr. Wilson of the Seminary in thinking that I should accept. I shall write to the church to-morrow. I thought it better to wait until I could write as a licentiate. Of course, I shall be ordained and installed at one and the same time. This has been an eventful day to me. The day of my ordination and installation will be yet more so."

In a like spirit of compounded philosophy and piety, he acquiesced in Mrs. Major Meade's stipulation that the wedding should be delayed until her daughter had passed her twentieth year.

"That will give you plenty of time to make your wedding clothes, and get your house-linen ready," he reminded his betrothed. "Consult your mother in everything. I cannot be too thankful to the gracious Providence that directed my thoughts to a life-partner

trained by that true yoke-fellow in the Lord."

The Major's sanction to the engagement was not cordial in manner, although civil in terms. His wife had given him to understand that all was right between the young people, he said, and he had no doubt as to Mr. Nash's character, abilities, and prospects. So long as his wife and daughter were content with the aspect of affairs,—“ahem! ahem—ha!”

A mumble finished off the sentence.

The Reverend Abner prided himself, moderately,—undue pride being a temptation of the Adversary,—upon his knowledge of the world and human nature. His Professors in what Armistead Meade called, out of his mother's hearing, “the Gospel Shop,” had recommended each neophyte to acquire such knowledge. They would find it useful in their business. He quite comprehended, therefore, the Major's embarrassment. Fathers always acted in that way when called upon to resign their daughters to other men. With the boys he had little to do. John, Maurice, and Charles were married, with houses and in-

terests of their own; Plumer was in business in New Orleans; Armistead was practising medicine in Richmond; Speece and Lacy were studying law at the University of Virginia, and never at home except during vacations. The accepted wooer walked the course when he paid his bi-monthly visits to Valley View, and was pleased to express to his affianced bride his pleasure in her growth in all womanly and Christian graces, under her mother's tutelage and the inspiration of a hope of becoming a helpmeet to him in the vineyard.

The one recalcitrant member of the tribe of kinspeople and connections was Mrs. John Meade, Junior, *née* Selden.

"Your mother was a nonesuch as a boy-raiser," she said to her quieter husband. "She is making an awful mess of it with Sam. The poor child might better be back at boarding-school than going on in the jog-trottery track laid out for her at home. Everything goes there by clockwork, and a girl rising nineteen is n't a clock. So many hours a day are given to hemming sheets and table-cloths, and working flannel petticoats and chemise

hands, and scalloping ruffles; so many hours to a course of instructive reading prescribed by Abner Nash—the starched prig! It would give you a headache and a heartache to read the titles of the books on her table. He sent her *Baxter's Saint's Rest* for a Christmas gift! Her lightest reading is d'Aubigné's *History of the Reformation*. Mr. Nash does not approve of novels, and discourages Shakespeare for young girls. *He* writes religious verses by the pound. She read some of them to me. She keeps them in a white portfolio in her bureau drawer, and scatters rose-leaves over them—trying to be sentimental—poor, mistaken dear! Once a week she writes a long letter to the Valley parson in answer to his last. The child is measured off and cut out and basted according to the pattern agreed upon between the mother in Israel and the young shepherd.

“ Don't interrupt me, John Meade! I say it is a burning sin and a crying shame in this day of free thought and free speech to bring up a pretty, bright girl as if she had no mind or will of her own. Your mother is, of course, the best woman alive, but she has ruled the Sally's

Creek neighbourhood, which always keeps fifty years behind the age, until she has forgotten that the earth goes around the sun every year. She 's a feminine Joshua, who, having halted the sun and moon, has forgotten to start them again.

“ I had to beg, as for my life, before she consented to let me have Sam for a month. She is to be married in January, and this is the last visit we shall have from her. And I mean she shall have the very best time she ever had in her life. While she is here, the neighbourhood is going to *hum!* ”

The humming began with what we know now as a “ house-party,” on the day succeeding Sam's arrival at Belholme, her brother's place. The first member of said party to appear was Mrs. John Meade's sister-in-law, Mrs. Dick Selden of Wyndham, a plantation three miles farther down the river. She brought her sweet face and affectionate greeting into the dining-room before breakfast was over. Her escort was her twin-brother, Phil Leigh, whose father, a rich citizen of Richmond, had lately bought a handsome estate across the

river and settled this, his eldest son, upon it. He was close beside his sister as she leaned over Sam's shoulder to kiss her before she was quite aware of her entrance. The girl, springing to her feet with an exclamation of delighted surprise, stood face-to-face with a masculine copy of her friend.

“ We need no introduction,” he said with a frank laugh, holding out his hand, as she blushed brilliantly and stammered apologetically in her confusion. “ My sister's favourites must be my friends—she and I are so nearly one and the same person. And your name has been familiar to me for years.”

With like easy grace of manner, he accepted the chair set by a footman beside her at the table, Mrs. Selden seating herself by Mrs. Meade.

It was all so unlike the Valley View life that Sam was bewildered, as by a dream of something she had read in a fairy-story, or imagined of Arabian Nights' enchantment. If there were clockwork in this household, wheels, cogs, and pendulum were hidden, whirr and tick inaudible. The breakfast-room looked

eastward, but thick vines tempered the sunshine; a soft breeze waved the muslin curtains and brought the scent of roses and lilies, warming to the day's work of beautifying and sweetening God's world. Happy faces clustered about the bountiful board brave with burnished silver and sparkling glass and the delicate china that were one of the hostess's extravagances. The mingling of laughing voices, the exchange of friendly banter, the lively round of talk, went to the visitor's head like a draught of old wine. The blush that had stained her exquisite skin at sight of the apparition at the back of her chair lingered in her cheeks when she had grown accustomed to Phil Leigh's face and conversation. She was, herself, the loveliest thing in the room, and her absolute unconsciousness of this was not her least charm. The almost puritanical routine of her home-life had made her naïve to a degree her new acquaintance had not, until this morning, believed possible in a young woman of her birth, breeding, and education. Similes of violets blooming under leaves, of moss-rosebuds, and drooping lily-bells, floated

through his mind while he improved the advantage this early call and his sister's fondness for Miss Meade had given him over other neighbourhood beaux.

He kept the place thus gained throughout the wonderful week which followed. At the end of that time his sister warned him of rumours that Sam was "engaged to be married to a young preacher." At that day, engagements were private property, often concealed from all except the nearest relatives, sometimes only guessed at by them. Mrs. Major Meade had strict and prudish ideas in this direction, scruples against confidences as to matters mothers should speak of under the pledge of secrecy, and betrothed girls should never mention at all, ideas and scruples which would be absurd to this later generation. Sam had loved Mrs. Dick Selden enthusiastically since her own childhood. They now held long talks together almost every day, the pure woman seeing, with each talk, more clearly into the depths of the pure girl's soul and heart. Yet the Reverend Abner Nash was never named between them, and Mrs. John Meade,

Junior, did not care to enlighten any one in the Pine Creek neighbourhood as to what she felt was worse than an unlucky entanglement.

His sister's communication did not dissuade the lover. He had acknowledged himself to be that by the time they left the breakfast-table that first morning. Since then, as he assured his confidante, he had read the guileless nature to the last leaf, and could not be mistaken in his conviction that she was heart-whole.

"There are ineffaceable hall-marks upon engaged girls," he asserted. "Miss Sam has not one. I know women well enough to be sure of that."

To verify his judgment, he went, like the whole-souled, honourable fellow he was, straight to his crony, Mrs. John, Junior, and put the question point-blank. Had she any reason to think that Miss Sam's affections were engaged?

"I am hardly the person of whom you should ask that," she said, teasingly.

He coloured to the roots of his chestnut

curls; his eyes, as blue and expressive as his sister's, danced and deepened.

“ ‘ Time enough for that, says I, ’ ” he quoted. “ ‘ Seriously, Cousin Betty, do you think I have a chance with her ? Unless she already loves another man, I mean to try for the prize with all my heart, soul, and strength. What 's the word for me ? ’ ”

“ The word for you, ” said Sam's sister-in-law with gravity he thought was feigned,—“ is, *Try!* ”

Her conscience did not prick her. If the Reverend Abner Nash could not hold his own after a year's occupation and fortification of the ground, he deserved to lose it. Sam should have her “ good time. ”

The neighbourhood rallied gallantly to her assistance. The weather was too warm for dancing, her many entertainers said to Sam in devising other forms of amusement. They were too kind to hint that, knowing she thought it wrong to dance, they avoided the risk of offending her scruples. They had—instead of cotillions and Virginia reels—boating - parties, forest and hillside picnics,

“ dining - days,” suppers, house-parties that drove and rode in the early mornings and moonlight evenings. Perhaps Sam enjoyed, more than all besides, the mornings and afternoons given to quiet reading aloud upon the riverward porch of *Ivanhoe*, *Kenilworth*, *Rob Roy*, *Marmion*, and *The Lady of the Lake*.

Usually the ladies present were Mrs. John, Junior, Mrs. Selden, and herself. Each had her work-basket and scrap of dainty needlework. Sam embroidered one dozen of her wedding - handkerchiefs in that beatific six weeks. In after years, she had only to look at flower, leaf, or vine wrought into the sheer cambric, to conjure up a photographic replica of the scene: the translucent tubes of the trumpet-creeper, hanging, like scarlet flames, between her and the sun; the fine tracery of cyprus-vine, filling up the gaps between the broad leaves of the morning-glories; the garden-walks, lined with lilies, asters, larkspurs, marigolds, and pinks of all colours, running down the slope to the river-wall. Her brother would lounge in a garden chair near the head of the steps, pipe in hand or mouth; upon the

top step sat the reader, always in such a position that, in lifting his eyes from the book, he could meet hers, did she chance to be looking in his direction.

There was much to feast a dreamer's eyes beyond reader, garden, and the fringe of shrubs edging the shore. The river made a sudden sally around the foot of the hill, forming a graceful bayou. Belholme, crowning the promontory, commanded a view of a tranquil scene framed by pendent branches of ash and beech.

Embroidery, even upon one's wedding handkerchiefs, tries the optic nerves. Sam rested hers upon an old grey mill backed by masses of soft foliage and, further inland, on a white gable and a porch—all the embowering trees let her see of Phil Leigh's new home.

“Next spring I shall build a better house, and on that knoll you can see over there, half a mile away from the river,” he had told Sam one day when she remarked innocently upon the pleasant picture made by mill and cottage. “That does well enough for Bachelor Hall.”



"A TRANQUIL SCENE FRAMED BY PENDANT BRANCHES."

Still dreaming, she had not seen him bite his lip and glance solicitously at her, in breaking off the speech.

They had gone to ride at three o'clock on the 13th of September (Sam never forgot the date). When they were within a mile of Belholme, on their return, a scrap of white paper fluttered across the road so close to the nose of Sam's horse that he shied violently. There was little danger that so skilful a rider would be unseated, but her sway in the saddle looked perilous to the escort. In a second he had flung himself to the ground and thrown his arm about her. The next instant it was withdrawn, and he stood, hat in hand, abashed and penitent.

“ I beg your pardon! I thought you were falling.”

“ Thank you! ” said Sam, simply. “ I understood just how it was.”

Phil swallowed an impetuous sentence as he stooped for the bit of paper that had startled the horse. It was the back of a letter, blank on the inner side. The outer bore part of an inscription:

*“ ner Nash,
ling Spring,
gusta County,
Va.”*

The rest was torn off. Phil threw it into the bushes by the wayside lest it should do more mischief, remounted, and they rode on. Sam had not read the mutilated address. It meant nothing to one who had never heard of the Reverend Abner. Nor had he ever seen Sam's handwriting.

The day was cool for the season. A bunch of dyed sumach-leaves in a hedge-row; a dash of scarlet gum-bushes in a marshy spot; a burning dogwood tree in the edge of the forest, foretold autumnal chill and change; there was a nutty smell in wooded roads from the dying foliage overhead. By mutual and unspoken consent they rode slowly, after entering the Belholme plantation. As Phil held up his arms to assist the girl to dismount, their eyes met in one long, clinging gaze, such as they had never exchanged before. In the same eloquent silence, they passed together up

the gravel-walk to the porch, where Mrs. John, Junior, stood to receive them.

“ Don’t come in just yet, Phil,” she said so seriously that his eyes flashed a keen inquiry. “ Ride over to Wyndham and bring back Marion and Dick to supper. The Michaux and Archers and, maybe, the Cockes, are coming. I ’ll explain, by-and-by.”

In the hall, she put her arm through Sam’s and led her on up to her room. With tender hands she took off the girl’s cap and began to unbutton her riding-habit.

“ I have news for you,” she said, pretending to have trouble with the third button-hole. “ Mr. Nash is here. He came in the Valley View carriage about an hour ago.”

“ She is game, for all she looks so gentle,” Mrs. John reported to her husband, when the evening that was festive to eye and ear, and wormwood and ashes to the souls of at least four of the company, was over with. “ She turned as pale as a ghost, dropped back into a chair and hid her face in her hands for one instant. Then she looked up and smiled.

“ ‘ Mother sent him to take me home, I sup-

pose. I ought to have gone two weeks ago. I have had such a lovely visit here, it is not strange that the thought of leaving you all should hurt me pretty badly. I won't be so foolish again.' ”

Nobody who saw her that night could have guessed that she had given way for one minute.

The Reverend Abner had enjoyed the twenty-mile ride and the volume of *Pastoral Sketches* he read on the way, tearing a strip from the blank page of Sam's latest letter for a book-mark as he awoke to the fact that he must be nearing Belholme. His coming was a preconcerted surprise for his betrothed, carried out by the help of Mrs. Major Meade. He enjoyed meeting his beloved when she came down to the drawing-room, very pretty and winning, albeit paler than when she left home. Perhaps she had pined for him. Mrs. Major Meade and he held one opinion in common as to what endearments might properly be exchanged between plighted lovers. He had never kissed Sam on the mouth, but he now kissed her hand twice, and held it folded in both of his while he told her of her mother's

health, and the gratifying popularity he was maintaining in the church to which she was to "take her letter" in three months more.

One of Mrs. Selden's children was ailing that evening, and her husband and brother brought her excuses.

"I am sure she will contrive to see you early to-morrow, when she hears that you are going to leave us," Dick Selden assured the girl in saying "Good-bye." "She loves you very dearly. The next time you come to our neighbourhood, you must give us a part of the visit."

As he had predicted, his wife drove over by breakfast-time next day, accompanied, as upon that memorable morning in August, by her brother. Sam saw them from the window alight at the gate, and groaned in the anguish of the recollection. She had drunk a cup of coffee with difficulty at the table, failed in the attempt to eat a biscuit, and excused herself "to finish her packing."

When Mrs. Selden's soft tap sounded on her door, she opened it promptly, and met the visitor unblenchingly. The first few sentences

spoken, she did the bravest thing of her life. Looking into the eyes which were so like Phil's, she said:

“ I have been engaged to Mr. Nash for a year and a half. I ought to have told you before, but it is not natural to me to talk of such things. I wish, now, that you had known it all the while.”

“ I suspected it before you came to Belholme, dear. I more than suspected it from what was told me last night. I am sure he is a good man. I hope you will be very happy together.”

“ He *is* a good man, and I shall do my best to make him happy, and myself worthy of him. I have been carelessly, sinfully forgetful of duty lately. I have had but one thought in my mind. That was the selfish longing to pour all that is sweet in life into one cup and to drink it down at a draught. I must suffer for it. That sort of thing brings its own punishment. I told sister Betty to send you up to me, if you should come. I thought—I feel—as if I should bear it all better if you would pray for me before I go.”

They knelt at the bedside, hand in hand, and the elder woman's voice trembled, then grew full, thrilling into earnestness of supplication for grace for the tempted soul, guidance for the straying feet, light for blinded eyes. Her faith laid the girl at the Great Physician's feet, and committed her absolutely to Him.

Both were calm when they arose. The real "God be with you!" was spoken in that upper chamber.

Early in January Mrs. Selden had a letter begging her to be present at the marriage, then but ten days off.

"I bear in mind, all the time, that you are praying for me 'without ceasing,'" said the concluding paragraph of the petition. "I am trying hard—harder than I would have believed possible five months ago—to lead an unselfish life; to put my own wilful desires and fancies out of sight and live for the happiness of those to whom my first duty belongs. When the task is easier than common I say, 'Somebody is praying for me,' and I like to think it is you."

"That is not the letter of a happy woman

who is going to marry the man she loves," said Dick Selden, to whom his wife brought it, as she did every other trouble. "Do you think she can possibly be in love with poor Phil, after all?"

"Dick!" horrified. "When she has been engaged to another man for almost two years!"

"Girls are kittle cattle!" quoth her spouse, thoughtfully, and let the matter pass for the time.

He had a long confidential interview with Mrs. John, Junior, before he told his wife to write that she would be at Valley View on the evening of the wedding, also to say that they would put up at the Bell Tavern at the Court House, driving the four miles between that and Valley View in time for the ceremony.

"I'd rather attend the funeral of any one of a dozen people I could name," said Mrs. John, Junior. "I reckon among my uncovenanted mercies that the children have chosen this particular time to have the whooping-cough. I don't envy you the trip, Marion. There's something horribly wrong at the bottom of it all."

The evening of the bridal was as bland as April. The ceremony was to be performed at eight o'clock. The sunset blush was fading from the western sky, and the east beginning to glow before the rising of the full moon, when the Seldens drove up to the door of Valley View. John Meade, Junior, was walking the porch nervously, and ran down the steps to jerk open the carriage-door.

"Anything wrong?" queried Dick, seeing his troubled face.

A gesture delayed Mr. Selden as he would have alighted. John leaned far into the carriage, across Dick's knees, to speak to Marion.

"There's the devil to pay!" he uttered, curtly. "And the Mater and Nash together have stirred the pitch until it has boiled over. Sam was as brave as brass until the bridesmaids were ready to dress her. Then she fainted dead away, and, when they brought her to, declared that she would not be married to-night, or at any other time, to Abner Nash. When the Mater tackled her, Sam asked her point-blank, 'Is n't it a sin to marry one man when I love another?' For the first time in

her life she stood out against her mother. I never saw the Mater at her wits' end before. She was wishing, just now, that you would come, Marion. She has called in old Courtney to her help. He arrived a few minutes ago. Luckily nobody else has come, except the bridal party."

He rattled it off breathlessly, with increasing perturbation. In his wife's absence he was all at sea. He missed her as he would miss his daily bitters.

"Has Mr. Nash been consulted?" said Marion.

John recalled afterward how quietly she and her husband had hearkened to his account of the dilemma unprecedented in family or neighbourhood annals.

"I took the responsibility of laying the case before him," returned the brother, darkly. "He was dressed—in bran-new broadcloth and white cravat, you may be sure—at five o'clock. He was sitting at his window, with a Greek Testament in his hand, enjoying the sunset. Said he considered superstition sinful and heathenish, otherwise he should regard the fine

day as a good omen. I blurted out what I had come to say, not mincing matters to spare his feelings. My sister had declared at the last minute, that she would not marry him, that she did not love him and did love somebody else. He was as cool as—as—iced milk-and-water! Smiled and said that great allowances should be made for nervous excitement and maidenly modesty in such circumstances. He had heard of similar cases, followed by years of happy conjugal life. He advised a composing draught, and, when her pastor arrived, a quiet talk with him. The hallucination would soon pass. He was too secure in the possession of Miss Samuella's affections to feel any uneasiness as to the final result. If everything else failed, he held himself ready to interfere. But it was not customary for the contracting parties to meet until the actual hour of the ceremony."

Marion's lips were compressed to a straight, white line. She gathered her furred cloak about her and arose, pushing aside a pile of other wraps huddled upon the front seat. John recollected that, too, afterwards.

“ I will go to her at once! ” she said—and, briefly and impressively to her husband as he assisted her to alight—“ Dick! ”

“ Yes, dear! ”

Not another word was exchanged between the two.

Mr. Courtney's massive form was upon the stairs before Marion, as she mounted. He moved slowly, grasping the creaking rail in climbing. At the door of Sam's room he turned to see who was near him, and his face lighted. He gave her a large, moist hand.

“ I am indeed thankful for your co-operation, Mrs. Selden. Mrs. Meade has all confidence in the efficacy of your influence over our dear young friend. We must be very positive with her. My observation goes to prove that our young ladies are often subject to this sort of nervous reaction upon these occasions. Our young friend has been over-diligent in her wedding preparations, and it is a peculiarly hard ordeal to her to leave such a home and such parents——”

The door was opened abruptly from within.

Marion stepped to one side where she could not be seen.

“ I heard your voice, Mr. Courtney! ”—said sharp tones the eavesdropper did not recognise. “ Come in! ”

Supposing Mrs. Selden to be behind him, he left the door slightly ajar. Marion laid her ear to the opening without hesitation or qualm. Any good woman would have done the same.

The sharpened tones were incisive:

“ Mr. Courtney! you baptized me as a baby. You received me into the church. As far as a Protestant can have a father confessor, you have been mine. I am in deep waters, now—the deepest waters a woman can be in. I cannot vow in God’s sight to love the man I have promised to marry. He kissed me to-day for the first time! ” She shuddered audibly, and Marion clenched her fists. “ I *loathed* him when he did it! I loathe myself for allowing it. I was too young and ignorant to know what I was doing when I followed my mother’s advice and engaged to marry him. Is it right for me to swear to a lie? A lie that will begin a lying, miserable life? ”

“ My dear child ! ” Marion knew, without seeing, that the spiritual guide took the girl’s hand into his large, soft grasp. He scraped his throat, unctuously :

“ You are not called upon to make vows, but to ratify those already made. The contract was entered into nearly two years ago. You are now to set the seal upon it. There is but one course open to you, as a betrothed, as a daughter, as a virtuous Christian woman who would not disgrace her profession in the eyes of a censorious world. No matter what you *feel*. You know what it is your duty to *do*. It is too late to draw back now. You are labouring under unnatural excitement. When you are calmer—quite sane, in point of fact—you will thank your mother and me for keeping you in the right—the only right and reputable way. Mrs. Selden, here, will corroborate what I say——”

Marion had slipped in under the shield of his broad back as she heard her name. She advanced, now, both tender arms extended, her face as the face of a redeeming angel, the eyes that were solike her brother’s, shining with tears.

With a wild cry, Sam cast herself upon her bosom :

“ Save me! Oh, save me! ”

“ You may leave her with me, Mr. Courtney,” said Mrs. Selden with gentle dignity. “ I will see that she is dressed in good time. Please say so to Mrs. Meade, and ask her to see that we are not interrupted for an hour or so.”

She locked the door after him.

The rest was one of Dick Selden’s best stories to the latest day of his sunny life. He called it: “ How my wife and I eloped with another fellow’s bride.” Sometimes he prefaced it with, “ The one and only white lie my wife ever told.”

She had engaged that the bride should be dressed “ in good time.” The costume of the bewildered, half-fainting creature, incredulous of the possibility of escape, was her travelling dress. Marion led her through the inner door of her chamber into a side-passage, down the back-stairs, and through a shaded alley to the foot of the garden where Dick awaited them with carriage, coachman, and the wraps needed for the night’s journey.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Mr. Selden lifted Sam, exhausted by the conflict of passions, more dead than alive through fatigue, in his strong arms, and carried her into the open door of Belholme, to leave her in the embrace of her sister-in-law.

She was married to Phil Leigh in February, at her brother's house, and with her father's consent. Her mother forgave her, vindictiveness being an ungodly quality, and contraband of grace, but she could not reconcile it to her conscience to sanction by her presence the marriage of her daughter to an unbeliever, *i. e.*, one who was not a church-member. Dick would have it that the calycanthus did not blossom at Valley View that year.

They were full of purple-red ovates, redolent of spice and spring, when Myra Meade Leigh was borne past them, one perfect Sunday in May, more than a twelvemonth thereafter, to be baptized in Mt. Hermon by Mr. Courtney. The venerable pastor had a "visiting brother" with him that Sunday who filled the pulpit—no other than the Reverend Abner Nash. There was no reason why he should not in-

clude his excellent friends in the Sally's Creek neighbourhood in the leisurely tour of the central counties he was making with his newly-wedded spouse, a young lady of piety, plain person, and a pretty property, whom he had selected from the many willing ones in his Valley charge.

But, as Dick was wont to say, " If there was one funnier element in the whole performance than my Methodist wife's lending herself to a runaway match, it was that the Reverend Abner should choose that particular Sunday for making the first visit he had paid to Opecanough since he played the supe's rôle in the domestic drama of *The Stolen Bride*."

12





Chapter V

At the Spa

THE aborigines—with sagacity so well established that wonder remains how they should have been, in spite of it, unclean, unhealthy, and barbarous—knew of the healing waters centuries ago, and resorted periodically to the glen out of which they gushed.

When old Isham Bannister, the eighth in the direct Virginia line of proprietors, drank himself, by the means of stronger potations, into the family burying-ground, the half-acre fertilized by his kindred dust was the only bit of land on the estate not covered out of sight by mortgages. So ruthlessly had the earth been drained by much tobacco-growing and no manuring, that the old plantation would have sold for a song, had not the mortgagees brought the sulphur-chalybeate spring con-

spicuously to the front of their posters. The property was bought by a company of Northern speculators; three other springs were dug about the fountain beloved of the Indians; a cheap three-story frame building, incredibly ugly and reasonably commodious, was run up on an eminence overlooking the desecrated glen; the wells were enclosed and covered by sheds, and the combination, advertised as the "Opecanough Spa," was ready for visitors.

The full title was not used colloquially. The phrase was transatlantic and sounded distinguished. The county was proud of it on that account. But in the mouths of the great commonalty, the watering-place that was to put fancy prices upon neighbouring lands, was "the Spa Springs." In such slip-shod talk as included familiar mention of "the Red Sweet," "the Bath Alum," "the Warm," and "the White," it took its place as "the Spa."

"In less 'n ten years, 't will be the equal of the best of 'em," a sanguine stockholder was saying to all within the reach of his orotund voice, one August forenoon in the second year

of the Spa's existence. " Mrs. Hatchett 'n I 've been in the habit for years of goin' to the Red Sweet for two weeks, then, f' another fortnight, to th' White. Not that thar was anything reelly the matter with either of us, you know. But a Jeemes River plantation ain't th' healthiest place in th' universe between June 'n' October, an' Mrs. Hatchett 's fond o' society, an' I enjoy seein' her enjoy herself."

" An' ain't averse to th' sight of pretty girls, an' to shakin' a foot, now 'n' then, in a Virginia reel, an' giving a blamed fine woman a spin of a dozen miles or so behind those blooded greys o' yours," put in a brother planter. " Ah, Colonel! it 's hard for an old dog t' learn new tricks, an' for a born 'n' bred ladies' man t' settle down to the matrimonial dog-trot. We all know how matters stan' with you."

Everybody laughed, Colonel Hatchett most loudly of all. Idlers are easily amused. He had a thunderous laugh, and a trick of dropping his chin upon his collar-bone and wagging his head as he roared, as one shakes a bottle to

empty it. He was over six feet high, with a chest-measure of forty-seven inches; his ample girth was emphasized by a complete suit of white linen, glossy from the iron; the broad-brimmed leghorn hat shaded a rubicund visage, kindly and honest, and that had been handsome before he "put on flesh." There was a cleft in the upper story of his double chin, and when he smiled, a dimple like a baby's danced in and out of his left cheek.

One of the saucy girls he was "not averse to seeing" and joking with, had called him to his face "a modern edition of a magnified cherub," a compliment he relished more than his fastidious wife could be expected to do.

He was apparently so affluent of healthy blood, his vitality was so riotous that the next observation aroused another general laugh:

"Somebody was sayin' yest'day, that the Colonel was here this year on account of *his* health."

The speaker, Ben Finney, was a professional humourist, and after the manner of his guild, cultivated an effective drawl.

"An' I can testify to seein' him totin' a jug

from the direction of the Springs up-sta'rs, mighty early one mornin' las' week. It never came into my head that thar was *water* in it, though. Not for his own individual use!"

The group of loungers occupied one end of the two-storied portico running down the front of the hotel. The tease sat upon the railing, facing the Colonel, whose chair was tipped back against the inner wall, his heels hanging upon the rungs, his knees on a level with the third button of his waistcoat. Others besides Ben Finney noticed the queer change in his complexion and expression, and caught the false note in the laugh that cracked in sticking in the Colonel's thorax.

"Who told you 't was *water*?" he retorted with badly-feigned surliness. "'N' if 't was, whose business was it? Ain't I got a right to have a complaint of my own? Or t' imagine I have? Which amounts to th' same thing."

"Oh, come, old fellow!" Finney made haste to say. "No offence, I hope? I told th' story as a joke. If I 'd had the least idea thar was anything in it——"

"Did I say thar was?" snapped the

Colonel, bringing the forelegs of his chair and his heels to the floor with an angry click.

He had stamped half-way down the porch when he brought himself up as abruptly as if he had been clapped on the shoulder. Wheeling about, he tramped bravely back again, and held out a great hand to the disconcerted tease.

“ Ben Finney! I ask your pardon! I ask pardon of all you gentlemen here assembled, for behavin’ in a manner totally and entirely unbecomin’ a gentleman, a neighbour, and a Christian. I am mighty fond of a joke myself, an’ I ought, tharfore, to be able to take one. But the fact is, gentlemen—” scooping the dozen into his confidence with an inward wave of each hand—“ when a man that has n’t had an ache nor a pain to speak of for better ’n twenty-five years, finds himself—through no known fault nor transgression of his own—the victim—yes, gentlemen, the prey of a—Malady—he may be excused, gentlemen, for feeling a little sore. That is to say—” this hurriedly and huskily—“ for considerin’ that the afore-said—Malady—is hardly a fit subject for a passin’ jest.”

Silencing by an expressive gesture the contrite protest that was framed by many lips, he concluded :

“ Friends and neighbours—gentlemen all! I depend upon you to see that this goes no farther. Good mornin’.”

Not a man there broke faith with him. Sobered and shocked by the half-revelation, and curious as well, though every one of the party was, each was the Colonel’s friend and a Virginia gentleman. The startling story was not discussed among them, then or later.

That is, not until it became public property and was in everybody’s mouth. Even then, they agreed among themselves to put “ the report down and out,” Ben Finney leading the way by denying it flatly upon his personal word and honour, as one intimately acquainted with the facts of the case.

It was not strange that the tale travelled like an electric flash through the crowd that did nothing from morning until night but chatter and listen to others’ chatter. But, knowing one another as they did, the twelve men and true marvelled exceedingly and continu-

ally "how the cussed thing got a-goin' in the first place."

The solution was too simple for them to guess at it. Miss Matilda Drake, a chronic dyspeptic and a super-chronic scandalmonger, was sitting in the dining-room that August morning, behind the closed blinds of a front window, so close to the group of loungers that she could have poked Colonel Hatchett with her ivory crochet needle, and keeping so still that not one of the talkers suspected her proximity. She had no business to be there. The dining-room was cleared of flies, swept, dusted, and the table laid for dinner, by eleven o'clock; then every shutter was closed and the place left to darkness and silence until the approach of two o'clock brought the waiters again upon the stage.

Miss Matilda Drake had mousing ways. She said aloud to herself, as she slipped into a back-door and shut it behind her, that the dining-room was the coolest place in the house at that time of day, and she had a right to make herself comfortable in any way she could in this roasting-hot weather.

She did not admit—she would have died sooner than admit to her confidential consciousness that she was moved to the longing for a cool, dark grotto, quiet, and freedom from buzzing insects, by catching sight of the knot of men at the upper end of the portico. There is a desire in the most single-hearted of self-deceived mortals to maintain a reputation for decent works and ways with our astral selves. There are shams we never drop even in the locked back-rooms of our imagery.

Before a couple more sweltering dog-days had gone by, everybody in the frail and flashy caravansery knew that Colonel Tom Hatchett, although the picture of health, was really dying of a mysterious disease. Most people preferred to name it a "Malady," without knowing how they got hold of the word. He was sensitive on the subject, as was but natural, considering how healthy he had always seemed, and nobody must betray any knowledge of the secret he had guarded so carefully. To avoid such unfriendly betrayal everybody shut his eyes and mouth so tightly that figurative wrinkles spread downward over all faces.

In blissful ignorance of the secret current of talk that swirled about and over him, and, as if to defy it and his own sensitiveness, the Colonel took to drinking the waters in the broadest light of day, in company with his wife. She set him the gallant example of quaffing, without a grimace, three and four glasses before breakfast, and as many more during the day.

“ I really rather *like* it,” she said to a coterie of women who had taken their work and their tongues to that end of the portico that gave on the eastern hills, one breathless afternoon. “ It is so sparkling and cool and invigourating, I have grown actually *fond* of it. The Colonel says I ’ll become a sulphur water *toper*, if I am not careful.”

In saying it, she tittered. Her titter and the way she had of bearing down hard upon certain syllables and words but partially redeemed her talk from abject inaneness.

She was a little woman, and always elaborately dressed, wearing many furbelows and much jewelry at all times of day. She was a beauty when Tom Haney Hatchett courted

her, and had not begun to suspect that she was no longer even pretty. Her titter, her mincing gait, her trick (one of many) of tilting her head first toward one shoulder, then the other, and looking up through the thinning eyelashes, were reminiscences of bellehood. Her face was a rounded oval, twenty years ago. Now it was more like a triangle, the chin being pointed, the forehead low, broad, and square. One might have looked for sense behind such a brow, but he would have sought vainly. The blue of her eyes had faded into shallow grey; upon the high cheek-bones were two well-defined disks of pink, so palpably artificial that those who liked her least could not accuse her of deception. Her whole face was frankly and profusely coated with powdered starch. Nobody thought the less of her for that. The powder-bag, or prepared-chalk ball, or cake of "lily-white," was as essential to every Southern woman's toilette as her tooth-brush. As a rule, she drew the line at rouge and carmine saucers. Sober heads were shaken sadly over Mrs. Hatchett's "worldly ways" in this respect.

She wore a pale-blue muslin gown to-day, flounced up to the waist, and each flounce was trimmed with a narrow edge of real lace. She was making tatting. The mimini-pimini fancy-work suited her to an absurdity. It also displayed to advantage the rings that clogged her lean fingers.

Not another woman at the Spa wore so many and such expensive ornaments, or thought so much of those she wore. She had no children, and no near relatives to divide her affections with bracelets, brooches, finger and earrings.

“How do you keep so cool, my dear Mrs. Hatchett?” ejaculated a plump dame, whose fan had not been still for a second in the last hour. “Here I am panting and perspiring, and almost dying with the heat, and you are as cool and comfortable as if the thermometer were not five hundred in the shade.”

