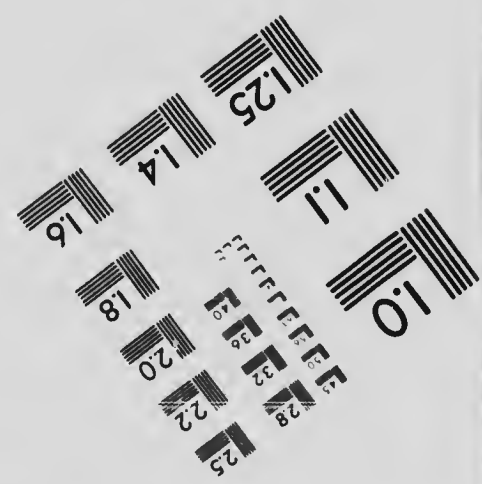
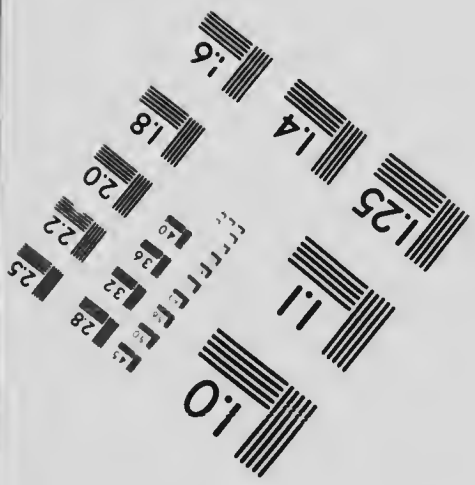
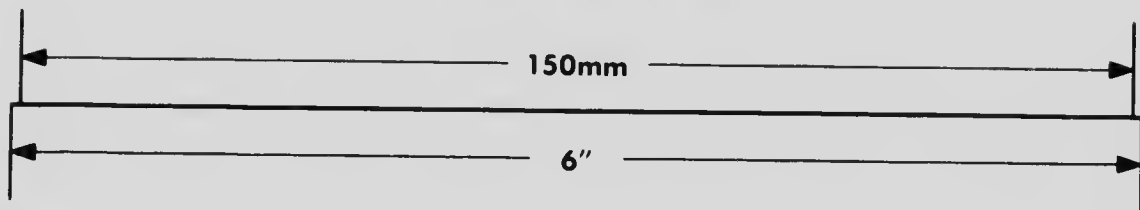
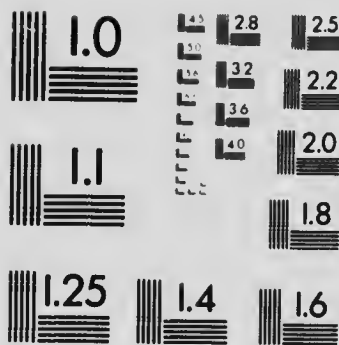
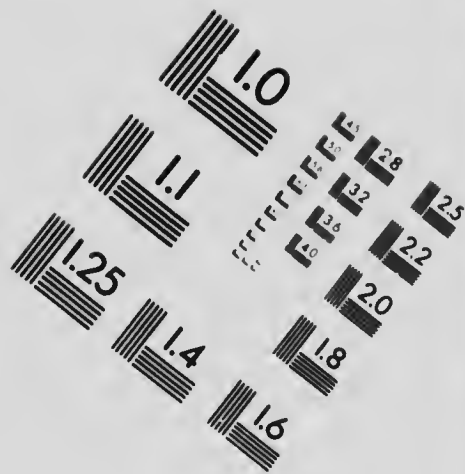
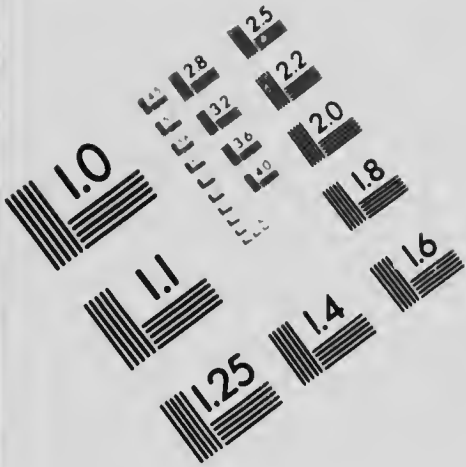


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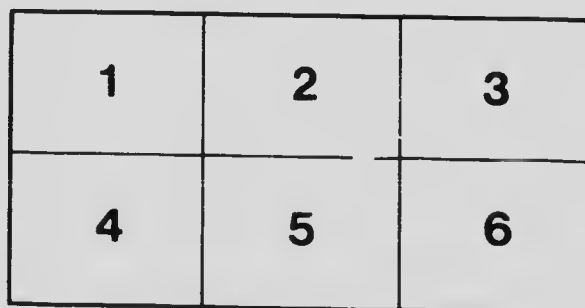
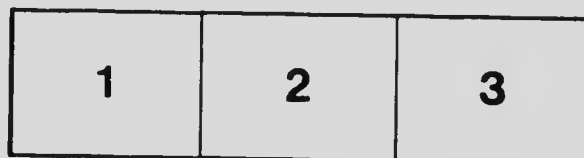
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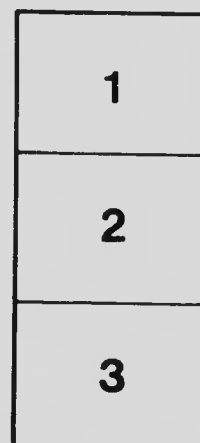
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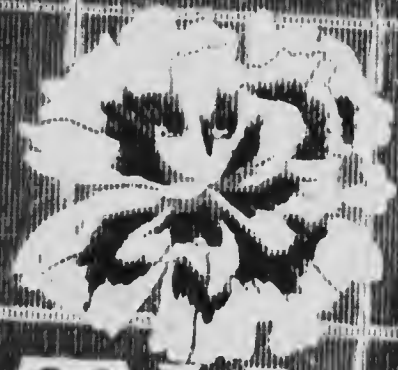
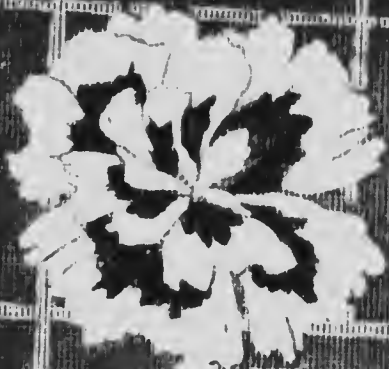
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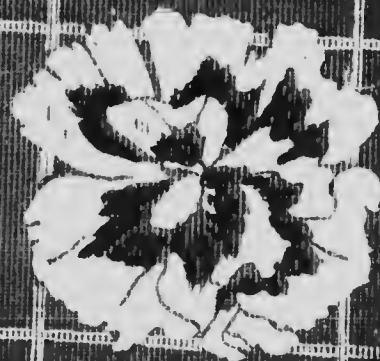
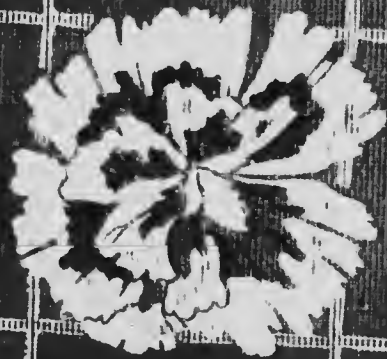
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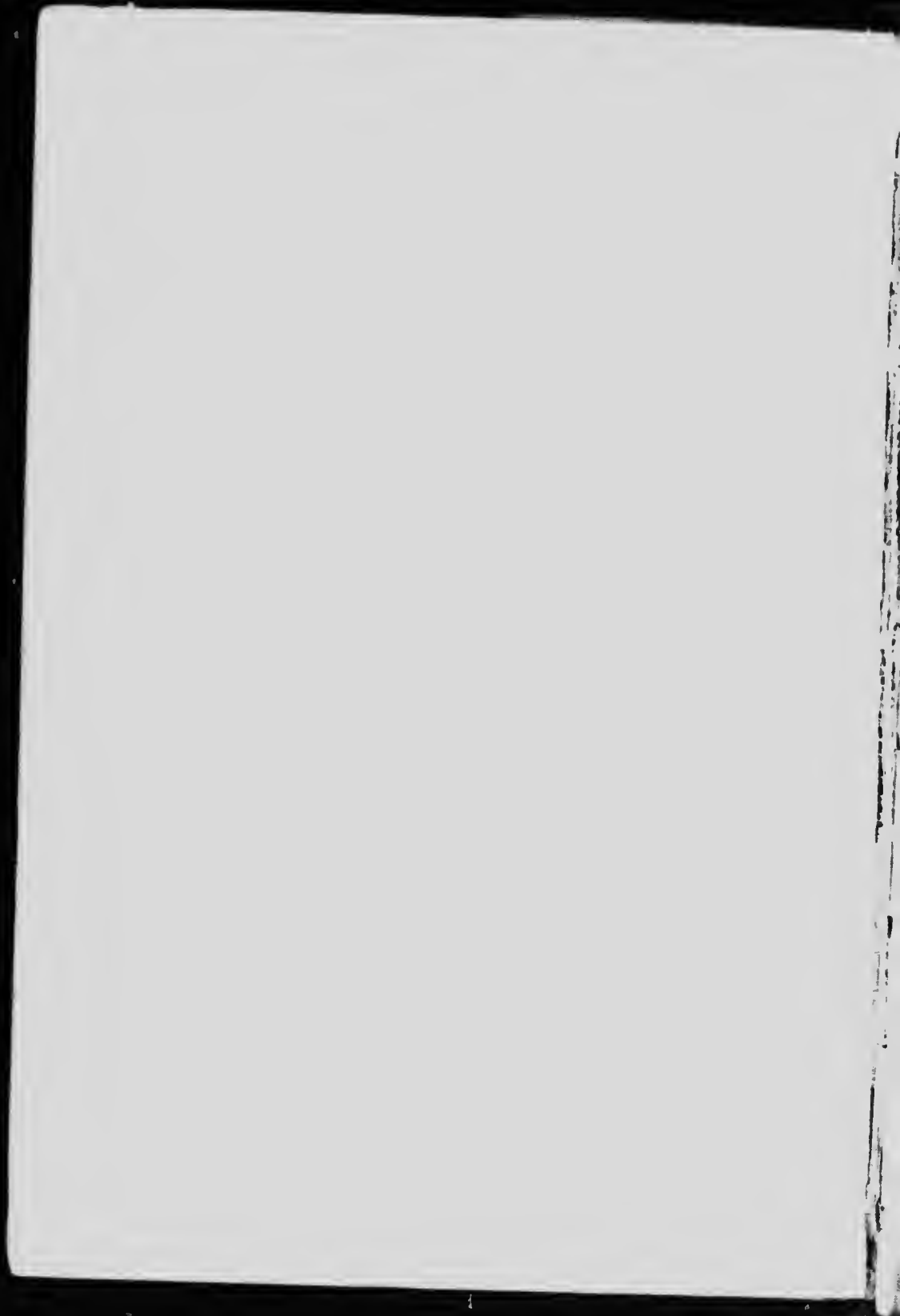
JUDITH

