

for several seconds, before she saw him. She was pleasing to the eye with her smooth brown hair and rounded cheeks, not yet faded from their bloom. Just now they were deeply flushed with the effort of stabbing her trowel into the turf and bringing it up again in a fruitless fashion. Ezra laid down his scythe and pattered over to her.

"Look here, Mis' Penfield," he said, kindly, "you gimme that trowel. Mebbe I can kinder loosen the earth for ye, if that's what ye want."

Martha Penfield looked up and smiled at him in a neighborly way. She was only five or six years younger than he, and she had known trouble, yet she seemed miraculously young.

"I kinder wanted to set out some pinks," she explained. "But I don't seem to make much headway, an' that's a fact."

Ezra took her trowel and essayed the task; but he, too, forebore.

"You can't get anywheres with this," he said. "Tain't much better'n a teaspoon. See here! You leave it to-day, an' to-morrow I'll come up an' spade it over for ye. Where you want the pinks to set? Right here close to the stone?"

"You're real good,"

said the widow.

"I hate to trouble you, but I ain't got any menfolks to turn to now. Yes, I thought I'd have the whole top here set over with pinks. He was terrible fond of 'em."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she evidently forgot Ezra, save as one vaguely concerned in her trouble through a kindred misery.

Ezra followed her glance to the headstone, and he read the date.

"Sho!" said he, meditatively. "Six year ago! I didn't know the Cap't 'd been gone so long as that!"

"It seems a good many times six to me," said the widow, crying a little. "Mebbe you think its queer I never set out any flowers before. You see I kinder liked the grass; but this year it come over me I wanted to do some little thing for him, more to make up my mind than anything else. But you know how 'tis, Mr. Timmins. You've lost too."

"Yes," said Ezra, mournfully. "I've lost as good a woman as ever drew the breath o' life."

"I never see much o' Mis' Timmins," said the widow, with the air of admitting her to the conversation, "livin' t'other side o' the river as we did, an' she keepin' so close to home. But I was always pleased when we did meet. Do you think your daughter favors her?"

"No!" returned Ezra, bitterly. "She don't. My daughter don't favor anybody but herself."

There he stopped, in some vague trouble at his own betrayal. They were both sitting now, he on Grandsire Eastman's grave and she on Aunt Susan's, and as they talked, they tidied the spot absently, pulling a weed here and there. Martha Penfield even smooth-

ered the turf with her hand, as if she loved it. Yet she was not thinking of the dead at that moment, only of Ezra Timmins. She knew all about the petty tyranny of Jane Ann. It was an old subject of common talk that her husband, Josh Moxom, became a peddler to escape the crisis of domestic life. The town knew also that Jane Ann was goaded by visions of a stepmother, and that she goaded her father in turn. But the widow never harped on unpleasant themes.

"So you're livin' with Jane Ann?" said she, with a cheerfulness proportionate to his need.

"I dunno whether I'm livin' anywheres or whether I'm only stayin'." The words rushed forth unbidden. For the two years of his bereavement he had not opened his poor heart to human friendliness, and now it would be heard. "Jane Ann's house is terrible small, so I stay there nights when Josh is off on the cart; but when he comes home, I sleep over t' the old place. But that ain't big enough for three, and I've thought some o' buyin' a place where we can all live together."

"Do tell!"

"Yes," pursued Ezra quite happily,

like a child who has at last found a sympathetic mate to enjoy his form of game.

"Angeline Pratt thinks some o' goin' out West to jine her brother. I've got the refusal of her place. Don't ye say one word. Jane Ann don't know it. I'm sick to death o' talk."

"That's a proper big house," said the widow, warmly. "Convenient, too! The kitchen's on the south side. Well, you can't say but that's big enough for three of ye. I expect Josh'd give up peddlin' an' come home for good?"

"I dunno," said Ezra, with sudden gloom. "That's what I had in mind when I talked with Angeline Pratt; but I dunno." In the light of his last encounter with Jane Ann, he had no very sanguine belief in the possibility of peace, even in a larger house.

"The day went softly on about them. It was June, and the woods on the upper heights were thick with leaves. Everywhere there was the smell of earth and the pungency of bark and root. Their talk flowed quietly, touching often upon the dead, but as if the dead were living. At that moment the two felt neither grief nor loss, because an according

sympathy made all things one. It seemed not long before a shadow cleared off the headstone, in a way that Widow Penfield knew. She had been here many a noon in sorrowful musing and seen it fleet away, and she did not heed the twelve trembling strokes from the old church tower.

"It's twelve o'clock!" she said, rising hastily. "I dunno what's become o' the day." Then, as Ezra rose, too, with some difficulty, she smiled at him and said, "I guess we're both on us a little stiff. We're gittin' on in years."

Ezra watched her down the path, and remembered what a pretty girl she had been when he and his wife were courting.