“I never perspire,” returned the Colonel’s spouse in modest pride. “Colonel Hatchett does enough of that for both of us.”

She tittered in glancing toward the person spoken of. He was surrounded, as usual, by

jolly comrades, all smoking in the shade some fifty yards from the hotel. The back of the Colonel's chair was supported by the trunk of a big oak, his heels were supported by the stout rungs of the chair. He was in his favourite costume of white linen that raised the tone of his sanguine complexion. At short intervals his mighty laugh boomed across the grounds and ricocheted from the house walls.

There was no grass under the trees, and no pretense at a lawn in the open. Turf does not take kindly to Virginia soil. Never having had it, the pleasure-mongers descried nothing unsightly in the parched, naked earth that had not tasted rain in a month. There was seldom enough wind to raise the dust.

Beyond the oak trees, all of native growth and lordly in size, was a body of pines. Among these melancholy evergreens were situated the ten or twelve cottages which were the "annex" of the hotel. As long ago as the early fifties the curative properties of resinous groves were dimly recognised, and each one of these cottages—log-huts, some of them—sheltered a confirmed invalid. The

comparative seclusion and stillness of the retreat, the soothing sigh of the branches, the spicy aroma they gave out under sun and dew—set apart that quarter of the Spa grounds as a special sanitarium. The cottages were built on each side of a straight road, a board pathway running along one edge of it for the use of invalids and nurses in rainy weather.

Far down in the green glooms of this aisle the chattering women presently espied a tall figure moving slowly in their direction, pausing every few yards to exchange greetings with those of the cottagers who were visible at their doors and windows. Nobody kept indoors today who could crawl into air that might be a degree fresher than that in the house.

“ There is Dr. Hutton ! ” said Miss Matilda Drake. “ He came up from Norfolk this morning. His devotion to his wife is simply *heavenly* ! The most heroic thing I ever heard of in all my life. ”

A treble chorus of sympathy responded.

Mrs. Gates, a late arrival from Petersburg, looked interested.

“ Is she ill ? ”

“ Ill! ” echoed Miss Drake, briskly. “ My dear, she is dying by inches. He brought her up here from Norfolk three weeks ago. Not that he hoped for anything like a cure, but Norfolk is unhealthy at this season, and *so* hot! She has her sister and a competent nurse with her, and that blessed saint of a man comes up every week to see her. And do you know, he is so exquisitely sensitive about such things, is so delicate in his tastes that he cannot bear the least allusion to her condition.”

“ That is true! ” chimed in another gossip. “ I had never heard how he felt on the subject, and, meeting him on the porch the morning after he came up the second time, I asked in the most matter-of-fact way in the world— ‘ How is Mrs. Hutton to-day ? ’ He drew himself up until he looked a foot taller, and, said he— ‘ I thank you, Mrs. Harris, Mrs. Hutton is quite well! It is a glorious day—is it not ? And what a delightful company you have here this season ! ’ And so led the conversation clear away from his wife. But *was n't* I shocked at my awkwardness when I was told what a sore subject her illness is with him ? ”

Miss Drake dropped her voice a point or two.

“ Her sister, Mrs. Allison, was telling me all about it, the other day. He spends but one hour a day in her room, half an hour in the morning, half an hour in the evening. Before he comes in, all the medicine bottles and bandages and *things*—are put out of sight; the room is aired; clean pillow-cases and all that, are on the bed, and the poor woman has a pretty sacque with pink ribbons put on over her night-gown and her hair fixed as if she were well, and she sits up in bed. She never leaves it, you know. When everything is ready Dr. Hutton comes in, kisses his wife, and sits down in a chair by the bed, and talks away cheerfully about one thing and another that he thinks would interest her——”

“ And what a charming talker he is!” put in another admirer.

“ You may well say so! *The* most fascinating man I ever met! Before leaving her, he reads a chapter in the Bible and offers a short prayer—just as he would have family worship at home, you know. It ’s all beautiful! perfectly lovely, and so touching! I cried while

Mrs. Allison was telling me about it; and so did she. She just perfectly worships her brother-in-law. She says there never was another man of such refinement and delicacy. He shrinks from associating the idea of sickness with one he loves. So he just ignores it."

"Anybody would think he had the cancer instead of his wife," commented Mrs. Gates, bluntly. "The desire for secrecy is one of the symptoms, you know—a marked peculiarity of the disease."

Mrs. Hatchett looked up quickly.

"Is *that* so? I never heard it before. How *very* funny!"

She tittered; the rest of the listeners looked shocked.

Mrs. Gates took up the word again:

"*She* can't get away from it," she maintained. "I should think the more of him if he gave her more of his time, and took less care of his own sensibilities."

"If you knew him, you would change your mind."

Miss Drake's assurance was in a whisper, the subject of her laudations being within ear-shot.

He was tall, spare, straight, with regular features and expressive eyes. He bowed comprehensively to the coterie that fluttered visibly at his approach, shook hands with those nearest to him, gracefully acknowledged an introduction to Mrs. Gates, and sat down by Mrs. Hatchett.

“It is a genuine pleasure to see my old friend, Colonel Hatchett, in his accustomed health and spirits,” he remarked, agreeably, as another volume of merriment shook the still air. “And I never saw you looking better.”

An underglaze of real colour showed through the frank powder and the palpable rouge. Mrs. Hatchett bridled and tittered; her head tilted to the right until her long earring brushed her shoulder.

“Neither of us has any excuse for being here, I suppose you think?” glancing from under her sparse lashes.

“On the contrary, you would not warrant the esteem in which I hold you both if you did not embrace such an opportunity of enjoying congenial companionship and of making others happy as is afforded by this establishment.

The County and the State are to be congratulated upon the Opecanconough Spa. The Virginia Springs are among the finest in the United States, not to say the world. The rendezvous they offer to the wealth and culture represented by the best classes of the South—and there are no better classes anywhere—is a boon to the human race.”

It grew hotter and hotter. At a call from the Colonel, trays of mint-juleps were brought from the bar to the group under the oak, and of iced lemonade to the ladies and their elegant entertainer. A hush that might be felt crept over the distant fields in company with grey shadows from thunder-heads rearing themselves bulkily in the west. The green gloom of the pine-vistas gathered blackness; lungs laboured in drawing in the dead air.

“ I am afraid we are going to have a thunder-storm,” said Mrs. Hatchett, tittering nervously. “ I ’m *dreadfully* scary in a thunder-storm.”

“ So is Mrs. Hutton, I regret to say. Finely-attuned nervous organisations often detect the subtle approaches of the mysterious

agent we call electricity, before duller senses are aware of its presence. Ah! there is the first flash! I saw it reflected from your diamonds—in a hundred tiny corruscations of radiance.”

This was fine! Mrs. Hatchett vowed to her tickled soul that she would carry the phrase in her mind and lose no opportunity of repeating it. It was almost worth while going through a thunder-storm to have her beloved gems thus immortalised.

“ You *do* say the prettiest things, Dr. Hutton!” twittering and tittering until all the ribbon bows on her gown seemed alive. “ What it must be to have such an imagination! I wish our other gentlemen would take a few lessons from you!”

A tremendous laugh from the Colonel’s expansive chest made the entire party glance toward him. The planter’s chair was on all fours; he was digging his heels into the friable earth; his elbows rested upon his knees and he was holding his shaking head between both hands in the delicious agony of a “ tip-top joke.”

Mrs. Hatchett frowned, and bit one corner of her thin lower lip :

“ The Colonel has *such* spirits!” she said, weakly apologetic.

The answering smile from Dr. Hutton was pensive and indulgent.

“ Who can wonder at that ? Dante tells us of an old man whom ‘ Death had forgotten to strike.’ Colonel Hatchett is one whom Sorrow has forgotten to touch in passing on to others. He rejoices in the sunshine as birds and butterflies bask all summer long.”

The hum of applause was broken short by a second flash, so much more vivid than the first that Mrs. Hatchett covered her eyes with her hands, and uttered a little cry. Several ladies got up and began gathering work-baskets and work preparatory to seeking refuge in the house. As a thunder peal shook the solid earth, one nervous woman threw her scissors from her with a shudder. Tactless Mrs. Gates accosted Dr. Hutton for the first time :

“ I suppose you would like to go to Mrs. Hutton if she is, as you say, timid in a thun-

der-storm. It would be bad for her to be frightened.”

His bow—he had risen with the others—was dignified, non-committal, and dissuasive of further trespass upon sacred precincts. His look said as much, and more. Mrs. Hatchett’s work-bag had fallen to the floor; spools, thimble, and other trifles chased one another toward the edge of the portico. Before Dr. Hutton noticed the accident the Colonel’s voice was heard:

“ Don’t stoop, Emmy! I tell you, child, you must n’t stoop! I ’m a-comin’!” he puffed, getting over the ground with speed remarkable in one of his weight.

He had just found out that a storm was at hand, and had looked around, instinctively for his wife.

“ I b’lieve she thinks I ’m a lightning-rod!” went with his parting roar to his companions.

He gave chase to the scattered valuables, grunting audibly as he stooped to collect them.

Dr. Hutton, erect and dignified in his composure, threw back his head and eyed him patronisingly. Mrs. Hatchett turned brick-red—

an unhappy contrast to the rose-colour on her cheek-bones, and chewed her lip in ill-disguised mortification. One may not be in love with one's husband and yet suffer in seeing him make himself ridiculous.

She never forgot a single particular of the scene: The party of women in the immediate foreground, surveying the grotesque figure as he clutched and reached for rolling spools and vagrant bodkins, emery-bag, and thimble. Some smiled kindly; some pityingly; all were diverted. Dr. Hutton had backed to the inner wall and stood there, majestically imperturbable. Fitful breaths of wind were raising eddies of dust along the ground; the trees were turning up their leaves to catch a sip of the coming rain; children and nurses were racing toward the hotel from all quarters, shrieking and laughing with excitement. Then—a blaze that wrapped the world in white and purple flame; a simultaneous crash that hurled her back into Dr. Hutton's very arms.

She came to her senses cruelly soon. There had not been time to lift her husband from the floor where he lay dead, his face downward,

one hand grasping a tiny reel of white cotton, the other the scissors that one of the women had cast from her a while ago.

She was sinking too rapidly to be moved when the remains were sent home at day-break next morning. The rain had lasted all night; the wheels of the funeral carriages and the tramp of the attendant body of horsemen ground and splashed dully in the soaked earth under the windows of her room.

“ I wish they had waited one day more!” she whispered to Mrs. Gates, who had not left her since she was struck down. “ But he will understand. He always made allowances for me.”

The afternoon was wearing slowly into twilight when another woman stooped to hear her say:

“ I heard the doctor tell you that the shock had hastened the end. The end was sure and not far off. Are you listening—all of you ?” trying to speak distinctly.

They came closer to the bed—the doctor, the coloured maid, and the three ladies who had tended her last hours. The small, weaz-

ened face was much changed under the death-shadow. Powder and paint had been washed off. She looked little and aged and pain-worn—a shrunken shell of what she had seemed, twenty-four hours before.

“ We kept the dreadful Thing to ourselves—he and I. It has been growing for years. We had a Northern doctor last summer. He told us the truth. Nobody else ever saw It. Not even my maid there. He used to dress It. The doctor showed him how. Then he would burn what he had taken off. That nobody should suspect. When I am gone, don’t move the bandages. He put them on yesterday, when I dressed for dinner. I have *suffered!* I can’t tell you how I have suffered. I was in pain all the time—day and night. But he suffered more, in seeing me in such agony. He let people think that we were here on his account. I was fretful and cross. I tried him times without number. I said, ‘ If It ever comes out, it will be through your imprudence.’ He never answered me back. Never gave me an unkind look. He was all patience—all sweetness. He did everything for me

with his own hands. Dear, gentle hands! His heart was an angel's in pity and in love. And I! God forgive me! Oh, God! forgive me!"

The trembling hands hid her eyes for an instant.

Mrs. Gates, the tears pouring down her cheeks, sobbed a word of comfort.

"Yes! I know all is well with him! How shall I meet his true, honest eyes when I recollect that, at the very moment he was—*called*—I was ashamed of him?"

She turned her face away. By and by, they heard her whispering to herself. Mrs. Gates bent over her.

"'Passing the love of woman!'" she was saying. And later: "'Of whom the world is not worthy!'"

When they thought all over, she rallied her senses and voice, heroically.

Slowly and audibly, as one renders dying testimony, she articulated:

"I say—'Of whom the world is not worthy.'"

As Mrs. Gates removed her hand from the eyes it had sealed down for all time, she saw

through the nearest window, Dr. Hutton walking down the board-path in the direction of his wife's cottage. The setting sun dashed the flooded road with streaks of green and gold. He held up his head as one who draws in grateful breaths of refreshment and strength; he stepped gingerly around puddles and rills of running water left by the departed rain. Near the door of his cottage he met a brace of pretty girls and lifted his hat gayly. They lingered to speak with him, and a chat of several minutes followed. As they passed on he kissed his hand to them in tender gallantry.

Then he disappeared within the cottage door. It was the stated hour for his visit to the invalid—and for family prayers.





Chapter VI

“V. V.”

I

MRS. GOODE MINOR sat at the head of her breakfast table. She had taken her seat there at eight o'clock. It was now ten. The forenoon was sultry and she was dressed in white, as was her wont in the mornings from May to October. These morning gowns were usually of opaque cambric, trimmed with narrow lace at the wrists and neck, or with crimped lawn frills. The frills never sagged or became rumpled with the wearing, and one clean crisp gown lasted her a week.

That there are people to whom “dirt does not stick” is a truism past profane questioning. There are those whom dust, soil, grime—all that is catalogued as “dirt”—do not approach while life and reason last. Virginia

Venable, now a guest at Deepford, the homestead of the Minors, had declared that Mrs. Goode Minor was not made of common dust, but of *alba terra*. The matron had smiled, then sighed, in hearing it.

“ At your age I had pink, as well as white, roses in my cheeks,” she said, in pensive resignation. “ But that was long ago.”

Her fair hair was still glossy and abundant, although, as was the vogue with married women at that day, she wore a lace cap with lappets. The cap was lighted with buff ribbons, and a half-blown rose of the same shade was pinned among the frills of her corsage. The rose had not laid a petal, with the thermometer already at eighty in the shade, and there was not a speck of moisture upon her forehead. She was one of the few mortals who are cool all through, with a fixed physical and moral temperature, like that of St. Peter's in Rome. Her chair was cushioned; a stool supported her buskined feet; her fingers moved with the rhythmic regularity of temperate heart-beats, as she wrought with ivory knitting-needles and soft white wool a baby's shirt for her newest

grandchild. Her tongue kept time with the knitting-needles ; the fleecy fluency of the monologue was like the unrolling of the fluffy ball laid atop of the shining keys in a white splint basket upon the table beside her. Eugene Aram, the butler, a spruce mulatto, whose apron was as sleek and spotless as his mistress's cambric gown, was washing up the breakfast dishes in a cedar pail with shining brass hoops. Each article went through three waters.

“ Of course I understand that, if left to yourself, you would wash cut-glass, china, and silver all in the same water, then drain them and wipe them with the same towel,” Mrs. Goode Minor was saying, in the plaintive monotone that had accompanied the task for a matter of four thousand and fifteen mornings, exclusive of leap-years, the present incumbent having entered upon the duties of the office eleven years before. “ Some mistresses are not willing to take the trouble to look after their dining-room servants, as I feel it to be my solemn duty to do. I have sat down to tables loaded with delicious victuals where I could

not eat a mouthful, because the plates and dishes and glasses had not been properly washed. They looked clean, but my fingertips told me the story. This is the sort of disgrace servants put upon their masters and mistresses. It is not only unkind, but it is dishonest, to slight work. Real honesty is to think of your master's interests as if they were your own. That is what is meant by loving your neighbour as yourself. I do not know what would become of your good, kind master if I had no more regard for his property than you have. The mistress who tries to do her duty by God and her family has little rest by day or night. What do you want, child ? ”

A young girl had entered hurriedly, and was tripping from one door to the other. She turned at the question, her breath and colour coming and going as if she had been running. As she spoke, she stammered very slightly upon words beginning with a hard consonant—a peculiarity of speech her admirers thought bewitching.

“ Nothing, mother. That is—I d-did not know you were in here.”

“Where else should I be at this time of day, Mary Scott?” patiently argumentative. “Where have you left your friends?”

“I am looking for V. V., mother. I can’t think what has become of her. I have n’t seen her for an hour.”

“She said at breakfast that she had letters to write. Who is entertaining Mr. Cocke?”

“He is in the summer-house. The d-dogs are with him.”

“Eugene Aram!” said his mistress, impressively, pronouncing the first *a* of his second name very long and flat, as the unfortunate ducked his head suddenly over the pail. “How many times am I to tell you that when you can bear your hand in the water it is not fit to wash silver in? Get some hot!” raising her grey eyes in calm austerity to the visage, where traces of the grin she had arrested were receding to his ears. “Don’t go, Mary Scott. I want to speak to you.”

The girl paused in the doorway and looked back over her shoulder, the big hazel eyes she never got from her mother startled and suspicious. She was rather tall, lissome, yet

round in figure, with an arch, piquante charm of expression, which, more than the delicate regularity of her features, had won her bellehood.

“ Yes, mother.”

“ Shut that door, and come here.”

Her mother called her “ Mary Scott,” always and punctiliously. Her father did the same in his wife’s hearing. At other times he followed the popular fashion that had fastened “ Molly ” upon her bonnie head. She carried the pet name as naturally and sonsily as she wore the mop of her copper-coloured curls, to which her mother was not reconciled after twenty years of futile soaking and brushing.

Even Molly Minor never defied the autocrat of the household. Goode Minor was “ a catch ” in his youth, a courteous and comely little gentleman of excellent family and education, of amiable disposition, and the heir to a large and lucrative estate. Since the day he married Camilla Scott, a pretty and penniless girl, he had not known what it was to have his own way, except when a lucky accident made it also her way and will. Yet, as he often and truly asserted, they had never had the ghost of

a quarrel. As truthfully she affirmed that her chief object in life was to secure the best interests of her husband and children. Her eldest son had married an heiress in an adjoining county; her second son was studying medicine in Paris. She had paired off two daughters to her satisfaction—one with a Baltimore millionaire twice as old as she, another with a Virginia judge of high reputation and ample means. Molly Minor was the “only birdling left in the nest.”

The mother had dallied with the phrase until it would have been ridiculous but for the birdling’s assured right to the title by virtue of buoyant spirits, winsome and tricksome ways. Mrs. Goode Minor was a power in neighbourhood and county, and was courted because of that power. She was not popular. The average neighbour resents a monopoly of influence, derived from whatsoever source. A clan may elect, out of custom or policy, to follow one member, yet remain judicially critical. Authority, once gained, is self-reproductive. In every sphere and clique we see people whose sole claim to leadership is that they are in the

lead. A majority of followers are too indolent or too stupid to ask themselves why they are in the ranks and on foot while the few are in the saddle and in the van.

There was no just cause for the trepidation with which Molly Minor obeyed the maternal summons. Yet her heart arose and smote her chin, her knees shook, and she looked every inch the culprit, before the lips—that would have been pleasant to look upon had the line of the upper been less straight—opened in inquisition. The inquisitor's tone was as bland and firm as well-made junket before the whey stage sets in.

“ Did Mr. Cocke go to the summer-house alone, and of his own accord ? ”

“ No, ma'am.”

Well-trained Virginia girls said “ ma'am ” fifty years ago, following the precedent of English maidens of the Edgeworthian period.

“ Ah! I wondered if you had left him to take care of himself. While your father is out on the plantation and I am busy with my housekeeping, the duty of entertaining visitors devolves upon you, of course.”

She had begun to knit again, and the big hazel eyes were fascinated into watching the rise and fall of the ivory needles that ticked like an eight-day clock with a whole week ahead of it.

“ You were in the summer-house with him, then, for a while. What excuse did you give for leaving him ? ”

“ None, ma’am. I said I was going into the house, and would send Flash and Snap and Rush out to k-keep him company,” the demure face breaking into ripples and dimples of mischief. “ He had talked for an hour about his dogs and his horses. The horses could n’t have been got into the summer-house, you know. So I whistled up the dogs and sent them out to him, and I came to look for V. V. —and to have a comfortable yarn.”

“ Put that table-spoon down, my daughter. The moisture of your hands will cloud the silver. Has it occurred to you that a man who owns the best hunters and carriage-horses, and the finest pack of hounds in East Virginia, has a right to speak of them occasionally ? If Daniel Cocke owned but one horse and kept

that in his father's stable, and had not a roof of his own under which he could keep a dog, he would probably choose other subjects of conversation."

The girl's face was aflame with generous wrath.

"Mother, I call that unfair—unkind—cruel!"

"Compose yourself, Mary Scott. That is not becoming language to use to any one, much less your mother. I have called no names. I know twenty young gentlemen who have one horse apiece, and not a house or a barn. I know but one as independent in means, as pure in life, as kind-hearted and generous, as Daniel Cocke. His mother was the dearest friend of my girlhood. It would be strange if he were not welcome in your father's house. If the house were mine I would insist that my daughter should treat him respectfully, if she cannot treat him kindly. Set down the pail, Eugene Aram, and open the door for your Miss Mary Scott. Not that door! the other! What are you thinking about?"

If he were thinking that, since his young mistress had entered the room from the front hall, with the evident intention of crossing the room and going out at the other door opening upon the stairway leading to her chamber, she might be still of the like mind, his respectful face offered no protest against the order he received. He opened the door indicated by the autocratic eye, and Molly as submissively walked out of it, into the hall, upon the front porch, down the front steps, and along a gravelled alley edged with box, hot and fragrant under the summer sun, and so to a square arbour overrun with honeysuckles, trumpet-creepers, and a multiflora rose-tree.

Mr. Daniel Cocke, fresh-coloured and large of bone,—a modern replica of some fox-hunting English ancestor—sat upon a rustic bench, elbow on knee and forehead on hand. The black muzzle of Flash rested on one knee, Snap’s tawny head lay upon the other, and the liver-coloured pointer Rush was seated upright on the bench beside the visitor, encircled by his arm. At sight of the tableau Molly Minor burst out laughing.

“ You only need a weeping willow and an urn to make you fit for a mourning b-breast pin!” she said, between the gushes of merriment. “ Oh, don’t spoil it!” the big young man having jumped up with a foolish guffaw, scattering his sympathisers to the right and left. “ You are so p-plainly one in heart, thought, and feeling that it is a shame to disturb you.”

“ You could n’t disturb us—I mean your company is always welcome—you are always congenial—” blurted out Daniel Cocke, red flushes stinging his eyeballs and racing to an anguished tryst at the back of his brain, where something whirred and whizzed.

“ Thank you ! I n-never heard anything more n-neatly put!” said Molly Minor, still quivering with laughter. Bestowing herself and her muslin flounces upon the opposite bench, she went on, mockingly: “ I don’t see why Rush should be promoted to a level intimacy with you, and his b-betters left in a lower place. Here, Flash! here, Snap! up with you, old fellows! Now, down charge! and lie close!”

With a fillip of her thumb and finger, she coaxed both dogs on to the broad bench, one on each side of her, their heads in her lap, and looked up wickedly at the six-feet-two hulk in Sunday broadcloth, erect and awkward in the middle of the arbour.

“There is plenty of room”—nodding at the other bench—“for you two over there.”

What the guest could do, and what he did, was to deposit himself in the place designated by the imperious nod, and to try to laugh again, with a result that sounded to him like the bray of a disconcerted donkey. What he would have liked to do, and could not, was to squeeze into some shape the scraps of the manhood this girl was continually kicking to pieces, and after telling her in one burning sentence how he adored, and hated, and worshipped, and despised her, to get himself out of her sight, and mounting his horse, ride across country to James River (I fear me much that in his mental agony he called it “Jeemes’s River), and make an end of the whole *damnable* business. (He said *that* too—not I.) He had loved the angelic little devil as hard as a

horse could kick—the aggressive provincialism furnishing the only simile that served his turn—before she put on long dresses. He was no nearer marrying her now than when the raw lad of twenty, newly come into his duchy of seven thousand acres of land, seven hundred negroes, and a handsome bank account, thought that the prettiest girl in the United States of North America was none too good for him.

Molly's lively sense of the ridiculous was tickled by the present situation, and she owed herself some indemnity for mean submission to the unspoken decree that had driven her back to the summer-house and the society of this "*g-gawk!*" who, throughout, and under and above his talk of horses and dogs, was, she divined intuitively, edging up to the oft-repelled, ever-renewed love talk that nauseated her—when *he* undertook it. The reflection made her merciless and ingenious.

"I wish V. V. were here to take a picture of us f-five," she pursued, her tongue tripping upon a consonant now and then, and, as it sounded to her auditor, wilfully. "Have you

seen her drawings ? She does such surprisingly f-funny things with her p-pencil and pen. The most delicious caricatures with a d-dozen strokes. She used to t-take off the unpopular teachers at school in the wittiest way. Don't b-budge! I must have you and the p-pointer. I 'll call her.”

Without rising or dislodging the dogs, she put her head through the vines behind her, and called, in a voice shaken and shrilled by laughter:

“ V. V.! Vir-gin-i-a Ven-a-ble! Where are you ? ”

“ Here!” rang down from a window in the second story, overlooking the harbour, and the bowed shutters were pushed apart.

“ Come down, and bring pencil and paper!” ordered her friend. “ There 's a d-dear! ”

Daniel Cocke got up, white and angry.

“ Indeed, Miss Molly, this is carrying a joke too far, even when I have the honour to be your laughing-stock. If you will excuse me, I will order my horses and relieve you of my company right straight off. Can you tell me where I can find your mother ? Rush and I

may be on a level as to brains and manners, but I know enough to say 'good-by' to the lady of the house before I go away—for a long time."

"G-good gracious!" ejaculated Molly.

It was real fright that sobered the madcap, and this the lover might have discerned had he been within gunshot of sanity. The revelation to her mother of prankishness that had banished, and forever, the most eligible suitor she was ever likely to have, seemed at the first blush the worst calamity that could befall her.

"What a t-tinder and t-tow t-temper you have!" she went on pleadingly. "I never m-meant to make you angry. I never d-dreamed that you would t-take me in earnest. Nobody ever minds my nonsense. Here, V. V.! help me to persuade this fiery young knight that I could n't intentionally insult my mother's friend—and mine!"

The falling cadence of the last word was artistic. To poor Daniel it was pure nature, and fascinating to intoxication. His sunburnt cheeks took on the moist ruddiness of a beef-steak; his laugh was unctuously happy.

Chivalrously bent upon shielding the woman he had distressed from further annoyance, he filled up the arched doorway with his gigantic personality, and confronted the newcomer valiantly.

It was a slight, dark little woman, whose rose-coloured draperies, long and flowing, brushed the flower-borders as she stepped lightly toward the arbour. She was shorter by half a head than Molly Minor, and less comely by so many degrees that good-natured people refrained from drawing comparisons. Daniel Cocke had never voluntarily conversed with her for ten minutes, all put together. He was shy of strangers and mortally afraid of clever women, and he had heard that this stranger was “intelligent.” Somebody had once spoken of her in his hearing as a “blue-stocking.” Yet now he, metaphorically, hurled himself at her.

“It’s too bad we called you down, Miss Venable! I declare it’s too bad! It was just one of Miss Molly’s tricks—don’t you know? I was saying that I should like to have you take my picture. I had heard that you were

such an artist, don't you know? No—not that exactly—that is, not my picture, but Rush's here. He's the prettiest dog I know anywhere—ain't you, Rush, old boy? I think the world and all of Rush. His mother is in my kennels, you know—and his father, too, for that matter. And before I could stop Miss Molly, she had you down. I declare I'm mighty sorry!"

Virginia Venable's smile was cordial and reassuring, without betokening that she was at all diverted by the string of disjointed lies. Her kindly glance took in every feature of the scene, and she drew a conclusion. She seldom required help in making up her mind. Mrs. Goode Minor had once spoken of her to one of her married daughters as "an admirable foil for Mary Scott. She is so dark and plain, and her taste in dress is so simple, that she sets off a pretty, stylish girl to advantage—poor thing! She is one of the best-hearted creatures living, and so attached to us all."

Through some unguarded cranny of confidential gossip the encomium had trickled to Miss Venable. Up to date she had made no

use of it, except to address the image in her mirror when she was quite alone with it, as “Molly Minor’s Foil.” The conceit did not rasp her self-love. Perhaps because she was humble and mindful of her friend’s superior estate. Perhaps because she was philosophical and exceptionally even-tempered.

The smile that showed faultless teeth in a mouth that was her best feature, was sunny; the courtesy with which she received the extraordinary explanation was the very soul and essence of tact.

“She ought to be punished—don’t you think so? And she looks so picturesque, just as she is, with a dog on each side, that if you will engage to keep the sitters quiet for half an hour, I will make a sketch of them, instead of one of you. When it is done, if you like it, we will draw straws—you and I—as to who shall have it.”

At twelve o’clock, Mrs. Goode Minor, shod with the slippers of silence, glided down the smooth gravel walk, and, herself unobserved, came upon an odd group. Molly Minor was posed upon the bench, her bare arms about

Flash's neck, her rosy cheek upon his head, her curls mingling with the sombre silkiness of his coat. Snap was crouched at her feet, his eyes languishing upward to her face. Behind Virginia Venable's sketching stool Daniel Cocke's herculean body was bent upon one knee, the florid face upon a level with the artist's; a hairy fore-finger indicated certain lines in the work.

"I had no idea anybody could draw as fast and as well as you do—much less a lady," he had said just before the *surveillante* was within ear-shot. "I declare it is like thinking with a pencil. It's perfectly wonderful!"

What the matron heard was! "I call that an elegant likeness—don't you know? Elegant! And it ain't one bit flattered."

While Mrs. Goode Minor took further observations from her covert, a young fellow approached the arbour from another quarter, across turf that muffled his footfalls into the soundlessness of her buskins. An opening in the vine-walls framed what the duenna saw from another point of view. His handsome face darkened with pain or displeasure; he

lifted a finger to his mouth, and bit at it savagely. Some trick of sun and shade betrayed the motion to the quick-eyed dog at Molly's feet. With an eager yelp of welcome, he broke away from the proprieties enjoined by Daniel Cocke's eye and word, and bounded upon the intruder. The other dogs followed suit, and the latest arrival had to beat them back with the hat he snatched off with the left hand, while he gave the right in rapid succession to the young ladies, then to Mr. Cocke. All laughed in different keys, and articulate salutations were swamped in the hubbub of joyous barkings and exclamations, until Molly put both hands over her pink ears and cried out that she “could not hear herself think !”

“Would we be the wiser for your thoughts, my dear ?” interposed her mother's butter-smooth and honey-dulcet tones.

She swam into the midst of the disorderly group, the suavest of greetings upon her straight mouth.

“How do you do, Mr. Finney ? I did not know that you were here, until I recognised your voice above the rest. I wondered what

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could be the occasion of such a commotion. My young people here"—the faintest conceivable stress upon the pronoun—" have been so quiet all the morning that I was coming to look after them. I was afraid you were having a stupid visit, Mr. Cocke. I did not know that you had converted the summer-house into a studio. May I look at the picture ?" taking the drawing-block from the artist's hand.

While the only one of her " young people " who retained her smiling self-possession, displayed the sketch and engaged a show of gracious attention, the dogs came back to Daniel Cocke, some occult law of instinct teaching them the value of a favourite's protection.

Rush covertly licked the brawny hand, cast behind the owner's back in reassurance which was a hollow sham, for Daniel shifted wretchedly from one leg to the other, sullen gloom in eyes just now alive and glad. Walter Finney had the knack of pushing him off solid ground into a quicksand when he was least on his guard. What the deuce brought the fellow

fooling around here on to-day of all days ? Molly had never been sweeter and prettier than during the past two hours, and in his capacity of inspector and critic of that nice Miss Venable's drawing, he had the right to stare full at the blushing sitter for half-an-hour at a time without being snubbed. He had sat upon the sill of the open door of Paradise, with his feet inside. This saucy, good-looking chap had banged the door shut without a word of warning, and Daniel was not quick enough to get out of the way without catching a shock and a hurt.

A certain facility of hypocrisy is requisite for the daily use of him who would ruffle it audaciously in the sight of his handsomer and more popular rival, and for all the backing of the duchy aforesaid, Daniel had not as much *savoir-faire* (which is French for hypocritical ease) in all his vast body as Walter Finney had in the tip of the finger that still bore the imprint of the bite he had given it a minute ago. He knew himself to be obnoxious to Mrs. Goode Minor, but he bowed over her hand in deferential grace that was almost tender, his

eyes as cloudless as the sky whose blue they reflected. He believed that Molly Minor loved every hair of his blond head, his every trick and turn of voice and feature, the happy, boyish laugh that set everybody who heard it to laughing, his dancing eyes and his straight nose, and manly chin, the shapely feet she would have been willing, had she dared, to dust with the mass of curls she had caught at and swept back with both hands at sight of him. Yet his laugh, as he pursued her to the back of the arbour, whither she retreated to bind up the riotous ringlets, sounded light and careless even to the jealous lover and vigilant mother.

“ Ah, let it alone—please!” he said, teasingly gallant. “ If you could only see how becoming that style of *coiffure* is, you would never change it.”

Daniel Cocke's grim jaw was grimmer for his grinding teeth. He guessed at the meaning of “ *coiffure*,” but he never used foreign words. Solid old Virginia talk was good enough for him, as it had been for his fathers before him. He would n't play the puppy

and dandy for all the girls in the United States of North America. Daniel affected the phrase. It covered all the ground that signified anything to a free-born American landholder.

Molly Minor alone saw the look that belied her lover's gay intonations. Through the blue eyes flowed a river of love, worship, and longing, of which she drank with heart and soul. And she had been so thirsty! This was Thursday, and she had not seen Walter since Sunday, when they had met at church. They had exchanged letters twice, for Eugene Aram had a sweetheart on the Finney plantation; but what were letters to the unspoken rapture of sunning herself in the full glory of his presence?

“ Mary Scott, my dear!” Mrs. Goode Minor was surveying her daughter over the top of the drawing-paper. “ Now that the sitting is over—and the likeness is really good, very good indeed, and the dogs wonderfully sketched in ”—she slipped a smile around the right hand edge of the paper, at the artist—“ you had better run upstairs and let Delilah put your hair to rights. Mr. Finney is polite

enough to say that that mop of curls is becoming, and it does well enough in a picture, but it is warm for August weather. You look very hot already. All that disordered hair upon your neck and shoulders must be unpleasant."

