

12 Patience Sparhawk and Her Times

"Where did you get it?"

"Could n't help it."

Patience opened the package of sugar with a jerk, and filling two bowls with the coarse brown stuff carried them into the next room and set them at opposite ends of the table. The men ceased talking as she entered, and saluted her respectfully. They felt vaguely sorry for her; but they were afraid of her, and she was not a favourite with them. Her mother, "Madge," as they called her to a man, they worshipped, despite or because of her peccability. They went down before her deathless magnetism, her coarse good nature, her spurious kind-heartedness. It was only when very drunk that she became violent and vituperative, and even then she fascinated them. Patience told herself proudly that she had no attraction for "common men" — that she repelled them. Not being a seer, she was saved the foreknowledge of a fatal gift in operation.

She took the large coffee-pot from the back of the stove and filled the men's cups with its thick fluid. Her mother's rolling eyes followed her with a malignant sparkle. She was afraid of her daughter, and resentment had eaten deep into her perverted nature. Patience filled a plate with bread and apple sauce, and went into the parlour to eat her supper in solitude. She took all her meals in this room, which with little difficulty she appropriated to her exclusive use: it was very small. She kept it in fairly good order: she was not the tidiest of children. But the old brussels carpet was clean, barring the corners, and the horsehair furniture had been mended here and there with shoe thread. As it still prickled, however, Patience had made a cushion for the clumsy rocker out of an elderly gown