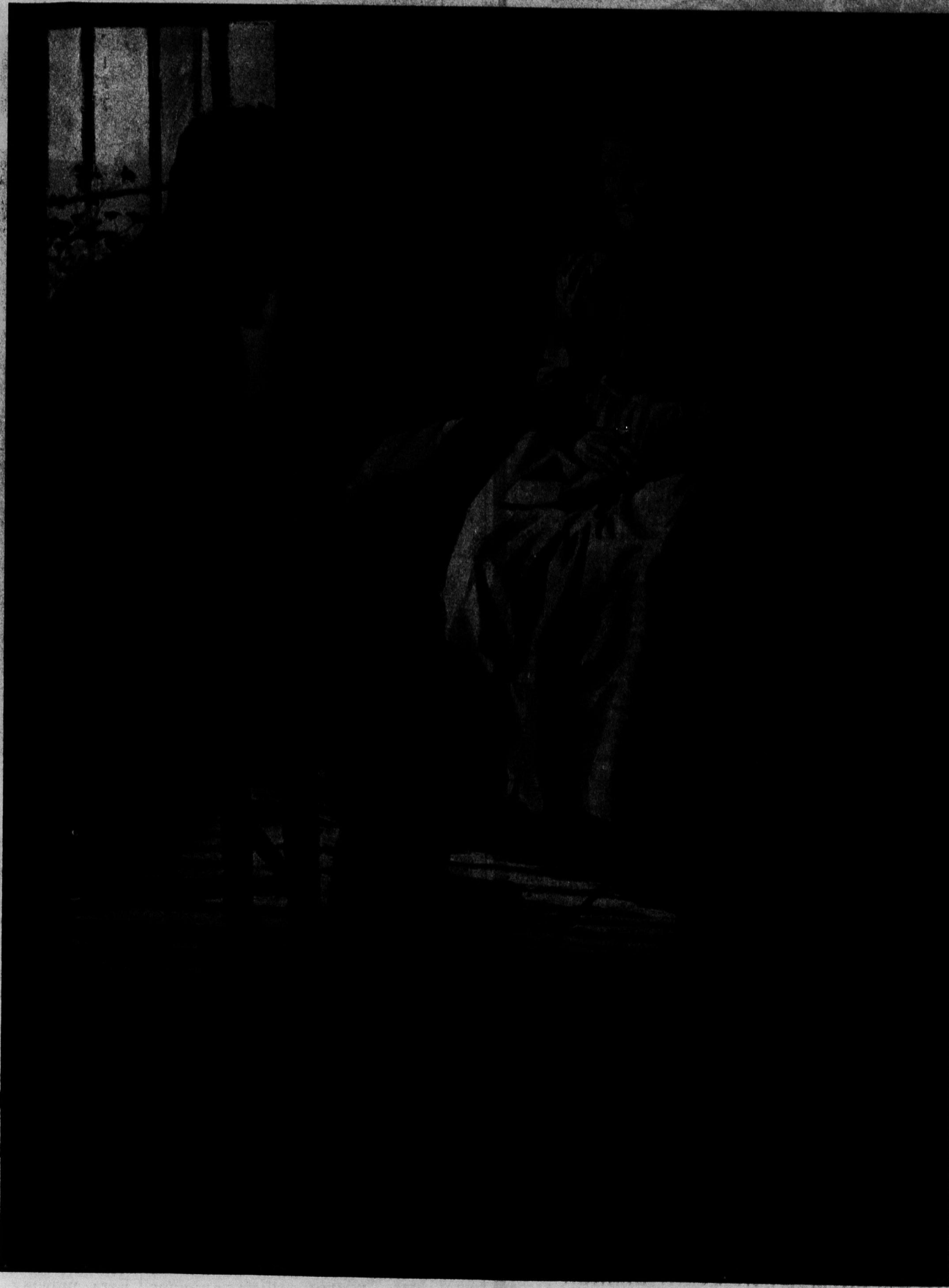
"She's a good woman, too," he said aloud, "a real good woman."

He was a little late at the dinner table, and Jane Ann, parceling out greens before him, asked him briskly, "Got the lot done?"

"No!" said Ezra. He began upon his dinner with great appetite. Something had stirred the air about him and fanned his life to quickened flame. "No. I left the scythe up there."

That night, after the late moon had

risen, Ezra got up from his bed where he had been lying dressed, and stole downstairs and out at the back door. He went softly round the house to Jane Ann's window, and listened there. She was breathing regularly, and at the sound his own breath came again. Then he stepped along the path across the orchard to his shed, and got out the spade and wheelbarrow. In a rich corner of the garden he set the barrow down, and began pulling up his early corn. When a spot was clear, he set his spade into the good, rich earth, and heaped his barrow with it. For the first time in years he felt the joy of living. He was doing something far from his accustomed groove, and it brought the scent and echo of a bygone youth, when even common things were half unproven. Some slight peril attended his way, for if Jane Ann should, for any reason, seek him in his chamber, she would not rest until she found him. With the fatalism of the hunted, he knew Jane Ann would prove invincible. But he piled his barrow high, stuck his spade into the earth, and went wheeling away out of the yard and up the hill. No one was abroad. Only the moon and he were awake in the June splendor. The intermittent creaking of his wheelbarrow made alarming clamor in the air, out of all proportion to its loudness. It was a steep pull to the little graveyard on the hill, and twice he stooped to breathe and mop his dripping face. Confidence returned to him in the deeper stillness there, and when he set down his barrow by the side of Cap'n Penfield's grave he was a resolute man. In some mysterious way he felt companioned by the friendly and always silent



Reading a Letter from Absent Ones.