She never railed. She never sneered. She might have done both without mortifying Molly into the consciousness that she was a perspiring Bowsalinda, which smote the child at the cool dry accents, and the unwinking serenity of the pale grey eyes.

"Before she goes we must cast lots for the picture," interposed Virginia Venable. "That was agreed upon between Mr. Cocke and myself before I began to sketch. Give me your hat, Mr. Cocke. Mrs. Minor will hold it, that we may know there will be fair play. Instead of straws we will draw rose leaves. That is more poetical. Mr. Finney, will you please keep the picture meanwhile? Here are two rose leaves—a red and a white—of exactly the same shape and size. I put them into the hat and throw my handkerchief over it. Shake it well, please, Mrs. Minor.

The one who draws the red petal gets the prize. Shut your eyes, Mr. Cocke, and put your hand under the handkerchief. *Ah-h!*”

The big red hand wriggled out of the gap left between the hat and the covering, as it had wriggled in. Between thumb and forefinger was a once white petal, bruised grey by the tight pinch that held it.

“ I can't pretend to be ungrateful for my good luck,” said Molly Minor's Foil, so gently as to shed sympathy with each syllable. “ But you may carry it to the house for me. And when you come to Petersburg next winter you may call and see how well it looks in a frame.”

Molly had vanished down a walk lined by a tall lilac hedge, and, with cool audacity the hostess named to herself effrontery, Walter Finney had taken the same route. It was a short cut to the house, but the delinquents had not reached it when the mother and her companions mounted the porch-steps.

“ It is cooler in the drawing-room at this time of day than out here,” observed the exemplary matron. “ Virginia, my dear, will you take Mr. Cocke in there ?”

“ Poor little Molly will catch it,” thought her friend, tolling the sulky visitor in her wake by the friendliest of smiles, leaving the duenna on guard in the sunny porch.

When they were out of hearing, she said, kindly, “ Shall I relieve you of my drawing-block and pencils ? ”

Daniel relinquished them dumbly. His face was blank with misery that had nothing to do with the episode of the grey petal.

“ I am very sorry,” went on the gentle voice.

It was full and soft, and more intelligently modulated than those of the other girls of his acquaintance, and he felt the charm without knowing in what it consisted.

“ Oh, it does n’t matter, you know,” he said, bluntly, and truthlessly. “ It ’s of no consequence whatever. It ’s of a piece with all the rest of it, don’t you know. I was born that way.”

An arch gleam, all harmonious with sympathy, played through, rather than over the “ plain ” visage. She moved a step nearer, and sank her voice significantly :

“ It would never do to let you have this, of course. But there is no law against making a copy of it that will be a better likeness and a better picture. We won’t draw rose leaves for that when it ’s done.”

II

Among the things appertaining to the consequence of Daniel Cocke, Esq., of Oakwold, Opecanconough County, Virginia, was a double buggy of the latest pattern, manufactured in Philadelphia. It would be called a “ surrey ” to-day. When made, it was known as a “ no-top tilbury.” Molly Minor had jeered at it from behind her bowed shutters when it was drawn up at her father’s door on the preceding evening.

“ He tries me with all sorts of bait,” she said. “ This time he has used a double hook, for his pet horses are harnessed to his best carriage. Walter Finney would be more graceful on a barebacked mule than the Oakwold grandee in the midst of his blooded horses and barouches and coaches and sulkies and buggies, and

strung with diamonds from top to toe of his clumsy body."

Nevertheless, Molly Minor was not superior to the girlish willingness to be seen as the honoured occupant of the new equipage, the prize for which the double hook was cast. Mrs. Goode Minor discountenanced the *tête-à-tête* drives of young men and young women. The neighbourhood whisper was that the maternal scruples on this head had incited Daniel Cocke to the purchase of the elegant turnout in which the four young people set forth at six o'clock on the memorable afternoon which supplies the date of this old-fashioned love-story. The arrangement of the quartette in the vehicle was undoubtedly madame's own. In the shining state of her afternoon toilette of black satin and thread lace, she came out upon the porch to admire the carriage, praise the horses, and to manipulate the party. The back seat was more comfortable than the front, she discovered at once.

"Of course the young ladies will occupy it," she purred. "Those cushions are really luxurious, Mr. Cocke. They reflect credit

upon your taste and your heart. Even a delicate old lady like myself would not need a pillow at her back there.”

Molly Minor's Foil was in solitary possession of the humour of the situation when Mr. Finney had handed her into the carriage as he might have passed in a bale of merchandise. Mr. Cocke put Molly in after her, each gallant with lightless face, and as mute as his companion in disappointment. Aware, in her shrewd soul, that Daniel had projected the excursion, and even bought the carriage, with a single eye to having his bright-haired idol at his side when he played charioteer, and cognisant of Walter's private notification to Molly of his intention to manœuvre her into the back seat, with himself beside her,—the unimportant fourth person of the *parti carré* proved her temper to be of the finest quality by amusement untarnished by a breath of envy. She presently won sober Molly to a glimmer of appreciation by a sympathetic pat of her hand, and a roguish glance at the chagrined backs of the couple before them.

“ Is n't it too funny ? ” she whispered,

cautiously, pulling down her mouth into the square droop of Daniel's, and lifting her eyebrows into the bored arch Walter's had assumed.

Then she began to make talk for all four so dexterously that the play of prattle was as an oiled finger upon roughened feathers. One by one, the listeners fell into better terms with themselves—a master-work of the tact which is genius—and each became amiably willing to contribute to the general fund of enjoyment. Our heroine was no parasite, if Mrs. Goode Minor did patronise her, and although gossips wondered what would become of her when, at the death of the aunt who had brought up the sisterless and brotherless orphan, all the old lady's property would revert to the relatives of her deceased husband. The slight girl of twenty-two, dark-eyed, and usually sallow, who made all her own gowns, and kept on the right side of everybody, high or low, knew her place in life better than her critics and patroness could know it. Knowing it, she meant to keep it, and, when opportunity offered, to better it. She loved, without

respecting, Molly Minor, whose room-mate she had been, at school at Richmond, for four years. She respected Mrs. Goode Minor's steadfastness of purpose, her social generalship, and her sublime self-satisfaction. It amused her to draw her hostess out and on to the development of her real character, and nothing diverted her more than the divine condescension which sought to set her daughter's foil in the foreground at an angle and in lights that were advantageous to Mary Scott, and yet not unbecoming to the humble companion. Virginia Venable loved her patroness as little as Mr. Walter Finney loved the woman he meant to make his mother-in-law against her will.

The chagrined set of the young lawyer's well-made shoulders would have stiffened into rage had he surmised how lively was his beloved's enjoyment of the splendid style in which they were bowled along the country roads, across rickety bridges, up hill and down dale, between tobacco and corn-fields, and so into the one long street of the County Courthouse. It chanced to be Court-Day, too.

The lawyer's forgetfulness of, or indifference to this circumstance, had told against him with Mrs. Goode Minor. It argued, to her thrifty imagination, brieflessness, or neglect of business that might have been his. Daniel Cocke's choice of the route was made, as Molly suspected, and as Virginia Venable and his rival felt sure, with a purpose. On foot in the public square surrounding courthouse, clerk's office, and county jail, he did not cut a distinguished figure beside better talkers and better lookers. Without being purse-proud, he was not reluctant, at this juncture of an unpromising suit, to improve every opportunity of enhancing his personal consequence in his dulcinea's eyes. His horses were second to none in the State, and no master could handle them better. He was at his best upon the box and in the saddle, and in view of the odds against him he was justifiable in being conscious of this.

Molly Minor, in the luxurious cuddlement of the cushioned seat, had an eye to these things, that reminded the keen observer at her side whose child she was. Her gaze rested softly

and contentedly ever and anon upon honest Daniel, planted squarely and straight on the driving-seat, whip and ribbons in hand. It could not be gainsaid that he went well with the double hook. The petted child was too fond of her Walter to confess the bait to be a temptation. She did wish, with a sigh that heaved her lace stomacher into covetous ripples, that she could have Oakwold and what went with it, and her *debonair* darling too.

Ah, well! there was no sense in bringing crow's-feet to the corners of longing eyes by worrying over the puzzle now. Both men were at her feet, and she would keep them there while she could. If the composite photograph had been known at that day, the sigh would have been a wish to blend the twain into one elective entity for her to have and to hold.

The equipage halted before the post-office with a mighty bustle of prancing hoofs and clinking harness-plates and chains, and a crush of wheels upon the gravelly soil that was as astral oil upon the kindling wick of Molly Minor's vainglory. Six or seven young men,

the cream of the county beaux, were lounging in the porch of "the store" and upon the long portico of the adjacent tavern, waiting for the hostlers to bring around their horses for a homeward start. The tilbury was quickly surrounded, and Molly held an impromptu levee. Adulation was the breath of her being. She bloomed forthwith into *riant* and glowing beauty. Every man there would tell his sister and his mother, that night, how perfect were her appointments as queen of her little court; how lovely and happy she looked; how obvious was Walter's devotion, how abject Daniel's adoration. She chatted faster and laughed more loudly than usual, her bloom more brilliant with each outburst of applause from the audience; she bantered one and encouraged another, a humming-bird in daintiest feather, with more honey-cups nodding to her than she had time to taste.

Twice during this ovation the little crowd was warned back from the wheels by the plunging of one horse and the uneasy curvetting of the other.

"You are not nervous about horses, I see,

Miss Molly,” observed an admirer, “or you would n’t risk your neck behind these.”

“I am timid enough—upon occasions,” rejoined the born coquette. “Sometimes I am as b-bold as an Amazon. It all depends upon who is the driver. To-day I am p-perfectly tranquil.”

The witchery of the pouting smile, the subtle ray shot under the fringed lids at the owner of the spirited team as he sat at ease upon the box-seat, half turned towards her, were exquisite and beyond imitation. The rapturous rush of blood to his scalp was distinct across the white strip of forehead generally protected from the sun by the hat now pushed back for the sake of coolness. The man who had elicited the tribute to his skill in driving looked up at him and feigned to glower.

“Lucky dog!” he said, in a stage underbreath, audible to adorer and adored.

The sunburnt tract pulsed with hot purple; Daniel shifted his position so as to face his restless team, and called to Finney, who had gone into the post-office for the Deepford mail and his own :

“Hurry up, old boy, or you 'll get left!”

Walter paused in the store door to sort the bundle of letters and papers he held; seemed to miss something, turned back, and did not reappear for a full minute. If Dan Cocke meant to show him off as his lackey he mistook his man. He sauntered up to the carriage, distributed their mail to the young ladies, tucked his own into his breast-pocket, buttoned his coat over it, talking smilingly to the fellows nearest him, and swung himself up indolently into his seat. Every motion was intentionally insolent. Daniel lost not one, and took in the meaning of the pantomime. The horses felt the change in his temper. The younger and more restive of the two leaped violently forward as the rein tightened sharply. There was a flaw in the new bit, and it snapped in his mouth. Before the bystanders could guess what had happened the mettled horses were tearing down the dusty road at mad speed, the light carriage hardly touching the ground as it whirled after them, the two terrified women clinging together upon the back seat; upon the front a man

wild with fear for the safety of the girl he loved, and one whose brain had grown as steady as a rock at the first bound of the frantic animal.

There was a two-mile stretch of level road ahead of them, he reflected, as calmly as if seated by his own fireside. Then came a curve, and a hill, long on this side, steep on the other. Beyond that was a crazy bridge that had no railing. This sort of thing must stop before they got to that bridge. He did not pull upon the rein attached to the unbroken bit. If not interfered with, the beasts would probably keep in the middle of the road. Blooded horses were apt to run straight. He could see half a mile ahead, and there were no other vehicles in sight. Only men on horseback, jogging along in groups of three and four, raising slow clouds of dust. Looking back at the rush and clatter of the runaways, they separated to the sides of the highway. Nobody shouted, or spurred after the flying devils. That was sensible and neighbourly. Even such fearfully strong colts as his best pair could not keep up this speed forever, but,

by George! what wind the rascals had! He was collected enough to feel a thrill of pride in them for that. He had no use for a broken-winded horse.

Those girls behind there were behaving well. He would tell them so when the run was over. Dear little Molly was a brick—a thoroughbred to the backbone. There was n't another such angel in the United States of North America. And that nice little friend of hers, who had promised him a copy of Molly's picture, had a cool head of her own. If they upset he prayed that it might be upon sandy soil. He had been over more times than he could tell. Once he broke a collar bone — once a small bone in his arm; once he got a bad cut on the head and was picked up senseless. He hoped that he would be tossed out first when the crash should come, that Molly might fall on him.

Could it be possible that they were almost at the top of the long hill already? This was speed with a vengeance, and the brutes were as fresh as when they started. If they showed no signs of slowing up— *Now!*



" THEN A CURVE AND A HILL."

Up to this second he had sat motionless and erect, his eyes upon the straightened backs and streaming manes. As quick as thought he flung the useless reins to Walter Finney, and with one tremendous bound cleared the dashboard, alighted upon the back of the off-horse, and had his powerful hands upon his windpipe.

It was a quarter of a mile from the bottom to the top of the hill. The throttled horse staggered within his length of the summit. As he dropped in his tracks Walter Finney had his mate by the bit. In half a minute a dozen men were about them and the danger was over.

Then, and not until then, Molly Minor fainted dead away in her friend's arms. When Daniel had choked the horse down he promptly and scientifically seated himself upon his head, while other hands undid straps and buckles. Sitting thus, he saw Walter Finney lift the limp white figure in his arms and carry her tenderly down to the creek, Virginia Venable at his heels. The bright head lay upon the bearer's shoulder, one little gloved hand hung

loosely over his coat sleeve. Had the shock *killed* the tender creature ?

“ Here! ” yelled Daniel hoarsely. “ One of you fellows take my place upon this cursed beast! I ’m wanted down there! ”

He overtook Walter before he got to the water.

“ You ’re winded, Finney! ” roughly, but not harshly. “ Let me help you. ”

Between them they carried her to the bank and laid her upon a patch of turf under a clump of willows, her head upon Virginia Venable’s lap, and both hurried to the creek. Their hats had been lost a mile back, and they had nothing in which to dip up water. Walter seized upon a wide leaf and shaped it into a cup. Daniel pressed the little fingers and the edges of his broad palms together, scooped up half a pint of water, and lost not a drop on the way back to Molly’s side. Then he fell upon his knees, the precious liquid still safe, and offered it. Virginia looked her gratitude as she dipped her fingers into it.

“ Thank you! You always have your wits within call, ” she said, quietly.

She had loosened the lace ruffles about the rounded throat, and put back the hair from Molly's face. At the first dash of the water the fainting girl caught her breath convulsively. At the second application she uttered a weak, piteous cry, and unclosed her eyes languidly. They met Walter Finney's as he knelt on the other side of her, the dripping leaf-cup in his hand, every feature eloquent of love and distress. Molly gave a stronger cry and threw her arms around his neck, hiding her face upon his breast.

“Oh, my love! my brave, *brave*, noble darling! You saved my life!”

Any man in the circumstances would have pressed her to his heart for one ecstatic instant and kissed the tousled bunch of curls—cheeks and lips being inaccessible. Men less favoured by nature had nicknamed Walter Finney “the pet of the petticoats,” and more than insinuated that manliness had deteriorated in the petting process. If it had, a remnant of prime quality made a gallant rally now. He looked straight over Molly's head into his rival's horrified eyes.

“ You are mistaken, dear,” he said, in gentle decision. “ You owe your life—all of us owe our lives—to Mr. Cocke. There is not another man in the county who would have dared to do what he has done to-day. It was the grandest thing I ever saw. Thank him — not me.”

Thoroughbred Molly made worthy use of her senses now that she had them back and in order. Raising herself from Walter’s arm, she reached out for Virginia’s hand to assist her to her feet, and held up both of her hands to her rescuer, gravely and sweetly. The moment was too solemn for blushes and coquetry.

“ I do thank you, Daniel,” using the name as easily as if it were her hourly custom to address him by it. “ I thank and bless you with all my heart. I can never forget how gloriously brave you were—never! I did n’t know what I was saying just now. You see”—a glimmering smile indenting one cheek—“ I never fainted before. Forgive me — won’t you, d-dear friend ? ”

“ Don’t mention it,” stammered Daniel, letting go the cold fingers he longed agonisedly

to warm at his lips. “We’ve all had a mighty narrow escape. I’m deucedly sorry it was my team that behaved so badly—and my bit that broke, don’t you know. It’s I who ought to beg pardon of every one of you, I’m sure. So we’ll let the matter drop. Now”—with a show of bustling away from a disagreeable subject—“the question is how to get these ladies home, Finney. If you’ll get some sort of a carriage from somewhere in the neighbourhood—by-the-way, that’s your brother’s house on the hill over yonder, is n’t it?—I’ll hunt up another bit and drive these fellows to Oakwold. They ought to be driven right off, you know, if they are ever to be worth anything again, and I ought to be the man to handle them, you know.”

Mrs. Goode Minor sat in a cushioned and valanced rocking-chair upon the front porch at eight o’clock that evening, awaiting in serene patience the return of her “young people.” The white heat of the August day had flushed into royal purple and gold, and these were cooling into greys and blues behind the hills that gave Deepford “a prospect” in

the low-lying midlands. In the catalpas, acacias, and poplars shading the lawn, in the hedges and flower-pots, myriads of tiny pipes were in tuning for the insect vespers. Upon the topmost twig of a giant oak by the gateway a mocking-bird was preluding an *opus* that would last far into the night. The pungent scent of the warmed box-borders made a harmonious chord of perfume with day-lilies, roses, and honeysuckle. Mrs. Goode Minor's spirit was sufficiently at leisure from care and calculation to imbibe the influences of the hour and scene. The cleanest house in the county was behind her; a model plantation before her eyes; a model conscience stretched itself at easeful length within her chaste bosom. Her chair swung smoothly upon the rockers; while she rocked she kept herself cool by slow sweeps of a white turkey-feather fan, and while she fanned she talked, all in the same metre.

Mr. Goode Minor, blue-shaven and dapper, carefully apparelled in a black coat, white waistcoat, white pantaloons, ruffled shirt and starched white cravat, his feet set off by pumps

and silver buckles, occupied a high-backed arm-chair set at a respectful distance from his lady wife. Had not thirty years' experience acquainted him with the perils of inattention, he must have dozed to the tuneful purr that lent itself amiably to the peace of the twilight.

“Yes,” answering herself, after the manner of the habitual monologist, “I am thankful that Mary Scott's choice of a bosom friend has fallen upon such a sensible, exemplary young person as Virginia Venable. Without being brilliant, she is intelligent and a safe adviser. One could wish for her own sake that she were not so plain in appearance, poor child! and that she had a trifle more of ‘dash’ about her. That makes up, to a great extent, for the want of beauty in a woman. But she is a lady, born and bred, and may, I devoutly hope and trust, secure a good husband some day who will take care of her. If she should not, some home would be opened for her, such as ours, for example, when all the children are settled in houses of their own. Or Mary Scott would find her a great convenience. A large establishment like Oakwold can always make room

for one who would act as a general overlooker, and so on."

Mr. Goode Minor laid the plump calf of one leg across the knee of the other and cleared his throat deferentially, then opened his discreet mouth and spake:

"You think, then, that Mary Scott likes him?"

"That is a question no right-minded mother ever asks a well-bred daughter until she is engaged," responded his mentor, with the impersonal composure of one who enunciates a general principle. "I have no fear what the answer will be when the time comes. My children are not in the habit of disappointing my expectations. They know that I have their best interests at heart, and trust entirely in my judgment. If this were not so I have lived to little purpose."

Mr. Goode Minor let his leg down and stooped forward to rub the calf as if the knee had hurt it.

"Of course! Of course! you are the proper judge in such matters, my dear. But I had an idea—erroneous probably, for men are poor critics of love-affairs—that is, of those which

are not their own —” chuckling fatuously. “But I was about to remark that I had an idea at one time that Mol—Mary Scott and young Finney were very good friends. Walter’s father and I were at William and Mary together. In fact, we were room-mates, and very good friends. Very good friends indeed. Walter reminds me of his father. In looks, that is, and voice and manner. And there does n’t seem to be any harm in the boy.”

“No harm, and not much of anything else,” retorted his wife, without altering the swing of rocker, fan, and tone. “He is well enough in his place, I dare say. But that place is not at my daughter’s side, except as a common acquaintance. I suppose the young man *has* intentions and hopes. In fact, I can see that he is deeply enamoured of Mary Scott. Coming, as he does, of a good old family, and being, so far as I know, of irreproachable character and fairly well educated, with an easy, pleasing address, we cannot object to his visits. He can never enter our family circle except as a visitor.”

She was great in her line, and her diplomatic

talents were of a high order. She was not a seeress, although notable as a conqueror of circumstance. While her equable mind hung in the hammock of complacent thought, two carriages were rolling toward Deepford along the roads traversed two hours earlier by one. The tilbury was in advance of a buggy drawn by a single horse. This last was the property of Robert Finney, Walter's married brother, near whose hospitable gates the runaway team was checked. The ladies of the household were not at home, and they had gone in the family carriage. The one available vehicle suitable for the purpose desired was the light buggy. By the time a bit was fitted in place of that broken, a smart roadster was in the shafts of the borrowed carriage and both conveyances were at the door. Virginia spared the situation all embarrassment by declaring her intention of driving to Deepford with Mr. Cocke. She was "never afraid of horses, and coveted the little excitement of another drive behind this particular pair. She wanted to see how they would behave after the frolic they had had all to themselves."

“You see—” to the knot of men whose perplexity gave way to admiration as the clear brave eyes looked from one to the other— “they would not have run had not the bit snapped. Any one of us would have done the same in the circumstances. Only, with us, the bit never breaks. Nobody was to blame, and it is but just that I should show my appreciation of this by going back as I came. Molly’s nerves have had a shock, and I cannot think of her going in the larger carriage. I don’t believe that I have any nerves. It sounds shocking I know,” with a delightful little laugh at herself, “but the deficiency is Nature’s fault, not mine. Mr. Cocke will accept me as a passenger, I am sure. If not, I’m afraid I shall be so rude as to go without his leave.”

“I’d give my head”—broke out honest Daniel, when they were on the road. “It is n’t much of a head, and there’s mighty little in it, at any time; but I’d swap it off, right out of hand, and give handsome boot with it, for one-tenth of your knack of doing and saying the right thing just in the nick of

time. I was born a bungler, a bungler I 'll live, and a bungler I 'll die."

"You made a magnificent bungle of what you did to-day," said Virginia, in fine irony. "Don't depreciate yourself, Mr. Cocke. Let your friends be the judges sometimes."

"Bah! that was nothing. We had but one chance, and I took it. Who would n't? There was no other way of getting hold of the horse. I don't deserve to be praised, for I had done it once before when I was only nineteen, and not near so strong as I am now. It was a colt I was breaking. The rein broke that time. So, I knew there was n't much risk if a fellow only kept a cool head. If there had been I 'd have acted just the same — with her on the back seat and almost certain death before us. You see, I knew that bridge. It would n't have stood the first jump of those horses.

"I don't say"—he resumed, gloomily, after a brief pause, and without noticing that his companion had paled perceptibly, and put her hands together in devout thanksgiving—"that I could have leaped so straight and 'lighted so

true, and squeezed that windpipe so hard, if I had known then what I do now. It was the look she gave me at the store when she said she was n't afraid when I was driving, that put the strength of forty men into me. I had n't seen her arms around another fellow's neck then. Oh, Lord !”

The groan was too much like a prayer to sound profane. They were in the heart of a forest. Hoofs and wheels were muffled by the fallen leaves. The western sky was still bright behind them, but there were cool glooms in the thick of the woods, and stealthy shadows invaded the road. The horses, skittish after their adventure, put up pointed ears on entering the dusky vista, and the chief offender jumped aside at the cry of a bird in the thicket. His master said a soothing word to him, and then, to Virginia—

“ Don't be afraid! You are quite safe.”

“ I know it !”

“ I wish to Heaven that all women meant what they say as much as you do, Miss Venable,” the ring of pain returning to his voice.

“ Men would n't be made such fools of, then.

17

And I have been such a blamed, blasted, downright, *doggoned* fool! I don't believe there is another such idiot in the United States of North America. I declare, if you were not along, I'd throw the reins down this minute and lash those rascals until they ran me into eternity."

"I am thankful that I am here, then. A man is not a fool because he loves a good woman. You will be better, if you are not happier, all your life, for a pure, true love. I know no man who has finer opportunities and greater responsibilities than you have. I don't expect you to see this now. It will come to you some time. God never put it into the power of anyone of your fellow creatures—be it woman or man—to spoil utterly the life of your mother's son."

His face was set toward the horses. He did not move, or speak, for so long that she broke the silence deprecatingly:

"I did not mean to lecture you, Mr. Cocke. Only I am so sorry for your unhappiness—I wish so much that I could be of any service to you—that I am afraid I may go too far——"



"THERE WERE COOL GLOOMS IN THE THICK OF THE WOOD."

She stopped there in actual alarm at the convulsive heave of the great shoulders as he gulped down some obstruction in his throat. It gurgled queerly as it went; his chin fell upon his breast.

“Thank you!” he said, thickly, without turning. “I’m *glad* you said that about my mother!”

III

Virginia Venable had the room she shared at night with Molly Minor all to herself from half-past nine o’clock until eleven that evening.

Walter Finney had stayed to supper, but left as soon as the meal was over, pleading that he must return his brother’s buggy. His own riding-horse was tied to the back of the vehicle, and he drove away into the warm murkiness of the summer night, subdued and sober, without having had a glimpse of Molly since the instant he delivered her to her mother and told the story of the mishap, expatiating magnanimously upon Daniel Cocke’s heroic feat.

The hero did not linger for tale or praise. He helped Virginia from the tilbury without saying a word, lifted his hat, still dumbly, to her, and bowed comprehensively to host and hostess, who were standing at the top of the steps, got into the carriage, and was gone. He might hide his hurt. He could not bear the touch of officious fingers, however friendly, upon it.

“ Daniel Cocke can always be depended upon to do the dignified, modest thing,” commented the incomparable mother, when the narrative was finished. “ We cannot be too thankful to a Divine Providence and to that most estimable young man for the preservation of valuable lives. Mr. Minor and I will drive over early to-morrow to Oakwold and express to him as well as we can the sense of what we owe to him. Language is all too weak in such cases. Mr. Finney, will you kindly thank your brother for the loan of his buggy. I could wish that you, Mary Scott, had arisen far enough above your childish fears to emulate Virginia Venable’s example and returned to your father’s house in the same conveyance

you left it in. It is not surprising that Mr. Daniel Cocke felt the imputation upon his ability to take care of you. No pains must be spared in the future to disabuse his mind of the impression. You had better go directly to the chamber, now, child. Delilah will bring you a cup of strong tea, and you will lie down and remain perfectly quiet until your nerves recover their tone. They must be in a pitiable condition, or you would not have given way to such babyish timidity.”

With all this and many etceteras gliding from her straight lips as tepid syrup from a full pitcher, she swept her daughter out of sight, and, as I have said, the lovers saw each other no more that night.

Nor was Virginia more fortunate for a while. Absolute quiet was the only assuasive for such excitement as Mary Scott had undergone. It was quite possible that it might be expedient for her to spend the night in her mother's room. Virginia Venable would do well to retire early herself. From all that the speaker could gather from Mr. Walter Finney's somewhat incoherent account of the accident, that

young lady had behaved admirably, but the reaction would come, and she must fortify herself to sustain it.

As a girder in the fortification the thoughtful hostess sent a hail-storm mint-julep to Miss Venable's room at ten o'clock.

Eugene Aram brought it upon a silver tray, also his mistress's love, and her " hopes that it may give Miss Virginia a good night's rest."

" Set it down," ordered the young lady, pointing to a table. " How does your Miss Mary Scott feel by this time ? "

The mulatto pursed up his lips and rolled his eyes from wall to wall.

" I ain't been let to see her, ma'am. But Delily, she say as how there is big goin's on in ' the charmer.' Marster, he been settin' in the dinin'-room ever sence supper."

" At what time are you going to Lochgyle to-night, Eugene ? "

" 'Bout midnight, ma'am."

" If those shutters are open"—designating an end window—" come under the window and wait until I throw something down."

" Yes, ma'am."

Now, Lochgyle was the Finney homestead, four miles away, and Miss Mary Scott had a duplicate key to her father's stables. Her own riding-horse was at Eugene Aram's service whenever he set forth on his nocturnal wooing. The note for which he was to wait would be weighted with the key. Mrs. Goode Minor's wits were sharp, but Cupid's tools were sharper.

The night was close and hot, and the young lady, besides being thirsty, was somewhat shaken by the events of the afternoon. Yet, after dismissing Delilah, who came at the usual hour to undress her, she looked dubiously at the tumbler still untouched. The mingled amber and crystal of the contents were dimly visible through the gathering film upon the outside of the glass; the crown of green mint sprays was redolent of joys to be tasted with the sipping of such nectar as is never mixed in perfection except by Virginians upon Virginia soil.

“ Is it worth her while to put a pinch of morphine in it, I wonder ? ” she mused. “ If she thought so, my good night's rest is a foregone conclusion. ”

She took up the tumbler, held it between her and the lamp, tasted it tentatively in feminine fashion with the tip of her tongue and the outer edges of her lips, and decided to take the risk of deeper draughts. In setting down the emptied glass another section of her reverie was half audible :

“ That woman has a heart as tough as a baseball, and a head as hard as the bat. As a compounder of summer drinks and of felonies against happiness, she is without a peer. She reckons without her host if she is counting upon dear Daniel as an accomplice.”

The darkness was beginning to make itself felt in freshening air flowing in with the moonlight through the four windows of the spacious room. She extinguished the lamp, curled herself up in a window-seat like a white kitten, and sat looking out over the tree-tops at the stars, and thinking hard.

Her life had been tame, heretofore. She had always craved adventure. Here was one, uncommon in pattern, if not in material. With all her common sense she hankered after romantic complications. She was in the thick

of a triple “ affair,” where she felt herself called upon by justice and affection to enact the *deus ex machina*. She was scrupulously honest in dealing with her subjective self, and now pressed home a query that had haunted her ever since the horse shied in the pine-shadowed road. Was personal interest coming to the front in the matter forced upon her consideration ? If so, would it introduce further complexity ? or would it be a trail out of the labyrinth ?

She had settled the question in her own mind when the door-knob rattled agitatedly, and somebody moved, wraith-like, from the darker end of the room into the moonlight, paused for a second to accustom her eyes to the *chiaroscuro*, then made a rush for the window-seat, flung herself upon her knees, her head upon her friend’s shoulder, and gave way to hysterical sobbing.

“ Oh, V. V. ! I am n-^ot to see him again until I promise to g-give him up forever. My heart is b-broken ! ”

“ Then we must find somebody who can mend it. ”

Virginia pulled up the shaking form into her strong young arms, and raised to the moonlight a face that was sodden and discoloured with weeping.

“As to giving him up, that will be the last thing you will do, for it will not happen until death do you part. The first step is to get you cool and quiet, you forlorn little duck! I wish I had not drunk that julep! It was simply delicious, and there was no end of Dutch courage in it. She did n't give you any? I thought not. The weaker you are, the better—for some things. Take a drink of ice-water, and let me bathe your face. Here are my salts. Or would you prefer cologne? Now, what is it all about?”

The “about” was formidable to the confidante, insurmountable to the narrator. “Mother” had lectured her for a solid hour and a half upon the iniquity of loving Walter Finney, and the sacred duty and awful necessity of marrying Daniel Cocke. If any doubt had existed in any well-regulated mind as to this last point, it was removed by the incident of the afternoon. The master of Oakwold had

perilled his life to save hers, and in the sight of so many that her name would be a by-word and a hissing among respectable people if she did not reward him by becoming his wife.

“ She said that D-Daniel Cocke was a k-king among men, and that if Walter Finney had l-loved me one-tenth as much as he p-pretends, he would have jumped upon the other horse and choked him d-down too. I said that he had c-caught him by the bridle, and the horse nearly lifted him off his f-feet, and that was what scared me so. She told me not to c-contract her again; that, by his own confession he sat still like a c-coward, and let Daniel C-Cocke do everything until the danger was over. She had thought him a gentleman, at least, who would t-take care of a girl committed to his care by c-confiding p-parents, but this affair showed him in his true colours.”

“ And what, may I ask, in the spirit of patient investigation, were you doing all this time ? ”

Molly’s sobs were redoubled; the stammer became a stutter.

“ What c-could I d-do, V. V.? Don’t talk

to m-me in that way! I 'm miserable enough without your t-turning against me too. You never heard mother when she is fairly under way. She d-don't raise her voice, or l-look angry, but every word goes through you like a knife."

Virginia was sternly inquisitorial and realistic.

" Did you tell her that you had thrown yourself into Walter Finney's arms, and let him kiss you and hug you before Daniel Cocke's eyes and mine ? "

Molly Minor glanced wildly at the door.

" For mercy's sake, don't speak of it! She would have *killed* me then and there! "

" What if Mr. Cocke should tell her to-morrow morning ? "

" He won't do it. No gentleman would. Clumsy and stupid as he is, Daniel Cocke is a gentleman. "

" He is a *man* ! whom neither you nor your mother appreciates. She values him for his riches. You would like to have them too, if you could get them without taking an honest man's love. "

Molly flushed up furiously.

“I don't care a rap for his money! I have thought sometimes that I d-did. I was quite certain I did when we were at the Court-house to-day, and everybody was staring at me, and admiring me, and the fine c-carriage, and all. I wondered if, after all, mother might not be right when she t-tells me that it is b-better to make sure of the substantial things that won't fade, like beauty and what young people call eternal devotion, and all that, you know. It was a wicked, *wicked* t-temptation; and oh! how I have been punished for it! I knew the real truth as soon as the horses began to run, and there sat my dear right in front of me, and he might be killed the next minute. And did you see the look he turned around to give me? And he put his hand back to give mine one squeeze, and I thought it meant 'Good-bye, and God bless you!' and I just prayed with all my might that I might be forgiven for thinking for one second of marrying anybody else, and if God could n't save us both, He 'd let us die together. I wish we had, if I am to do as mother says and never see him again, except

to tell him that we can never, never, *never* belong to one another!"