GRACE
ALEXANDER











JUDITH





Stephen stooped to inspect a blurred note *See page 88*

J U D I T H

A STORY OF THE CANDLE-LIT FIFTIES

By

GRACE ALEXANDER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GEORGE WRIGHT

TORONTO
McLEOD & ALLEN, PUBLISHERS

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TO MY MOTHER



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“For life, with all its yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,
Is just our chance o’ the prize of learning love.”



JUDITH



JUDITH

CHAPTER I

AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

A nautic steamboat, all white and gold elegance, lights and commotion, gliding down the Ohio River toward the town of Camden, sent out a deep, mellow boom—it seemed as if the river itself had spoken.

Indian summer had drawn over the world its soft veil of haze. A red dawn had been followed by a golden noon, and now a magic purple twilight hovered near. In Pleasant Valley this was the most delicious hour of the long day.

Of the half-dozen persons standing on the deck of the boat ready to land, all but one were marvelously attired—it was a period of extravagant dressing, when "costume" applied to men as well as women—this lull between the faint, far-off echoes of the Mexican War and the near, mighty thunders of the Civil War. The women careened in hoop-skirts of prodigious size and of every color of the rainbow, while the men, cane-flourishing and "B'God-

ing," lounged and swaggered in girl-waisted, claw-hammer coats of blue or brown, variegated satin stocks and tall white bell-crowned beaver hats.

The exception to all this elaborate gaiety was a stalwart young man who wore a minister's long black coat, stock of plain linen, and broad-brimmed felt hat. Standing somewhat apart from the other passengers, he lent himself to the charm of the scene.

Fresh from the bleak landscapes of New England, he thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful. In the whole picture was wealth and vividness of color. The glow of sunset lingered on the bosom of the river, mingling with the haze in a tremulous, amethystine mirage.

Clambering up from the river bank on the right were the wide, slow streets of a little old half-southern town, peaceful, bowery. East, west and north of the town purple hills, gently rising from yellow, kingly corn-fields, from swelling upland pastures and from thick orchards, shut out the world and its confusion. The streets and the roads winding out from the town over the hills were red, as became arteries of a country of warmer blood than his own pale-roaded North. Even the late sunshine in which the scene was bathed seemed distinctively mellow. Camden, after the manner of an old-world hamlet, combined repose with richness of hue.

The young man observed all this with more than passing interest, for he was looking on what was to be his new home. He wondered what kind of life he would find there. On just such a small, sequestered stage as this, he mused, it is decreed often that the human comedy shall be played most divertingly, because most naïvely, and that the human tragedy shall unfold in ancient simplicity.

Slowly the steamboat swerved in toward the wharf and, with hardly a jar, touched it. The next moment the young minister crossed the gang-plank.

"Kimball House, suh?"

A negro stood before him, respectfully waiting. Yielding his valise, he followed the negro up the street beneath the shade of venerable elms—hale patriarchs courteously bending toward each other in leafy, shimmering arches.

Passing a large tent on his left, he came, after a moment's walk, to a small white brick church of unadorned simplicity, on which his eye lingered. Here he crossed the street to the square, red-brick hotel, roomily set in a shrub-trimmed yard, in which was a mossy windlass well and a green and gold and purple grape arbor. With its wide porch, high-ceilinged, airy rooms, good beds, and Southern dishes, it promised a simple, bounteous hospitality.

After supper, in company with the minister from New Alden—the next town below Camden—who

had arrived by the late stage, he left the hotel and crossed the street to the tent, where a meeting was to be held for the rough river-folk—human drift-wood that washed up at the town. Already the tent was filling with a motley crowd—men and women, including stokers and roustabouts and flatboat-men.

The New Alden minister, a careful, elderly man, began the meeting. Gently he urged that sinners consider their state, lest they fall into perdition.

The young minister, seated at the back of the platform, looked over the crowd now and again for signs of awakening interest. But in the uncertain light of the tallow candles it appeared as an inert black mass.

The New Alden minister droned on, with mild kindness pointing out the heavenly way. A few persons frankly slept, while others, disappointed at not having found the entertainment they sought, were straggling out at the door. Wearily he turned to the young man, who now sat with his head bowed in prayer.

“You try, brother. But it’s stony ground.”

Slowly and reverently, almost reluctantly, the young minister rose. Coming to the extreme front of the platform, he stood for a moment in silent survey. It was stony ground. Could he hope to sow seed that would take root? Meanwhile, despite the dimness of the light, his presence had carried to the

farthest benches: power and symmetry of frame but half-concealed by his long coat; a clean-shaven face lighted by fine black-blue eyes looking ardently out from under full brows; strong features expressing much of human sympathy, something that was purely spiritual and ascetic.

Simply he said: "Let us sing."

In a tenor voice of unusual robustness, yet more persuasive than robust, and strangely, thrillingly sweet, he himself began:

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me;
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

The voice was strong like corn, like wine penetrating, and it was laden with balm of honey. So rich was it that no instrument would have added to the completeness of its music, yet it vibrated with the pathos that only the unsupported voice possesses. With increasing fervor it rose again:

Just as I am, though tossed about,
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

The sleepers were waking up now, and the stragglers at the rear, caught by the emotional quality of the voice, lingered in the aisles.

The young minister noticed a woman enter the tent. He watched her as, with the air of one worn or dejected, she dropped into the last bench.

Like a bright flash a warning from ancient prophecy fell from his lips, and he began his exhortation. He seldom made use of gestures, but his whole frame was eloquent. His eyes dilated and glowed. Power radiated from him. In darting, searching sentences he warned his hearers to turn from their ways ere it should be too late. He stood before them a burning and a shining light. Hell gaped at their feet. An instant they gazed into the fiery lake, and then he bade them look up to where Heaven shone, a far-off but not inaccessible glory. The mantle of the young John Wesley seemed to have fallen on his shoulders. With melting eye and accents of irresistible tenderness he repeated the "Come unto Me!" of Jesus.

He paused.

A deep expiration, as of the easing of some mighty burden, sounded through the tent. And then, led by the New Alden minister, there broke forth a chorus of amens and hallelujahs.

Suddenly an old woman raised her faltering treble in grand simplicity:

There is a fountain filled with blood.

Instantly the young exhorter caught up the strain,

and the quavering old voice and the steadfast young voice sang on together :

And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

Other voices quickly reinforced them. By a common impulse every one rose. Like a mighty wave the old hymn rolled over the tent, submerging all within its melting grace.

Hymn after hymn followed, starting now from the platform, now from the benches. The indifferent, heterogeneous crowd had become a congregation swept as a forest by a great wind. Many were seized with a conviction of sin so strong that they trembled. One or two fell flat to the ground, losing for the time all consciousness of bodily existence. Sobs burst from men and women alike. Several persons came down the straw-strewn aisles and knelt supplicatingly at the mourners' bench. Exclamations of remorse and petitions for pardon broke from lips habitually profane.

By this time the elder preacher was moving among the mourners, speaking words of comfort and guidance. But the young man remained on the platform, up and down which he strode, quoting now a vivid Scriptural warning, and again, in that marvelously sweet, powerful tenor voice, breaking into the refrain of some jubilant hymn. People

came forward in increasing numbers, weeping, groaning, praying. In utter despair they knelt about the altar. Soon, however, they leaped to their feet with shouts of victory. Joyously the New Alderminister shook hands with them. A general love-feast ensued.

A shout of rapture ringing through the tent caught the young minister. Turning whence it came he saw a steamboat captain ecstatically waving his arms above his head. And far back he saw again the woman whose dejection he had noticed earlier in the evening. She no longer drooped. Leaning slightly forward, she appeared to be hanging on his words like one spiritually famished. Her solitariness touched him, and for a moment he regarded her intently. But at that distance she was only a figure. Her large scoop bonnet and the dark circular mantle falling down over her hoop-skirt might be equally the calyx of youth and beauty or the husk of age and decrepitude.

