

"He warn't sassy nor nothin'?" inquired Sandy, anxiously.

"No—he wasn't sassy," was the answer.

Sandy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Them city fellers s mighty apt to be sassy, and this time o' year they's allers prowlin' 'round," and bestowing another soft caress on the baby he went his way.

That evening as they sat together before the door Sandy said:

"Oh, Molly, I'm agoin' over ter Jim Barker's by sun-up ter-morrer, ter help him out with his hoein'. Ye won't be lonesome nor nothin'?"

"No—I reckon not," replied his wife. "It won't be the first time I've been here alone."

Involuntarily the eyes of the husband and wife met, in his a furtive questioning look which she met with a steady gaze. In the dusky twilight her face showed pale as marble and her throat pulsated strangely. The man turned his eyes away; there was something in that face which he could not bear.

And at "sun-up" Sandy departed.

Molly went about her work as usual. Nothing was forgotten, nothing neglected. The two small rooms shone with neatness and comfort, and at last the child slept.

The hour for her meeting with Staples had arrived, and Molly came out and closed the cabin door behind her—but here her feet faltered, and she paused. With her hands pressed tightly on her heart she stood there for a moment with the bright August sunshine falling over her; suddenly she turned and re-entered the cabin, went noiselessly into the bedroom and knelt down by the sleeping child. One warm, languid little hand drooped over the cradle's edge. As her eyes fell upon it a quiver passed over the woman's white face, and she laid her cheek softly against it, her lips moving the while. Then she arose and went away. Down the dusty road, with rapid, unflinching steps, and eyes that looked straight before her, she passed, and disappeared in the shadow of the forest.

When Sandy came home at night he found his wife standing in the doorway, her dark braids falling over her shoulders, her cheeks burning, her eyes full of a fire which kindled his own slow but ardent nature. He had never seen her looking so beautiful, and he came on toward her with quickened steps and a glad look in his face.

"Here, Molly," said he, holding up to her face a bunch of dazzling cardinal-flowers, "I pulled these fur ye, down in the gorge."

She shrank from the vivid, blood-red blossoms as if he had struck her, and her face turned ashy white.

"In the gorge!" she repeated, hoarsely—"in the gorge! Throw them away!" and she cowered down upon the door-stone, hiding her face upon her knees. Her husband stared at her a moment, hurt and bewildered; then, throwing the flowers far down the slope, he went past her into the house.

"Molly's gittin' on her spells agin," he muttered. "Lord, Lord, I war in hopes ez she war over 'em fur good!"

Experience having taught him to leave her to herself at such times, he said nothing now, but sat with the child upon his lap, looking at her from time to time with a patient, wistful look. At last the gloom and silence were more than he could bear.

"Molly," said he, softly, "what ails ye?"

At the sound of his voice she started and rose. Going to him, she took the child and went out of the room. As she did so, Sandy noticed that a portion of her dress was torn away. He remarked it with wonder, as well as her disordered hair. It was not like Molly at all; but he said nothing, putting this unusual negligence down to that general "cur'usness" of womankind which was past finding out.

The next day and the next passed

away. Sandy went in and out, silent and unobtrusive, but with his heart full of sickening fears. A half-formed doubt of his wife's sanity—a doubt which her strange, fitful conduct during these days, and her wild and haggard looks only served to confirm—haunted him persistently. He could not work, but wandered about, restless and unhappy beyond measure.

On the third day, as he sat, moody and wretched, upon the fence of the cornfield, Jim Barker, his neighbor from the other side of the mountain, came along, and asked Sandy to join him on a hunting excursion. He snatched at the idea, hoping to escape for a time from the insupportable thoughts he could not banish, and went up to the cabin for his gun. As he took it down, Molly's eyes followed him.

"Where are ye goin', Sandy?" she asked.

"With Jim, fur a little shootin'," was the answer; "ye don't mind, Molly."

She came to him and laid her head upon his shoulder, and, as he looked down upon her face, he was newly startled at its pinched and sunken aspect.

"No, Sandy, I don't mind," she said, with the old gentleness in her tones. She returned his caress, clinging to his neck, and with reluctance letting him go. He remembered this in after times, and even now it moved him strangely, and he turned more than once to look back upon the slender figure, which stood watching him until he joined his companion and passed out of sight.