Virginia gathered the child again in her arms and kissed her.

"You blessed, true-hearted *woman*! You found your soul while we were rushing headforemost to destruction—that is certain. How dare you come to me whining that you must give Walter up and marry somebody else? Child! don't you know that would be a sin—a foul, *vulgar* sin—such as blackens a woman's soul for time and for eternity?"

"You don't know mother," faltered Molly. "She told me that the curse of Heaven would follow me if I turned out to be an undutiful, ungrateful child. She quoted Scripture by the yard to prove it, V. V."

"So did Satan, upon several occasions," observed the other, sententiously. "As to the curse of Heaven, it is n't to be had upon call, whatever some pious people may think. Listen to me, Molly Minor. All you have to do is to hold fast for love and for life to Walter Finney. He is not cut out by such a liberal pattern or out of such stout material as Daniel,

but there is good stuff in him. And since you want him and he wants you—

Jack shall have Jill ;
Naught shall go ill.

That 's a counter-charm to the curse you are afraid of. How is it to be brought about ? That is none of your business. Hold fast in your heart of hearts to Walter, and be as kind as the law of loving another man allows to Daniel. Sit down at that table and write all this to Walter. Eugene Aram will be under the window for the note in ten minutes. Then go to bed and sleep the tear-marks off your cheeks and the pain out of your dear heart.”

For ten successive days Mrs. Goode Minor appeared at the breakfast-table with her freshest war-paint on. Her cambric gown was like cream-laid, satin-wove writing-paper for stiffness and gloss ; her fair hair was parted with geometrical precision in a line with her thin-nostriled nose ; the pale grey eyes were hard and bright, the mouth was a narrow gash in the tranquil severity of her visage. The servants knew her weather-signs, and went softly and

delicately about their tasks; Mr. Goode Minor carved circumspectly, ate sparingly, and passed most of the daylight hours abroad, "looking after the plantation." Virginia Venable was placidly unobservant, and helped Molly to maintain a show of cheerful ignorance. Upon the eleventh day the daughter was summoned into "the chamber" confessional. The inquisitor-general would know why Mr. Walter Finney had not showed his face at Deepford since the day of the accident. There was something sinister in his absence and silence.

For the first time since her babyhood Molly Minor faced her judge courageously. Her cheeks were pink, and her eyes glowed with strange fire.

"I wrote to him not to come here again, mother. It was not worth while to give you the trouble of forbidding him the house. For that was what you meant to do. I told him that I was not to meet him anywhere, or write to him again until you had plenty of time for changing your mind."

"Did I ever change my mind, Mary Scott?"

“Not that I know of, ma’am. While I am under age it is my duty to obey you. I promised you and I promised V. V. to do it, and I’ll keep my word, whatever it may cost me. I wrote this to Walter. But I told him at the same time that I should n’t change my mind while grass grows and water runs.”

She ran it off fast, without the symptom of a stammer, her colour warmer and her eyes brighter with each word.

Mrs. Goode Minor knit one ivory needle free of the Saxony wool and the other half-full before she spoke.

“You have behaved very well, my child, considering all things,” she uttered, then. “The sacrifice will be made up to you some day in a way you least expect. God bless you for a dutiful daughter!”

What the superbland benedictorian least expected was that a verbatim report of the interview in Virginia Venable’s handwriting would go off under the cover of that night to Walter Finney. “Time and I against any other two,” was the spirit if not the letter of her policy. Daniel Cocke had been to Deepford

twice that week ; and as, at the special request of that most modest of heroes, no verbal allusion was made to the daring leap for a quartette of lives, he was less self-conscious in talk and action than was his former wont, and comported himself like the acknowledged friend of the household, secure of his standing and his welcome. He was always more at his ease in Walter Finney's absence, and was now apparently inclined to accept that young gentleman's disappearance from the field as a favourable augury.

And the stately ship of the chatelaine's personality and schemes went on, bound for the haven under the lee of the Oakwold domain, and all the county lifted admiring hands at the changeless triumphs of such diplomacy as her simple-souled neighbours had only read of in novels and in history, ancient and modern. It was next to certain that her youngest child was as ductile in her supple fingers as her brothers and sisters had proved themselves. Molly's subdued aspect carried out the supposition. Her pretty coquetries, her saucy sallies and frolicsome humours were blended and mel-

lowed into gentle vivacity that was winning, but unfamiliar to her mates. She went abroad as freely and frequently as ever with her guest, but seldom met her late lover. He had taken to the law in hard earnest, said the gossips, and had become a recluse from the haunts that once knew him best. A rumour that never got to Mrs. Goode Minor's ears was that Daniel Cocke was “throwing business” of all sorts into the hands of his defeated rival. That, to the gossip-mongers' apprehension, settled the matter definitely. Daniel had the kindest heart in the world, and he could afford to be magnanimous. His blooded hunter was tied to the Deepford horse-rack two mornings of each week, as a rule, and one, two, sometimes three afternoons of the same week, his double buggy and fast trotters dashed through the long street of the Court House with the owner upon the box-seat, Molly Minor and her bosom friend behind him, and, in seeming, as well contented as he.

Mrs. Goode Minor could have confirmed all these rational conclusions had it been her habit to divulge the inner history of the Deepford

family life. Daniel Cocke had always been fond of music. Now he asked no better entertainment than to listen to Molly's school-girlish execution of waltzes, marches, and quicksteps, and her artless warblings, based upon *The Heart Bowed Down*, *Here We Meet too Soon to Part*, *Thou Hast Wounded the Spirit that Loved Thee*, *The Last Rose of Summer*, and such other mournful and elegiac ballads as our foremothers made merry withal in their girlhood.

Once in several hours Mrs. Goode Minor, knitting-work in hand and key-basket on arm, would look into the drawing-room, accept the seat big Daniel set forward for her, and enter into affable discourse with "her young people." She always found Virginia Venable established at an improvised easel near the front windows, busily engaged in working up to artistic excellence a copy of the sketch of Molly and the dogs taken in the arbour. It was an open secret that the finished drawing was to be Daniel Cocke's property — a circumstance of which the mother, with characteristic delicacy, feigned to be ignorant. She criticised the

work amiably and sparingly, the artist receiving each suggestion gratefully, and acting upon it so obediently that her patroness became cautious in offering hints. The dear girl really attached too much importance to her careless remarks. She was an ignoramus in such matters as art, and did not know much more of music as a science. She was more than grateful to Mr. Cocke for stimulating that naughty, lazy child to keep up her practising. Young ladies were so apt to drop accomplishments when they left school. Mr. Cocke's taste for music was inherited. His mother, who was the dear friend of her girlhood, was the best performer in Mr. Persico's school in Richmond when they two were there together.

A given quantity of these complaisant mouthings having been flowed—a verbal veneer—over the surface intercourse that concealed much far more interesting to the maternal soul, the manœuvrer would withdraw her feet from the carpeted threshold, piously pleased with Heaven, and so much of Heaven's law as she was permitted to amend and execute.

“ Slow and sure, is certainly our good Daniel Cocke’s policy,” she condescended to remark, confidentially, to her husband the week after the two girls had left Deepford for Petersburg.

Virginia had begged for and obtained the maternal sanction to a visit of a month or six weeks from her friend. It was now late October, and a lively blaze sang upon the hearth of “ the chamber ” where the wedded pair were sitting after supper.

“ Daniel Cocke called this morning while you were at the Court House,” she continued, “ and I made so free with him as to ask him in here. He seemed really touched by the invitation. I think he took in all that it signified. Indeed, he said as much, and in quite a handsome way for a diffident man.

“ ‘ You were my mother’s friend, Mrs. Minor,’ he said, ‘ I hope you will always be mine. I have the highest regard for the whole family, and your kindness in asking me into this room goes to my heart. Nobody has occupied “ the chamber ” at Oakwold since my mother died. I keep it locked up.’

“ Then he fidgeted in his chair and turned

red in his bashful way, and began to blunder in his talk. ‘I have hoped lately, Mrs. Minor, —I mean, I should like,—I am a lonely man, and it would be a good thing for me—and I should be a heap happier——’

“At that minute, as ill luck would have it, in came Eugene Aram with cake and wine, and broke off the sentence. Of course, as Mary Scott’s mother, I could not broach the subject again. But I drank a glass of wine to his health and happiness, and the realisation of his fondest schemes. And I could see by his manner of thanking me that he quite took in my meaning. He goes to Petersburg to-morrow. His excuse for calling was to ask if I had any message for Mary Scott.”

Mr. Goode Minor rubbed the shins the brisk blaze was toasting too quickly, afterward hanging a red silk handkerchief over them as cooks put paper over bread to hinder the premature formation of the crust.

“You think, then, that she likes him?” he ventured, a canine and pathetic wistfulness in eye and accent.

Molly was never dearer to him than of late.

She had grown more tender, more considerate of his tastes and fancies—in every way more lovable. He wanted her to be happy. There were times when he was wrought up to saying (to himself) that she *should* be happy according to the dictates of her own heart, whether his wife approved her choice or not.

“ You have asked that question before, and repeatedly, my dear.” She was too contented to be sarcastic, and smiled indulgently in stirring up his small wits to the recollection of his unimportant sayings. “ Some day, perhaps, you may believe that your wife understands her own and her children’s business to some extent.”

“ Of course! certainly! *of* course! I beg pardon for seeming inquisitive. I only wondered if you had had any serious conversation with her lately upon the subject. It is a serious subject, you know, and it is just as well to be sure that a young lady knows her own mind in good time to—ah—back out,—to take the back track, as one might say, before the irrevocable jump is taken.”

Mrs. Goode Minor was holding the white

turkey-feather fan between her face and the brisk blaze. The shade was not so deep that her husband could not see the calm displeasure of the pale grey eyes turned upon him.

“ If you please, Mr. Minor, we will drop the subject entirely. It is too delicate and sacred to be alluded to in language better suited to the race-course than the decent privacy of the family circle.”

Mr. Goode Minor mumbled something about winding the dining-room clock, and tiptoed stiffly out of the chamber, as if intent upon keeping the inchoate crust from cracking. Eugene Aram was about to extinguish the lamp upon the table. His master bade him leave it, and by the light read a letter marked “ PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL,” which he had taken from the post-office that day. It was long, and he already knew it by heart, this being now the sixth perusal.

DEAR DAD AND CHUM,—Please get for me, by hook or crook (and *without letting mother know anything about it*), one thousand dollars (\$1000.00). As I want the money for my *wedding-clothes*, I shall probably never ask you for another cent while I

live. *Such* a getting up-stairs as there will be when the news gets wind! We three—He, V. V., and Me—mean to pull the wool over people's eyes as long as possible. Mother will take it hard, I am afraid, and that will be bad for you, my dear old Daddy. Mother ought to remember that *I have always been a dutiful child*, and that I am *a woman of my word*, and she knows what I told her two months ago. V. V. says you had better make the draught (or do you spell it "draft"?) or check, or cheque, or whatever you call it, payable to Daniel Cocke, Esq. If I were to draw such a large sum from the bank myself, *it might make talk*. D. C. will be here this week—bless his heart! He has been *so good*—and *so sweet*—and *so true to me and to himself*—that I love him *almost* better than anybody else in the world—with a *few* trifling exceptions. One of them is your *blessed* old Self!

Devotedly your little

MOLL.

P. S.—Write to me and *send me your blessing*. D. C. writes that he is going to *try* to tell mother before he comes to Petersburg, but V. V. and I are sure that he will not pluck up heart to do it. He is n't afraid of wild horses, or the face of man, or the Old Harry himself, but the face of mother *is altogether another thing*. *We* know that, don't we?

M. S. M.

P. P. S.—If D. C. *has* told mother, let *her* tell you. Don't let her know anything about this

letter. Keep my counsel, like the *close-mouthed angel* you are.

MOLLY SCOTT.

N. B.—Don't imagine that *anybody* will ever make me care an iota (whatever that is) less for *you* !

MARY SCOTT MINOR.

“ It is all right, I suppose.” The mystified man refolded the sheet and tucked it into the very bottom of his pocket. “ Her mother won't like being kept in the dark so long, but she will be pleased with the match, and she seems to have worked the child up to not minding it. She is a wonderful woman—her mother. I could have sworn that Molly had a sneaking fancy for the other. Poor boy! that accounts for his wringing my hand so hard in the court-house to-day. I hope he knows how I would have had things if I had had my way. His father and I were chums at William and Mary.”

Another month had gone by when there arrived at Deepford a joint epistle from the girls, pleading for an extension of Molly Minor's visit until the first of December. Mrs. Goode Minor wrote a gracious affirmative before she

departed in her carriage, wrapped in black velvet and sables, to a " dining-day " at a house six miles away, where she discoursed in her best swing and purr of the undying devotion to Mary Scott of that excellent and most judicious friend, Virginia Venable. The two girls were going into Richmond and Petersburg society together this fall, and blissfully happy, if one might judge from their letters. She foresaw trouble in getting Mary Scott back again, such was Virginia Venable's reluctance to part with her. Not that Mary Scott would rebel at the summons home. She was the most dutiful of all Mrs. Goode Minor's children, and none of them had ever disobeyed her. Mothers had a way, sometimes, of complaining of the responsibility of bringing up children. Hers had never given her a pang. She opined that undutifulness was always the result of parental mismanagement.

A handsome matron sat directly opposite to the monologist, and hearkened attentively up to this oscillation of the verbal swing. Then she smiled queerly, and it would seem involuntarily, for she composed lips and eyebrows cir-

cumspectly as Mrs. Goode Minor leaned forward to accost her.

“ Don’t you agree with me, Mrs. Finney ? ”

“ Oh, quite ! ” answered Walter Finney’s mother. “ There must be, as you say, something radically wrong in a system of management which does not create perfect confidence between mother and child, and result in absolute obedience on the part of the child. ”

Then she smiled again, more queerly than before. Mrs. Goode Minor had never liked her. There was something insincere, not to say sinister, about her. Her son Walter looked like her sometimes. She shuddered in genteel moderation at thought of the escaped danger of alliance with the two. The wisdom-fraught serpent was a simpleton compared with that dear, wise confidante who was keeping Mary Scott happily aloof from the toils of whilom lover and would-be mother-in law.

On November 29th, a day of lowering heavens and wailing winds and much tribulation among naked trees and sighing hedges, a thick letter was brought to Deepford by a negro who had been despatched to the postoffice

by the affectionate mother. Mary Scott wrote home regularly every Wednesday, and her letters reached their destination on Friday. This epistle covered eight pages; it was addressed on the outside to her mother; it began within—"My dear Mother and Father."

"Read it aloud, my dear!" said Mrs. Goode Minor, unrolling her knitting and settling herself to listen in comfort, if not leisure. "I have been looking for confidential tidings for some weeks. My motherly instinct told me that they must come shortly."

"My dear Mother and Father," began the father, when his spectacles were in place.

"It would have been more proper and dutiful had she put your name first," commented the wife.

For the second time the small, husky voice of the consort read:

MY DEAR MOTHER AND FATHER,—V. V. wanted to write to you herself, but she is *up to the eyes in work, of course*, and then, as I tell her, it is only right that I should break the news to you. Is there such a word as "*newses*"? I wish there were, for there are two of them. To crack the ice at one *thump*, on December 23, V. V. *will become*

Mrs. Daniel Cocke, of Oakwold. Does n't that take your breath *clean* away? It began on the day of the runaway in August. A “*trifle light as air*” (needless to relate here) convinced Daniel Cocke that I could never love him *except as a brother*. He took it like a cherub—or (what is better) like a brave *man*—and V. V. *braced him up* like a true, sensible, tender-hearted woman. She honoured *him* for his behaviour, and he was grateful to her for *her* sympathy. Then he made another discovery—to wit, and namely, that *she put him at his best* when he was with *her*, and that he *was at his worst*—in fact, not a bit like himself—when he was with *me*. She rubbed him the right way; I rubbed him the wrong way. Next, he discovered that the surest way to get out of love with one woman is to fall *head over ears* in love with another. Which he *forthwith* proceeded to do. As for V. V.—

The next paragraph was in Virginia Venable's handwriting:

As for her, the best thing she knows of herself is that she can appreciate the great-hearted, clean-souled man who honours her by asking her to take his mother's place in his home. I am more practical than sentimental, as you know, dear Mrs. Minor. But I am too romantic, as well as too conscientious, to marry a man whom I do not love and honour—

A blot and a scrawl blurred the paper here, as if the pen had been jerked from her fingers. Molly Minor took up the tale again :

I can testify that they love one another dearly, *dearly*, DEARLY! And they are going to be the happiest couple (so Daniel says) in the United States of North America. I say, until Walter and Me are married. (V. V. says that is n't grammatical. I don't care if it is n't. "*Me*" means more than "*I*.")

For the second news is that, as I was twenty-one years old on the fifteenth of this month, I have promised to marry my *first*, and *last*, and *only* love on the fifteenth of January, IF you, my dear parents, will give your consent to have the ceremony performed in your presence at Deepford, *in good and regular style*. If not, V. V. and her kind aunt say we can be married here on the twenty-third of December, at the same time with V. V. and D. C. I *hope* you will be reasonable. Family quarrels are *unpleasant* things, and we Minors have *never washed our soiled linen* in the public square (so to speak). If you will let me come home to be married, nobody will suspect *anything wrong*. V. V. will give us a big second-day ball at Oakwold and have half the county present. Is n't that a clever notion ?

I have had my wedding-clothes made up with V. V.'s. Mr. Daniel Cocke handed me a check

(cheque ?) for *one thousand dollars* (\$1000.00) *over a month ago* for this purpose. Father and he can settle that. That is, *if you give your consent*. If not, D. C. is kind enough to say that *it makes no difference*. Ever your loving daughter,

MARY SCOTT MINOR.

P. S.—Please answer *by return mail*.

M. S. M.

P. P. S. — Dear father and mother, my heart *aches* after reading this letter over, for I know how *hurt* and *displeased* you will be. But, indeed and indeed, I *cannot* give up Walter. *Do* forgive us, and call us *both* your children. And you see, mother, that I can't marry Daniel Cocke now, even if I wanted to. Which I *don't!*

Your little

MOLLY.

Thackeray's biographer relates that when he had finished the scene in which Becky Sharpe is actually proud of her husband's prowess in beating Lord Steyne, the great novelist smote his thigh exultantly, ejaculating: "Thackeray, my boy, that is *genius!*"

Virginia Venable had never heard the story—Thackeray being then alive—when she embraced her collaborator in the foregoing effusion with the cry: "Molly Minor! that is a

stroke of genius!" The "stroke" was in the concluding paragraph of the main epistle, and had to do with the unsuspecting Daniel's transfer of Mr. Goode Minor's check to his daughter.

Through Eugene Aram's sweetheart there came to the girl a graphic tale of the sensation produced by the master-touch. A tale of weeping and bemoaning that passed into hysterics, of a cry shriller than any other her maid within the chamber, and Eugene Aram at the keyhole, had ever heard from the straight lips—a lament over the disgrace of a shameless, thankless child who actually drew upon one suitor for money with which to make ready for her wedding with another; of frenzied adjurations to her terror-stricken spouse to write at once to Daniel Cocke—to go to see him—to send for him and make it all right, for the sake of dead-and-gone Scotts and living Minors.

However much or little the story owed to the imaginations of the retailers, it is certain that Mrs. Goode Minor kept her room and bed for a week, and refused for two days after

her arrival to see the daughter hastily summoned to her bedside.

It is as certainly true that among the guests at the Oakwold ball, which is still a notable tradition up and down the river, none bore herself with serener grace and expressed more satisfaction in the happiness of the newly wedded couples than the mother of the bride of thirty-six hours. Her daughter's beauty was the fresher and more bewitching for the contrast offered by the dark little lady who, that night, assumed the place kept forever afterward, of fashion and society leader in the region heretofore dominated by her former patroness.

It was her new son-in-law who overheard part of her conversation with a crony in a corner of the banquet-hall, and carried the same gleefully to Mrs. Daniel Cocke.

“Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Cocke are naturally devotedly attached to my daughter, Mrs. Finney,”—thus ran the tuneful monotone. “But for her they would probably never have met, and would surely never have fallen in love with one another—in fact, the dear girl made the match. Her wilful little heart was

set upon having her friend settled near her, and you know, my dear Mrs. Preston, on what terms Mr. Daniel Cocke was in our house. His mother was the friend of my girlhood, and I must always feel a lively interest in her only child. He did not select his wife for her beauty, it is true, but she has fine natural abilities and an excellent education, and she will have no trouble in managing him. He seems very fond of her, and the orphan girl could not have done better for herself. It may not be, strictly speaking, a love-match like that of my two turtle-doves, who have been all in all to each other since their babyhood, you may say, but Mr. Minor considers it a judicious marriage on both sides, and, as usual, I acquiesce in his superior judgment."





Chapter VII

The Overseer's Wife

“ THAT mother of yours is a good woman, if ever there was one!” Major Meade stood at the front window of the Fairview dining-room, watching the family carriage on its jolting way down the hill to the outer gate of the plantation. He had put his wife into it, packed sundry baskets and parcels about her, and enjoined the coachman to drive carefully over the “ washouts ” and around the mud-holes when he could do so without upsetting.

“ I wish you could have made up your mind not to go until morning,” he had said, wistfully, to his spouse. “ It is n't a fit evening for a dog to be out ! ”

Mrs. Major Meade had no sense of humour, and the equivocal remark did not provoke a smile.

“ She may not be alive in the morning,” she answered, gravely. “ I shall stay with her until all is over. There is nobody there who can be trusted. Good-bye!”

There was no appeal from her decision when given with that serious, impassive face. The major could and did grumble to his daughter, Mrs. Phil. Leigh, who was staying at the old home with her baby, the grandmother’s name-sake.

“ A good woman, if ever there was one!” he pursued. “ But so set in her ways that if she were anybody else I should call her ‘ heady.’ ”

The present expedition bore out the husband’s qualified opinion. There had been a week of March rains. Creeks were “ out ” over the low grounds; highways and private roads were wellnigh impassable. Bob Irby, the overseer, had waded his way “ across lots ” that day at noon to consult the Major upon plantation affairs, and to mention, incidentally, that his wife was “ mighty low.”

“ ‘ Pears like she could n’t hold out much longer,” he added, rolling his quid into the

other cheek and spitting, with intention, at a passing rooster. "It's what all on us has got to come to, some time, of course, but it will be mighty inconvenient in some ways when she goes. She's been a good manager—Sarah Ann has."

The conference was held on the back porch. Mrs. Major Meade's maid overheard, in passing, and reported the husband's observation to her mistress, who straightway made her preparations to visit her suffering neighbour.

As the Major's business confidante she was aware that Bob Irby would have been discharged half a dozen times in the six years of his tenure of office but for his wife. She was a Presbyterian of the strictest sort, for one thing, an excellent housekeeper, a reserved woman, who stayed at home and watched over the Major's interests, so far as she could, as she would have guarded her own, and who held her somewhat "shackling" husband up to his work. Twice, when he was laid up with a sick-headache after a visit to the Court House "to buy groceries"—both times in the Major's absence from home—Mrs. Irby had mounted

his horse and made the rounds of the plantation in person, directing "the hands" with keen intelligence and impartial severity that made them pray for Bob's speedy recovery.

"She suttently do know how to git wuk out o' niggers!" was the report made by the head man of the gang to his master, who repeated it, chucklingly, to his better half.

There was a genuine liking on Mrs. Major Meade's side for the taciturn, grim-faced sister of the church, who did much of the family sewing and made such butter as nobody else on the place could turn out; whose young chickens never had pip or gapes, and whose young turkeys lived through wayward seasons that slew the precious chicks by the hundred upon other plantations. She wove rag-carpets, too, that Mrs. Major Meade was willing to lay in her own chamber, and to exhibit to visitors as "really handsome," and every garment worn by the shambling six-footer whose name she bore was fashioned by her nimble fingers.

She had been growing thinner and sallower for the past six months, and she was never plump or rosy within the memory of her pre-

sent associates. Mrs. Major Meade had remarked upon the change in her appearance several times, and had been assured curtly, but civilly, that "nothing ailed her." The lady had, nevertheless, sent nourishing food and a bottle of her famous bitters down from "the house" for her use, and when Irby told the Major (always incidentally) one sleety February day, that "Sarah Ann was taken mighty sick last night, and kep' her bed this mornin', and I wonder if she is n't goin' to make a die of it," Mrs. Major Meade sent off, post-haste, for Dr. Henning, the best physician in the region, and an elder in Mt. Hermon Church, ordered her carriage, and drove through the storm to see the sick woman.

Mrs. Irby had not left her bed since. There was some inward, mysterious "trouble," said the doctor, which was eating away her life. The wonder was how she had kept up and about so long. She would never be up again. A skilled nurse was sent down to her from the mansion on the hill, and a strapping young girl to supplement the one old coloured woman who had come to Opecanacough with the Irbys

from Lunenburg, and had belonged to Bob Irby's mother.

If the overseer's wife were grateful for the neighbourly kindness shown to her in her low estate, she never spoke of it. Always taciturn, she was now almost dumb, never speaking except to answer a direct question, and then in the briefest possible phrase. Hour after hour she lay motionless on her back, her hands folded, her hollow eyes, black as coal, with an undying spark glowing far down in them, fixed upon the whitewashed ceiling. When Rev. Mr. Courtney, her pastor, paid his semi-weekly call, she hearkened in the same stony silence to his exhortations, his readings, his prayers. When he questioned she made reply, and her laconic utterance was rational and coherent. He could have wished for more abundant attestation to the sustaining grace always vouchsafed to the dying believer, but, after all, he placed more dependence in the testimony of a blameless, consistent Christian walk than in deathbed experiences; and so far as he could judge from Mrs. Irby's answers, she was resigned to go, or to stay.

The overseer's house was a story-and-a-half cottage, three rooms below, with two chambers under the sloping roof. It was blackened by age and weather, but when the leaves were on the trees of the encompassing grove was not uncheerful. A neat vegetable garden was at one side, a corn-field at the back. Mrs. Irby never cultivated flowers. There was not so much as a vine about the porch, or a lilac-bush at the windows. In the grey gloom of the wet March afternoon the place was lonely to dreariness. Not another dwelling was in sight. The splash of the rain from the eaves upon the guttered earth below were all the sounds the visitor heard as she paused upon the threshold. She had alighted at the gate and picked her way along the drenched gravel-walk without seeing any sign of life. Was this the stillness of death ?

She struck softly against the panels. If the sick woman were still alive, a loud knock would disturb her.

"Come!" said a faint voice from within.

One entered the death-chamber through the smaller of the two front rooms which gave

directly upon the porch. At the back of the larger room was a white bed. A fire burned upon the hearth. A table by the bed held phials, a cup-and-saucer, and a bowl.

Mrs. Major Meade looked around her in strong displeasure.

“ You are alone! This is all wrong! Where is Maria ? ”

“ I sent her upstairs to sleep. She sat up last night.”

“ Chloe should have taken her place. Where is she ? ”

“ I sent her out to the kitchen to help Judy. There is a great deal to be done—supper cooked and water heated and so on. I am going to die to-night.”

Without start or exclamation, Mrs. Meade laid aside her wraps, slipped her arm deftly under Mrs. Irby's head and put the cup to her dried lips. She did not bathe the sufferer's brow, or stroke her cheek, or even pat the bony hand upon the coverlet. She did infuse into her firm voice such assurance of sympathy and full comprehension of what the voiceless creature felt and desired, that the fierce glitter

of the cavernous eyes softened with gratitude.

“ I want to tell you where you will find things,” said the failing voice.

“ By-and-by!” reassuringly. “ Now you must rest while I dry my feet at your fire. It is very wet out-of-doors. I am going to stay with you to-night. We shall have plenty of time to talk it all over.”

The heavy lids drooped half-way over the failing light in the sick woman's eyes. They had not been wholly shut since she took to her bed. The watcher had to strain her ears to hear the flutter of the wasting breath. Her husband had spoken truly in calling her a good woman. With her whole heart she prayed for the passing soul; for a joyful deliverance from the miseries of this life and the pains of death, and an abundant entrance into everlasting life. She could not know what her sister's peculiar temptations and griefs had been and were, but since GOD knew—what matter ?

“ Mrs. Meade!”

Half an hour had passed in silence and in prayerful thought before the summons came. The nurse was on her feet instantly and passed

quietly to the bedside. A glance showed her accustomed eye that a change—the change that comes but once to any face—was there before her. Not a muscle betrayed the discovery, but the undimmed sight of the dying woman detected her knowledge of the truth. She answered as if the other had spoken :

“ Yes! it is near now. In the bottom drawer of the bureau you will find my shroud and all the rest of the things. Would you mind taking my Bible home with you? I don’t want anybody to have it that would n’t care for it.”

“ Thank you! I will keep it and prize it ” —with simple directness. “ Have you sent for your relatives? Are there any friends you would like to have me write to when you are gone? ”

“ There is nobody—anywhere! Nobody to shed a tear. Nobody to wear a stitch of mourning! ”

The strident accent, the stern desolateness of glance and feature, were terrible. It was as if Something had leaped into sight out of

the darkness, and dealt the listener a blow in the face.

“ Oh! ” she breathed, involuntarily. And then—“ Your husband will miss you sadly. He has said so, more than once, to us.”

Mrs. Irby twisted her head on the pillow, and lay with her face to the wall. The watcher could have believed that she smiled—and not pleasantly.

There was another long silence.

Mrs. Meade leaned over the silent figure.

“ Mrs. Irby! this is the honest hour. If you have any word to leave for anybody you may trust me to give it. I have thought, sometimes, that you had a great sorrow on your mind—perhaps the recollection of some wrong done to you. You have seemed so lonely—and never very happy. There may be somebody—somewhere—who would be comforted if you could forgive him—or her—before you go away. I may be mistaken. But we all have need to pray: ‘ Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.’ ”

“ *I* have n't said that in twenty years! ” She raised her hands and clenched the fists

hard. "Nor ever shall! I won't go before my Maker with a lie in my mouth!"

A rush of blood choked her. Nightgown, coverlet, and the arms tossed aloft in the agony of suffocation—were dyed red. Mrs. Meade raised her to a sitting posture and knocked violently upon the wall to awaken the sleeper in the room overhead.

When Maria ran into the room it was to see her mistress lay the breathless form back upon the pillow and shut out with her hand the awful stare of the sightless eyes.

By ten o'clock that night, the household was in order. The stiff, comfortless order that strikes a chill to the heart because it means so much and so little; because it matters less than nothing to the stark clay which is the cause of the decent parade; because it signifies everything that is definite and irrevocable to living beholders.

Such was the custom of the times. It was also obligatory upon friends or neighbours of the deceased—never upon the near of kin—to sit up all night in the presence of the corpse, or in an adjoining room, through the open door of

which the remains were kept in full view. Substantial refreshments were spread upon a table and hot coffee simmered upon the hearth.

Mrs. Major Meade was not imaginative, or in the least romantic. She did not speculate as to the probable origin of gruesome regulations that had been in force in all respectable Virginia households long before she was born. No association of classic "funeral baked meats," or the ancient vigil kept about the dead, lest demons should seize upon the body and the scarcely liberated spirit, diverted her mind from the business of the occasion. As the wife of Bob Irby's employer, mistress of two of the servants who obeyed her orders, and the nearest neighbour and fellow church-member of the just-departed, she took command and had things done decently and in order.

Not until she had sent the widower to bed—after seeing him mitigate his noisy grief by a bountiful supper—packed Chloe and Judy off to the outdoor kitchen, and bidden Maria lie down upon a pallet in the back room to be within call, did the perfunctory mood of the

“capable” woman of the county give place to one of sincere regret and gentlest pity. That Mrs. Irby had a history she had believed since her first interview with her. Her reticence with regard to her early life, the singular isolation of one who must have had family ties like the rest of her kind, the control she exercised over the weaker husband whom she did not affect to love, belonged to the hard side of her nature. None of the acquaintances she had made of late years had had a glimpse of the softer side, if there were one.

Mrs. Meade drew her rocking-chair to the corner of the hearth where she could command a view of the inner room, and took up from the candle-stand beside her the Bible which was her legacy. It was bound in rusty calf-skin; the fly-leaf, that had probably borne the owner's name, was torn out. The stout volume was worn by many readings. A glance showed that the Old Testament had been conned more diligently than the New—not an uncommon thing at that period of the Church's evolution. A leaf fell into the new owner's hand as she opened the book. It contained

the twenty-seventh chapter of Genesis—the story of Jacob's thievish masquerade in his brother's birthright robe. Another leaf fluttered out as the lady would have turned it, and hung by a thread to the back. She read the italicized heading of a chapter:

“ Jacob, coming to the well of Haran, meeteth Rachel and is entertained by Laban. He covenanteth for her, but is deceived by Laban. Rachel also given him to wife on a new agreement.”

She put the leaf carefully back into place, and repeated audibly the text that arose to her lips:

“ Be not deceived ; God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.”

The seed the undutiful stripling put into the earth had brought forth bitter retribution for the man.

The Bible fell wide open, of itself, at the Sixty-ninth Psalm. Two verses were enclosed in brackets and heavily underscored:

“ Pour out Thine indignation upon them, and let Thy wrathful anger take hold of them :

“ Let their habitation be desolate, and let none dwell in their tents.”

“ Dear me!” The reader laid down the

book with a shiver that was not born of the chill night. "This is dreadful! Poor soul! poor, unhappy, unforgiving soul!"

A sudden wind was rising; a draught from the dim room behind her waved the flames of the candles uneasily. She arose to set the light-stand in a corner, noting, as she moved it, that a ragged winding-sheet had gathered upon each candle. Moved by custom and tradition, she took up one and went into the death-chamber to see that naught was amiss there. An inexplicable impulse made her draw down the smooth sheet and look at the face it had covered. For the first time it occurred to her that Sarah Ann Irby might have been—not pretty, but handsome, once. The forehead was fine, the nose well formed, although made too prominent now by the thinness of the cheeks. The mouth, stern and close-set in life, had relaxed into lines that were almost comely; the abundant hair, streaked with grey, must have been of a rich brown twenty years ago. The twenty years that had gone by since she had said, "Forgive us our trespasses!"