It seemed time to draw the meeting to a close. Why did the young exhorter delay? The night had been bountiful in blessing. Could there be some particular soul for whom his soul was wrestling?

If this were true, it might have been the lone woman by the door, for presently, like one summoned to do a bidding, she rose and slowly advanced down the aisle.

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Abruptly, as in distress, she clasped her hands together
Page 19

Totally unconscious of the crowd, and looking straight before her, she came with face slightly upraised. Her bonnet, for comfort's sake, had been loosened—the air in the tent was warm—and it fell now to the back of her neck, secured only by the ribbons under her chin. Not only her silk traveling mantle, but something in her carriage set her apart from the crowd. As she drew nearer, the minister saw that she was young, slight and almost tall, with thick hair the color of Roman gold, and violet eyes more remarkable for clear astral shining than for size or length of lash. Her face, certainly, was not beauty perfect, yet with those eyes and with that hair she was perfectly beautiful, since beauty radiates from the sum of its elements, any one of which, if of supreme type, may serve to ensky a face not otherwise free from flaw.

Moreover, although delicately built and as yet undeveloped, she bore about her the promise of a womanliness beyond that of the most of her sex, a rare and gracious, if somewhat late, flowering, as if a magnolia should unfold its radiant bloom amid pines.

Transfixed by her absorption and her beauty, the young exhorter stood awaiting her. To his surprise she stopped half-way down the aisle. Descending the steps of the platform, he went to her.

“Why do you hesitate?”

"Oh, but I must . . ." She caught her breath. Her eyes fell.

"You must what?" he prompted gently.

Apparently she did not resent his question, for the eyes, uplifted again to his, answered with a look that shed confidence. But her tongue faltered. Abruptly, as in distress, she clasped her hands together. Becoming aware that her bonnet had slipped back, she colored deeply and, half-turning from him, pushed it forward. Within its dark depths her face receded like a flower dropped into a well. The next instant she was walking swiftly down the aisle. Putting one hand on her skirt to keep it from tilting, she shot sidewise through the narrow door and was gone.

For a moment the young minister remained in the aisle, staring out into the night. Then, joining those that had gathered at the altar, he assisted the New Alden minister in welcoming them.

Later, as the two men left the tent, the elder rested his arm affectionately and without jealousy on the younger one's shoulder.

"It was a night of victory, Brother Waters!"

"Yes," was the answer, doubtfully spoken. The young minister was thinking, not of the many that had responded, but of the one who had turned away. An uneasy sense possessed him of something rare and precious, which he had allowed to escape.

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CHAPTER II

'A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

The sky was still thick with stars next morning when the front door of the Kimball House opened quietly and the figure of a girl, in traveling mantle and with a satchel in her hand, stepped out. It was the unpersuaded fair one of the tent meeting the night before.

On the broad porch she paused and looked eagerly about. A heavy frost had fallen, and to all appearance the season had overnight advanced into early winter. A few elms still held their leaves, and in the morning wind they rustled drearily.

As the girl stood there, her bonnet somewhat back from her face, about which her bright hair blew at will, her eyes large and full with unreserved revelation, she might have been the Sleeping Beauty just awakened.

Almost directly across the street stood the tent, gray, empty and silent. The lights, the crowd, the thrilling voice of the young preacher of the night before, were gone. The tent was now but a shell. Its soul had fled.

East, she looked down a side street to the green flowing bank of Indian Creek, where perched a high red mill. As a child she had often watched its big wheel fling on the air a silver spray, and had privately thrust her fingers into the miller's bin, that she might feel the fine, white, noiseless stream of flour trickle through. Farther east she could see the round red brick tower of the town academy—memory added the ivied walls, now hidden by trees, the classic columns, and the winding path up which she had walked so many mornings to study, chiefly deportment and music, and, as a special accomplishment, conversation in French. From the Academy her recollection wandered on to the toll-gate, whose long white pole, like a shadow-lengthened arm, she had never seen lowered; on to the fair-ground, a green desert for fifty-one weeks in the year, blooming as by magic the fifty-second; still on to a bosky hollow in which gushed a mineral well known as the Wishing-Well, a charming spot to which she had often walked on summer evenings.

But, as though magnet-drawn, her eyes turned again to the gray, deserted tent almost in front of her. How different it had appeared the night before! Had that meeting and her part in it been a dream or a reality?

The girl descended the steps of the hotel and, entering the street, walked thoughtfully northward.

The morning air was chill, but she did not draw her mantle about her. Secured only by the clasp at her throat, it rippled freely back in the wind.

Soon she had reached the public Square, in the middle of which stood the quaint low court-house, with pointed cupola, outside stairway, and thick rough walls of native stone. Farther on she passed dwellings. Many of these also were of rough stone or brick, built flush with the sidewalk, an early fashion that gave ample space at the rear for the tall, tangled flower-gardens, with their vivid masses of bloom,—their stately procession through the seasons of fragrant eglantine, blushing peonies, tawny lilies, spotted flags and flaunting hollyhocks, and their humbler neighbors: clove pinks, marigolds and love-in-the-mist. From these gardens the girl had once plucked many a nosegay, but this morning they were bare and blossomless. Such leaves as clung to their stalks were sere and shriveled.

At the small, square, eight-paned windows in the houses she had often seen kind, familiar faces. Now at every one of them closely-drawn blinds confronted her gaze like indifferent glances from eyes once friendly. The silent, shut aspect of things, the mental picture that it suggested of people still warm and comfortable in their beds, shot her through with a thrill of loneliness.

On she went up the long street. Near the edge of

town, where the houses were farther apart, the crunching noise of wheels on a country road entering the street a short distance ahead reached her, and the sound of men's voices. Reflecting that if the men chanced to be drunk she might be subjected to rude comment, she stepped behind a clump of sycamores that stood, naked and shivering in the rimy air, at the side of the street.

The men proved to be sober. One drooped wearily. As they drove slowly by, the girl distinctly caught a fragment of their conversation. In an instant her whole expression altered and she became intent.

"You can't blame Mrs. Troop for taking on so about Abel."

"No, he's all she's got."

"Well, he's near the turn now. The doctor says—"

The voices had grown too faint for the girl to hear more.

As she emerged from behind the sycamores she drew her mantle quickly close, as if she had received a sudden chill. She continued her way, walking rapidly. Soon she came in sight of an old house—a mansion it was, in the warm, superlative speech of Camden—standing back from the street some distance to the right, behind walnut trees. By the slackening of her pace, the compression of her lips

and the deep breath that she drew, it was evident that she had reached her destination. It was as though she had said aloud, "At last!"

The house was built of brick that had once been gray and were not yet white, and on misty, cloudy days it became one with the mists and the clouds. It was substantial enough, however, in the morning starlight to eyes sharpened by poignant memories of childhood days spent therein. In front it was two stories and a half high, with a gambrel roof, while on the side nearest her extended a long ell, two stories high, with colonnaded upper and lower galleries.

Despite man's boasted superiority over inanimate things, it must sometimes appear, to a melancholy Jacques at least, that, after all, he is made for them, not they for him. This house had sheltered two generations of La Mondes—the aristocrats of Camden. Where were they? Dead, most of them, or scattered far. But the house still stood, old, it is true, but not visibly decayed, passionless, neutral, as if it meant to stand for ever.

North of the house the ground sloped down to a creek, on whose banks a few green willows still wept the departed summer. At the red bridge spanning this creek Camden ended. Beyond, the open country, broken only by low hedges and rocky walls, lay in fields of the cloth of silver. Everywhere the gay

tints of the day before had been cooked to a leathery brown.

The girl opened the low gate and went slowly up the semi-circular blue stone walk beneath the great walnut trees, whose high, bold, black branches, swishing lonesomely in the wind, seemed to brush the star-sown sky. On the soft worn stone beneath, the leaves, that with the passing of autumn had danced down to their death and been trodden underfoot, had left their imprints, a few separate and distinct, but most of them criss-crossed many times, so that the walk appeared to be covered thickly with hieroglyphics, like the Rosetta stone. But this record was ephemeral, and with the first heavy rain would vanish.

Reaching the front door, the girl tried the knob. It did not turn; the door was locked. She lifted the brass knocker and waited—its dull clang brought no response. All around the door was a row of tiny oblong panes of glass, but the chintz curtains that covered them baffled her efforts to see inside. She then went round the house to a cabin at the rear. She stepped up to a window of the cabin and looked in; an old negro lay on a pallet sound asleep. She was about to tap on the window and waken him, but instead retraced her steps to the front of the house.

Going to one of the low, shutterless windows, she pressed her face against the cold pane, putting up

her hands on either side, the better to see. Heavy, deep-red damask curtains hung there, but they were parted in the middle. Without stopping for more than a glance, she tried the lower sash of the window and found that she could raise it. She did so, and, by means of a narrow stone ledge that gave her footing, stepped in.

It was a house in which things had happened. It was one of those ancient houses that creak of themselves, and whose door-latches fall as at the touch of an unseen hand. Human joy and human sorrow alike had visited it: the eager expectancy of birth, the tender beauty of betrothal, storms of passion, the chill awaiting of death. Alien dwellers would have called it haunted, and so it was, but by shades that no eye would ever see and that nobody need fear.