An impulse she could not resist compelled her gaze to follow them—to leap beyond them, till it rested upon the Devil's Ledge, a huge mass of rock which frowned above the gorge. Along these rocks, at intervals, towered great pines, weather-beaten, lightning-stricken, stretching out joint arms, which seemed to beckon, and point down the sheer sides of the precipice into the abyss at its foot, where a flock of buzzards wheeled slowly, and passed at length away, only to return, again and again, as the slow hours lagged and lingered. The sunshine crept across the floor never so slowly, and passed at length away; and just as the sun was setting, Sandy's tall form appeared, coming up the slope. Against the red sky his face stood out, white, rigid, terrible. It was not her husband; it was Fate, advancing. The woman tried to smile. Poor mockery of a smile, it died upon her lips. The whole landscape—the green forests, purple hills and gray rocks—swam before her eyes in a lurid mist; only the face of her husband—that was distinct with an awful distinctness. On he came, and stood before her. He leaned his gun against the side of the cabin, and placed the hand which had held it upon the lintel over her head; the other was in his breast. There was a terrible deliberation in all his movements, and he breathed heavily and painfully. It seemed to her an eternity that he stood thus, looking down upon her. Then he spoke.

"That's a dead man—over thar—under the ledge!"

The woman neither moved nor spoke. He drew his hand from his breast and held something toward her; it was the missing fragment torn from her dress.

"This yer war in his hand—"

With a wild cry the woman threw herself forward, and wound her arms about her husband's knees.

"I didn't go for to do it!" she gasped; "fore God I didn't!"

Sandy tore himself away from her clinging arms, and she fell prostrate. He looked at her fiercely and coldly.

"Take yer hands off me!" he cried. "Don't tech me! Thar's thet ez mus' be made cl'ar between you an' me, woman—cl'ar ez daylight. Ye've deceived me an' lied to me all along, but ye won't lie to me now. 'Tain't the dead man ez troubles me," he went on grimly, setting his teeth; "taint him ez troubles me. I'd 'a' hed to kill him myself afore I'd done with him mos' likely—ef you hadn't."

"Tain't that ez troubles me—it's what went afore! D'ye hear? Thet's what I want ter know an' all I want ter know."

He lifted her up and seated himself before her, a look of savage determination on his face.

"Will ye tell me?"

The woman buried her face upon her arms and rocked backward and forward.

"How can I tell ye—Oh, Sandy, how can I?" she moaned.

"Ye kin tell me in one word," said her husband. "When ye come back from Richmon' thar wuz them ez tole tales on ye. I hearn 'em but I didn't believe 'em—I wouldn't believe 'em! Now ye've only ter answer me one question—wur what they said true?"

He strove to speak calmly, but the passion within him burst all bounds, the words ended in a cry of rage, and he seized her arm with a grip of iron.

"Answer me, answer me!" he cried, tightening his hold upon her arm.

"It was true, oh, my God, it was true!"

He loosened his grasp and she fell insensible at his feet.

There was neither tenderness nor pity in his face as he raised her, and carrying her in, laid her upon the bed. Without a glance at the sleeping child he went out again into the gathering darkness.

Far into the night he was still sitting there, unconscious of the passing hours or the chilliness of the air. His mind wandered in a wild chaos, over and over again he rehearsed the circumstances attending the finding of the dead man beneath the ledge, and the discovery of the fragment of a woman's dress in the rigid fingers; his horror when he recognized the man as the one he had seen crossing the road near the cabin, and the fragment as a portion of Molly's dress. He had secured this and secreted it in his bosom before his companion, summoned by his shouts, had come up. He knew the pattern too well—he had selected it himself after much consideration. True, another might have worn the same, but then the recollection of Molly's torn dress arose to banish every doubt. There was mystery and crime and horror, and Molly was behind it all—Molly, the wife he had trusted, the mother of his child!

It must have been long past midnight when a hand was laid upon his shoulder and his wife's voice broke the stillness.

"Sandy," said she, "I've come—to tell ye all. Ye won't refuse to listen?"