Mrs. Meade replaced the face-covering with another shudder, as involuntary as the first, and went back to her rocking-chair. She had exchanged her dress for a double flannel wrapper she had brought along in the expectation of watching all night with the sick woman. It was none too warm as the sullen wind grew boisterous by fits, and the time wore on toward midnight. An owl cried to his mate in a tree back of the house, and was answered far down the road; a cat mewed, first under one window, then the other, as it made the rounds of the dwelling. The listener reflected, with relief, that the sashes in the other room were raised but a couple of inches. A cat was an ugly creature to have about in the circumstances.

She wished she had her knitting, or some other book to read than the Bible she was oddly reluctant to open again. When a backlog broke in the middle, letting a brand down at each end of the hearth, she jumped upon her chair. This must be what weak people suffered from as nervousness. A rough gust shook a great shower of drops from the laden boughs of a cedar at the corner of the porch.

She heard no steps or other sound until somebody knocked upon the door.

“ The Major ! ” she thought, with relief of which she would have been ashamed two hours ago. It was like him to come out in the dead of night to look after her. She hastened to open unto him, her stout heart never admitting the idea of possible marauders.

A woman stood in the doorway. Tall, gaunt, clothed in a shapeless cloak or robe that draped her to her feet; something white, wrapped about her head and under her chin, giving her the aspect of a hooded nun. By firelight and candle-light, Mrs. Meade saw her face as plainly as she had seen it an hour ago in the other room. For form and features were those of Sarah Ann Irby, who had died at four o'clock that afternoon. It was her voice, too, that said, while she stood without the threshold :

“ Before I come in, I want to say that I ain't come to ask pardon now, nor never ! It 's too late to begin that sort o' thing, even if I had done anything to be pardoned for,— which I ain't never done ! ”

If Mrs. Major Meade had never proved herself a brave woman before, she did at that dread moment. Had she been a Papist, she would have exorcised the wraith with the Sign of the Cross. Being Protestant—and Presbyterian—she stepped swiftly back to the stand where lay the dead woman's Bible, caught up the Book and held it between her and the apparition.

“ In His name what do you want—and why are you here! ” she demanded in a voice that did not quaver.

“ Oh! ” uttered the stranger—drawing out the interjection with a rising cadence. “ I ask *your* pardon! I took you for my sister, Mrs. Irby. I heerd, three weeks ago, that her health was failin', an' says I to myself, ' I 'll resk a visit to her, considerin' it may be the last, an' 't would n't be becomin' a perfessin' Christyan to go out o' th' world, carryin' of a mortal gredge on her soul. ’ ”

At one o'clock the newcomer sat at her side of the hearth, the few tears she had thought it decent to shed when informed of her sister's death dried, her inner woman refreshed by a

comfortable meal. She was garrulously willing to tell the story of her life and as much of her twin-sister's as was bound up in it.

Closer scrutiny of her face modified Mrs. Meade's first impression of her resemblance to Mrs. Irby. The general effect of features and figure was the same, but the strong intelligence that marked the physiognomy of the overseer's wife was wanting from her sister's. The quality of their voices was not unlike, but the visitor had engrafted upon hers a whine that, after a while, "got upon the nerves" of the listener. It grew harder and harder to sit still and feign respectful attention while the other rocked placidly upon a creaking plank of the floor, never seeming to notice the teasing iteration, and talked! talked! talked! Of her early home in Mecklenburg; of her father's consequence as the owner of a "real nice plantation," and how "he lost 'most all he was worth, goin' security for his brother, jest as Sarah Ann and me (Susan Ann I was. Ma *would* name us as near like as she could) was grown.

"We had lots o' beaux 'though, money or

no money. 'T was unlucky that we both should 'a' fancied the same feller"—she maundered on. "'T was ordered, I s'pose, or 't would n't have been. And Elbert Mosby was a han'some man in them days—if I say it that should n't. (He 's been in his grave five years.) Rob Irby was courtin' Sarah Ann at the same time Elbert was. She used to make no end o' fun of Bob. He did n't know enough to mind it. He trotted after her like a dog. Besides bein'—well, to say the least, toler'ble good-lookin' "'—simpering and smirking—"we got lots o' notice on account of us bein' twins, you see. An' plenty o' fun out of it, too, playin' tricks upon folks that could n't tell us apart. Elbert Mosby always insisted we did n't look more alike than many other sisters. There was no such thing as foolin' him, do what we would. Till one day, I jist set my head to work to git the better of him. He 'd come to see Sarah Ann, and she war n't at home. I curled my hair (hern curled naturally) and rubbed my cheeks with mullein-leaves (she 'd more colour than me) and put on one o' her dresses, an' run down-stairs jist

as she always done. And—' Why, Bert!' says I, copyin' her way of talkin'.

' He had n't heerd she war n't at home, and the parlour (we had a sure-'nough parlour in them days) war n't very light, on account o' keepin' out the flies. An' sure 's you 're born—he come right up to me an' put his arms 'round me an' kissed me twice, an' says he—' How is my beauty, to-day?' I let him kiss me an' talk a long string o' love, me a-settin' by him, an' his arm 'round my waist. Then, byme-by, I laughed right out in his face, an' says I, ' Look here, Bert Mosby!' an' I pulled up my sleeve to show a brown mole I have on my elbow. Plenty o' folks used never to know us apart except by that mole. Girls mostly wore short sleeves in them days, you know.

' My! war n't he hoppin' mad, 'though! He 'd hardly speak to me for a week afterward. Sarah Ann, she made it up between us, an' I was glad enough to be frien's with him again. For if I had n't knowed I was in love with him before, when he kissed me and hugged me that way would 'a' opened my eyes. I made

up my mind I 'd have him, by fair means or foul, from that minnit."

" But he was engaged to your sister! "

When Mrs. Major Meade used that tone in her family it carried conviction and wrought compunction in those who were exercised thereby.

The stranger was in nothing abashed :

" All 's fair in love, you know"—with a more disagreeable simper. " 'T seems 's if Providence was on my side, too, for, jest at that time, Pa 'n' Elbert Mosby had a fallin' out 'bout a pointer-dog that belonged to Elbert and that Pa said killed his sheep. Men will fight over a dog sooner 'n they will over a woman. So, Pa he forbid the place to Elbert, and Elbert he swore he 'd marry Sarah Ann at all resks, an' there was a terrible to-do over it.

" Sarah Ann, she held fast to him through thick-'n'-thin, an' 't was gen'rally thick-an'-hot, for Pa had a most-an-awful temper, an' Elbert, he was high-spirited. The upshot of it all was that Sarah Ann 'n' Elbert was to run away to North Car'lina an' get married. They could n't be married in Virginia without a

license 'n' consent o' parents. We lived jist a few miles from the State line an' 't was easy enough to manage.

“ Elbert had bought a nice farm in Halifax County, an' fixed up his house, ready to go to housekeepin', an' they was to go straight there 's soon as they was made man 'n' wife.

“ I helped Sarah Ann git her things ready. She 'd most all her weddin' clo'es made, anyhow. We packed 'em in a trunk an' sent it to a tavern Elbert told us about, just across the line. One of his nigger men come for the trunk one night, on the sly. The nex' night, Sarah Ann was to meet Elbert outside our plantation-gate. He 'd have a buggy there, ready for her.

“ We had medicine of all sorts in the house. Ma had had to take morphine that spring for colic, an' I knew what the dose was. Sarah Ann's travellin' things was all laid out on our bed, that night, for her to put on at nine o'clock. She was to creep out and meet Elbert at half-past. She made b'lieve to have a headache at supper-time. She was that nervous an' upshot she could n't stan' seein' Pa

an' Ma, and her meanin' to deceive them an' leave them forever. For you see, we knew what Pa was. I took her up a cup o' coffee——”

Mrs. Meade arose to her feet and faced her in right unsanctified and womanly indignation.

“ You don't mean to say that you drugged your sister's coffee, and gave it to her with your own hand! When she *trusted* you!”

The sinner looked up, with falling jaw and surprised eyes. They were shifty and treacherous, Mrs. Meade now discovered, utterly unlike the honest, fearless eyes in which the red fire had died hard and slowly, ten hours ago.

“ Any other woman—let alone a man—would 'a' done the same if they had 'a' been tempted like I was. I knew I could make him a heap happier than Sarah Ann could. Her temper was too much like hisn. They 'd 'a' fit like cat 'n' dog. I was easy-tempered an' knowed how to manage folks—'specially men. When she had fell soun' asleep, I put a note on her piller, sayin' that me 'n' Bert had been foolin' her all the time, an' had been in love with one another for mont's. I knew *that*

would keep her mouth shut. She had a dreadful jealous, suspicious disposition, Sarah Ann had.

“ Well! we rode pretty near a’ hour. Bert had a pair o’ fast horses, an’ he got all the speed out of ’em there was in ’em.

“ The preacher who had been spoke to to do the marryin’ was waitin’ for us at the tavern I told you about, an I says—meachin’ an’ bashful as could be—that ‘ I ’d like to speak to him alone before the ceremony.’ I could always talk a man around if I had half a chance. I told him how sorry I was to be obleeged to leave my parents’ house, but that they ’d ’a’ married me to another man if I ’d ’a’ stayed. An’ I took occasion to tell him my name was ‘ Sarah Susan Ann Wilson,’ an’ he vrit it down so in th’ certificate he give me afterwards. I ’d a notion ’t would n’t be lawful to be married by Sarah Ann’s name, an’ me bein’ Susan.

“ As he begun to say, when we was standin’ up (an’ me with my green barège veil over my face, all the time), ‘ Do you, Sarah ’—I got a-coughin’, an’ the ‘ Susan ’ slipped in unbeknownst to Elbert. I ’d thought it all over beforehan’.

“ I knowed, of course, there 'd be a big fuss when I was found out, but I did n't think 't would come soon as it did. We stayed at the tavern that night. I was dreadful tired after the journey, an' I did n't wake up next mornin' till long after sun-up. When I opened my eyes Elbert was standin' by the bed, half-dressed, an' lookin' at me in a way that told me he knowed who I was. When I spoke, he ketched hold of my arm and jerked up my sleeve, an' there was the mole on my elbow! My! you should have heerd him damn me up an' down!”

“ I am *glad* he did!” cried the “ Jachin ” of Mt. Hermon. “ He could say nothing too bad to you! I wish I had been there to help him! He ought to have taken you back home—a disgraced woman—and left you!”

Mrs. Mosby snivelled resentfully behind her handkerchief.

“ I must say I don't think overly much of your manners! An' in the first hours of my affliction, too! I looked for more Christyan charity when I was a-makin' a clean breast of my bygones. An' I 'm free to confess I had

mighty tough work for the nex' few days to bring that man to see reason. I had to make him b'lieve that Sarah Ann was in the plot, an' meant to take Bob Irby in the long run. That 's why she sent me in her place. An' then I 'd cry and kneel down and ketch holt of his knees an' tell him I 'd loved him all the time. 'T warn't no fun, I can tell you.

“ Are you goin' to leave the door open ? It's gittin' mighty cold in here ! ”

Mrs. Major Meade had set the door wide, and was now raising the window.

“ I want to air the room ! ” she said, curtly. “ I cannot breathe ! I see now why your wronged sister read the story of Esau and Jacob, and Leah and Rachel, until she wore the pages to rags. One thing more you ought to know ”—stopping in front of the bereaved relative. “ She marked a Psalm for you to read. I 'll send it up to your room. You must go to bed now. I cannot hear anything more. God may forgive you—some time. Your sister never forgave you. And ”—with deliberate emphasis—“ as a woman—and a Christian—I don't see how she ever could ! ”



Chapter VIII

Marthy

I

HER "given name" in full was Martha Ann. Elderly people who had known her from her birth, called her "Marthy Ann" when they wished to be emphatic. The Southern trick of rubbing off sharp corners whenever they can be rounded, wore the final hard *a* into *y*. Nobody said Marth*a* in Virginia until "after the War."

Marthy was freeborn, and had married, at eighteen, Josiah Jones, another free negro in the Fighting Creek neighbourhood. He was a carpenter by trade, industrious, sober, honest and good-natured, some dozen shades darker of complexion, an inch shorter, and many degrees less clever than his comely wife.

Peachy Harvie, Esq., of Glamorgan, sold to the thrifty couple the land upon which Josiah had built a neat cottage. The planter had further proved his good-will to them by "standing master" for them, as his father had "stood" for their parents. This sort of legal sponsorship was requisite to their continued residence within the State bounds. In the case of the Joneses, the responsibility was reduced to a minimum by the recognised respectability of husband and wife. When coloured wards became neighbourhood nuisances, sinking to the level of "or'nary, no-'count free niggers," the sponsors withdrew their moral support, and left the ingrates to their fate. The law, if anybody took the trouble to enforce it, ordered them to leave the State within the twelvemonth, or to be "sold South."

Josiah and Marthy were as far above such chances as if their forebears had come over with the Cavaliers and their descendants had lived upon their own freehold ever since. Josiah was a good workman, and seldom idle. Marthy was a neighbourhood "institution." She did clear-starching, helped in pickling,

preserving, and house-cleaning times, going out by the day to environing plantations; took in plain sewing and soap-making, bound shoes for the shoemaker at the "Co'te-House"; worked button-holes and finished off coats, vests, and pantaloons for the village tailor, and brewed root-beer that had a county reputation.

Mrs. Harvie, busy one May morning in her store-room, received with satisfaction the news that Marthy Jones wanted to see her.

"The very person I was thinking of this minute!" ejaculated the housewife. "Send her right in here!"

The woman came in—tall, straight as a reed, with the free, stately tread of a forest princess. Her dark blue calico fitted well; a white kerchief crossed her bust; a white apron was tied about a trim waist; on her head was a scarlet and white turban. Mrs. Harvie, dumpy, heated by climbing up to shelves and exploring barrels, her sixth-best bombazine criss-crossed with dust and flour, suffered by the contrast without suspecting it.

"I'm right glad to see you, Marthy! Here I am, expecting a house full of company, and

the cherries just perishing to be preserved. I'll have to leave them to you this year."

Marthy hearkened respectfully and patiently to the five-minute speech of which this was the preamble.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, when her opportunity came. "If you'll let me take the sugar 'n' cherries over home, I'll put 'em up quite out o' your way. But, looks if 't warn't meant f'me t' go out wukkin' ag'in for a right smart while."

"Why, what 's the matter?"

The mulatto grew dusky red, and put up her hand to catch an embarrassed cough.

"I've got a baby t' look arfter!"

"Marthy Ann Jones! Are you distracted?"

"If you got time to listen, I'd like to tell you all 'bout it, Miss Lizzie."

"Time! Good gracious! Shut the door and sit down right there!" designating a full sack of raw coffee.

"I'd rather stan', if you please, ma'am. I ain't got long to stay. You see, this was how 't happen'. Las' night I was ironin', 'n' J'siah, he had drapped 'sleep in his cheer by

the fire, when all t' once thar come sech a lick 'ginst the winder that I let the iron fall on the table an' J'siah, he jump' up 'n' grabbed a stick o' wood, 'n' both on us ran to the do'. There warn't nothin' thar. We went out to the gate 'n' looked up 'n' down the road 'n' listen'. Fur 's we could see—'n' 't was a beautiful night,—nothin'! nothin'! jes' the stars a-shinin' over our heads 'n' the win' a-blowin' easy in the trees. Back we come to the house, 'n' J'siah 'n' me, we 'greed 't was a dead limb of the big apple-tree fallin' off 'n' blowed ag'in the winder. We 'd hardly shet the do' when—whack! thar came the same noise agin' the glass. I happen' to be lookin' right t'wards it, 'n' I see, plain 's could be, two white wings a-breshin' 'cross it."

" All imagination, Marthy, you may depend on it! "

" May be so, ma'am, but that 's what I shall allers b'lieve I see. Well! out we run to the do', ag'in, this time with a lamp. An' right under the apple-tree—you know it grows close by the front winder, Miss Lizzie—thar laid on the groun' a baby! "

“ I don't believe you! ”

“ Fo' the Lord, Miss Lizzie! a white boy baby, nigh 'pon six mont' old, I sh'd think, for he 's got four teeth. All dress' in white clo'es—plain, but nice—'n' wrop' up 'n a new cradle-blanket, 'n' so soun' 'sleep he ain' wake up till long pas' sun-up.”

“ Laudanum!” said Mrs. Harvie, sagaciously.

“ It's likely, ma'am. He acted sorter stupid when he did open his eyes. Blue, Miss Lizzie, 'n' his skin like lilies, 'n' 's hyar like yaller silk. How ennybody could 'a' had the heart fur t' leave him out thar, 'xposed to the dew, or t' be chawed up by hogs, 's more 'n I ken onderstan'. But what I come to ax you, Miss Lizzie, is ef you or one o the young ladies 'll come over t' our house 'fo' I ondress the chile. J'siah 'n' me, we 'greed, sence he is white, thar ought to be some 'xamination of him by 'sponsible white persons, fust of all. I give him some milk 'n' water to drink 'fo' I come 'way. He eat real hearty 'n' stared 'round 'bout him right sensible-like, then he drapped off to sleep ag'in.”

“Laudanum!” repeated Mrs. Harvie. “A heavy dose, too. He ’ll be drowsy all day, probably. The young ladies and I will be over as soon as the carriage can be got ready. The idea of such a thing happening in *our* Neighbourhood! It is enough to make your blood run cold. Six months old—did you say?”

“I sh’d say ’bout that, ma’am. An’ well-growed too, for his age.”

“He must have been brought a long way!” opined the lady with a detective instinct. “A child that old is n’t an easy thing to dispose of without being missed by neighbours. Mr. Harvie must look into the matter. It ’s a downright scandal!”

The Joneses lived only a mile from the Glamorgan house, but neither mother nor daughters ever walked when they could ride, or be driven. Marthy had been at home for an hour when the lumbering family chariot drew up at her gate. A narrow strip of grass lay between the cottage—a neat frame building—and the highway from which it was separated by a post-and-rail fence. Flowers

bloomed under the windows; hop-vines and morning glories climbed over the little porch. A pleasant interior was revealed by the open door. There were two rooms on the ground-floor, a loft above.

The visitors entered, from the porch, what might be called a bed-parlour. The floor was clean and waxed until it shone. Strips of rag-carpet, woven in gay stripes by Marthy's own hands, lay before the hearth and at the bedside. A feather-bed was tucked up, round and smooth and high, under a patchwork quilt of a rising-sun pattern. A pair of fat pillows lay at the top. Muslin curtains, coarse but clean, were at the windows; the cushions of the splint-bottomed chairs were covered with bright calico; two or three coloured prints hung against the whitewashed walls. No other coloured family, bond or free, in the length and breadth of Opecancanough County, had such a home.

Marthy met the ladies at the door, the baby in her arms. Josiah stood behind her, a delighted grin showing every tooth in his head. The child lay passive, still drowsy, while the

visitors gently removed his clothes. They were, as Marthy had said, "plain but nice," and each article was perfectly new. Inside of the waistband of the flannel skirt was stitched a folded paper. Mary Harvie, the elder of the sisters, read aloud what was written in a "back-hand," used evidently as a disguise:

"His father and mother are dead. They was respectful people, but I ain't fit nor I ain't able to keep him no longer. Pleas, dear folks, take care on a helpless orphin and God Amighty will bless and prosper you forever."

"Amen!" said Josiah and Marthy in a breath.

The response had so much the tone of a vow that Mrs. Harvie looked up sharply.

"You are not thinking of keeping him yourselves, surely! Of course he ought to be sent to the poor-house?"

"J'siah an' me, we wrastled in pra'r over him 'most all night long," said Marthy's sweet, slow accents. "We 'greed—an' I b'lieve 't was the Lord whar put it inter our hades—that thar ain't but one thing lef' fur us to do. Them white wings at th' winder did n't

come fur nothin'. This chile was *sont* to us! We mean fur to take as good keer on him as poor, ignerrent coloured folks ken, 'tell he 's call' fur by some o' his kin, or by the angels, or 'tell he 's a man growed, ef so be he 's lent to us that long."

"But, Marthy—" remonstrated Ella Harvie, moved to earnestness by the sight of the swarthy face pressed to the fair head upon the childless woman's breast—"you *can't!* The child is *white!* Don't you see? What could you do with him?"

"Bring him up in th' fear an' the' admonition of the Lord, Miss Ella, better 'n it c'd be done in th' po' house. That 's th' devil's own den fur children! I could n't answer to Him Who sont His own Son to be born in a stable-manger, ef I was to throw this innercent creature he 's been trusted to me into no sech han's as them po' house marsters an' mistisses is! An' to be fotched up in sech company as thar is thar! The meanest sort o' po' white folks trash. They ain't fitten to 'sociate with a clean little *pig*,—let alone a baby with an immortal soul inside of him."

Tears arose to the visitors' eyes as the baby, aroused by the energy of her speech, opened his blue eyes, misty with slumber, smiled into the face close to his, gave a contented murmur and nestled down to sleep in the strong arms enfolding him.

Marthy spoke again, softly and reverently :

“ Then, thar 's that blessin' Miss Mary read jes' now. J'siah 'n' me mought jes' 's well have it 's ennybody else.”

Mrs. Harvie scolded, but in a half-hearted way, and her daughters pleaded ineffectually while Marthy bathed and re-dressed the waif. Josiah had gone to his work in the garden back of the house, and his wife sustained the brunt of the attack alone—patient, respectful, and saying little, but calmly resolute through it all.

“ You are a good woman,” Mrs. Harvie relented so far as to say in taking leave, “ and deserve a blessing—whether the one promised in that paper is worth anything or not. I 'll send you down a lot of clothes my Russell has outgrown.”

The report carried to Glamorgan by the three ladies of the mystery of the child's advent

and his beauty brought a large party over to visit him the next day. It was the first of many such. If Marthy had been disposed to neglect her charge, the curiosity and oversight of the community would have prevented it. But from the moment she undid the blanket pinned about him, when she brought him into the light that memorable night, and saw him, motionless and fair as a Parian cherub, upon her arm, all the long-defrauded motherhood awoke to wind itself about the lovely foundling.

The mysticism of her race sought in the circumstances attendant upon his coming, token and symbol whereby she might shape her conduct toward him. He was thoroughly healthy, and the absolute sweetness of his temper had something unearthly in it to his foster-mother's apprehension. The idea was caught up eagerly by the neighbourhood negroes, and, inter-twisted with tribal traditions and New Testament stories, was the theme of many a cabin symposium and prayer-meeting exhortation.

A sinless child had been committed to the arms of one of the despised and enslaved race, and with signs and wonders. It behooved the

wise to watch and to wait for further developments of the Divine intention themward.

“ It can’t be true that you have given him such a horrid name as Melchizedec!” said Mary Harvie, about a fortnight after his arrival. “ It would be outrageous to fasten it around his sweet neck. Sister and I had picked out ‘ Ernest Maltravers ’ from the *loveliest* novel we have been reading.”

Marthy was particularly fond of Miss Mary, and the dismay expressed by the pretty face moved her to real pity. But she had principles, and, with the untaught woman, principle went very far.

“ I ’m mighty sorry fur to disapp’int you, Miss Ma’y. But J’siah an’ me can’t see no way out o’ callin’ him ‘ Melchizedec,’ since the pra’r-meetin’ they hel’ hyer las’ Sunday night. Br’er Chesley, he done been read ’bout the pries’ of th’ Mos’ High, ‘without father, without mother, without descent, havin’ neither beginnin’ o’ days, nor end o’ life.’ ”

In repeating it, she lapsed unconsciously into the rhythmic chant with which the devout negro always reads or recites sacred words.

She arose from her seat and intoned the rest of her speech, swaying gently from side to side, her eyes slightly upraised, forgetful for a moment of the human presence in which she stood:

“ J’siah, he say it come to him, like insp’ration from on high, same-like it come to me, the minnit Br’er Chesley done fotch out th’ words. He riz right up in th’ midst o’ th’ meetin’, then ‘n’ thar, J’siah, my husband done—an’ sez he—‘ Brethren ‘n’ sistern! th’ name o’ th’ chile th’ angels laid at my do’ shell be Melchizedec from this time forth, even fur evermo’, Amen ‘n’ Amen!’ sez he, like the words was n’t hisn, but was spoke through his lips. ‘N’ then, Br’er Chesley”—resuming her seat and conversational tone—“ he bust forth inter th’ movin’est pra’r you ever heerd, Miss Ma’y. So you see th’ name is done give an’ sanctified, ‘s you mought say.”

“ I certainly am disappointed,” pouted Miss Harvie. “ Maltravers is such a noble name!”

“ It is!” assented Marthy, a shade of regret mingling with her thoughtfulness. “ I say, Miss Ma’y!” brightening as the thought



"MEL HAD CUT CARRY'S NAME INTO THE BARK."

struck her—" why not sorter mix the names together ? We counted 'pon callin' him 'Mel' for short 'n' eve'yday. ' Travers ' is a fine-soundin' name, an' he 's got to have a surname 's well as a given one. 'Spose we call him Melchizedec—that is ' Mel '—Travers ?"

The ingenuity of the conceit appealed to the humorous side of the Harvie nature, when Mary told the story at home. She carried to Marthy the next day the unanimous approval of the family of the proposed compromise.

The question was of immediate moment. The Baptist Church, to which Josiah and Marthy belonged, as did nineteen-twentieths of their race at that date, was convulsed, a week later, by the information that the adopted foundling had been christened in the Glamorgan drawing-room on Sunday afternoon by the Episcopal clergyman, whose parishioners the Harvies were, receiving then and there the name of " Melchizedec Travers." Mr. Harvie and his daughter Mary were sponsors. The rite that brought excommunication upon the foster-parents and ostracism of Marthy among those of her colour and station, gave her a

stronger hold upon the patronage of white neighbours.

Yet even the Harvies comprehended imperfectly the deep significance of what was done in their home and by their connivance. The startling departure from the faith and usages of Marthy's sect was a solemn testimony to her belief in the waif's unlikeness to herself and to her kind. She sealed him formally as one of a superior race by the ordinance, set him apart for whatever exalted mission might await him.

Advertisements and private investigation failed to educe any information as to the child's relatives or antecedents. For all that transpired to the contrary, Marthy's vision of the "white wings" might have been a celestial visitant who laid "Mel" on the dewy sod under the apple-tree and then took flight.

Christmas succeeded May, and May followed hard after Christmas, and the orphan ran about and filled with sweet babblings the humble domicile of the negro carpenter, as happy and as tenderly cherished as ever was prince in a kingly palace.

By request, Marthy always carried him to Glamorgan when she went there to work. The young ladies of the house and their guests petted, played with, and spoiled him as effectually as was possible with one of his sunny disposition. He sported about Mrs. Harvie's chair with her own little ones, and took turns in riding upon the merry planter's foot with Russell, who was his senior by a year. Mel was the best baby ever seen, never crying unless he was very badly hurt, affectionate, obedient, sprightly, and even at this age so fond of music that he would sit on the floor by the hour, rapt and hushed, while Miss Mary played on the piano. He could "turn a tune" deftly by the time he was two years old, catching an air after hearing it once and whistling or humming it correctly. According to the Herodian practice of those good old times, Mary Harvie taught him to read by the time he was three, and with such success that he would render a chapter in the New Testament fluently every night in the hearing of his enraptured and awed guardians. At five, he became Marthy's instructor, actually piloting her through the

alphabet and into the *Child's First Reader* in six months after the odd tutelage began.

It was the most difficult task Marthy had ever undertaken, but she never flinched from the drudgery. If the child had the patience to teach her, the least she could do in return was to learn. She often sat up until midnight to finish sewing interfered with by the lessons he "had set his heart upon." The silent, toilful hours were full of contented dreaming that left refining traces in a milder dignity of manner, serener thoughtfulness of countenance. She did not speak of these dreams even to Josiah. Sometimes she marvelled within herself if there were aught sinfully presumptuous in her ambitions for the child.

Consistent in her resolution to bring him up in a way that should distinctly indicate his disparity from her class, she never let him sleep with her, or eat at her table. When he could sit alone, Josiah made a low, round stand of cherry wood and chair of corresponding height for him. The stand was spread with a white cloth for his meals and set out with a flowered china plate and mug, and a real silver spoon.

A tiny shed bedroom was added to the cottage, and into this Mel's bed and clothing were removed the day he was four years old.

Marthy called Christmas his birthday, somewhat to the scandal of such devout people as fancied they detected a touch of sacrilege in analogy and appropriation.

Marthy excused herself with simplicity :

“ His comin' into the worl' was the happies' thing ever happen' fur me 'xcep' the comin' o' that Other Chile, an' I want to be thankful for both at th' same time.”

Her own language was hopelessly provincial and ungrammatical. Her quick ear caught similar lapses in Mel's talk, which she promptly corrected. That she let him call her “ Mammy ” was in deference to the custom with white children, even after they reached man's and woman's estate, of thus addressing their coloured nurses. Josiah was invariably “ Uncle Joe ”—this being likewise a familiar title applied to elderly negroes by white and black children and young people.

Mel took polish readily. The innate refinement of his guardian wrought in him nobility

of thought, together with grace of diction and deportment extraordinary in a child of his age in any position. He grew apace in body and learned rapidly from books, yet bore willingly his share in household duties, the more zealously when he felt that he was "helping Mammy."

The hours spent by Marthy in happy companionship with her idol were given by Josiah to the outer and lower world, that held heroic aims and romantic dreams in light esteem. He was reasonably fond of the "smart little chap," and proud of having him in charge. Whatever of religious enthusiasm he may have felt in the earlier stages of Mel's residence under his roof was soon rubbed off by the comments and jeers of his fellow-workmen. Once he ventured to grumble at the additional expense of a growing boy to "poor folks."

Marthy's terrible contempt and wrath were like the near scathe of lightning.

"Somebody's been put you up to sech blasphemicious talk!" she declared. "Tell 'em, nex' time, that the chile lef' by the Lord at your gates ain' never cos' you one cent; that these

ten fingers"—extending them—"an' this hade"—touching it—"has ministered to his necess'ties. An' ef so be that the po' heathen pagons know anything 't all 'bout the word o' th' Lord, ax 'em ef they ever hyer' o' the man whar teched the Ark!"

Mel was over nine years old when, one bright October morning, he trudged off at Russell Harvie's side to the school near the Court-house. Russell was a freckled-faced, sandy-haired lad, sturdy of temper and of limb, who liked "Aunt Marthy's little boy" well enough, but looked down upon him as much younger and more "babyfied" than himself. He had promised Marthy to "look after the kid," and held a confidential interview with her, while Mel was putting his books into his bag, in which talk ginger-cakes and root-beer had place and emphasis.

Marthy kissed her boy's hands with a passionate pressure. She never kissed him on the mouth, unless he took her by surprise and offered the salute with his arms about her neck. He turned when they were fairly on their way, and lifted his hat in a pretty gesture

of farewell that brought quick moisture to her proud eyes.

“ He ’s cut off a heap finer piece o’ cloth ’n Mars’ Russell, ef he *is* a born gentleman’s son,” she meditated, aloud.

She stood in the door, looking after them until the dust kicked up by Russell’s aggressive toes settled again on the red road. The stillness of the dying year was in the air. The grasshoppers no longer shrilled in the dry grass; the katydids had ceased their peevish iteration. October is a rainless month in Virginia, and so nearly windless that the fine powder beaten up by feet and wheels hangs like a roseate mist on the horizon at sunrise and sunset. The hickory trees on the roadside were a soft yellow, the nutty fragrance of their leaves, the breath of the late roses shaken by the bees from the two hives under the apple-tree, the calm sunshine, the thrill of exultation in her boy’s beauty, talent, and goodness, made Marthy glad and grateful. A blessing had come into the house with the child, and had remained there. One text, often upon her tongue, came to it now.

“ Take this child, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee wages.”

“ 'Pears like I ken hyar the Marster say it,” she said to herself. “ He meant that for me!”

Josiah had money in a Richmond bank. Mr. Harvie had “ put out ” a hundred dollars for Marthy—a confidential transaction. She was “ savin’ it for somethin’ partickkeler,” was all she told her agent. Nobody in the round world was in the secret with her. She had made it her business, one day when she was in town, to inquire the price of a second-hand piano and learned that one could be had for two hundred dollars. By the time he was twelve years old Mel should have one of his own. Ella Harvie was married, but Mary remained single—the gentlest, kindest old maid that ever lived up all her life for others. She pronounced Mel a musical genius, and delighted to impart to him her light stock of mechanical skill in the manipulation of the key-board. His fingers fell into position and measure by intuition; his ear was faultless. He played far better already than his teacher, as she assured him after each lesson. Flattery

glanced from him like arrows from tempered mail. In this, as in most respects, he was singularly unspoiled.

It was well for himself and for the foster-mother's peace of mind that he was proof against attentions and praises that would have made a meaner nature insufferably vain. He was a favourite with high and low. The best people in the region allowed their children to associate freely with him.

Marthy recalled in her musings, with a prideful thrill, how one day last week she had chanced to espy him through the forest undergrowth on her way to Glamorgan, talking familiarly with little Carry Tinsley, Mrs. Harvie's niece. The children were standing by a beach tree, scarred by the initials of two generations. Mel had cut Carry's name into the bark and was showing it to her, as she stood switching her frock with a bunch of ferns.

Marthy had lurked behind the bushes long enough to feast her eyes upon the pretty picture, then stolen on unobserved by either of them. When her nurseling, as a man grown, should revisit his early home, why should n't

he be still reckoned the equal of the proudest white man—or woman—of them all ?

The dreamer would go in presently to her work. A young girl who was to be married at Christmas had given her underclothes to her to make, and would pay fifty dollars for the job.

“ That ’s the Lord’s way of givin’ wages,” she murmured again. “ Seems-if I never see sich a pretty day as this befo’. Looks-like everything was a praisin’ Him!”

Another slow cloud of red gold-dust glittered between her and the sun in the direction the children had taken. It enveloped and glorified the portly figure of Mr. Harvie, riding toward her. She remembered afterward that she was conscious of a disagreeable sensation—a slight hysterical choking—at sight of him. He reined in his horse at the gate, and threw one knee over the pommel without alighting.

“ How d’ye do, Marthy ? How are you all coming on ? ”

She came down the walk to the gate, resting her folded arms on the top bar.

“ Pretty smart, thank you, Mars’ Peachy. Won’t you ’light ? ”

“ ’T ain’t worth while, I reckon. I met your young rascal down the road with my Russell. He told me he was going to school. How ’s that ? ”

“ Suh ? ”

“ Where ’s the use of it ? ”

His look was more enigmatical than his words. Marthy coloured painfully and stammered:

“ Why, Mars’ Peachy, I ain’ eddicated myself, but I want him to be.”