The room in which the girl found herself was a parlor, spacious and lofty, deeply wainscoted in black walnut, and furnished elegantly in mahogany and rosewood. Evidently it had not been used in years, had not even been entered, for the film of dust that lay on the straight-backed cathedral chairs and spindle-legged tables and on the bare floor was unmarked by print of hand or foot, and the air was musty.

The room was saturated with personalities. The invisible presences of those who had lived there, who had sat before the open fire, read the books,

played on the square rosewood piano inlaid with mother-of-pearl, who had laughed, wept, sighed and sung there, hovered about it—the imperishable human essence, as it were, of beings whose physical and mortal bodies had long ago vanished.

The girl stood for a moment perfectly still just inside the window. She felt as if the father and the mother whom she had lost were present. Surely it was but yesterday that they sat in this room, and about them played a merry little girl with violet eyes. It seemed now as if the presence of this little girl passed her without recognition, as if the woman and her grief and the child and her joy were absolutely distinct, apart for ever.

On a table stood a pair of tall wrought-silver candlesticks. Taking one, she lighted the taper and went out into the wide hall. The child-presence was now at her side and went with her. Across the face of the wallsweep clock, spiders, she noticed, had boldly built their webs, as if they sought by their gossamer threads to hold back Time. She passed a small chest, and the child-presence whispered that here she used to slip delicious bits of maple sugar. She raised the lid, but instantly saw that the chest now held only moldy crumbs. She went the entire length of the hall, opening every door and peering into every room.

Returning to the parlor, she set down the candle

on a table, mechanically removed her bonnet and mantle, and laid them with her porte-monnaie on a chair. Then she raised the lid of the piano and lightly ran her fingers over the loose yellowed keys. A harsh jangle sounded through the still room. The child-presence turned away as if hurt; once it had heard from those keys sweet and mellow music.

From the piano the girl stepped to the wall, where hung a small worked motto. The child-presence whispered that this was her first sampler. Her heart began to prick her like a numb hand or foot roused to sensation.

On a console near the piano lay the ponderous family Bible. She opened to the record at the back. The page scrolled "Births" confronted her with one entry, dated June 4, 1827. Next she turned to the death page. It, too, bore a single entry. She hesitated a moment; then, taking from her satchel her traveling secretary, she brought out a bottle of ink and a pen, and added a second name and date. There was a sand-box lying near, and she dusted the fresh entry with its powdery black contents.

Finally she turned to the page headed "Marriages," where again appeared one record. She continued for some time to look at this page, not at the names on it, but at the blank space below them, as if she were thinking how it would look when two other names should be written there. At last she

closed the book and restored it to its place. The child-presence seemed far away.

She became aware now, by the chill wind that blew on her, that she had left open the window through which she had entered. She crossed the room and looked out. The stars had faded out by this time, and only a ghost-moon rode in the sky. She shut the window and, passing out through the hall, went to the woodshed at the back of the house. Filling her arms with wood, she returned to the parlor and lighted a fire, then drew the damask curtains close.

It was not long before a blaze sprang up. She knelt before it and held her cold hands to the warmth, rifts of pink showing between the slim, white, curved fingers like the rose kiss on a sea-shell.

Presently rising, she went out into the hall and slowly ascended the wide stairs. Reaching the upper hall, she passed straight back to a small room on the right, which she entered.

The child-presence was close now. This had been its own room. In the corner still stood the small white bed, and there was the double casement window opening on the gallery outside, near whose fluted columns a cherry tree each May had burst into its miracle of delicate white bloom, and in June hung thick with red ripe fruit.

From the window she turned to the corner of the

room opposite the bed. There lay her old playthings. There sat her big doll, which she had dressed and undressed, punished, praised, prattled to and loved, a very little mother. Its smooth china face was the only object in all the house on which Time had left no mark. Dropping down by its side, she seized it and, pressing it passionately to her bosom, burst into tears. At this the child-presence vanished completely. It seemed to rush into her arms with the doll and become part of her, as if the flood of tears washed away the barrier that divided them. In the recollection of her tender love for her doll she found her way back across the long years to the free, happy days of childhood, and knew that no later grief or joy could ever estrange her from them.

How long she sat there she did not know. At last she heard a step on the stairway. The next moment an old negro with a patriarchal crown of white wool appeared in the door. At sight of her he threw up his hands in astonishment.

"Praise de Lawd! Miss Judith!"

"Yes, Zack, I've come home."

"Well, dis ol' niggah am mighty glad ter see you! But whar's Miss Rachel?"

Slowly the girl put down her doll and rose to her feet. Her eyes opened pathetically wide.

"Mother will never come home, Zack," she said softly.

CHAPTER III

JUDITH LA MONDE

While Zack painstakingly prepared breakfast, Judith La Monde went down stairs again to the parlor. But at the door she paused.

The room was now in a glow, for in her absence the fire had burned up brightly. The ruddy flames, glancing and leaping, made the dark rosewood piano shine, and brought out in high relief the rich carving on chairs and tables. They seemed fairly to warm into life the portrait of a woman in early maturity that hung, limned in rich, unfaded colors, in a deep oval setting of gold above the mantel-shelf. Almost they gave light to the eyes, breath to the delicate nostrils, a sentient curve to the red lips, to the bare, beautiful shoulders a living hue, to the low, round bosom, with its lace scarf fastened by a coral rose, a gentle swell. The presence of a delicately-bred and charming woman emanated from the picture and pervaded the room. Of this portrait Judith had been distinctly conscious ever since she first entered the house. But she had shrunk from viewing it. Now she looked steadily up at it.

It was singularly like her, even to the low chignon, and it was fair—very fair. But a second glance only was needed to detect this difference between the painted face and the living one: the painted face was the lovelier of the two, but the living face showed a gain in fineness and in strength of feature that made it less fragilely beautiful, better to trust in. The one seemed ready for an angelic halo; the more dearly bought glory of sainthood might in years to come crown the other.

Slowly, as if it drew her, Judith went toward the portrait. Then she did a strange thing. Claspng her hands together, she lifted them beseechingly and said aloud: "Must I, mother?"

Her hands dropped, but she continued for some minutes to look at the portrait. Her eyes, falling below it then, rested for a shorter time on the small portrait of a dark, handsome man, about whose eyes there was an inscrutable look, as if he had sat for the picture reluctantly, determined that if his features must be painted his heart should not be.

Drawing a chair before the fire, she sat down. She sat there for a long time, absorbed in reverie. The fire burned lower and lower, and the glow in the room departed. The fall of charred and dying embers roused her, but she did not replenish the fire. Instead, fascinated, she watched spark after spark float up the blackened chimney throat and, like an

infinitesimal soul, go out in darkness and nothingness. At last, among the gray ashes, only a few embers were left. Again and again they flamed up with all their original brightness.

Over and over the words that Judith had heard in the street that morning repeated themselves; they bore for her a peculiar significance.

"You can't blame Mrs. Troop for taking on so about Abel."

"No, he's all she's got. The doctor says—" She wished now that she had run after the men and asked them what it was that the doctor had said.

"If I had only written to Abel I would have known," she cried passionately, pressing her hands against her temples. "He may have been ill for weeks." She shrank back suddenly in her chair. "But must I marry him?"

Abel Troop, a young farmer of the county, she had known from childhood. When, three years before, by the terms of her father's will, she went abroad to complete her education by study and travel, she lightly promised to marry him. She recalled him as he had appeared waving his hand to her the morning that she and her mother left Camden: spare, a trifle stooped, with colorless hair, a thin face, and blue eyes out of which looked a pure and gentle soul. She had felt genuine sorrow at their parting.

But in the great world into which she had stepped he had no part. It was beautiful and bright, strange, gay, absorbing, beyond all her dreams. At first Abel's letters seemed pleasant enough, but gradually, as she grew in years and in knowledge, she began to realize that in promising to marry him she had bound herself to a narrow, lonely existence. Abel had no conception of life as it unfolded to her. His letters inevitably reminded her that she had given her word to return to him. At the same time they unconsciously and increasingly disclosed that he had not advanced beyond his early youth. She feared they would never be happy together. But would he be happy without her? And how far was she responsible for that?

Occasionally, in pleading his love for her, he rose to a rude eloquence, but this was pathetic rather than moving; it was so evident that, with unconscious egotism, he was viewing their relation wholly from the side of his own desires. She had come to dread hearing from him, and had delayed her replies. Her mother sometimes chid her for not answering, but in the end allowed her to pursue her own course. At last the letters ceased. Almost a year had passed since she heard from him.

She knew now that she had never given him her woman's love; that she never could give it to him. Fond of him she would always be, for he was good

and mild and kind. But to marry him would be to put on a mute that would deaden every vibration of her being, and she was young and full of melody that would not willingly be denied its high, natural song of joy.

She recalled how, as a child, she often visited Fir Heights, Abel's home. The families saw little of each other, but Abel's father often drove into town and begged that he might take her out to the farm for a few days. Her mother was always more than willing that she should go, but her father—the dark, imperious father whom she had never quite understood—sometimes stormed and kept her at home. When he had permitted her to go, it seemed like a concession to her mother, whose health was frail.

At Abel's she never liked to stay in the house, though Mr. Troop would take her on his knee and caress her with an affection at whose depth she had wondered. It was a gloomy home. The rooms were darkened by the sinister firs with which the house was half surrounded, and though Abel's mother was not unkind, Judith had been afraid of her. But out in the sunny fields and in the apple orchard she had romped and roamed with Abel in all the rapture of healthy girlhood. She was almost as strong as he, could run nearly as fast, and in their sports often excelled him. Still she was always glad when the time came to go back home, for Fir Heights was

lonely. After Abel's father died, Mrs. Troop had been less kind, and her visits there ceased. A few years later her own father died.

