

MARIA DALE

clasped the soiled book, the pent-up tears of years suddenly broke forth in heartsick abandonment.

Late that afternoon Maria sat in her rocker beside the muslin-curtained window. The rain still pattered on the roof, and as she rocked gently to and fro she caught the fragrance from the garden as it stole into the room.

On the street below, regardless of weather conditions, Billie and Jimmie Riggs splashed about in the porridgy earth.

"It's rainin' on Dale's curtain," she heard the younger of the two remark, and deftly drawing in the escaped frill of muslin she looped it back. The pocket-book was open on her knee, and between the straps mildewed bank bills to the amount of several hundred dollars were disclosed to view.

The floodgates of fifteen bitter years were unexpectedly opened as she gazed in bewilderment at the contents on her lap. Incidents of the past crowded thick and fast before her tear-dimmed vision, and once more she was ushered back to the bygone days when Maria Dale was the village belle and Albert James the favored suitor.

Orphaned in infancy without so much as a penny, he had started life very early in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the general store. Shortly after their engagement he was offered a position with a dry goods firm in the city and Maria, ambitious for their future, encouraged him in his acceptance.

Six months after his departure her mother died,