“ He can read now, can’t he ? ”

“ O yes, suh! Beautiful! an’ writes right good, too. Miss Ma’y, she done set him copies. She allers seems to set a heap o’ sto’ by Mel—Miss Ma’y does.”

“ Humph! ”

His nostrils were wide with disdain, and Marthy felt the blood hot in her face again, while heart, hands, and feet were cold. Mr. Harvie thrashed his pommel-knee gently with his riding-whip. He had a kind heart and really respected the industrious couple for whom he “ stood master.” But what he had to say must be got rid of, for the sake of

Marthy and the boy he and his had done as much to unfit for his proper sphere as had this ignorant, short-sighted woman.

“ You took the brat against my advice, Marthy, and every year makes it plainer how right I was, and what a fool you were. I ’ve told Josiah so, time and time again, but I dare say he was afraid to say as much to you. As you have said, my daughter has helped on this business of making Mel good for nothing. He is a pretty plaything, and his taste for music and all that makes him more interesting to her, now that she ’s one by herself at home. It ’s time this foolery was stopped, once for all. He ’s got education enough, and too much, for what he ’ll have to do in life. How came you to send him to school without consulting me ? ”

“ You ’ve been ’way from home, Mars’ Peachy——”

“ Why the deuce did n’t you wait until I got home ? Have you spoken to Mr. Williams about taking Mel into the school ? ”

“ No, suh. I did n’t know ’s I ought to. I jes’ sent him ’long so with Mars’ Russell when he come by this morn’n’.”

“And a precious mess you’ ve made of it! Do you suppose that, even if Mr. Williams lets him attend, the boys will put up with being classed with a free nigger’s foundling ?” growing angrier as he forced out the brutal phrase. “ Or that their fathers and mothers will hear of it ? I ’ve always bragged on your common-sense, and your knowing how to keep your place, Marthy. But you are getting above yourself! ”

Her face was sharp and yellow; the drawn lips showed her teeth clenched like those of a suffering dumb beast. The fingers of her right hand tore splinters from the unplanned rail as the same hurt thing might gnaw the wood. Every word was the cut of a rawhide upon her full heart. Race, instinct, and custom were strong, for neither in glance nor gesture did she resent his speech. Her great black eyes, dull with misery, looked past him into the air, as if seeking the “ pretty day ” that had died so suddenly for her.

“ Somebody had to tell you this,” pursued Mr. Harvie, in a milder tone. “ You don’t want to have your house pulled down over

your head some night by a mob of hot-headed fellows. You 've done a thing that will make you more unpopular with the coloured people 'boutcher'" (about here) "than you are already, and lose you the respect of the whites. I'm your best friend, and you know it. That boy can't go to school with gentlemen's sons! I don't want to have him hurt, nor you, either."

"Hurt! Mars' Peachy!" The dull eyes dilated with terror. "Who 'd go to hurt that angel? He 's peaceable 's a lamb!"

"School-boys maul lambs and angels pretty roughly, sometimes—the little devils!"

"He 's white as any on 'em, Mars' Peachy. He ain't my chile. Nor he ain't no common folk's chile, suh. May be you 've done forget the writin' that come with him?"

"Bah! a badly written, worse spelt scrawl. He came of low white trash, a great deal worse than honest coloured people."

Marthy trembled and blenched no longer. Her loyal heart took strength from what she herself knew and felt. Malice, slander, cruelty, could not make her prince ignoble.

"The b'loved of the Lord shall dwell in

safety by him, Mars' Peachy. The Lord knows His own. I don' b'lieve He 'll let nobody harm a hyar of that chile's head. You say I mus'n' sen' him to school, nor let him learn nothin' mo' nowhar. Please, suh, what 'll I do with him ?”

“ Put him to the carpenter's bench with Josiah!” said Mr. Harvie promptly. “ The sooner the better.”

“ 'T would be same 's puttin' a dove with crows, Mars' Peachy, to set him to work 'side o' them whar J'siah is obleeged to stay 'long, all day. Ain't thar boa'din' schools way off somewhar, whar he could be learned as he ought to be—whar nobody need n't know—'bout J'siah 'n' me ?”

“ Suppose there were—'though such things always leak out—what would you do with him in his vacations, and when he leaves school ? He could n't live here with you—nor, boutcher, where everybody does know. The wrong step was the first one, you see.”

Her strong hands wrung one another in an agony.

“ I ain't never thought o' the time when 't

would n't do for him to stay here no longer!" she groaned. " You 're right, Mars' Peachy: I 's a rank, born fool! 'Fo' th' Lord, I ain't never look fur 'noughahead for tosee that time!"

The abjectness of her misery touched the planter's heart.

" I see you have n't, Marthy! Like many wiser folks, you have let your heart outrun your wits. It does seem a doosid shame that such a likely boy should n't have a show in this world. But it 's the will of a mysterious Providence, you know, and His creatures must submit. I say!—suppose I could get him a place in a tobacco-factory in town, or in a store, or something, and no tales told, you know? If he 's got anything in him, that would give him a chance to rise."

If he had expected her to be grateful he was chagrined by the stolid look that is as often the refuge of the lowly-born when deeply moved as gay *insouciance* cloaks the wounded sensibilities of the thoroughbred.

" Thank you, suh!" impassively. " I 'll talk to J'siah 'bout it an' let you know."

" Oh, very well!" If she could be ungra-

cious he could be indifferent. " That reminds me! I called by to speak to Josiah about a corn-crib I want built. Send him up to me to-night. Good-bye!"

Marthy went into the house and shut the door. The tranquil sunlight, the sweet smells and sounds of the perfect weather were hateful to her. She snatched up her sewing and wrought at seam, gusset, and band until the thread twanged like a bowstring and the needle was hot to her fingers. Her head was awl; her heart-beats made her ears ache. She had not come to the thinking-point. She could only suffer in seeing the desolation of the Land of Promise and cry out against man and against Him Who had made man cruel. She stood, holding her Heaven-given child by the hand, against a blank wall, as high as the clouds, built across the pathway of honourable career, the only road to a reputable life. Her heart might be as white as snow, her soul pure, her deeds right towards God and man. One drop of the accursed blood that swelled her veins would make her an outcast. In her fall she would drag down the thing for whose dear sake

she would have laid down her life at any minute within the last nine beautiful, mistaken, worse-than-wasted years.

She could not—she would never again love or praise the Maker Who had suffered this monstrous injustice to curse the earth.

By-and-by, like the stealing in of a pungent vapour that awakes the sleeper in a burning house, returned the menace of Mr. Harvie's words—" I don't want to have him hurt."

He was safe in school-hours. Mr. Williams was a Northern man, engaged by the neighbouring planters to teach the " old-field school " wherein their boys were fitted for college. He had taken a lively interest in Mel, and, more than once, had " hoped " in Marthy's hearing, " to have the pleasure of teaching him some time." But he boarded at the Bell Tavern in the village and would go home for his early dinner in " play-time." What mischief might not be done during the hour of his absence ?

A happy thought struck her as the sun touched the noon mark on the kitchen-floor. She did Mr. Williams's washing. His clean

clothes were already laid in the flat basket set in the sunshine on the floor over there against such time as it might be convenient for her to carry or send them to him. She would go to the Court-house with them now, looking in at the school-house in her way.

Laying down her work, she tucked a little bag of dried cherries and a larger bag filled with her famous ginger-cakes, under the clothes, lifted the hamper to her head, locked the house door, put the key into her pocket and set out on her walk through the woods. Every child in the region knew the taste of her cakes and sugary dried fruits. She would treat the school and propitiate possible enemies, change the young wolves into fawning lambs.

The wolves were in high spirits, if one might judge from the yells and cheers she heard afar off. She quickened her pace in nearing the school-house. She was running breathlessly when she broke through the chinquapen shrubbery surrounding the clearing in which the house was built.

Striking right and left with fist and basket,



" SHE SET OUT ON HER WALK THROUGH THE WOODS."

with never a thought of the clean garments, which flew wildly abroad at each stroke, she rushed upon the scene of action,—past Russell Harvie, who was fighting, scratching, and biting in the clutches of four big boys,—and gained the centre of the rabble. The heart of the tumult was her darling, naked as he was born, bruised and bleeding from a brave and hopeless fight. Four of what Mr. Harvie had aptly called “ little devils ” had pinned him to the earth; others were stirring up a pot of tar abstracted from the nearest stable-yard.

“ Make him jet-black, like his Daddy Joe! ” Marthy heard as she covered the fainting child with her powerful body.

That night Josiah and his wife went up to the Glamorgan house, and asked to see the master. They were bidden at once into the dining-room where the family was eating a late supper. Mr. Harvie had had a busy and an exciting afternoon. He had visited the school in person and had the grim satisfaction of superintending the several floggings laid on judiciously by Mr. Williams with a stout arm and willing heart. Mrs. Harvie and Miss Mary

had been crying at intervals ever since they had heard of the outrage done to their *protégé*. Their tears flowed anew at sight of Marthy, who strode into the room, tall and stern, leaving Josiah just without the door. Her eyes were dry; her mien was so stately that Mr. Harvie arose involuntarily as before one of his own caste.

“ ‘Pon my soul, Marthy, we are all mighty sorry for what has happened,” he began.

“ Yes, Mars’ Peachy ! ” quietly and respectfully. “ You tole me what I mought expect. ‘Whar’s Mel?’ did you say, Miss Ma’y? We did n’t dar’ leave him ‘t home fur fear the house mought be pull’ down over his hade, as Mars’ Peachy say mought happen. We would n’t fetch him to this house, ‘cause some of the coloured boys mought poke fun at him. We lef’ him in the bushes down by the spring ‘tell we go back. It’s moonlight, an ‘ef ‘t warn’t, Mel would n’t mind. He ain’ no coward, even when twenty boys has got a-holt of him at once! I ‘m mighty thankful to Mars’ Russell for standin’ up so fierce fur Mel. I hope he ain’t much hurt?’ ” glancing around for Mel’s champion.

“ Oh, Russell ’s all right! A little sore and scratched, and his clothes badly torn—that ’s all. That ’s the fortune of war, you know. His mother thought he ’d better go to bed early. The danger is that she and his sister will make too much of him for taking your boy’s part. Schoolboys must rough it, everywhere. It ’s good for them.”

“ Yes, suh!” Marthy’s tone and look did not change for the gentleman’s effort to make things easier all around. Her accent was lifeless; her eyes were dull and set. “ We come up, to say, Mars’ Peachy, as how J’siah an’ me ’s ’greed to move to Richmon’. Thar’s heap o’ free coloured folks thar, an’ a good cyarpenter ken allers git wuk in town. An’ ef you ken let us know of some ’spectable white fam’ly thar whar Mel kin boa’d ’tell he ’s learn’ ’nough fur to git a good place in a sto’, ’n’ ’f you will pay his bills with the money we give you—’n’, as you tole me this mornin’, ‘ no questions axed,’—we ’ll never trouble you no mo’ in this worl’ an’ suttin’ly be mighty thankful to you in th’ next.”

II

“ It ’s you again—is it ? ”

The speaker was an Irish maid, smartly dressed. She held the front door open just far enough to show her sneering face to the coloured woman who had rung the bell at the basement entrance.

“ I give yer message to the gentleman, an’ he told me ter tell yez when yez called agin that he had n’t no use for you, nor for none of yer kind. Them was his very wurrd, an’ here ’s a young lady as will swear to them ” —nodding backward as the cook’s red face appeared over her shoulder. “ So yez may go yer ways, an’ bad luck go wid yez! It ’s the loike of yez that ’s a-thryin’ everywhere to take the bread out o’ honest white girls’ mouths. Think shame to yerself ! ”

“ Is Mrs. Travers at home ? ”

“ No! ” mimicking the querist’s accent. “ Mrs. *Trarvers* ain’t at home! Nor she would n’t demane herself to spake wid the loike of yez, if she war! ”

The door was slammed in the stranger’s

face. She stood still for a moment, irresolute and dazed, then went slowly up the area-steps to the sidewalk.

No one who had known her at thirty—comely, alert, and energetic—would have recognised Marthy Jones to-day.

Josiah had died during “the war.” She had worn widow’s mourning now for him for ten years. She had not seen her adopted child in twice that length of time. At fifteen, his handsome face and musical talent caught the fancy of a wealthy relative of the teacher under whose care and in whose family Mr. Harvie had placed his orphaned “ward.” Teacher and friend were New Yorkers. When the rich kinsman returned home, he took the lad with him, with his nominal guardian’s full consent.

From the day of their removal to Richmond, Marthy kept her relations to Mel a profound secret and commanded him to do the same, upon penalty of her extreme displeasure. She furthermore enjoined upon him to write his name “Melvin.” The happy, foolish conceit that had fastened “Melchizedec” upon him

belonged to the past he must forget as fast as possible. Mr. Harvie seconded her desires strenuously. He paid school and board bills—as was supposed, out of his own pocket—and kept a kindly watch over Mel, visiting him whenever he came to town; always bringing tokens of kindly remembrance from Mrs. Harvie and Mary. The boy's former nurse and her husband—most respectable and worthy coloured people—lived on Church Hill, and, by express stipulation, Mel visited them every Saturday. His vacations were spent at Glamorgan. His old nurse washed and mended his clothes; came to the teacher's house and took care of Mel when he had the measles and the mumps, besides keeping him supplied with home-made dainties that were the envy of his comrades.

Mr. Harvie confided the whole story of the founding to the rich patron. After hearing it, the latter adopted the boy formally. He had accepted from the first, as a noteworthy coincidence, that the name given to the orphan in baptism was the same as his own—Travers.

Marthy impoverished herself for six months

to stock her boy with new, good underclothing, all made by her skillful fingers and as fine as any gentleman's son wore. To the outfit she added a real silver watch, marked with his name.

With the first pocket-money he received from his new guardian, the lad bought a locket for his nurse, enclosing his hair and bearing his initials, and gave it to her at his parting visit. She had a letter from him every month for two years. He was very homesick for a while. While the shock of awakening to the consequences of his equivocal origin and social position had taught him discretion in the manifestation of his love for his dark-skinned benefactress, his heart clung to her none the less tenderly for the revelation. His letters were long, affectionate, and full of interest to Marthy and the Glamorgan household. A pilgrimage to the old home followed upon the receipt of each epistle. Neither Marthy nor Josiah could read writing, and nobody but Mrs. Harvie or Miss Mary could be trusted with the dear contents. Marthy got her kind interpreters to read each letter over to her four times. After that, she had it "by heart."

When Mel was seventeen, Mr. Travers took him abroad for three years' travel and study. Still, letters continued to arrive with regularity that kept Marthy's soul full of pride, and was a continual surprise to her more worldly-wise patrons. Mel's photograph, taken in Florence when he was eighteen, was Marthy's most valued possession. She kept it—with his letters, his christening-frock and certificate of baptism, the precious locket, four locks of hair cut at different ages, and the paper found in his waist-band when he was left under the apple-tree—in a box made by Josiah from a bough of the old tree itself.

This box went with her to New York when, heart-famished for news or sight of the idol from whom she had not heard since 1860, she travelled Northward. A stray, circuitous rumour had reached her, early in the present year, of the social and musical successes of a Melvin Travers who was said to be a Virginian. She had acquaintances who had "gone North" soon after peace was declared. Some of them had made homes for themselves in New York. They welcomed her hospitably

and lent her the aid of what may be styled "the underground telegraph service" in seeking tidings of "a little boy, named Melvin Travers, she had nussed as much as thirty years ago." She revealed nothing more to her coadjutors.

A floating cobweb here, a stray shred there, were spun by patient, ingenious love into a clue that guided her to a handsome house in a fashionable street.

Still loyally discreet, she left word with the servant who answered the bell, that "Mr. Travers's old nurse from Virginny would like to see him, if he 'd say when she could call."

She had her answer to-day.

She carried the smart and the chill of it back to her garret in a crowded tenement-house and went to bed. Unfortunately she was too hale at sixty to slip out of her emptied world, because she prayed, with strong agony and tears, for release. Her friends nursed her zealously during the fortnight of feverish lassitude that ensued upon her hurt. By the time she was well, she knew that she must work or starve, unless she became a pauper dependent upon

the charity of those who were almost as poor as herself.

A Richmond acquaintance had obtained an excellent place for herself and several others through a certain intelligence office well up-town. Guided by her, Marthy presented herself in the waiting-room of this establishment one morning in May. She had put on her well-brushed mourning gown, and tied her well-saved crape bonnet over a starched white turban. Her fichu and apron were as wide and as spotless as when she had entered Mrs. Harvie's storeroom thirty-five years ago to a day, to tell the story of the "white wings" and the baby laid under the apple-tree. She did not forget the date as she made ready for her expedition.

The superintendent eyed the antiquated garb, half-quizzically, half-doubtfully, until he heard the enthusiastic eulogium pronounced upon the wearer by her more sophisticated companion. His brow cleared as the story went on.

"Just in time!" he said. "There's a lady in the other room who is getting in coloured

help all through her house. She wants an elderly woman of experience as head-nurse—to look after the children's clothes and all that, you know. I have been wondering where I could lay my hand upon her."

Marthy followed him into the front room, strangely apathetic. It did not seem that she had any personal concern in the transaction. The " lady " deserved the much-mangled title. Sweet-faced and sweet-voiced, her address to the dumb, patient creature, who listened with folded hands and drooping eyelids, was like a warm touch upon a frozen surface.

" You are from Virginia, I understand ? My husband was born in that State. I should like to have a Virginia ' mammy ' for my children, and nothing would please him more. What can you do ? "

" ' Most anything 'bout the house, ma'am, " —in the slow, musical speech set in a minor key, peculiar to the best of her class. " I 'm said to be a good sewer, an' I onderstan' all sorts o' housework, 'n' I 've had a heap to do with babies. "

" We leave town early this year, on account

of the children. The baby is teething. We have a cottage in the Catskills, and shall not be back in New York before October. Do you object to the country? Some servants do."

"I was born 'n' raised in the country, ma'am."

A queer spasm shut off her voice. It was not for her to say how homesick she had been for her own house and county for twenty-odd years.

The bargain was made. A month ago, the desolate woman could not have been bribed to leave the city that held her 'boy.' Now—what matter where she went, or with whom? She listened in the same dull dream, while her friend talked of wages, and assured the prospective mistress that she would never regret the engagement. Marthy wished Kitty Casey would not talk so much and promise such fine things on her behalf. She was nothing but a machine, now. Nobody knows how soon a machine may get out of order.

The arrangement was made to meet at the railway station next morning, and her officious friend attended her to the rendezvous at the

appointed time. The rest of the party were not so punctual; there was a bustle and jumble and rush in getting into the train and settling there. The youngest baby was not well, and, before Marthy shook off the sense of strangeness and isolation inseparable from transplantation at her age, the younger nurse accosted her across the aisle:

“ Would n’t you like to hold him ? ” indicating the child in her arms. “ His mother says you ’ve had ’xperience with babies. *I* think he ’s a pretty sick child.”

It was a lovely infant that Marthy received, but the blue eyes were glassy, the cheeks purpling with fever. She had no leisure for selfish sadness while she held him for the rest of the journey in a tender, steady embrace, that the motion of the cars might not increase his discomfort.

“ He looks like the las’ one I nussed,” said she, falteringly, to the mother, who followed her up to the cottage nursery. “ How ole is he, please, ma’am ? ”

“ Six months. He is his father’s namesake and the only one of the three that looks like

him. What do you think is the matter with him ?”

Raising her eyes to answer, Marthy saw that the husband stood by the wife. A gloriously handsome man, with gold-brown hair and moustache, blue eyes, finely chiselled features, and straight, broad shoulders. The Virginia accent thrilled the nurse to trembling as he spoke.

“ He has fever—has n't he ?”

“ Yes, suh. I 'm 'fraid so, but 't may be nuthin' but his teeth.”

“ In my hurry yesterday, I forgot to tell you my name, or to ask yours,” said the wife, smiling. “ I am Mrs. Travers. What shall we call you ?”

The woman hesitated slightly. A sick dimness was creeping over her senses.

“ Ann—if you please, ma'am,” busying herself with the baby's skirts.

“ Mrs. Travers tells me you are from Virginia.” It was the husband's voice again.

“ From what part ?”

“ Hanaracker County, suh.”

“ Ah, Henrico! I lived in Richmond for a

few years. Was your home near the city ?”

“ Not fur off, suh.”

“ Do you think the little boy ought to have a doctor ?”

Marthy stooped over the baby on her lap.

“ O Lord! O my good Lord! gimme strength!” she was praying. “ Lemme hole my tongue an’ keep my senses, so ’s I ken save this one’s life, too!”

The parents allowed her full time for consideration. She seemed embarrassed and diffident, but both were impressed by her intelligent face and dignified, respectful demeanour.

“ Good nussin’ goes funder with chillen ’n physic,” she said presently. “ We ’ll do our bes’ for him, suh.”

Her best was unremitting attention, such watchful assiduity of tenderness as called forth hearty praise from the physician summoned when the little one was attacked with convulsions that night. It was a week before he was pronounced convalescent.

“ You have a treasure in that nurse of yours,” the doctor told Mrs. Travers. “ She is a first-class specimen of a kind that is fast

passing away. Where did you pick her up ? ”

“ In New York—accidentally—or rather, as I like to believe, providentially. I think the fact that she and my husband are natives of the same State induced her to come to me. Mr. Travers comes of an old Virginia family, although, his parents having died while he was a baby, he knows little of his near relatives. I am foolish enough to be glad that I have not married a man who never had a grandfather. I have a weakness for good blood. What is it, Ann ? ”

The nurse had come in while she was speaking, and waited respectfully until she ceased before she made known her errand. The yellow pallour of her face drew the doctor’s notice.

“ Take care of yourself, my good woman ! ” he said, after her message was given. “ We can’t have you laid up. ”

Marthy sped back to the nursery, bolted the door and sank on a chair panting and shaking, like one pursued by the furies.

“ He ’d be ruin’ ef ’t was foun’ out as how

a po' free nigger brung him up. She don't know! she 'd fy'ar hate him ef she did. I 'd be tore limb from limb, an' burn' in a slow fire, 'fo' I 'd ever let on a word, so help me God!"

The Traverses took her back to the city with them in the autumn. The children loved her dearly, and of their own accord took to calling her "Mammy," in tones that awakened wildly sweet echoes in her soul, yet so charged with pain that sometimes she felt her burdensome secret to be almost beyond endurance.

"I like to hear it!" said Mrs. Travers, one evening.

She had looked into the nursery on her way to a party, to see that all was well with the babies.

"Mr. Travers often speaks of his old 'Mammy.' He says you remind him of her. Here he is!"

He entered, pulling on his left-hand glove. He was in evening dress, the costume that makes the true gentleman look himself more distinctively than any other, and reduces the

parvenu to his butler's rank. Marthy's eyes and heart glowed pridefully; her whole soul sprang toward him as she met his glance.

"I was telling Ann that she reminds you of your old nurse, Melvin," his wife explained.

"She does very strongly at times. But my dear old 'Marthy' was not so tall as you, Ann, and stouter. I used to think her voice the sweetest I ever heard. I lost sight of her during the war, and since then have not been able to hear anything of her. My guardian, Mr. Harvie, died in '62, and his wife the same year. Two of his sons were killed in battle, the single sister did not outlive the war, and the married one removed to California. I advertised in the Richmond papers for news of Josiah and Marthy Jones, in 1866, but without success. They are both dead, no doubt. Are you ready, my pet? How lovely you are to-night in your new gown!"

She laughed and blushed as he kissed her; both said, "Good-night, Mammy!" in leaving the room.

Marthy laughed and cried together when alone. "'Pears like I 'm 's good 's dead 'n'

buried!" she sobbed. " But seein' him so constant, 'n' servin' him 'n' hisn with all my heart 'n' soul 's so like heaven I ought n't to complain. I 'se been sho', this long time, as how that sassy Irish huzzy lied when she said he would n't see me. Now, I knows it, praise th' Lord! "

A terrible shock fell on the peaceful household the next morning. Mrs. Travers's diamond ear-rings and brooch had been abstracted from the case containing them while she was at breakfast. Her husband had proposed to take them to be cleaned at Tiffany's, and on opening the drawer where they were placed over night the theft was discovered. Without notifying the family of the loss, Mr. Travers summoned the police and put the house in their hands. Marthy was left in the nursery with Mrs. Travers and the children, the other servants in the library under the eye of a detective, while the search went forward.

Mr. Travers, who accompanied the latter party, appeared in the nursery presently, with a broad, shallow box in his hand. One of the officers was at his heels,

“ Is this yours, Mammy ? ” asked the master, kindly. “ It was found between your mattresses. I am sure it contains nothing that does not honestly belong to you, but the other servants might complain if we did not open it. Where is the key ? ”

Marthy sewed steadily on, with averted face, and seemed not to hear.

“ Ann ! ” said Mrs. Travers’s gentle voice, “ Mr. Travers wants the key to this box. Get it, if you please ! ”

“ I done los’ it ! ”

Her muffled tone, her dogged demeanour, admitted of but one construction. The officer whipped a small chisel and hammer from his pocket, and held out his hand for the box.

“ We can fix that soon enough, ” he said, briskly.

Marthy threw herself upon the casket with a strangled shriek.

“ Marster ! Mars’ Mel ! Please, suh, for the good Lord’s sake, don’t let ’em open this hyar box ! I ’ll take my Bible oath, Mr. Policeman, thar ain’t nothin’ wrong in it. I ain’t never stole’ so much as the wroppin’ o’ your

finger in all my born days. My dear, sweet young mistis! you must n't have this cruel thing done! I 'll go to jail fus'!"

The stridulous accents of the officer arose above her frantic abjurations, and her mistress's soothing words.

" 'T is n't a question of going to jail, or opening the case. The matter is in the hands of the law. Bring the key, or I break the lock! "

Marthy drew back and stood up, tall and straight.

" The Lord's will be done! He knows, 'n' you, my marster 'n' mistis, 'll b'ar me witness 's how I did n't go fur to do it. I would 'a' hendered it with my dead body ef I could. But won't you, please, suh"—to the policeman—" let Mr. Travers onlock that box an' 'xamine what 's in it? Hyar 's the key! I done tole a lie 'bout it. May be that will lose my soul. An' 't was all throwed away!"

She walked into the other room, leaving the door open behind her, knelt down at a chair and wrapped her apron over her head.

Sounds like the wash and break of the sea rang in her ears, mingled with the murmur of

human voices. Blind adoration of her idol had ended in his destruction. If she could die this moment at his feet, acknowledged and forgiven by him, it would all be "thrown away." She had wrought his disgrace in the sight of the world, lost him the love and respect of the fair, well-born wife, who would recoil disgusted, from the worse than nobody—the pauper foundling, brought up in the hut of a free negro!

She shivered and moaned at the pressure of a hand on her shoulder, but did not offer to rise. The coo and call of a baby's voice penetrated the muffings over her ears; impatient little fingers tugged them away. Baby Mel shouted gleefully in her scared face, when he had unveiled it. His father held him; his eyes swam in tears; his wife was crying softly, her arm about her husband's neck. No one else was present. Marthy put out her arms for the baby, and Mr. Travers assisted her to rise.

"Sit here, in this chair, Mammy. You are weak and nervous!" How merciful was this man's forbearance! "Drink this water! When you can listen to me, I want to tell you, first of all, that the diamonds are found. That

poor fool of a new chambermaid had them in her pocket. Now—let me look at you!”

She raised her face, humble, incredulous, worshipful, for he had taken her toil-worn hand in his.

“ It is strange I did not know you before. Dear, noble old Mammy! But did you suppose I had married this little girl here without telling her everything? It is n't my fault if she will persist in believing that I am a nobleman's son, stolen and carried off to your door by some wicked wretch who will yet be exposed. It comforts her and does n't hurt me. She knows she can trust you not to spoil her romantic story by letting people who would n't understand know all that I owe to you. To everybody but ourselves, you are our friend, the nurse who took care of me when a child, and my children's Mammy, who will have an honoured home in my house as long as she lives. In my wife's heart—in mine—in GOD'S sight—you are what you have always been—what you will ever be—my *Mother!* ”

He knelt reverently, and bowed his beautiful head for her blessing.



Chapter IX

The Desire of his Eyes

FOUR old women gossiped in the front yard of the County Poorhouse, one sultry July afternoon. The half-acre of ground dignified by the name of "yard" was absolutely bare of turf and shrubbery. Against the rail-fence separating it from "the men's part," grew a few mildewed lilacs and scrubby snow-ball bushes, and a tangle of untrimmed Washington's Bower, the hardiest and longest-lived of creepers. Beyond the men's part was the House garden in which six old men were hoeing between rows of cabbages, black-eyed pease, and turnips, and hilling up sweet and Irish potatoes. The women's yard was bounded on the right by a corn-field. An opening in the yard-fence, where there had never been a gate, led to a road little better

than a bridle-path, crossing an "old field" given over to broom-straw and sassafras saplings. A fence half a mile away marked the line of the public road. On the other side of this thoroughfare was the Swamp, dry now as the Great African Desert, but like a sodden sponge in the early spring and the early winter.

A row of melancholy aspens, six in number, stood in front of the long, rickety frame building, two stories high, and two rooms deep, devoted to the comfort and convenience of the paupers of Opecanough County. Just now these were twenty-three, all told; thirteen women and ten men. The aspens had been in a decline for years, and a coat of white-wash, applied to the trunks in a spasm of cleanliness on the part of the overseer's wife, had furthermore so dispirited them that they had put out but half the reasonable complement of foliage this year. Locusts were shrilling in the branches, a teasing jar of sound like the vibration of rusty wires. The annual drought had seized upon Central Virginia the middle of June; the paupers' hoes raised puffs of dust, and a yellowish cloud of the same

followed the course of a plough, a horse, and a man, moving through the cornfield. The long blades were twisted into wisps, and the tassels on the immature ears were brown. As the man ploughed, he alternately sang and whistled *Clar de Kitchen*, never changing the tune or the time.

“ I wish your son would learn another tune, Mrs. Johnson,” quavered one of the crones. “ It makes me right down nervous, this hot weather, to hear the same thing, for a’ hour at a time.”

Her nerves, like her whine, her tortoise-shell snuff-box, and a black silk frock worn four times a year, were a souvenir of the better days that lent a flavour of distinction to Mrs. Tony’s “ ways.”

Mrs. Johnson did not resent the criticism of her half-witted offspring. She sat upon a stiff low chair, elbows on knees, smoking a corn-cob (“ husk ”) pipe with a short reed stem. Mrs. Blankenship, on her left, Miss Betsey Martin facing her from the hewn log doorstep of her own room, were also smoking. The snuff grime upon Mrs. Tony’s grey moustache was

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the hall-mark of her more genteel practice. All were clad in blue "Virginia cloth," straight and scant in the skirt, bulging as to waist; all wore caps, and there was not half a set of teeth among them.

"I don' pester myself to listen at him," the parent retorted, stolidly, sucking audibly upon her pipe-stem to clear it of a clot of nicotine. "'Slong 's he ain't in no mischief, I don' take no notice what he 's doin'. He grows jes' like sparrergress, an' pears-like it makes him res'less. Lord o'mercy, Sally 'Kiah! Whar you goin' now?"

A little woman had tripped out of one of the five doors opening directly from as many bedrooms upon the yard. Her faded pink calico frock showed her lean ankles and bare feet; a gingham sunbonnet hung by the strings upon her back; she had a hickory splint basket in one hand. Her skin was like creased whitey-brown paper; her features were absurdly small; three yellowish-grey curls bobbed on each side of a face as fleshless as that of a mummied baby. She cocked her head toward her left shoulder and made answer smirkingly:

“Goin’ to hunt huckleberries! If I git ’nough, goin’ to sell ’em at the Coat House, or swap ’em off fur sugar. They don’ make my coffee half sweet ’nough hyar.”

“See you don’ git nothin’ stronger ’n sugar!” croaked Mrs. Blankenship.

The quartette of crones cackled like so many Guinea-fowls. The subject of the witticism tittered appreciation of the innuendo, and tripped across the yard to the fence of the cornfield. Bob Johnson had checked his horse, and leaned on the top-rail staring at her. He was a gawky lad of nineteen, tall and loose-jointed. His trowsers were of butternut homespun, his shirt of unbleached cotton cloth was blackened with sweat and dust; a shock of gingery hair fell to his eyebrows and low upon his bull-neck; the prominent light eyes and the hanging lips, widened by a grin of fatuous delight, were brutishly imbecile.

In the hot stillness every word of the colloquy at the fence reached the coterie under the aspens.

“You *dasn’t* go, Bob Johnson! Ole Jones would take a cowhide to your back ef you was

to stop yo' ploughin' an' go 'long a 'me to hunt huckleberries. I know whar they are 's thick 's spatter, an' big 's partridge aigs."

Mrs. Johnson lowered her pipe from her mouth. " You, Sally 'Kiah! let that 'ar boy 'lone! You, Bob! I 'll take a stick to you ef you don' mind! Stop that foolin'—both on yo'!"

Sally 'Kiah sent back a mocking laugh as she danced over to the path leading out of the yard, and started across the old field. Bob swore obscenely at his mother, slapped the rope lines upon the back of the raw-boned horse, and turned the plough in the furrow, the dust rising to conceal the slouching form, the withered corn rustling as he pushed through it.

Miss Betsey Martin squared herself upon her doorstep, resting her skinny arms more comfortably upon her lap, and grunted meaningly. Earlier in the action of life she had a trick of talking with her teeth shut. Now, she mumbled between shrivelled lips, one loose tusk working like a miniature pump-handle.

" Can' teach a' old dog new tricks! She 's

been at that kind o' business all her life. 'Slong's 't was a *man*, it did n' make no difference whether he was young or ole, rich or pore, white or—*blue*—or any other colour!"

She clamped the movable tusk upon the livid underlip, turned her husk pipe upside down, shook out the ashes, and poked the refuse from the bottom with a hooked little finger.

"I 've heard tell she was tol'able good-lookin' oncet," said Mrs. Blankenship, tentatively. "She cert'nly is mighty hard-favoured now."

Miss Betsey refilled her pipe from a bag hung at her side, pulled herself up, holding her back with both hands, and tottered into her room for a coal of fire from the hearth. It was a mean place, even for a Poorhouse dormitory. The walls were blackened by smoke; there was not a thread of carpet upon the ill-fitting boards of the floor; a lumpy feather-bed upon an unpainted bedstead; a pine table holding a bowl and a grey stone pitcher without a handle; a blue wooden chest and two chairs bottomed with roughly woven straw,—furnished it. The agèd inmate would know no

other home until she was laid in the potters' field on the bleak hillside back of the Poor-house, where there was not so much as a numbered board to tell who slept in hollows that were once mounds. Briers, poke-stalks, Jamestown weeds and alders were never disturbed except when a space was hacked clean to make the work of spade and mattock easier.