But she continued to see Abel. They had gone to the Academy at the same time, and her mother welcomed him at their home. Judith liked his gentle ways; he worshiped her. He took her to the town parties—she knew that he went solely for her sake, for in society he was shy and ill at ease. And they had walked to the Wishing-Well together.

When, almost without formal courtship, he asked her if she would one day be his wife, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to answer "yes." She was seventeen. There were no metes and bounds to life. Yesterday was an inconceivably remote past and to-morrow an equally remote future. To the affection that she bestowed on him he had given the name of love, and with her mother's sanction she suffered it to remain because she had not known better. Her own woman's love slept later than was usual, and Abel was not the man to waken it.

Step by step she reviewed her life from the time when she went abroad.

On reaching France, her mother placed her in a convent just out of Paris. Much of her time there was given to music, for which she had a rich gift. Often at sunset she strolled with one of the nuns

through the cool, high-arched cloister, or, better, rambled alone in the pleasaunce, where stood a sundial, moss-mantled and red-rose-entwined. At the hour when day dies into dark she had loved to linger there, dreaming dreams flooded with an olden, golden glory from the time when the convent was a favorite château of Louis the Grand. Light and shade flecked the face of the old dial strangely. In the dusk that later crept around her she felt gay, ghostly figures, patched and powdered, flit by on their way to trysting bowers near the dial. Some of them possibly had been her ancestors.

Thus passed two years, varied by brief holidays in Paris with her mother, among old friends of her father, who in his youth had spent much time abroad.

Later, when she began to travel with her mother, Abel and the farm seemed immeasurably far off. It was not easy to blend recollection of that narrow, remote life with her now rich experience—the great cathedrals of Rome and Milan, the art galleries of Dresden and Florence, the operas of the brilliant young Verdi sung in Rome, daily intercourse with men and women of the world. The face of trouble was wholly strange when it appeared most unexpectedly one day with the news that, through the mismanagement of her father's executor, their fortune had been swept away. Under the shock Mrs.

La Monde's health failed, and in a month Judith was motherless.

In her mother's last days Judith learned that her friendship with Abel had been encouraged through an exceptional influence. Rachel Warren, her mother, had been a beauty and a belle, and David Troop, Abel's father, she now gathered, had loved her devotedly. He was a poor man, though of good family, quiet and unassuming, and so steadfast in his suit that she might have yielded had not Charles La Monde, handsome, wealthy and aristocratic, come suddenly home from France and made hot love to her. Not long after her marriage to La Monde, Troop retired, broken-hearted, to his father's farm and married his cousin, Hester Bruce, an orphan girl, who was so desperately in love with him, it was said, that he took her out of pity. Gradually he had sunk to her somewhat lower social level.

Mrs. La Monde had always entertained for her old lover a tender regard, the more so as she suspected her husband of inconstancy. She had been glad to see her daughter and David's son fond of each other, having become persuaded that in her own life the plainer man would have made the worthier husband. She owned to Judith that it was with many misgivings she had taken her abroad, for she knew that this would almost certainly break the tie that bound her to Abel. She confessed her

belief that her husband had deliberately provided for these years of separation, foreseeing a time when Judith and Abel might drift into an engagement—a step he had discussed with her as socially beneath his family. If any doubt of his intention remained, it was dissipated by a second clause in his will which provided that Judith should not marry before she was twenty-one.

On her mother's death Judith had found herself alone and all but penniless in a strange land. It was necessary for her to return at once to Camden. This in itself was not hard, for she loved the little town in which she was born. But returning to Camden meant returning to Abel. This she had accepted as her bounden duty. True, she could still claim almost a year of freedom, for she had determined to respect her father's will, though she would henceforth inherit from it but the slenderest of incomes. She now realized how far-sighted and wise he had been in trying to save her from the very web in which she had become entangled. Yet she loved her mother, and longed to do as she had desired, and she knew that her mother had wanted her to marry Abel.

Rising, she began to pace slowly up and down the long parlor. From out the portrait above the mantelshelf she felt the eyes of her mother following her.

Whether she married Abel or not, where was her present home to be? She could not stay where she

was, in the house that had always been home, for it would soon be sold. And she had not a single near relative. There was Colonel Carroll, her father's friend, but he was a bachelor and lived alone. She could think, indeed, of but one roof under which she would care to dwell—that of Charlotte and Jane Eastbrook, her own and her mother's friends, who lived in Camden.

Especially did she wish to see Charlotte Eastbrook. Though Jane was the younger, she had invariably addressed her as "Miss Eastbrook," while she always called her sister "Miss Charlotte." Jane was one of those women who are valued; Charlotte was greatly beloved. If our Lord had come to Camden as once He came to Bethany, Jane would have been the Martha cumbered about much serving and Charlotte the Mary to sit at His feet and hear His words.

Pausing in the middle of the parlor and looking into the fire, Judith saw that the last embers had finally gone out. Desolate ashes only were left. Was her life to end in ashes also? She felt that if she married Abel Troop it would.

Vividly the events of the night before came back to her.

When she had arrived in Camden by the late stage, she had gone straight to the Kimball House, wearied in body and in spirit. She had left home in

the unfettered joy of girlhood; she was returning in the responsibility of womanhood. 'The future was filled with verities that she dreaded. Now that she was in Camden, fulfilment of her promise to Abel did not seem so easy as it had seemed in far-away France. So dismayed was she at the discovery that in coming back to Camden she had come, not to territory subdued by advance exercise of will, but to battle-ground, that she shrank from meeting any one she knew. And she had been away so long—would not everything and everybody seem strange? So far she had recognized no one. Even the landlord of the hotel was a stranger.

She had indeed been tempted to go directly to Miss Charlotte for comfort and counsel. The comfort would be sweet, but she knew beforehand what the counsel would be: Miss Charlotte would never wish her to marry Abel. To confide in her would be only to invite a biased sympathy that would confuse her own judgment. She would have to work out her own problem, as all must. For the first time she realized that she was alone in the world. Hitherto she had drifted; she must now choose her course.

As she sat in her room at the hotel, revolving in her mind the question of her duty to Abel, there reached her from across the quiet street the sound of a strong, tender voice lifted in song. Something

in the quality of the voice, and the refrain that it uttered with so much fervor, strangely affected her. Looking out of the window she saw, a short distance down the street, a lighted tent. Perhaps here was leading for her,—she followed it. Once inside the tent she became wholly absorbed in the meeting, and could not have told what happened until she found herself walking down the aisle, exalted to a state at which renewal of her vow to Abel seemed easy.

But a curious paradox had intervened to prevent the execution of her purpose. The very man whose eloquence so magnetically drew her was in himself the cause of her retreat. As she had gone down the aisle she could not help but contrast him and Abel. Coming closer to the platform on which he stood, she beheld in him a type of all that she would be giving up in marrying Abel. Face to face with him in the aisle, she was overwhelmed with doubt and confusion, from which she had precipitately turned and fled.

She blushed now as she realized what the young minister might think of her. As one who seeks to banish an unwelcome reflection, she caught up her bonnet and mantle from the chair where they lay, and, going into the hall, hung them on the rack there. But the young minister! After all, extraordinary as her action had been, she could not believe that he

had misjudged her. Her step took on a new elasticity.

She began to hope that Abel did not still expect her to marry him. Might it not be that he had ceased to care for her? With the readiness of youth to believe that out of every difficulty a happy escape may be made, she half persuaded herself that this must be so. Surely he could not think that she still loved him. But inexpressibly she dreaded the thought of hurting him. With a hope that was really a prayer, offered as much for his sake as her own, she looked forward to finding that the last year of their separation had cooled his passion.

She would go that day to see him. It would be hard to meet him after their long separation, harder still to meet his mother, who, she had always known, disliked her. But she must go. Was that all she could do for him? She studied a moment and then her face cleared; the strong figure of the young preacher came vividly back to her, bringing a suggestion.

Turning away from the desolate, ash-strewn hearth and extinguishing the candle, she went to the window and pushed back the dark, heavy curtains. The morning sun, rosy and cheerful, streamed in.

CHAPTER IV

FIR HEIGHTS

The same sun, shining also into the dining-room of the Kimball House, found Stephen Waters at breakfast. The meal went forward leisurely. The savory ham and the steaming coffee were not to be hastened over. Among the regular guests there was much pleasant familiar talk, but Stephen, seated by himself rather lonesomely at a long table, had no part in it. For a time he found entertainment in the amazing swiftness and dexterity of the white-jacketed darky waiter—named William Lewis, counted “monstrous smart”—and in his unchanging question to each newly-entered guest, “*How* will you have yo’ aiggs?” which delicately assumed that no sensible person would think of forgoing altogether such flaky omelets and crisp turnovers as the black aunty in the kitchen provided.

But before long Stephen’s thoughts insensibly wandered back to the tent meeting of the night before. Once more he was standing in the aisle with a pair of starry, violet eyes looking up into his own.

“Change, suh?”

Stephen started. William Lewis's unctuous accents dispelled this vision, replacing it with one of crumpets and syrup. His "Yes" was cut rather short. Had his thoughts been written on his face and was William Lewis privately smiling at him?