He shivered beneath her touch but did not answer, and there in the miserable darkness which hid their faces from each other, Molly told her story from beginning to end, told it in a torrent of passionate words, broken by sobs and groans which shook her from head to foot.

"I met him in the woods," she went on. "I took him to the ledge, because I knew nobody would see us there, an' I then told him everything. I went down on my knees to him an' begged of him to go away an' leave me; for I couldn't bear to—to give ye up, an' I knew 'twould come to that! I begged an' I prayed an' he wouldn't hear; an' then—an' then—" she sobbed, "he threatened me, Sandy, he threatened to go an' tell you all. He put his wicked face close up to mine. I pushed him away an' he fell—he fell, Sandy, but God knows I didn't go fur to do it!"

She stopped, her voice utterly choked with agonizing sobs, but the man before her did not move or speak. She threw herself down and clasped her arms about him.

"Sandy! husband!" she cried. "Do what ye please with me—drive me away—kill me, but remember this—I did love ye true an' faithful—say ye believe that!"

The man freed himself roughly from her arms.

"I do believe ye," he answered.

There was something horrible in his fierce repulsion of her touch, in the harsh coldness of his voice, and the woman shrank back and crouched at his feet, and neither spoke or

moved again until with the first twitter of the birds, the baby's voice mingling, the mother rose instinctively to answer the feeble summons. She was chilled to the marrow, and her hair and garments were wet with the heavy dew. Sandy sat with averted head buried in his hands. She longed to go to him, but she dared not, and she went in to the child. Weak and unnerved as she was, the heat of the room overcame her, and, sitting there with the baby on her lap, she fell into a deep, death-like slumber. She returned to consciousness to find herself lying upon the bed with the child by her side. Some one had laid her there, and drawn the green shade close to shut out the bright light. She started up and listened; there was no sound but the whirr of insects and the warbling of birds. She arose, stiff and bewildered, and staggered to the door. Sandy was gone.

The day dragged its mournful length along and as night fell steps were heard approaching. Molly's heart gave a great leap, but it was not her husband's step—it was that of Bob, her brother, who came slowly up the path, a serious expression on his boyish face. She would have flown to meet him, but she could not stir. Her eyes fastened themselves upon him with a look that demanded everything.

The young fellow came close up to his sister before speaking.

"How d'ye, Molly, how d'ye?" he said, seating himself beside her and glancing curiously at her white, desperate face.

"What is it, Bob?" she gasped; "what is it? Ye can tell me—I can bear it."

"I ain't got nothin' much to tell," he answered with a troubled air. "I war thinkin' ez you mought hev somethin' ter tell me. Sandy, he come by an' said as how he mus' go down ter Gordonsville, he an' Jim Barker, on accounts o' the man ez fell over the ledge."

The shudder which passed through the woman's frame escaped Bob's notice, and he continued:

"He said ez how he mus' stay till th' inquist war over, an' moughtn't be back for a day or two, an' axed me fur ter keep ye comp'ny till he comes back."

"Till he comes back!" she repeated in a whisper.

She hid her face in her hands, and Bob, who, like Sandy, was used to Molly's strange ways, did not question her further.

Days, weeks and months passed away, and Sandy King did not return. Jim Barker, who had seen him last, knew only that he had expressed an intention to remain a few days longer in the town, and further inquiries revealed nothing more.

Bob remained with his sister, and, after the first few weeks of excitement, settled quietly down in charge of the little farm—"until Sandy gits back," as he always took pains to declare.

This stoutly maintained contingency was regarded by the scattered inhabitants of that region with doubt and disbelief. Sandy's mysterious disappearance excited much comment, and gave rise to endless rumors and conjectures. The current belief, however, was that being himself a man of peaceable habits, he had found his wife's temper too "cantankerous," and had gone in search of the peace denied him beneath his own roof, such an event having occurred more than once within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Molly knew nothing of all this. She never left her own door from the day of her husband's departure, and Bob, warm-hearted fellow—had stood valiantly between his sister and the prying eyes and sharp tongues which sought to pluck out the heart of her mystery or apply venom to her bleeding wounds.

That something very serious had occurred, he, more than any other, had cause to suspect, but he respected his sister's reticence, and watched