Miss Betsey was the oldest member of "The House" family and a deep repository of County scandals. When she reseated herself upon the doorstep, there was a muffled grating of chairs along the gritty earth, as the three occupants drew them nearer to the oracle. They were expectant, but not impatient. A story, and a full-flavoured one, was in Miss Betsey's black eyes, gleaming fitfully up in their sockets like the coal on the loose hillock of tobacco in the pipe-bowl as she pulled hard upon the short reed, and sent intermittent rings of pale blue smoke into the breezeless air. When she was ready she would say her say. For some reason, probably known to herself, but a mystery to everybody else, she had been comparatively reserved with regard

to Sally 'Kiah's antecedents. There was something in the air now that augured better things. An incautious query might ruin the prospect. The autocratic senior had "ways," and the manner of her works was uncertain.

Mrs. Tony fanned herself with a turkey wing and plunged a sensuous thumb and finger into the perfumy, brown velvetiness of the snuff sent to her yesterday by a distant kinsman in Cumberland County; conveyed a liberal pinch to nostrils that dilated with expectation and drew it in lingeringly. The other two women smoked quietly and pretended to watch the men working in the dust-dry garden about the cabbages and sweet potatoes, the turnips and the black-eyed pease. Bob Johnson, rallying from his recent rebuff, was chanting among the distant corn-rows:

My ole white horse laid on the ice,
 An' on his back-bone sot two mice,
 His groans resoun' the hills aroun',
 Hark ! from de toms a moanful sound !
 Clar de kitchen, ole folks, young folks,
 Ole Virginny neber tire !

" They say thar 's one hund'ed verses in

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that song," ventured Mrs. Tony, giggling feebly, "an' I reckon Bob knows 'em all."

Miss Betsey Martin filiped the coal from the now ignited tobacco. Mrs. Johnson shook her head warningly at the last speaker. The brew must not be shaken. Beyond the beaten barrenness of the house-yard and the crooked rail fence enclosing it, acres of yellow broom-grass stretched, level and sad, up to the swamp lands where Sally 'Kiah was hunting huckleberries to be bartered at Opecanconough Court House for a pound of moist sugar and five glasses of cheap whiskey.

Perhaps this was in Miss Betsey's mind as she mumbled forth the first sentence of the long-kept story.

"Thar war n't a prettier guirl in the whole State o' Virginny, forty-odd year ago, than that thar woman you see go by hyur jes' now, bar' foot 'n' bar' face, 'n' ready to cuarry on with a boy young 'nough fur to be her gran-son, 's you might say."

The tale told under the melancholy aspens and the pale, cruel blue of the July sky that

day came to me through other sources, and will be given in another guise.

Hezekiah Miller had lived a bachelor for fifty-eight years when his mother, who, although bed-ridden, had outlived her husband by twelve years, died in her son's arms, blessing him for all his goodness to her, and exhorting him to turn to the Lord and so live that he would meet her in heaven. The eldest-born of his godly parents and heir to the fine estate of High Hill had not led a godly life. Apart from his filial piety, he had none of any kind to commend him to his church-going neighbours. A burly, red-faced squire, "all of the olden time," he drank more peach-brandy, swore more roundly and rode harder to hounds than any other man in three neighbourhoods. After High Hill degenerated into a bachelor's hall, his exemplary sister-in-law, Mrs. Sydenham Miller, of Pine Ridge, declared that she was afraid to enter the old homestead unless her husband were with her, "Brother 'Kiah had such a rough set of men about him."

True, there were compensations to the sober

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mind of the exemplar. The house was well kept by servants trained under the late mistress, confessedly the best manager in the county. There was no danger that the massive furniture and mighty stores of linen, china, silver, and glassware would be injured or stolen. They would be rendered up, in good condition, in the Lord's own time, into the hands of Mistress Sydenham and be passed down to her children. By the will of Hezekiah Miller, Senior, High Hill and all its appurtenances were entailed upon the Christianly respectable second son and the heirs of his body, should Hezekiah, Junior, die without legitimate issue.

No contingency seemed more remote than the failure of this provision on the May-day six months after his mother's death, when 'Kiah Miller, riding through a by-road of his brother's plantation, happened upon the prettiest scene his eyes had ever beheld. A girl was on her knees in a wild strawberry-patch, filling a basket with the fruit. Her finger-tips and her lips were reddened with berry-juice. Her sunbonnet was off, also the cape that had

covered her shoulders. These were as white as milk, as were her perfect arms; her eyes were as blue as the smiling heavens; her complexion like mother-of-pearl overhung by blush-roses; her teeth gleamed snowily in the smile, half-alarm, half-amusement, altogether enchanting, flashed up at her admirer as he drew rein beside her.

Maud Muller had not been written then. If it had been, neither of the parties to this sylvan romance would ever have heard of it. When the berry-picking was done they were upon such cordial terms that the squire lifted the girl into his saddle and held her steady with one arm while she guided his horse to the house of Sydenham Miller's overseer. The overseer was her uncle, winsome Sally had said, and that she was to live with him now, her own father having died a couple of months ago. She was not shy with her new friend after the momentary surprise of meeting was over. She prattled as volubly as a child who had known him for every one of her eighteen years; was as full of fun and graceful tricks as a kitten, guilelessly ready to meet him fully

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half-way, with a tilt on the side of merciful consideration for his age and his bashfulness in association with the other sex. He scandalised the Fighting Creek neighbourhood by frequenting the overseer's house for the next month, and threw it into horrified hysterics by marrying Sally Wilkinson on the tenth of June, one month from the day of the rencontre in the strawberry-patch.

On the last day of March in the year following, High Hill witnessed strange doings. Dr. Henning, the family physician, alighting from his horse at sunset, inquired amazedly the meaning of extraordinary preparations going on about the gateway and the palings of the lawn. Piles of pine knots were ranged at regular intervals at a safe distance from the fence, and around these hovered a score of negro men attended by a crew of twice as many children, all a-gog with gleeful expectation. Before the negro who took the doctor's horse could reply, 'Kiah Miller strode hurriedly down the paved walk leading from the front porch.

"For the Lord's sake, don't wait a minute, doctor!" grabbing the other by the arm and

propelling him toward the house. "P'nelope says she is doing first rate, but I 'd rather you 'd see her. She 's worth all I can do to help her along — God bless her sweet soul! Those piles of lightwood? For bonfires, sir!" laughing in nervous defiance of possible ridicule. "Nineteen of 'em, sir! One for every year she has lived — God bless her! There 's to be a nigger with a torch in his hand by each one of them when the boy comes. And every nigger is to blow a horn as loud as he can blow, if it busts his lungs. They 'll hear the racket in the stars!"

He roared with thunderous laughter, dealing the doctor a great whack between the shoulders, as he dragged him up the steps.

"You 're mighty sure it will be a boy, I see," remarked that functionary, dryly, stamping the March mud from his boots upon the shuck mat.

Like all country practitioners, he liked a savoury dish of gossip and had inclined heedfully to the stories of the promoted plebeian's escapades, before and since her marriage. Her influence over her infatuated spouse was

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unaccountable to a staid Presbyterian elder who had "attended" the High Hill family for forty years.

Dry acerbity was lost upon the elate auditor.

"Dead sure, sir! Sure as death and shooting! She has given me her word on it. And what she says, she stands to like the little brick she is. God A'mighty bless her for the greatest thing ever made in human shape! Talk about a little lower than the angels, sir! She's clean out o' sight of 'em, sir! The pattern was broke after she was made. Come in, man! Come in!"

The doctor glanced backward at the objectionable piles of fuel.

"What about the effect of your racket on her nerves?"

"Nerves! Lord save you, man! She never had one. Be hanged if she did n't make me carry her to the window fifteen minutes ago to look at them! and laughed as if she'd die. Then she took my face between her little hands, and says she, still laughing, 'What a dear old goose you are, to be sure!' and made believe to slap my jaws. Declares she'll blow

one of the horns, herself! Any other woman would be crying, and scared out of her senses. But my *Sally!* Oh, Lord!"

He blew his nose stertorously and laughed huskily.

"See here, 'Kiah!" The doctor halted outside of "the Chamber" door, which was across the hall from the drawing-room on the first floor. Laying hold of the lappel of the husband's coat he looked squarely into his watery eyes. "Between brandy and delight you are not fit to go in here. I want you to stay out. Too much depends upon keeping a woman quiet for me to let you into this room. Men are always in the way at such times, and you might do more mischief than I could undo."

It was said low and so impressively that 'Kiah Miller yielded at once.

"Have your own way, Doc! have your own way!" with an awkward snort meant to cloak nervous alarm. "The game 's in your hands just now. Just you wait 'till the boy is here, and we 'll see who holds trumps. Give my love to my angel girl"—his voice thickening

again into hoarseness,—“and tell her I’m loving her and suffering with her all the time. You’ll find me in the dining-room when you come out.”

He found, too, one of the famous suppers that had given Jefferson, the High Hill cook, his reputation. The doctor’s chilly mood melted measurably at the sight and the smell thereof. The patient was doing well, he reported, and Penelope, the plantation “granny,” herself the mother of ten living children, was quite equal to any emergency likely to arise for a couple of hours.

“Maybe longer,” he said, cheerily. “Slow and sure,” is a capital motto in such cases. “I am as hungry as a bear in a spring thaw!” rubbing his hands over the plate of stewed oysters set before him, and sniffing the aroma of broiled partridges and wild turkey escaping between the silver covers and the great dishes they masked. “Now I think of it, I had no dinner to-day. Two more interesting cases have kept me out all day. And both boys! Blessings never come singly.”

“Here’s a health to all three!” uttered the

host, draining his glass. "Now fall to work with a will!"

Coffee was poured, and the two men were waited upon by Windsor, the "head dining-room servant," one of Penelope's sons. Six feet tall, and as straight as a pine tree, he moved about the table with the noiseless grace of a leopard, gravely impassive, yet alertly courteous in anticipating every probable wish of those he served. His jetty skin bespoke him a blooded negro, yet his features were those of the Moor, not the Congo; his abundant hair was straight.

"A likely fellow, that!" observed the visitor when the two white men sat down for a post-prandial smoke before the blazing logs behind the fender.

"The likeliest nigger in Christendom!" assented the master. "By——! I think, sometimes, I ought to give P'nelope her freedom-papers. Those five boys of hers are a fortune to any man. Madison, the second one, is my head man, you know; Monroe is my carriage-driver; Adams is the blacksmith; Wellington is the carpenter. I'll be dashed if every man-

jack of 'em ain't more of a gentleman than his marster! That old father and mother o' mine knew how to train servants if they did n't know anything else."

He fidgeted uneasily while he talked, poking the fire that needed no attention; knocking down shovel and tongs with a clatter, and breaking off in the middle of a sentence to turn towards the door. The doctor kindly feigned to see none of these signs of growing perturbation. The situation was an old story to him, and he was most comfortable in mind and body.

"They understood some other things mighty well," he said, with a significant glance around the apartment.

The house, ungainly in exterior, like most of its age in that locality, was finished within so handsomely as to be a distinct surprise to visitors who had known nothing of the wealth and taste of former owners.

The dining-room was wainscoted to the ceiling, which was decorated in an elaborate design of the now rare putty-work. Upon the high mantel was a pattern of garlanded flowers

held at each end by a Cupid; the dancing flames were given back in dazzling gleams by shining brass fender and andirons and struck prismatic sparks from cut-glass, silver, and china upon tables and buffet.

The doctor's dry intonation belonged to his thoughtful and admonitory moods. It was evident in his next observation:

"They did their best by their children. That 's certain. No better woman ever lived than your mother."

"You mean that I ain't the man their son ought to be? You 're right, sir! dashed right! But I turned over a new leaf when I married that suffering darling in yonder. And, by George! I am going to paste it open and iron it down to-night if all goes well with her. You don't know that woman, doctor! She 's the joy of my life! Is n't there something somewhere in the Bible about the ' desire of a man's eyes?' That 's what *she* is, sir, the desire of my eyes!"

"*Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips,*" quoted the literal Presbyterian soberly.

'Kiah Miller slapped his thigh smartly.

"Gospel truth, sir! Anything more of the same sort? I thought it was 'eyes,' but 'heart' does as well."

The tactless elder fished up another quotation:

"Son of man, behold I take from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke; yet neither shalt thou mourn, nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down."

"Why, d—n it, man! What do you mean?" wheeling angrily upon him. And in the same breath, but with an utter change of tone,—“God forbid! She has been my redeeming angel! If I lose her I lose everything!”

He kicked his chair back; there was a piteous gulp in his throat after the last word; he began to pace the floor agitatedly, his head sunk upon his breast, his great hands clenched at his side.

The doctor hemmed twice before speaking. For the first time the thought crossed his deliberate, provincial mind that the neighbourhood sentence upon the giddy girl who had

outraged proprieties and precedent might be a trifle harsh. If she did dress gaudily and extravagantly; if she was pert to her husband's old friends, and ridiculous in public demonstrations of a devotion to 'Kiah which nobody believed to be genuine; if half the stories were true which were told of her familiarity with her servants and carousals with the mixed multitude she drew about the High Hill fireside and table,—there was yet a possibility that some leaven of good lurked within her, and might act in time upon her infatuated adorer.

“ I am glad to hear it,” he said. “ *Very* glad, 'Kiah! As you say, I do not know Mrs. Miller very well. You see, the difference between her age and ours seems to make a gap——”

“ It does n't with her!” interposed the other, halting in front of his friend and speaking fast and eagerly. “ If you could only hear her talk about that, you would understand that the difference is an advantage to us both. She makes me young, and I give her steadiness——”

The door flew open, and a tall negress, her

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head bound in a white turban, called out peremptorily,—

“ You better come quick, Doctor! ”

She vanished before he could answer, and he followed, still without any appearance of excitement. At the door he paused to say :

“ It 's all right, 'Kiah! But don't you bother me and worry her by disobeying orders.”

In the hall the master ran full against Windsor and a couple of subordinates on their way to clear off the table. 'Kiah Miller gripped Windsor's sleeve :

“ Have every man ready to light up the minute I show myself in the po'ch, and every one with his horn in his hand! Run for your life! ”

He spluttered out the rapid order, shaking like an aspen-leaf, his face was blotched with purple; one big vein in his forehead was almost black. As the men sped away, he fell upon his knees before the hall-sofa, above which hung his mother's picture, and prayed aloud, brokenly, cold beads of sweat trickling from his forehead into his eyes; prayed for the sweet life that might be going out for aught

he knew; for the precious new life that was coming.

“ Oh, Lord! I have been a great sinner!” a woman coming up behind him heard him groan. “ But take care of *her!* She ’s a saint!”

The woman was his wife’s own maid, and she had just left the Chamber. She was a smart, dressy mulatto, and, encouraged by the youth and levity of her mistress, was disposed to greater freedom of speech with her superiors than the elder Mrs. Miller would have allowed. She touched her master on the shoulder now, her face wreathed with saucy smiles. As he sprang to his feet, she put her arms akimbo, and laid her head upon her shoulder coquettishly, as his wife had a way of doing:

“ What you gwine ter give me for my news, Marster ? ”

Two heavy hands fell upon her bare, brawny arms; he was literally speechless; his rugged features worked convulsively.

“ It ’s a fine boy, suh! Listen! don’t you hear him ? ”

“ And *she?* ”

“ Oh, all right!” more carelessly. “ I mus’

go back right straight off. I jes' run out the minute I heerd the news, for to git ahead o' everybody else."

He laughed all over his face, but the tears ran fast down the weather-beaten cheeks.

"Here!" thrusting his hand into his pocket, and drawing out several gold pieces. "I'll give you twice as much when you come to tell me I can see her and the boy."

As old Penelope called sharply to her from the chamber-door, their master rushed out upon the porch, snatched down his hunting-horn from the rack where it hung, and blew a long blast into the star-lit night. The hubbub that responded was indescribable. Nineteen tongues of red fire flared upward; a chorus of yells and cheers joined with the bray of the horns; dogs barked, women screamed with laughter, babies cried, and, like the ruling genius of the pandemonium, the burly figure of the master, magnified and distorted by the lurid leap of the bonfires, and burlesqued by the black shadow wavering upon the wall behind him, danced and gesticulated upon the porch-steps, drunk with joy.

A violent hand seized the arm flourishing the bugle over his head.

“ For heaven’s sake ! ” cried the doctor in his ear, and harshly. “ Stop this cursèd racket ! Come ! ”

As his host had dragged him into the hall three hours ago, he pulled the bewildered man backward now, stumbling over the threshold, past the mother’s portrait, and so into the dining-room. Windsor and his assistants were busy about the table, laughing and talking as they folded the cloth and set back the chairs.

“ Get out of here ! everyone of you ! ” commanded the doctor.

He pushed his terrified charge down into a chair. The rugged face had changed from purple to a queer yellow, the jaw trembling so that but one word escaped the lips :

“ *She ?* ”

“ She is doing well—— ”

Before he could say more, colour and light flooded the husband’s face ; he raised his clasped hands in a transport of devout gratitude ; tears and sobs broke forth.

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“ Thank God! Oh, thank God! I can bear anything now! The child!”

The doctor's face, dark and stern, bent to the level of the man in the chair.

“ Brace up, 'Kiah!” he said. “ For you 've got a heap to stand. The child——”

His breath scorched the listener's ear, as he whispered the rest into it.

The cry that answered pealed through the house. 'Kiah Miller wrenched himself from the physician's hold and was at the chamber-door before his pursuer could overtake him. As he sprang after the maniac the doctor shouted to Windsor, who loitered in the hall, for help. The two struggled dumbly with the maddened wretch while he bit and kicked at them, bellowing out curses and threats, begging and commanding them to let him “ get into that room and kill that *thing!*”

“ Lock the door, and hold it!” called out the doctor, feeling his strength fail him, and as he spoke the sound of a woman's wild, shrill weeping and a baby's lusty cry penetrated the thick panels.

'Kiah Miller ceased to fight; a terrible quiver

ran through his limbs; he pitched headlong to the floor, blood pouring from nose and mouth.

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One month from the day when Hezekiah Miller was carried, like a breathing log, to his brother's house, Sydenham and his exemplary wife bundled the young mother and her baby off to her overseer uncle.

When Hezekiah died, five months later, his wife was beggared. Her name had never passed his lips during the time it took him to drink himself to death. On the day he was laid in the High Hill burying-ground beside his mother, news was whispered among the servants, and filtered through this medium to his blood-kindred, that the repudiated wife had "taken up" with a low white man in the Muddy Creek neighbourhood. Her own relatives had turned her adrift with her child; but for the trunks of finery she carried away from High Hill—after the Exemplar had weeded them of family silver and laces—she was as poor as when 'Kiah Miller had found her in the wild strawberry-patch. Of the motley crew who had profited by the brief period of

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her exaltation, there were none so poor as to do her reverence, or to affect the semblance of humane treatment. Her story had but one side. That was told in hints, and shudderingly. She paid the penalty of her misdeeds alone, without redress, and unpitied.

At sixty years of age, she drifted, a morsel of human garbage, into the Opecanconough Poorhouse. The one remnant of her once honourable estate that had not been reft from her was the nickname by which her doating husband had been known among his friends. It was fastened upon her in obloquy; but by the time her entrance upon the life of a public pauper was registered in the books of "The House" few except veteran gossips like Miss Betsey Martin knew where and how she had acquired it.

When a pit was dug in the red clay of the barren hill behind the Poorhouse to receive the withered body, the ill-begotten title was written for the last time:

"Sally Kiah. Received, June 14, 1830. Died, January 12, 1845. Supposed age, about 80."

The overseer whistled idly as he made the entry and sanded the fresh ink.



Chapter X

The Lethe Mystery

THREE men stood upon the front porch of a grim and gaunt old house on a bland morning in January, 1844. From their point of view they overlooked twenty miles of "neighbourhood." The hill topped by the Lethe homestead rolled northward to fat corn-fields irrigated by Deep Creek. At the foot of the southern slope, a good mile away, flowed Broad Creek, leaving, with each semi-annual freshet, an alluvial deposit several inches deep upon the low grounds.

"Colonel Scott used to brag that the corn grew so high there the whippoorwills sang in it at twelve o'clock in the day," said the tallest of the group. "Then he would wind up with, 'Sure 's you're one damned sinner, an' I'm another, sir!' I've heard him say



"A GRIM AND GAUNT OLD HOUSE."

it a hundred times. It was his favourite oath.”

The speaker was Parke Flournoy of Letlone, the adjoining plantation. He was well built, over six feet in height, broad-shouldered and flat-backed, tanned to a dusky red by the winds and suns of fifty-five summers ; a representative Virginian country gentleman, and the father of three of the prettiest girls in a section that counted beauties by the dozen.

One perceived at a glance that his companions were from the city. The fact was betrayed not merely by complexion and dress, but by purer and more incisive articulation, the speech of men accustomed to mingle with many and various types of humanity; those to whom time was more valuable than to the opulent dweller upon ancestral acres and among his own people.

Burr Mayo (he had dropped the “ Aaron ” as soon as he was old enough to read for himself the story of the duel with Hamilton) was born in the Deep Creek neighbourhood, learned enough Latin and Greek in Basil Lowry’s

old-field school to help him over the low sill of Hampden Sidney College; was graduated at eighteen and "went into business" in Richmond, where two uncles were making fortunes as tobacco manufacturers.

His errand to Opecananough at this unlikely season for country excursions had to do with the purchase of a "place" for his eldest and namesake son, who hankered after an agricultural life and an abode in the vicinity of Letlone and sweet Lucy Flournoy.

Lethe—the old Scott homestead—had just come into the market. The last resident proprietor had died twenty years before, since which date the dwelling had not been occupied. The land was worked on shares by a couple of ex-overseers who lived in the house built for Colonel Scott's manager, a quarter of a mile from the main residence. The family negroes were parcelled among a dozen legatees, with the exception of two or three who, the late master had willed, should remain in their cabins, and be fed and clothed by the estate during the period of their natural lives. The landed property was not to be divided until

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the youngest child of the heir-at-law—a nephew—should attain his majority.

The house was less desirable in the eye of the prospective purchaser than the fertile fields and extensive woodlands it overlooked. It was built in colonial days of timber cut in the nearest forest; the exterior was severely plain; the proportions were ungraceful. The shallow eaves of the slated roof added to the lean effect of the whole. The walls were of a mellow grey, pleasing to the artistic eye and harmonising agreeably in summer with the flanking grove of native oaks and hickories. The boards that had battened windows and doors for many years now lay in disorderly heaps upon the porch floor. The front windows had been raised to sweeten the air within.

The three gentlemen had paused simultaneously upon the top step to survey the landscape. It meant much to them, as it had to their forebears, what could be seen from their homes, and that free sluices of air from all quarters could visit them in hot weather. It meant much to the younger Mayo that a gable of Letlone was visible across the inter-

vening woods, lowlands, and creek, and more, that a window of Lucy Flournoy's second-story chamber was in that particular gable. He was staring at it while his future father-in-law told anecdotes of Colonel Scott's eccentricities, concluding with his boast *anent* the Broad Creek corn-fields.

"There was no doubt about the latter section of the oath, I reckon," responded Mr. Mayo, dryly. "He was a hardened old sinner if ever there was one, if half the tales told of him were true."

"One-tenth would be enough to settle the question of his present habitation in the minds of the good people about here," said Mr. Flournoy. (He pronounced it "'boutcher" and used the phrase *ad libitum*.) "The stock was *bad*, sir! rotten through an' through, an' 'way back. The estate came to him through his eldest brother, Jim Scott. 'Wild Jim' he used to be called in a day when it was more the fashion for young men to drink, gamble, and fight over women than it is now. There were six of the boys: 'Nate'—that was the old Colonel—Nathaniel Greene—was the only



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one who died a natural death. Two committed suicide. 'Wild Jim' was one of them. Tom fell in the war of 1812, where his father an' brother got their titles of 'General' and 'Colonel.' Two got killed somehow out West. 'T was lucky only two of them ever married. The sooner sech blood as that runs into the ground the better for the rest o' th' world.

"Well! shell we take a look at th' inside of the house?"

"Come, Burr!"

His father's touch and voice awoke the son from a reverie of a blue-eyed girl in a white dress who would trip out of the door every morning to take a peep at her old home, on her way to the dining-room to pour out his coffee. He would have a spy-glass hung just within the door. If the foliage should interfere with the view, there was nothing easier than to cut down one or two hundred trees.

The soft, moist breath of the January thaw had not dispelled the stagnant air unstirred by human movement for two decades. It grew more chill and musty as the footsteps of the explorers echoed upon the uncarpeted floors

and oaken stairs. The dust that accumulates mysteriously in all shut-up buildings was packed into a quarter-inch of fine soil upon everything. At the right of the central hall was a square drawing-room, running laterally across half the front of the house, taking in the left wing. A massive sofa stood against the front wall near the fireplace. A cloudy mirror in a tarnished frame hung between two rear windows. Six chairs, heavy and claw-footed like the sofa, and, like it, upholstered in black haircloth, were ranged against the breast-high wainscot.

“ I did not know there was any furniture left in the house,” remarked Mr. Flournoy in surprise. “ There was an auction after the Colonel’s death, and I supposed everything was taken away.”

They found no furniture in the other rooms. There were three upon that floor; one which the younger Mayo silently designated as “ the chamber,” was opposite the parlour, and back of that a dining-room in a rear extension was connected with the out-door kitchen by a covered corridor. Four bed-chambers of fair

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size in the second story, and a big attic under the shelving four-sided roof, made up the complement of rooms. There were "cubbies" on two sides of the attic—a long glazed scuttle at the back gave sufficient light.

"Full of rubbish, I suppose," said Mr. Mayo, opening one after another of the low doors.

One cubby was empty, save for the unaccountable dust deposit. As he probed the dark recesses of the other with his cane something toppled outward with a slight thud. His son dived into the cubby and brought out a frameless portrait that had stood with its face to the wall. The dust of an unknown number of years was caked upon it. Burr laid it down and made another dive into the dark.

"I thought I touched another!" he ejaculated, dragging out a second canvas. "This grows interesting!"

He took both portraits to the sky-light, knocked them lightly on the floor to dislodge the heavier dust, then brushed and rubbed them with his father's big bandanna. Something more than a dry scrub was required to

clear away the grime. They made out that one was the picture of a girl with large eyes, the other that of a man with a cruel, sensual mouth.

“ Looks as if he might belong to the breed you were describing just now,” said Burr Junior to Mr. Flournoy. “ I hope the woman did n't belong to *him!* ”

He thrust both canvases back into the cubby, flapped and beat the bandanna until the excited dust set them all to coughing; then they went down the narrow stairway, their boots clattering noisily in the spacious emptiness they left behind them, the reverberations of laughing voices answering and mocking one another from side to side of the raftered roof even after the trio had gained the blessed outer air.

In June Lethe was ready for the young master's occupancy. Carpenters, painters, and furnishers sent up from town had worked fast under his personal supervision. Declining gratefully the cordial invitation of the Flournoys to become their guest, he fitted up the first-floor chamber with a cot and other

bachelor comforts and "camped down" early in May, taking breakfast and dinner at the overseer's house, his supper almost invariably at Letlone.

"For two whole months I slept alone in that house, and was about it at all hours of the day and night, and never saw or heard anything unusual or unnatural," he would say in later years. "Indeed, the premises were too quiet. There were no rats or mice, for there had been nothing there to eat for ages. On calm nights I could believe that I heard the grass grow outside—everything was so deadly still."

He combined the sleep of the labouring man with that of the young and happy those nights. He had laid hold of his chosen profession with both energetic hands, spending eight or ten hours of the day out of doors, in the saddle or on foot. He had no time for the junketings to which he was invited, or for any sort of social duty beyond his daily visit to Letlone, where bonnie Lucy was up to her eyes in preparations for the event that was, early in October, to give a married mistress to Lethe for the first time within the memory of a generation.

In August he had the unspeakable pleasure of welcoming to his own home his mother, the two little sisters who were his playthings and pets, and two brothers, collegians in the full swing of vacation pleasures. A week later a fresh influx of relatives taxed the sleeping accommodations of the house to the utmost. With the large and liberal hospitality of the Virginian of that date, Burr had installed his parents in the spacious chamber on the drawing-room floor (newly fitted up for Lucy) and betaken himself and his belongings to an upper room. This he now surrendered to a couple of girl cousins, with never a hint that he had been occupying it. For two nights he shared a bed with one of the college-boys. On the third — the weather being intensely hot — he decamped privately to the drawing-room, ordering his body-servant to call him in the morning before anybody else was up.

The sofa, upon which the valet had spread linen sheets and heaped pillows, was broad, low and elastic, a vast improvement upon the elephantine affair across the room. A town upholsterer had pronounced the old sofa “valu-

able as a curiosity," and Burr had had it and the six clumsy chairs "restored" so far as polishing the mahogany went, and bringing out the deep ruddy lights which are the hallmark of honourable antiquity in the modern collector's eye. The funereal hair-cloth, highly respectable in the sight of our grandmothers, was left untouched.

When he removed his outer garments preparatory to stretching his weary frame upon the luxurious springs of the lounge, Burr laid them upon the arm of the sofa, his collar and cravat upon the top of all. His watch was tucked under his pillow. He had abundant cause for self-gratulation in his choice of a dormitory. The great room was airy and incomparably cooler than the crowded upper chamber he had left. He stretched his strong young limbs to their full length with an audible sigh of profound satisfaction and was sound asleep before his last thought of Lucy was half way to Letlone.

He was aroused by the touch of something cold upon the hand thrown over his head upon the pillow. He was wide awake on the

instant, and sitting upright, his feet pressed hard on the floor for a spring. Sensible people with their wits on tap do not cry out "Who 's there?" in such circumstances. The slightest token of wakefulness invites attack and indicates the direction in which it should be made. Burr Mayo had practical wits, and he was no coward. He held his breath and listened with every sense concentrated into hearing. The August darkness folded him in like a down *duvet*—as soft, as warm, and as impervious. A muffled snore stole downward through the ceiling. A maiden aunt, whose performances in that line had a local reputation, slept in the room directly overhead. The homely sound was reassuring. He had been dreaming! The coldness that had not left his hand and wrist—a creepy sensation as if dead fingers had clasped his—was the effect of impeded circulation—and no wonder! There was nothing like lying on one's back with one's arm thrown over the head for provoking nightmare. Still sitting on the side of his couch, he began to chafe the benumbed member.

At that second he heard a movement at the

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far end of the room, near the door. He had locked it and bolted the Venetian shutters of the windows before going to bed.

The movement was a step, slow and irregular—not the patter of a dog's paws, but the tread of a human creature. It passed to the head of the room on the opposite side from him, then down again, keeping the same distance away — once — twice — and yet a third time. His concentrated senses made out that the feet were unshod — either stockinged or naked. Once one of them caught and dragged upon the Brussels carpet, as if in faintness. Once the tread ceased while he could have counted ten — then went on, more haltingly than before.

The alert listener through the darkness raised himself by noiseless degrees to his feet and crouched for a rush and grip should the midnight intruder come near enough to be laid hold upon. He had not thought of anything supernatural. A thief had secreted himself under the sofa, and was prowling near until he could assure himself that the owner of the house was again fast asleep. Perhaps one of

the boys was walking in his sleep. He had heard queer stories of escaped maniacs. Whatever was over there, wrapped in the August gloom, must be captured.

The steps were slower and more distinct on this, the tenth round. He kept his head steady by counting them. The unshod foot dragged again upon the carpet—now exactly across the room. As the walker reached the antique sofa he stopped abruptly; a heavy body fell upon it with a force that made it tremble and creak. With the fall came a deep human groan and a horrible gurgle—then all was still.

Burr Mayo was in the middle of the floor at a bound.

“ For God’s sake, who are you ? What is it ? ” he cried.

Upon lying down he had set match-box and candle upon a stand at the head of the lounge. Recollecting them, when no answer came to his call, he groped his way back, found the matches, struck one and held it above his head, peering into the shadows. The tiny flame did not reach the sofa; with shaking

hands he lighted the candle and carried it across the room.

His clothes lay just as he had left them on the arm of the sofa, the collar and neck-tie upon the top of all. Besides them there was nothing to be seen on the spot where he had heard the suicide fall, a moment ago, and the life-blood gush from his throat.

He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes past two! His heart beat like a trip-hammer; his tongue dried within his mouth; his legs would just bear him back to the lounge, where he sat gazing stupidly about the room, now so still that he heard the throb of his own pulses. He was as confident that he had heard it all with his waking ears as if the bleeding figure were lying at his feet. The wavering footfall; the second of anguished hesitation beside the sofa, the strangling groan—were awful realities no subsequent argument could nullify. He lay down again, leaving the candle burning. Before it sank down into the socket, the purple murk in distant corners began to give way before the early dawn.

Burr had reached but one conclusion in his

troubled watch. Until he could solve the mystery, at least in part, he would confide in no one. Above all, Lucy must not suspect that aught was amiss in the home he was making ready for her. The idea of subjecting his tender darling to the terrors of an experience such as had tried his tough nerves to the utmost was intolerable. He would search this thing out quietly, and by the knowledge gained guard against a repetition of the outrage.

He began investigations that very day with old Cumby, the sole survivor of the past-worthy "hands" to whom Colonel Scott had bequeathed a home and maintenance for the residue of their useless lives. Cumby was supposed to have begun existence under the name of "Cumberland," ninety years before the sale of the estate on which he was born. After his master's death Parke Flournoy had "stood master" for him, and the neighbourhood had pampered his self-conceit by consulting him in all disputed questions relative to the past, of which he retained, or pretended to retain, a distinct recollection.

The owner of the land on which the patri-

arch's cabin stood — the two-roomed log-hut from which no process save that served by Death upon prince and serf could oust him— carried a propitiatory offering of a flat “ tickler ” of peach brandy and a twist of tobacco half a foot long. Cumby was puffing at a trial pipeful of the twist when the donor plumped a direct question :

“ Have you ever heard any foolish talk about Lethe being haunted, Uncle Cumby ? ”

The nonogenarian sat in a split-bottomed arm-chair just without the cabin door, Burr upon the stump of a tree a little way off. With all his interest in the subject upon his mind, he noted mechanically how substantially built the hut was ; that there was a gay rag-carpet upon the floor, visible through the open door, and a red-and-white calico bed-quilt upon the feather-bed. As mechanically he recalled Lucy's laughing remark that Cumby was considered a prophet by the negroes thereabouts ; that he told fortunes for pay ; was supposed to understand certain magical arts and to have money hidden “ somewhere.”