After breakfast Stephen, in company with the New Alden minister, saw something more of Camden and its people. Newly appointed as junior preacher on the New Alden circuit, he had come to take charge of Camden church and the two country churches of Bethel and Medford, distant from Camden perhaps three and five miles as the red-winged blackbird and bobolink fly, fully twice as far by the winding roads and unbridged streams that he must travel.

He spent a busy morning, and shortly before noon was glad to rest for a moment in one of the comfortable rocking chairs ranged along the hotel porch.

Eagerly he looked forward to his new work. Camden circuit was his first regular appointment, though he had supplied pulpits here and there during the usual term of his deaconhood. From the first he had experienced a keen desire for missionary work, and his transfer to this middle-west conference had been made at his own earnest request, with the warm approval of its bishop, a born general of the church militant, who took an instant and great liking for this new, strong-limbed, young volunteer.

Stephen's coming to Camden marked for him, therefore, his real entrance into life; it was the commencement dream of his last days at college become reality. Up to this time he felt he had merely existed. Neither memories nor events had as yet written themselves deeply upon him. Both of his parents he had lost so early that he could not recall them, and his boyhood, spent at the home of an uncle in Vermont, had passed in the quietest way possible. He had never been beholden to this uncle for support, his father having left a sufficient sum of money to make him independent of charity and to fit him for whatever walk in life he should see fit to choose.

While he was still boyish enough to like to beat at shinny, he felt that he wanted to be a minister, and the desire had grown in him with each passing year, though less from any definite religious call, in the technical sense in which the church employs that word, than from a deep and troubled yearning to do something that should somehow make life less pitiful and mean to some few people—at least to the few that he might hope to influence through word and contact—make it seem less a succession of chores and more a fulfilment of large purpose. His election was, in fact, an overflow of human sympathy that must needs find channel and resting place in the hearts of his fellow men and women.

He had prepared himself at Wesleyan University.

having naturally chosen to enter the service of the sect to which his mother had strictly adhered. As he now surveyed Camden from the porch of the Kimball House he was glad that his lot was cast within its placid borders.

Looking down the red street, he saw a cow chewing her cud and swishing her tail in a serene saunter; a high, billowy load of hay grudging the driver his seat and drawn at a snail's pace by stout mules; an ancient carryall; and beyond, on the river, steamboats and packets on their way to and from the larger ports of Cincinnati and Louisville. Now and then a boat with an alluring name like *The Creole Belle* came all the way from far New Orleans, like a great, white bird wandering into strange waters. Sometimes these boats touched at Camden; more often they did not.

It was not long before the four-horsed yellow stage, cradled like an ancient barque, dashed by to the post-office, bringing the mail from New Alden. A ripple of excitement radiated through the town, lasting until the big mail-bag was opened and its contents were distributed. Then, as white-jacketed William Lewis appeared in the doorway of the hotel and rang the bell for the old-fashioned early dinner, people were reminded that it was twelve o'clock and strolled homeward.

Stephen himself was about to heed these cheering

chimes when an aged black man came up the steps of the porch and handed him a note:

Abel Troop is very ill. Would it not be within a minister's office to go out and comfort him? More than one would thank you if you did. He lives four miles from town, at Fir Heights. Take the main road north for a mile and turn off at a lonely byway leading to the west. Cross the creek and keep straight on for about three miles, when you will come to a house on the brow of a slope, with dark firs about it.

The name signed to the note was "Judith La Monde." Stephen wondered to whom it belonged. It was a beautiful name, with something of distinction about it. He looked carefully at the handwriting. The letters were delicately traced, most of them, with exceptions in the f-like s's, whose long strokes were firm almost to boldness. He re-read the note: "lonely byway"—"house with dark firs"—it struck him as characteristically feminine. Plainly, the writer had memories of this Troop house—memories shadowed, it might seem, with forebodings.

He folded the note and put it away in his pocket, determined at once on doing what it asked, partly for the sake of the writer, partly because he was glad of an opportunity to begin his pastoral work. The family referred to in the note must live in the neighborhood of his nearest country church, Bethel. He had often envied Catholic priests their title of "Father"

and the large measure of personal interest and affection it bespoke; if he were denied the title, he would nevertheless fill the office as nearly as he could. He would go out to see Abel Troop that afternoon. Delays of any sort were contrary to his nature. The texts he loved best were from St. John, but in the "straightway" gospel of St. Mark he had always found a peculiar satisfaction.

After dinner the New Alden minister examined his young associate in Wesley's *Sermons* and Fletcher's *Checks on Calvinism*. Having found him satisfactorily accoutered in these matters, he departed for home, feeling that he could safely leave the spiritual welfare of Camden resting on the young man's shoulders. To Stephen the prospect of a brisk canter into the country was welcome. He started, and soon left the highway for the road west.

This road, as the writer of the note had said, was lonely. Winding past low, white farm-houses quite overshadowed by great red barns and past sentineled corn-fields strewn with golden pumpkins, it climbed long, gradual, beech-brown slopes to upland meadows, across which flocks of sheep, like gray, drifting clouds, grazed on succulent herbs spared by the frost; steadily on and up it led into a remote, hill-bound solitude. At last it brought him to the foot of a hill darkly crowned by fir trees, above which the upper part of a house was visible in the low, flaming

sun of the western sky. Without doubt this was Fir Heights.

So gradually had the road risen that Stephen had hardly noticed his ascent. Now he realized that the homestead stood on the highest land for miles about. He continued his way up the narrow, rocky lane, which, clambering to the top of the slope, was deflected from its straight westering course by an old apple orchard in which red apples still hung un-gathered. Turning to the north, the lane ended abruptly at the side of the house before the garden gate. By this gate several spring-wagons were standing, and here Stephen hitched his mare.

He could now see that the homestead was neither large nor small. From the two-story front it diminished to a story and a half middle, a one-story kitchen—semi-detached after the southern fashion—on by the slanting roof of the kitchen porch to the still lower milk-house.

The windows on the side next the lane were all closed, doubtless because of the young farmer's illness. At happier seasons they commanded a sweeping panorama: below, hill and valley, winding river, and red road dipping down; above, pearly dawn, sunset scroll or the glittering march of stars. Yet Stephen doubted if at any time the homestead wore an aspect quite cheerful. If it had ever been painted, no evidence of the fact remained; decay was manifest in

rotting weatherboards and a half-fallen chimney and the "dark firs" crowding against the house must surely make its rooms gloomy even on the brightest day. So remote was its situation that those who abode there could know but scant human intercourse. The farming implements that lay about were of a rude and primitive sort. On these hills civilization seemed to have halted in the eighteenth century.

As Stephen turned to enter the gate he caught sight, through the orchard, of another house standing unfinished some distance beyond the homestead in the middle of an unplowed field. It was pretentious, having a bow-window and other unusual adornments, although somewhat awkwardly planned, as by one inexperienced. Altogether its situation and appearance were surprising.

Passing around to the front of the homestead Stephen entered the open door. Going on to an inner door that led, he divined, to the sick chamber he found himself in a room not large, whose painted ceiling made it seem oppressively low. It appeared almost filled by the dozen men, women and children who sat or stood at the foot of the bed or opposite talking in constrained half-whispers.

On the bed lay a man of twenty-five or thirty years, his eyes half open in stupor, his lips parched with fever. Against the head of the bed leaned an unwieldy, old-style cello or viol, evidently his prop-

erty, for on the neck some lugubrious hand had tied a bunch of crape.

By the side of the bed, gazing fixedly at the sick man, an elderly woman sat in the sculpturesque rigidity of stony grief. She was dark and heavy-browed, and doubtless had always been plain; but she had one of those faces to which time is kind. Her features united firmness with sensibility to a degree that was rare and pronounced, while in her large Roman frame, unbowed by years and toil, and in the poise of her head, with its heavy coils of lustrous hair, still intensely black, there was something not remote from grandeur. She was a woman to battle to the last and die standing, as did the Brontës. She took no notice of Stephen.

All conversation ceased on Stephen's entrance. He stood in uncertainty a moment. Then addressing the elderly woman he said: "I have come to pray with you, Mrs. Troop, if I may."

She did not heed. But, roused by his voice, she caught her son's hand and bent toward him.

"Abel, son, speak to your mother!" Her pleading voice, it seemed to Stephen, would pierce the ear of death itself.

"Son, son, don't you know me?" Still Abel gave no sign.

"He may last till midnight," Stephen heard some one murmur.

"I dreamed last night of a wedding," audibly whispered a woman with visible complacency at the apparent rapidly approaching confirmation of her superior gift of clairvoyance. She was obliged, however, speedily to yield precedence in the eyes of the watchers to an old crone of the sort that hover about country birth- and death-beds—grim vampires of pain and grief—the outlines of whose figure merged so completely in the shadows of the corner in which she rocked that it seemed not a person but the shadows themselves that croaked:

"While you were all out at dinner his fingers picked at the counterpane."

Significant glances were exchanged.

Stephen noticed now that one of Abel's hands lay half-clasped on his breast, and that it held a tiny, worn leather case or locket. A woman sitting near the bed answered his look of inquiry.

"It was his sweetheart's, Judith La Monde's. She's jilted him. It is to be buried with him."

Instantly Stephen recalled the name as the one signed to the note he had received, but he had no time now to speculate on the fact. The air in the room was close and feverish.

"Will one of you please open a window?" he said quietly.

A man on the far side of the room rose and pulled open a seldom-used door that led into the

back garden. The afternoon was mild, and the current of air that crossed the room, gently stirring the sick man's hair, was tempered to Ausonian softness. Beyond the door the garden path stretched straight into the sunset sky, an earthly avenue to celestial glories of banded jasper, chalcedony, beryl, topaz and jacinth.

