

"My dear," said the invisible husband after a long pause, "perhaps by ten—or half past. Or suppose we say eleven."

She ran out into the corn to see him. It seemed to her, suddenly, as if she should strangle to death if she did not see him once more. But she did not call, and he did not know that she was there. She ran on, gathering up her chocolate-coloured calico dress, and wrapping her checked shawl about her head nervously. The parson was singing. His voice came back on the wind:

"How firm a foundation, ye sa-a-ints of the Lo-ord!"

She wiped her eyes and came back through the corn, slowly; all her withered figure drooped.

"I don't know but I'd ought to have perked up and gone with him," she said aloud, plaintively.

She stood in the house-place, among the chickens, for a few minutes, looking out. She was used, like other women in that desolate country, to being left much alone. Those terrible four years of the war from '61 to '65 had taught her, she used to think, all the lessons that danger and solitude can teach; but she was learning new, now. Peace had brought anything, everything, but security. She was a good deal of a woman, as the phrase goes, with a set strong Yankee mouth. Life had never dealt so easily with her that she expected anything of it; it had given her no chance to become what women call "timid." Yet as she stood looking through the stark corn on that cold gray day she shook with a kind of horror.

Women know what it is—this ague of the heart which follows the absent beloved. The safest lives experience it, in chills of real foresight, or fevers of the imagination. Deborah Matthews lived in the lap of daily dangers that had not alienated her good sense, nor suffocated that sweet, persistent trust in the nature of things, call it feminine or religious, which is the most amazing fact in human life; but sometimes it seemed to her as if her soul were turning stiff, as flesh does from fear.

"If this goes on long enough, I shall die of it," she said. "He will come home some day, and I shall be dead of listenin', and shiverin', and prayin' to Mercy for him."

Mrs. Matthews came back to the house indefinitely comforted, in a spiritual way, and prepared to lock up carefully, as her husband had bidden her. It was necessary to look after all the creatures first. Silence and solitude responded to her. No intrusion or intruder gave sign. The day was darkening fast. The gloom of its decline came on with the abruptness of a mountain region, and the world seemed suddenly to shrink away from the lonely spot and forget it.

Mrs. Matthews, when she had locked up the animals with difficulty, fastened the doors and windows of the house carefully, looked at the clock. It was half-past six. She took off her muddy rubbers, brushed them neatly, folded away her shawl, and started the fire economically. She must have a cup of tea;