All this went through the young man's mind

in a flash of thought, and he was still waiting for Cumby's reply. The wizard took the coal with which he had lighted his pipe from the glowing mass beneath with his bare fingers, and threw it away before he answered question for question :

“Whar de haants gwine to come from, Marse Burr ? Dem what 's in de good place doan' want to come back. Dem what 's in de oder place *can't* git out !”

“ There are two opinions as to that. They do say that some spirits manage to get back, once in a while, maybe to try to set things right that they left crooked.”

Cumby sucked silently—Burr fancied sulkily—upon the reed-stem of his corn-cob pipe. After a moment of decent waiting the inquisitor pushed matters home :

“ There was that brother of Colonel Scott's—' Wild Jim,' as he was called—who blew out his brains—or cut his throat—at any rate, took his own life. He was a gay bird from all accounts. Maybe he is sent back as a part of his punishment for the deeds done in the flesh. Do you recollect him ?”

The old man reached out a skinny hand, the colour of dead ashes, to clutch the door-jamb nearest to him and pulled himself as nearly upright as he could stand. His quavering voice thickened and broke at intervals while he spoke; his bleared eyes had an evil gleam. Yet he was upon his dignity and on guard.

“ I war Marse Fus’ Leftenant Jeemes’s body-sarvant, suh, all through de war, whar he fit, bled and near died fo’ he’ country, suh. I war wid him from he’ fus’ to he’ las’ breath. He war a puffick gentleman, suh, from de crown o’ he’ hade to de toe o’ he’ boot. Dey doan’ grow none like him dese days—” with sneering significance. “ Ef so be he *do* come back to dis yere cussed y’arth, he know jes’ what he ’s doin’. You may be sure o’ dat—plum sartin! He allers knowed he’ own min’ an’ he knowed how to make meddlers, an’ liars, an’ backbiters min’ *dey* own business.”

The half-amused, half-affronted planter could not extort another sentence, good, bad, or indifferent from him.

“ He ’s a surly old cur!” he said to Mr. Flournoy that evening. “ I asked him a

question or two about ' Wild Jim ' Scott, who must have been dead these fifty years, and he went off like a pop cracker! ”

Mr. Flournoy laughed. “ You trod right on his pet corn! He worships the very name of ' Scott,' and, rumour says, was mixed up in too many of Wild Jim's and the Colonel's scrapes to care to talk about them now when he is supposed to be getting ready for glory.”

Burr Mayo proved of what metal he was made by occupying the drawing-room again that night and for seven nights thereafter. It did not prove him a coward that he lay awake for hours together, listening for a repetition of the mysterious disturbance that had caused him so much perplexity, and starting, as at a pistol-shot, when a mouse ran between the ceiling and flooring, or a dog barked under the window.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened during these vigils or in the two months which followed. It would appear that the ghost had his times and seasons for revisiting the lower world, and was not to be forced or cajoled into changing these.

The private detective never veered for a moment from the conviction that he had actually heard, when in the calm possession of his faculties, all that passed on that memorable night. He had gone over every incident a thousand times, without altering one particular. The aimless promenade of the unshod feet, the touch of a dead hand upon his, the fall upon the creaking sofa, the hollow groan, choked by the gushing blood—were certainties—not a vagary of a diseased imagination. And still he kept his own counsel, watched and waited until the days of languid September slipped away, and October was at hand.

The wedding-day was but ten days off when he announced his determination to have the cumbrous sofa taken up to the garret, “to make room for Lucy’s piano.”

“It does take up a great deal of room, besides being hideous,” assented his unsuspecting mother, and the good son breathed more freely. It would be easier to keep the secret when the devilish thing was out of sight.

Six men accomplished the removal. The sofa would have stuck fast in the crooked,

narrow stairway leading to the attic. An impromptu derrick was rigged up below the skylight, and the monster, all four claw-feet sprawling stiffly, yet seeming to snatch at the ropes that bound them, was hoisted up on the outside of the house, bumping fiercely against the wall as it arose.

Burr lingered behind when the men had set the detestable thing against the wall and clumped downstairs. The sunlight from the western window had showed him something he had never noticed in his many inspections. For a space of perhaps eighteen inches long and four wide at one end of the seat, the haircloth was dull and not glossy. The spot, or streak, was irregular in shape and ran to the outer edge of the seat. If a thick liquid had been spilled there and trickled down the slight incline, it might have left such a trace. When Burr passed a finger over it, the texture of the haircloth seemed stiffer and rougher than elsewhere. Other spots—mere specks, some of them—were also dull and rough.

The almost bridegroom was ashamed of the impulse that made him recoil from the touch.

He said a word behind his teeth in disparagement of his nerves, which he would not have had Lucy hear, and started to follow his men.

At the stairhead he turned, walked resolutely up to the sofa and dealt it a kick, boyish in petulance, manly in might.

“No more of your tricks upon travellers, you ugly brute!” he said aloud. “If I ever catch you at that game again, I’ll burn you alive! I was a fool not to save myself the trouble of dragging you up here by carting you off to the woodpile, and so getting rid of the devil and all his works.”

II

Sally and Betty Flournoy were spending the day at Lethe. It was the first Monday in the month — therefore “Court Day,” and every white man in the neighbourhood was at the “Court House.”

“Men are nice things to have in the house after dark, when you begin to feel lonesome and scary,” pronounced madcap Betty. “But three girls have better fun all day long

when there is no broadcloth to molest them, nor boots to make them afraid."

She was balancing herself upon the arm of the banished sofa, swinging as neat a pair of feet as the county could show. Betty's idea of free-and-easiness was to sit where she could swing both feet clear of the floor, and, *à la* Queen Elizabeth, as "high and disposedly" as she liked. Lucy was kneeling before an open trunk, her head well down into it. Sally was strolling idly about the great garret, tapping barrels, peeping into boxes and opening cupboard doors.

"In the name of common sense, what are *these?*" she interrupted Betty to say, emerging from a cubby, with a dust-laden square of canvas in each hand.

Knocking the portraits together as her brother-in-law had done, to dislodge the loose dirt, she set them upon the sofa. Betty jumped from her perch and Lucy left her trunk. The three pretty faces were like a cluster of apple-blossoms, as they pressed together over the grimy panels. The wind was always high to a listener in the garret. It cut

pipingly past the sharp gables now, and rumbled in the stomachs of the chimneys built at each end of the raftered space. A cloud drove over the sun, and the place grew suddenly cold and dusky.

Lucy put out her hands involuntarily as if to keep off an unwelcome presence, and tried to speak naturally:

“It’s odd I never saw them before. They must have been there since the year One. Yet”—the housewifely instinct working upward—“I gave *particular* orders that every hole and corner of the garret should be cleaned! They are *thick* with dirt! We’ll take them down and make Amy give them a good scrubbing.”

Betty was still staring at the dim faces.

“I suppose they were human somebodies, once,” she said, dubiously. “They are a pair of precious scarecrows, now. *Br-r-r-r!* this place is like an ice-house! If Lu takes more cold, we’ll catch a scolding all around”—as her sister sneezed. “I’ll take the woman”—seizing it as she spoke. “Sally can have the man. I would n’t touch him with a ten-

foot pole. He has the evillest eyes I ever beheld!"

But for the bold, hard eyes and sensual mouth, it would have been a handsome visage that came into view under the hands of Lucy's maid. The features were regular, the face was a fine oval; the massive head was set well upon broad shoulders. The costume was a blue military coat, with gold epaulettes, and there was gold braid on the stiff collar and cuffs. The painting was fairly done; the expression was lifelike.

"All the worse for him!" quoth Miss Betty, when Sally said—"You can see it must have been a good likeness."—"I believe the worst I ever heard about the 'Scott boys' when I look at him. I suppose he was a Scott?"

"This yere one *warn't!*" broke in Amy, with the freedom of a privileged servant.

She had cleared the grime from the face of a beautiful girl with large, lustrous eyes, a profusion of waving black hair looped about a tall, carved comb, and a rich brunette complexion. The rounded neck and shoulders were bare but for a necklace of gold beads; one slender

hand held a rose up to her chin as if to match the colouring of her cheek. The coquettish gesture went well with her arch smile. A red shawl was draped across the bust and caught up by a perfect arm.

“ She must have been a gipsy!” “ Or a Creole!” “ Or Spanish!” chorussed the sisters, in a breath.

Amy continued to scrub vigorously — one might have thought, viciously. She was a full-blooded “ coloured person,” although a lady’s maid, and reckoned a belle. Her skin was like clear black coffee; her lips were full, but not thick; the hair visible under her snowy turban was crinkled, rather than kinky.

“ Humph!” the ejaculation was decisive and *in-cisive*. “ She ’s jes’ a *merlarter!* That ’s what she is! A merlarter—plain, dry, *so!* I know one when I see her. All the fine clo’es o’ Solomon-an’-his-glory would n’t fool me. I been thar too many times!”

Her auditors heard and gazed in blank dismay, as the details of the picture grew upon them. That even “a Scott”—one of a race that knew no laws save such as were made by

their ungoverned passions and remorseless wills —should be in possession of a quadroon's portrait and keep it in his house — strained the credulity of Virginia-born-and-bred women.

It was Betty who suggested that both pictures be taken to old Cumby for identification. He had been cognisant of all the happenings and havings of "the family" for three-quarters of a century. He must tell them the story they were sure belonged to their "find."

Through the garden was the short cut to Cumby's "quarter." In spite of the boisterous wind there was a flavour of spring in the outdoor air. Hooded in shawls they had caught up from the hall-table, they scampered down the back-steps, across the yard and along the main alley of the spacious flower and kitchen gardens, laughing and chatting as they went, like children on a "lark." Hyacinths were in bloom in the borders; a row of young peach-trees shook saucy pink fingers at them over the southern palings. It was good to be alive and together in Lucy's very own home, with no check upon their prankish humours. Passing through the gate at the bottom of the



"THE LOW-ROOFED CABIN BACKED BY A GROVE OF PINES."

garden, they fell into single file in a crooked thread of a path which was the only lawful means of traversing a field of lush winter wheat between house-grounds and the low-roofed cabin backed by a grove of pines.

“ The dolefullest place on the plantation ! ” muttered Betty. “ If I were superstitious (which I am not, thank Heaven!) I ’d never come near it. You know Aunt Chloe vows she saw the devil, hoofs, hide, and horns, sitting a-straddle the chimney, one night ! ”

“ Sh-sh-sh ! ” said Lucy, her hand upon the door. “ ’T is n’t safe to say such things here. He is n’t as deaf as he pretends to be. ”

Cumby cowered over the blazing logs in the deep chimney, chafing his gnarled fingers and grumbling at the woman whose turn it was to cook and clean for him that day. Such service was a part of the tribute levied by the pauper-despot upon the plantation. It was characteristic of the semi-feudal age that nobody thought of refusing to render it. He twisted his head over his bent shoulders like a white-headed owl, and blinked morosely at the noisy party that brought February breeze and

perfume into the stuffy room. Betty made herself heard above the others:

“ O, Ung’ Cumby! we have found two such funny old pictures in the garret, and have brought them for you to tell us all about them. Set them up on the bed there, Amy, so ’s he can see them!”

The maid disposed them against the fat side of the feather-bed, plumping it up behind them that the light might fall right.

The nonogenarian shivered and shrank as at a lash across his eyes.

“ Merciful Marster in Heaven!” he wheezed, putting his hand to his throat.

In another second he had himself in check:

“ What you done brung dat trash yere for, Amy Creed ? scarin’ de life out o’ folks wid yer racket! Dish yer ’s *my* house! You git outen it!”

He reached a long arm for a stick leaning against the wall.

“ Oh, you shut up!” retorted dauntless Betty. “ You dare not touch her while I ’m here, and you know it. Look here, Ung’ Cumby! You are going to tell us who these

people are before I budge one step. I 'm next-to-sure-and-certain that that man with the impudent eyes is Wild Jim Scott. But who 's the other? Come, tell us all you know, and I 'll send you over a bottle of peach brandy to-morrow that would bring the dead to life—if there 's anybody you 'd care to raise from the dead.”

Lucy pulled her sister back; Sally retreated to the door, and Amy threw herself between her young mistress and the old man. He had raised the stick with both withered hands; his face was hideous with rage; he gnashed his toothless jaws — hissed and spluttered and snarled when he would have spoken.

“ He 's gwine ter have a fit!” screamed the woman in charge. “ Run, ladies! He mought be dang'rous! ”

“ You may be sure we stood not upon the order of our going, but went at once,” said Lucy, merrily, to her husband that night. “ He 's a *dreadful* old creature! Betty stirred him up a little too hard. I am going down to-morrow, alone, and see what coaxing will get out of him. I am bound to know all

about those portraits. And I believe he could tell the whole story.”

Burr knit his brows.

“ You will do nothing of the sort ! ” he said, more peremptorily than he was aware of. I won't have you go there again, unless I 'm along. It is n't safe.”

There was a spark in Lucy's blue eyes.

“ ‘ Must ’ is a hard word, Burr Mayo ! I left those pictures in the closet under the stairs, fully meaning to have Amy go down to Cumby's quarter with me to-morrow. He won't hurt me. He 's always ‘ magocious ’ when I go to see him. And I want to carry out my plan.”

“ You won't do it all the same ! ” persisted the master of the house, doggedly. “ In this matter I must be obeyed.”

“ Obeyed ! Burr ! ”

The sparks flew hot and fast ; her voice rose.

“ Yes ! obeyed ! I am a better judge in this instance of what is proper than you. I have a right to insist that my wife shall do as I say, whatever may be her whims.”

He got up and left the room to ensure the

maintenance of marital authority. He had had a vexatious and tiresome day at the Court-House; his head ached; things had not gone right on the plantation in his absence. In short—as he said to himself half an hour later—he was a cross-grained brute who ought to be strung up for nine-and-thirty on his bare back. He would say all this and as much more as she would listen to, in Lucy's ears, before he was ten minutes older.

He was on his way to the house after the nightly inspection and locking up of the stables, when this wholesome resolve fixed itself in his mind. The moon was at the full. The wind had fallen dead asleep after sweeping the clouds out of sight behind the eastern horizon; the sighs of hyacinths mingled with the more pungent scent of the budding box-hedges wet with dew. Burr was not romantically imaginative, but he had a tender heart, and he was still passionately in love with his wife.

He had struck across the upper garden to get to her the sooner when, at a sharp turn in the path, he almost ran against her. She was

hurrying down the central alley, as she and her sisters had hurried that forenoon; a white shawl draped head and shoulders, and, with her gray gown, harmonised the fleeting figure with the moonlight. She was going so fast with a light, skimming motion, more like the flight of a bird than the walk of a woman, that she was beyond hearing of his voice, unless he should shout, before he rallied from the shock of her appearance. He stepped into the wider path and gazed stupidly after her as she sped down the garden slope, slipped through the gate, and glided on, like a wind-driven mist, across the wheat-field until she turned the corner of Cumby's cabin. He was farsighted and he traced her distinctly to that point.

“ I would n't have believed it! ” ejaculated the horrified Benedict, chokingly.

To disobey him in this downright fashion would have been bad enough. To violate decency and tempt danger by going alone after dark, half-a-mile from home, was monstrous. No Southern woman who had any regard for appearances would venture unescorted beyond

the bounds of her house-yard by night. The dread of runaways—the mysterious, ubiquitous outlaws of nursery stories—was never absent from children and women.

He obeyed the angry impulse to pursue and to bring her back until he brought himself up at the lower gate opening into the field. The latch was so stiff with rust, the wood of the gate so swollen by recent rains that all his strength was required to raise the one and push open the other. How had Lucy got through so easily? She had made no pause, holding on her way as evenly and swiftly as if there were no barrier to be passed. The momentary halt gave him time to reflect. Instead of making a scene at the quarter, where there were likely to be three or four negroes bound upon business of their own with “the trick man” they believed Cumby to be, he would await the culprit’s return in her room, and give her there the lecture she should not escape through any mistaken notion of clemency.

He was composing certain clauses of the well-merited admonition when he stalked in at

the chamber-door, and became, all at once, aware that his hat was on his head, and that he was in a lady's presence.

“ Well, dear,” said Lucy's gentle tones, “ You found everything all right at the stables, I suppose ? It 's a lovely night—is n't it ? ”

She was sewing under the shaded astral lamp on a workstand at her corner of the hearth. Her dress was crimson, and not grey ; her fair hair was perfectly smooth. A more tranquil picture could not be put together.

Burr dropped awkwardly into a chair, speechless and confounded. Half an hour earlier, he would have been enraptured at the discovery that she was disposed to ignore their first tiff matrimonial. Now, he never thought of it. He could not get hold of a word until Lucy glanced up from her work, smiling divine encouragement.

“ Have you been taking a walk ? ” she asked, to make talk run smoothly.

“ Did n't I see *you* in the garden just now ? ” he stammered.

She smiled yet more reassuringly. It is

always easier for a woman to come around gracefully than for a man.

“ Oh, no! ” quite as if her denial were superfluous. “ I have n't left the house since supper-time, even to go out on the porch. I must say the moonlight was a temptation, but it would not be prudent while I have this sore throat.”

“ Of course not! that was quite right! quite right! ” rejoined her lord, briskly and abstractly.

Whom—or what had he seen? He could have made oath to his wife's identity. Figure, motion, the sylphlike grace of carriage and gait, the very manner of holding the shawl about her head—were Lucy's to perfection. He wished he had put out his arm and grasped her drapery when she was actually within reach of him—that he had called her back, even from the gate.

The gate! He started as if at a prick of the needle in Lucy's hand. Why, the Creature (he called her that by now) had passed through, without opening it! The queer, never-to-be-forgotten chill that had crisped

his flesh and entered into his bones on that awful August night crept down to his extremities.

“ If you don’t mind, darling,” Lucy was saying in her softest voice, “ you and I will take those pictures quietly back to the garret to-night, when none of the servants are about. I don’t care to set them gossiping. They are saying already that the house is haunted.”

Burr’s smooth brow was corrugated darkly.

“ Eh! who says so ? ”

Lucy laughed. She was turning down a hem by a thread and had not seen the scowl.

“ The negroes, of course—poor, superstitious things! ’ Though, for that matter, wiser people than they are not superior to such things, sometimes. For my part, I agree with Betty, who says she ‘ is n’t afraid of things with no bodies on. Save her from the living, and she’ll save herself from the dead,’ she says. Betty is a great girl! ”

Burr offered no opposition when she lighted one candle for him and one for herself, and led the way to the closet under the stairs where the portraits had been left. At the door he

drew her back, put his arm about her, and kissed her. He was not petulant nor yet sullen, then, she meditated, holding both candles while he hauled out the pictures. But his manner had something in it that was odd and constrained. She could have thought that he disliked to handle the rubbish she was intent upon stowing away where it would not remind her of their first family jar. She had meant her proposition to be a sign and seal of the wifely submission she acknowledged that she owed to him, and tried with all her amiable might not to let him perceive her disappointment at his nonchalant acceptance of the token.

He halted under the hall-lamp to inspect the paintings. Lucy still held both candles and raised them above her head the better to see the pictured faces.

“ Do you think they would have painted her portrait if she had not been—quite—*white* ? ” she queried, nestling nearer to him as they looked at the beautiful face whose tropical bloom was not paled by the rose held audaciously close to it.

“ A quarter-breed, at least ! ” The strong

distaste with which he regarded both canvasses increased while he looked. "They were a devilish bad set—all of them. I've more than half a mind to stuff this trash into the fire, and be done with it."

"Fire! fie, what naughty words!" burrowing her head quite into the front of his waistcoat to show her displeasure. "Put the poor things back into the cubby, and let them sleep quietly for another fifty years. I can't bear to see portraits burned! They seem so alive—somehow!"

She ran nimbly up the stairs, still carrying her candles high, and he followed. He could not oppose the forgiving angel she had proved herself to be. The garret stairway was enclosed, and a strong draught of air poured down upon them, like so much water, when the door was opened, bringing tinglingly to their nostrils the composite mustiness of a raftered attic that has felt the storms of many winters. Lucy's sweet laugh was a bell-tinkle in the blackness above, as Burr looked up at her from below. The candle-flames wavered back and forth, throwing her lower figure into

obscurity. Her face was like a white star suspended in the midst of glooms. He had hit one of the frames against the door and dropped it. It was his muttered word as he stooped for it that made her laugh. Tripping over the bare boards, the click of her high heels ringing like skates upon ice, she set her candles on the sofa, and passed beyond to pick up something white,—a bit of underwear her quick eye descried upon the floor by the trunk she had opened in the morning. She had closed it without noticing that she had not put everything back. She raised the lid, laid the garment within, shut the trunk, and, attracted by the beauty of the night, rested one knee upon it to look out of the skylight. Burr was shoving the pictures as far back into the cubby as he could reach, and heard what she was saying imperfectly until she screamed: “ Oh, Burr, dear! *don't!* ”

He looked around in time to see her topple backward and fall, her head striking the floor.

He sprang to her help, lifted and stood her upon her feet. She clung to him, sick and giddy, catching her breath hysterically.

“ My precious child: how did you happen to do that? You might have hurt yourself seriously! ”

“ How did I do it ! ” echoed Lucy, indignantly. “ Why did you pull me over? You gripped my neck and jerked me backward. Rather rough play, I call it ! ”

“ I was n't within ten feet of you ! ” retorted the husband. “ I never touched you ! ”

She could not disbelieve him. He must believe her.

The little wife crept into the shelter of the strong, manly arms and glanced fearfully into the dumb depths of the vast attic.

“ Then—*who* did ? ” she whispered. “ I felt two cold hands about my neck as plainly as I feel your warm hands now. And you saw how hard I fell! I tell you, IT *pulled* me down ! ”

With a blind faith in the exorcism of fire, which was probably an inheritance from an orthodox and persecuting ancestry, Burr Mayo made a bonfire of the old sofa on the morrow in a field adjacent to, yet at a distance from,

the house. The seasoned and varnished wood glowed as fiercely as the faggots dipped in tar had blazed about the heretics of old; the stench of burning hair arose to heaven and was carried by the wind for a mile on the level.

“ ‘T was a haän’some piece of furnitur’,” said one crone in her master’s hearing. “ Seems sorter wicked fur to destr’y it.”

Her gossip answered: “ Miss Lucy ain’ been fotch’ up by her ma’ fur nothin’. She can’t byar the thought of a bade-bug anywhar in *her* house. An’ dar ain’ but one way for ter git rid of dem red varmints. Dey mus’ be burn’ up, root an’ branch.”

“ Let it go at that,” laughed Burr, in repeating the dialogue to his wife. “ Now, what do you say to the same treatment for mulatto and soldier? There may be bugs in them, too.”

Lucy would not consent. It would be too much like an *auto-da-fé*. Her ancestors were Huguenots, and the suggestion was not agreeable. The portraits could do no harm shut up in that cubby-hole with their faces to the wall. Nothing must be said at Letlone, or else-

where, of what they had seen, heard, and felt. Least of all, must the excitable negro imagination be fired by a hint of the truth.

Lucy was game to her Huguenot backbone, and Burr had never been more proud of her than when she proposed that the two who were in the secret should talk no more of the mystery, and, as far as possible, exclude thoughts of it from their minds.

“ We might talk it over until doomsday, and not unravel it,” said the sensible small matron. “ Since we have got to live at Lethe—and would n’t live anywhere else if we could”—patting her husband’s hand—“ we will just pretend that there is nothing wrong there, and wait until time explains everything.”

They were driving up the avenue to Letlone. It was eleven o’clock in the morning. Lucy was to spend the day with her mother, who was far from well. Plantation affairs demanded Burr’s presence at home. He would come for her before sunset.

“ Unless we should have a storm,” he subjoined, craning his neck to look out under the

buggy-top at a watery sky. "In that case you must stay at Letlone all night. You must n't add to that cold."

He was learning to be tenderly careful of her health. She clung to him, and spoke in a frightened tone:

"You won't sleep alone in that house, dear—after last night!"

Burr laughed lightly.

"You are not learning to be a coward at this time of day? No, precious child! I will have Dick sleep in the dining-room. He will snore loudly enough to scare all the ghosts out the county. I promise you!"

He had not recollected the promise when he stood by the window watching the driving sleet that hurried on the twilight, and saw a figure on horseback gallop past the front gate to the stables. Lucy's petition and his reply were uppermost in his mind as the storm-stayed rider entered through the back door, and proved to be Bolling Flournoy, Lucy's favourite cousin and their neighbour.

"I never was so glad to see you before!" uttered the host, heartily, helping to remove

the guest's drenched surtout and leg-wrappers in the hall. "I was just trying to reconcile myself to the prospect of a lonely night. This is what I call a providential dispensation! You're the right man in the right place, for once."

He repeated the welcome with unction at nine o'clock. Both men were young, healthy, and hungry. They had enjoyed a bountiful supper, and now sat before "the chamber" fire, pipes at lip. By-and-by they would have an egg-nogg nightcap. Except for the single glass of brandy-and-water Flurnoy had accepted to ward off the evil consequences of his wetting, nothing stronger than coffee had been tasted by either. Both were temperate in the right sense of the word, clear of head, and clean of conscience, and with so much of common interest to talk of that neither remarked the growing violence of the storm until a clap of thunder shook the house.

"In February!" ejaculated Flurnoy.

"The breaking up of winter!" said Burr. "It often happens so. I don't fancy winter electricity. It is said to be more deadly than in summer. Maybe because it is out of season."

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“ It served us a good turn once,” observed Bolling. “ I ’ve often heard my grandfather tell how the British near Trenton mistook Washington’s cannon for thunder on Christmas Eve, and did n’t budge from their camp-fires to reinforce the troops he was attacking. By Jove! ” as a second crash seemed to split sky and earth—“ That would do credit to the dog-days! ”

He was knocking the ashes from his pipe on the fender. Burr had arisen to take down a tobacco-box from the mantel, preparatory to a new deal all around. A sheet of blue fire streamed between them from the unshuttered windows, making weird, fantastic streakings athwart the crimson flare of the blazing logs in the chimney.

By a simultaneous impulse they could never explain, the young men looked behind them.

In the very middle of the room, half-way between the hearth and the closed door, stood a woman, her arms raised over her head in prayer, or in imprecation. Burr had one swift glimpse of the upturned face and recognised it. Then it sank upon her hands, and, like one crouching under a blow, her shoulders shaking

with sobs, she swept to the door — and was *not!*

It was the action of an instant. It was all so unexpected and so startling that neither of the spectators had stirred or spoken. One fact stunned the senses of both. She had not opened the door! It was shut and fast when she disappeared beyond it. Both had seen her closely—unmistakeably. They had the room to themselves. The thunder had not ceased to roll when they looked into each other's eyes and each beheld in the other's face the awful consciousness of what had been. It was a sickening second in which the blood chilled and settled about the stout young hearts.

A shrill shriek—stifled as it left the lips—aroused them. They were at the door at a bound, tearing blindly and frantically at the bolt—still wordlessly. In yielding, the knob came off in Burr's hand. He heard it clink against the fender as he threw it away and dashed into the hall. There was no light there. No midnight was ever darker.

At the stairhead there was movement—the shuffle of feet—the rustle of garments—short,

loud breaths. Then something fell—rolling down! down! down! rebounding from each oaken stair, until a dull thud at the bottom ended the viewless tragedy.

It was over before Burr could tear back into the chamber for a candle, and bring it out.

Hall and staircase were vacant but for themselves. A strict search of the house revealed no other living thing except Rough, Burr's best pointer, famed far and near as the "sharpest" of watch-dogs. Him they found squeezed up against the wainscot under the bed in the chamber, trembling like a leaf, and whimpering piteously when his master spoke to him. Front and back doors were locked; every window was fast.

The last place searched was the garret. There, Burr amazed his friend by passing his candle to him to hold and diving into the cubby under the eaves, whence he emerged with the unframed portraits. His jaw was set vindictively, his face was livid. He glared at the canvasses as at his arch-enemy, but vouchsafed not a syllable of explanation until they were

again in the chamber. There he turned the face of one picture toward Bolling.

“ You saw her!” he said, between locked teeth.

“ I did—so help me Heaven!” uttered the other, actually staggering back under the surprise.

Speech came hard, and his vocabulary was insufficient to the occasion. Burr took out his clasp-knife and ripped the canvas loose, cut it into strips, and crammed them under the forestick with the tongs.

With the idea of helping on the work of demolition, Bolling picked up the wooden square to which the portrait had been tacked and broke it across his knee. His fingers touched something smooth on the under side. A bit of paper was pasted upon the wood. The paper was yellow-brown, the letters upon it were legible in a strong light. The friends deciphered them, one by one. There was a name, and below it, a date:

“ DAPHNE,

1802.”

The keenest scrutiny found no inscription upon the other frame. The portrait it had supported fed the lurid fires that were still gloating over its companion.

Long after the tempest had bellowed itself hoarse, and then uttered out of voice, the two men sat over the fire and discussed phenomena neither would have credited upon the other's testimony. Flournoy, born and brought up in the district, racked his memory for traditions of dark doings once rife in the long-deserted homestead. They were vague and unpromising. The "wild Scotts" were none too good to have had a hareem of half- and quarter-breeds under the peaked roof. That was an open secret, even while they lived and ruffled it with the most dashing bloods of their times. The blackest legends concerning them did not hint at other murders than self-destruction.

"One thing is certain," concluded Burr. "That old scoundrel Cumby was in their confidence and he had a hand in their worst scrapes. I'll drag the truth out of him tomorrow, if I have to do it with red-hot pincers.

I 'll *starve* him into telling all he knows! I 'll burn this house down with my own hands sooner than have this hellish work go on. Lucy is as brave as a lion. I never imagined such pluck in a woman. But no delicate woman should be subjected to what we have gone through to-night. I 'll put a stop to it, somehow. Directly after breakfast we 'll go down to Cumby's cabin and attack him in force."

Before they sat down to breakfast word was brought to the master of the house that Cumby had been found dead in his bed by the woman whose turn it was to look after him that day. The excited negroes were solid in the persuasion that he had been killed by a thunderbolt, and one forged for that express purpose. Also, that nothing in his life was so consistent with the character generally ascribed to him as the manner of his leaving it. It bolstered and buckrammed their faith in his necromantic gifts. He could not even die like a common man.

Burr had sent down strict orders that the remains should not be touched until he, and the physician, for whom a swift messenger was

dispatched, had viewed them. The morning meal was just finished when Dr. Henning alighted at the gate. The three gentlemen lighted their pipes before walking down to the wizard's den. Little was said on the way except by the doctor. If he remarked the moody silence of his companions, he thought little of it. They looked as if they "had made a night of it." Husbands did that sometimes in the absence of their gentle guardians. They had to walk in Indian file through the wheat; the supple stalks whipped their legs and, beaten flat by the storm, tangled themselves about their ankles. There was little that was pleasant in any stage of their errand.

The plantation "head-man" mounted guard outside of the closed cabin-door, but a gang of curious and declamatory negroes of all ages swarmed about the conjuror's late abode, like so many greedy carrion flies. The hum subsided at sight of the white gentlemen, to break forth afresh as soon as they had entered the hut and again shut them out.

The February sunshine fell obliquely through the small square window across the

red-and-white bed-quilt, to the face upon the pillow. The head was strained back horribly; the lips, as black as an ape's, were drawn away from the toothless gums; mouth and eyes were open and too rigid to be closed.

The doctor made a mechanical and futile effort to unlock the fingers doubled tightly in upon the palms of the hands stretched straight down upon the coverlet.

"He has been dead for hours," he said, with professional indifference to the gruesome features that turned the others sick. "There may have been a sort of paroxysm at the last, but he died of old age. He has *cumbered* the ground for an unconscionable length of time, as it is."

With which poor jest they left the shrivelled clay in the hands of the domestic undertaker and sexton.

"I can trust you, old chap?" Burr Mayo fell behind the doctor to say in Bolling Flournoy's ear, as, returning to the front porch, they espied the Letlone carriage rolling up the avenue. Three rosy faces nodded to them out of the windows as blithely as the hyacinths

were shaking off their sleety night-caps before the relenting warmth of the new day.

“ To the death, my boy! ”

A tight clasp of hands ratified the compact.

They kept it so well that even Lucy knew nothing for over a year of the experience her husband had shared with her cousin. A year during which no nocturnal alarms had marred the peace of the dwelling dignified into “ the Mayo homestead ” by the birth in August of a son and heir—Burr the third.

It goes without saying that Cumby's cabin stood vacant all that time. The master, prudent and merciful, never thought of proposing that it should be tenanted. His boy was two months old when he had the rickety structure torn down, the logs and boards carted into an “ old field,” and burned up. He believed that he had purged his own house by this primitive process, and, if the truth were told, felt easier in mind after the second *auto-do-fé* had given entertainment to the plantation-idlers for five long hours. Everything that had pertained to the wizard was heaped upon the fire and consumed : bedding, furniture, clothing, and the

nameless materials used in his unholy trade—feathers, bones, rabbit's feet, beads, and scores of other things "of no value except to the owner," who had known how to "trick" and "conjure" and "bewitch" with them.

"I am going to build a new tobacco-barn just where old Cumby's quarter used to stand," announced Burr to his wife, that evening; "if only because not a negro will set foot in it after dark. My prime tobacco will all be stored there."

The shrewd design was forthwith carried into effect.

Is it the strangest part of my story—every section of which is vouched for by credible witnesses—that, in digging the foundation of the new tobacco-house, the workmen struck their spades into a human skeleton barely four feet below the surface? It was the skeleton of a woman of medium height, with straight, slim limbs and a well-shaped head. There was no sign of a coffin to show that she had been decently interred, and of course, after all the years during which it had lain in the earth, not a vestige of a shroud,

Just as Burr Mayo and his wife, hastily summoned, leaned over to look into the excavation, a negro, crouching within it and scraping aside the earth with his hands to uncover the skeleton in its entirety, drew out and shook away the mould from a lock of silky black hair. Tangled in it was a tortoise-shell comb, high-backed and elaborately carved, such as Lucy had seen among her grandmother's treasures.

That was all!

THE END.



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