Stephen turned questioningly toward Mrs. Troop. "Do, do!" she cried, as though just comprehending the wish he had expressed of offering prayer.

There was a moment of total silence. Then the little group heard a tenor voice of subdued power and penetrating sweetness line out the hymn beloved by all Methodists :

Who are these arrayed in white,
Brighter than the noonday sun ;
Foremost of the sons of light,
Nearest the eternal throne ?

Hesitatingly at first, but with increasing confidence, the bedside watchers followed with voices of every quality : the rough, vigorous voices of men in manhood's prime ; the sweet, pathetic voices of women just beginning to know life's tragedy ; the colorless treble voices of children, and the palsied, hollow voices of the old, in which only the outlines of the tones, in uncertain tracery, remained, all subdued as befitted the hour, yet closing each verse in

a kind of shout. The words of the hymn few, if any, of the singers uttered consciously. They had been so long familiar that even to the children they had ceased to convey individual significance, but were merged into a nebulous whole, a vision of angelic glory. The effect would have been monotonous but for the fact that the older men and women, exercising a special privilege, wandered off the tune at regular intervals, executing in a thin falsetto certain peculiar variations, but returning on the last note with an exultant thump.

The hymn ended, Stephen looked at Abel. Almost, he thought, there was a change coming over his face. He raised his hand, and every one knelt in silent prayer at chair or bedside. A hush fell on the room. He himself, being still intent on Abel, knelt last. As he did so a shadow fell across the bed. Glancing up involuntarily, he saw, standing in the garden door, framed in the glowing colors of the evening sky, the girl of the meeting in the tent in Camden the night before, her eyes fixed on him, her lips parted in breathless absorption.

As she stood there, suffused in the glory of a sky rivaling the walls of the New Jerusalem, she seemed as one arrayed in light. A messenger she appeared of mercy and kindness, a bringer of good tidings. What connection had she with this household? Was she—yes, she must be the writer of the note. If

any doubt had remained, the gratitude in her eyes would have told him that she was Judith La Monde.

A second glance between them followed, lasting the smallest fragment of time conceivable—a glance of mutual perception only. Then a delicate blush overspread Judith's face and her eyes dropped softly.

Stephen's eyes dropped, too. In doing so they rested on Abel's hand clasped on his breast. The hand moved restlessly, and, half-relaxing, allowed the tiny leathern locket to fall out. As it struck the bed the spring snapped, and the lid, flying back, revealed the tip of a bright, gold-red curl. In contrast to the dark case it looked like a fairy crescent moon imprisoned there.

Stephen took up the locket to shut and restore it, but nervously dropped it. This time the golden crescent slipped out, and down on the coverlet fell a tiny shower of gold.

Hastily he put out his hand to gather it up. But at that instant a wanton breeze swept in through the door and the hair flew hither and thither about the room.

Aghast he looked up at Judith. She had half started into the room as if to catch a part that had blown near her. But a second impulse checking the first, she now stood in an attitude of arrested motion, slightly inclined forward. In her face, which was without a vestige of color, distress at first

seemed written; but instantly it gave way to an exactly opposite expression—that of unutterable relief.

A look of bewilderment broke into Stephen's face. Then, recalling her agitated words to him at the meeting and the words of the bedside watcher, he comprehended. Marriage with Abel was the duty to which she had alluded. The curl that had lain in the locket she evidently regarded as symbolizing herself, and the accident that deprived her lover of it gave her a momentary sense of freedom.

Again Stephen looked down at Abel. As he did so he fancied that a troubled expression appeared on the sick man's face and that the fingers that held the locket twitched. He picked up the locket, glancing again at Judith. She, too, had noticed Abel's distress and pitied it. Shutting the locket, Stephen made as if to restore it to Abel. He read in Judith's eyes a wish that he should do so. He replaced the locket in Abel's hand. Instantly the fingers closed round it and the troubled look vanished.

Once more Stephen looked up at Judith. Even in the infinitely short space of his glance the consciousness came to both—each read it in the other's eyes—that they were in a sense partners in deceiving Abel. Without the curl the locket meant nothing. The motive with each had been desire to soothe the sick man. Nevertheless . . . almost for the instant there seemed a bond between them.

All this had occurred in the twinkling of an eye, and not another soul in the room saw any of it.

But was Judith already regretful? She appeared to grow suddenly frail and all but unable to stand. Her look startled Stephen and recalled him to his duty as a minister. Sternly he withdrew his thoughts from her, and with closed eyes and bowed head began that Psalm of searching pathos and wonderful beauty, "*Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee.*"

The last words of the Psalm had scarcely fallen from his lips when he heard a light, swift step and the rustling of a woman's garments. Opening his eyes he saw Judith La Monde standing beside him in an agony of remorse.

"Abel!" she cried in a voice of thrilling tenderness as, kneeling by the bed, she seized the hand that held the locket. "Abel, it's Judith! I've come back!"

A moment of utter confusion followed. The weeping mother rose and stared at her son's sweet-heart as at one risen from the dead. Every one stood, and no one knowing what to say or do, there was blank silence, in which Abel Troop half opened his eyes and in a distinct, though feeble, voice repeated, "*Out . . . of . . . the . . . depths,*" and then, after a long pause and with a smile of great joy, he added, "Judith!"

"Glory to God!" shouted an old man.

Stephen held up a warning hand. Meanwhile a

strange tumult was going on within him. Judith La Monde might be wrong in not wishing to marry Abel—but how beautiful she was, and what depths of feeling were hers! Involuntarily he turned to speak to her, but she had vanished. For a second time she had eluded him.

Released from silence the astonished men and women crowded about the bedside.

“I call it a miracle!” ejaculated a woman. “But did Rachel Warren’s daughter drop from the sky? And why did she go?”

“Hush!” admonished a neighbor, finger on lip, glancing significantly at Mrs. Troop, to whose face the name had brought a look of bitterest hate.

CHAPTER V

THE CAMDEN CIRCLE

"In jes' a minute, Miss Jane!"

Sally Lightfoot, or, as she was more generally known, Miss Eastbrook's Sally, slowly rubbed invisible flecks of dust from the round top of her mistress's mahogany whist table. She had been set at this task full five minutes before, but the oblong gilt-framed mirror hanging above the table afforded Sally an entrancing view of her chocolate-colored face and woolly topknot, coquettishly adorned with a bow of cherry ribbon, and under such circumstances dusting is naturally at a disadvantage.

From the kitchen delectable odors were wafted as of something browning in the oven.

"Umph!" sniffed Sally. "Dat cake done smell mighty good! Wish 'twas aftahnoon!" she continued, rolling her big black eyes anticipatively.

The Camden Circle, the social assembly of Camden quality, was to meet with Miss Eastbrook that afternoon, and the spacious front and back parlors, with their high, stuccoed ceilings and formal array of problems in solid mahogany, vere being brought

to a state of resplendent polish, down to the last clawed foot and brass ball.

Miss Eastbrook and her sister lived alone in a two-story gray brick house on the corner opposite the Square, where in summer the elms cast their deepest shade. In Camden's vernacular, the Square was noisy, but strangers were wont to accept this description of it as a local idiom. It was a prim old house with two high front doors precisely alike, whose heavy knockers had responded to the best people of Camden. Eastbrook was one of Camden's most respected names. As Jane Eastbrook herself sometimes observed, it was a name that commended its owner, whether it appeared on the chased silver door-plate, the heavy dinner goblets or the family tombstone.

Without waiting for Sally, Miss Eastbrook whisked off the summer shrouds from the low, fiddle-backed chairs and the two sociables, exposing faded rose-wreathed damask that her prudent care had preserved without a single break for more than a quarter-century. Miss Eastbrook loved the graceful pattern of the damask, and she paused a moment to enjoy it.

As she stood looking down at it she appeared not unpleasing, though somewhat over-precise. Her tall and slightly angular form was clad in a black bombazine dress, to which her cashmere shoes, her cork-

screw curls and her tuck comb seemed natural and suitable accessories. She was one of those estimable women that never fall short in duty, but who seldom overflow in generosity. She was honest to the division of a hair, she was unremittingly industrious and she meant to be kind. But she had small notion of being kind in the way that people were in want of kindness if it happened to be out of her own rather narrow way of being kind to herself. She had all her life subsisted on oatmeal porridge, and she could not conceive of a nature that demanded strong meat and wine, and the color, lights and music of a banquet.

"Leave the table, Sally! Goodness me! And dust the chairs!"

"Yes, Miss Jane," responded Sally comfortably. "But law! how dirt do select!"

Meanwhile Miss Eastbrook rearranged the polite literature on the table: Warren's *Ten Thousand a Year*, from the New Alden circulating library, the *Handy Letter-Writer* and Young's *Night Thoughts*, to which she added from the low book shelves a blue and gold copy of the *Young Lady's Guide*. Miss Eastbrook had no thought of governing the proceedings of the Circle by the *Guide*. Correct methods of encouraging retiring suitors or of repelling unwelcome ones was information that its members could scarcely be supposed at their birthdayless ages to re-

quire. But having a great regard for decorum, Miss Eastbrook prized the *Guide* as the most elegant volume she possessed, and she always felt that the sight of it on the table added tone to her hospitality.

"Have you-all done heard 'bout de new ministah, Miss Jane?" Sally poised, dust-brush in air and craned for another peep into the mirror.

"No! What about him? Has he come?" Interested in spite of herself, Miss Eastbrook paused in her task of dusting her sister's long-disused harp that stood in a recess in the back parlor—a duty that was never intrusted to Sally.

"Done come las' night. Mighty pow'ful preach-ah!" Sally let her dust-brush fall. She had early learned that one bit of news may be made to take the place of many licks of work. Innocent of Sally's machinations, Miss Eastbrook encouraged her with a semi-indulgent, inquiring, "Yes?" She always felt it an especial duty to be strict with Sally; her sister Charlotte was so lax.

"Good-lookin', too!" went on Sally. "An' he sings de hymns—Lordy, how he sings 'em!"

"Were you at the meeting?"

"Not esactly. We peeked in."

"*We?*" repeated Miss Eastbrook meaningly.

"William Lewis? That is why you are so sleepy this morning!"

But Sally was jealous for her reputation as a

belle. "'Twan't William Lewis," she tittered, with a toss of the cherry bow. "Nudder'n."

"Indeed! But there, I must see to that cake! Mind you rub the tankard! And bring the goblets to the kitchen to wash." With a mental comment on the worthlessness of the whole black race, Miss Eastbrook hurried out to her cake.

The door had not long been closed before Sally gravitated back to the mirror. She was adjusting the cherry bow at an angle even more coquettish than before when the door opened. She jumped, but her fright was needless.

It was a fragile, blue-eyed wisp of a woman, who came into the room carrying a charming low china bowl filled with late pink roses. With her beautiful white hair indifferently twisted into an odd little coil at the back of her head and a slight flush on her cheeks she looked as delicate as one of the roses, and as practical. In the language of Camden, she was a choice person.

"Law, Miss Cha'lotte!" exclaimed Sally, "how you scart me!" She picked up the discarded dust-brush and idly trailed it up and down the backs of the chairs.

Going to the table, Miss Charlotte slightly moved Young's *Night Thoughts* and set down her bowl of roses. Sally's eyes followed her admiringly.

"Law, Miss Cha'lotte! How you do keep dem

posies! 'Pears like flowahs jes' likes ter grow fer you!"

"Well," sighed Miss Charlotte, "these are the last for this year."

Unable to find the least shred of excuse for lingering any longer within sight of the mirror, Sally last betook herself to the small gate table in the corner of the room and proceeded to shine the tall silver tankard standing there flanked by crystal goblets. Elderberry wine, which no one else in Camden could make quite so delicately as Miss Eastbrook, was always served to the Circle from this tankard.

Sally idly arranged the goblets on the tray. "One, two, free, six, seb'n, nine, 'leb'n. Sich a pity 'bout dat goblet! Dat little Judith ought ter had a lickin'!"

Miss Charlotte's blue eyes flashed. "Mind or you will break one of them yourself!" she said almost sharply.

"Yes, Miss Cha'lotte!" responded Sally meekly. She was astonished. Never before had she heard Miss Charlotte speak so.

Charlotte Eastbrook lived in awe of her sister, to whom she left all the active management of the house. Unconsciously, Jane had "put upon her" from their youth up. When they were out together Charlotte seldom spoke. Not infrequently when Charlotte appeared alone at a friend's house she had the air of a truant. Jane never visited except in state

and at what she termed proper visiting hours; Charlotte liked to run in bonnetless on her neighbors whenever she wished, which might be early in the morning or, for Camden, late at night. When Jane expostulated with her she was genuinely sorry, for she had no wish to violate the traditions of the family, and she disliked to vex her sister, but before long she would again find the impulse to slip away too strong to be resisted. The sisters resembled two clocks ticking side by side, each true to its own standard but not quite together.

In her sister's estimation, Charlotte was the least bit shiftless. This was partly because she painted pictures, which in Jane's eyes was frittering, pure and simple—and partly because she lacked Jane's inexorable sense of order. Charlotte's room was a chaos, into which Jane entered only of necessity. She did not comprehend that her sister did not even see the chaos, but only the row of canvases ranged round the wall, each with its prize blue ribbon from the county fair, a salon all of her own work and every picture on the line. When Charlotte's room became too full to hold any more it overflowed into the attic, sorely against Jane's approval.

"Sister," she had protested somewhat severely one morning, as they stood together in that upper region of cobwebs and clutter, "can't you burn some of this rubbish?"

"Rubbish! Oh, Jane, treasures!" Miss Charlotte extended her arms out over bulging bandboxes and ancient bursting trunks, backless, fine-print novels, beds, bureaus and sofas in all stages of decrepitude, as if to embrace them.

"But, sister, a mouse couldn't get through here!"

A twinkle of fun lighted Charlotte's mild blue eyes.

"Sister, why should a mouse get through?"

The rubbish remained.

The Camden Circle, for which Miss Charlotte had saved her roses, was a distinctly blue-blooded band, membership in which the daughters of certain families inherited from their mothers. In Camden one was either in or out of society; there was no purgatory.

The members of the Circle were not always in immediate need of more parlor tidies, nor did their wardrobes positively require the lace and knotted fringe that occupied their fingers at its meetings. But there were always plenty of people whose affairs could not possibly be regulated by themselves.

This regulating was, for the most part, not ill-natured; at least it was not meant to be, though if the persons whose family skeletons were dragged forth, whose love-making, wedding finery, scandalous neglect of their children, unheard-of extravagance in gown and bonnet, size of hoops, quality of

fringe, waste of candles at night and weakness for lying abed mornings, religious principles and hopeless inconsistencies in the light of those principles were overhauled, analyzed, dissected and condemned, had chanced to hear, it might have been difficult for them to believe that the hearts of the members were filled with pure neighborly love, and that it was out of this abundance that they spoke. If one wished to find out everything about anybody in Camden it was only necessary to attend a meeting of the Camden Circle.

As a center for the distribution of news, nothing could compare with the Circle. Of course it was understood that its disclosures were not to be repeated, and the members were invariably astonished when they discovered that the whole town was familiar with every detail so discreetly uttered. The fact that unmarried women slightly predominated in the Circle had caused smarting outsiders to say hateful things about spinsters' tongues, one masculine cynic having been known to growl that "the town was fairly pizenized with old maids."

There was one topic that was never discussed. This was money. Every one agreed that money was vulgar, and there was, besides, a delicate recognition of the fact that no one had any of it.

Soon after three o'clock the knocker sounded smartly, and Sally, ner cherry bow exchanged for a

frilled cap, grandly ushered into the hall Mrs. Marcia Johnson.

"You kin rest yo' wraps in de spa'h chambah, Mis' Johnson!" Sally was on tiptoe with the excitement of having company. She cast a covetous glance after Mrs. Johnson's fawn-colored silk and ostrich feather to match.

Mrs. Johnson swept up stairs, swept down again and then swept into the parlor.

It could not be said of Camden's ladies that they lacked presence. Tall and fine-figured, they carried their clothes to perfection. They understood, for instance, the art of wearing shawls, and never appeared to greater advantage than in their flowered black lace ones draped over their Sunday silks. Some of them had risen on state occasions, like weddings, to the very great grandeur of black velvet and blond lace. In manner they echoed the graciousness of their undulating hills and bending trees. Almost Kentuckians, they softened their r's and gave the twang of "y" to "can't" and "carpet." They doted on visiting across the river, certain of them, indeed, boasting a beat through the blue-grass which they covered regularly each spring.

Again the knocker fell. This time it was Miss Maria Bowman who swept in. Miss Bowman lived next door to the Eastbrooks, but she had not seen fit to come on this ceremonious occasion without

those articles of dress and dignity—bonnet and gloves. She had been ready for some time, but had prudently watched at the front window to assure herself that at least one guest had arrived before she left the house. She would not have been first herself for worlds.

Sally was less interested in Miss Bowman than she had been in Mrs. Johnson, not regarding her, in fact, as quite quality.

"Same ol' plum pelisse!" she commented, half audibly, turning up her nose as Miss Bowman passed, her heavy gold ear-bobs swinging as she walked.

But Miss Bowman, innocent of the scorn in which her ancient but serviceable dress was held, was already punctiliously greeting the ladies of the house. She and Jane Eastbrook mutually preferred to forget for the time that they had compared cake receipts over the back garden fence that very morning.

Soon all of the dozen or so members of the Circle had arrived and were sitting about the front parlor, each erect in her chair—to have reclined would not have been genteel—each laced to the semblance of an hour-glass covered with a shining expanse of bright flowered silk or brocade, and each with her neat reticule of work. The time was spacious, and costume corresponded. Had the Almighty created woman in the fifties, Adam might have been spared

his rib,—a hoop would have served excellently instead.

Miss Charlotte, as usual, retired to a remote corner of the room. After the excitement of a Circle meeting she often experienced a slight headache. Advancing years had refined Miss Charlotte increasingly. Like a candle that has burned a long time and has become more flame than wax, she seemed more spirit than body.

It was almost a cousins' party, for everybody in Camden was related to everybody else, or, at the very least, connected by marriage. Many were cousins "on both sides," yet an air of formality always prevailed.

"Have you heard, Maria," inquired Miss Eastbrook, "that the new minister has come?"

"No." Miss Bowman glanced up from her tating. One could not count stitches and display a properly appreciative attitude toward one's neighbor's news at the same time. "Have you seen him?"

"Not exactly," answered Miss Eastbrook. "He only came last night. But they say he is a powerful speaker. And he sings beautifully." Sally would have rolled her eyes to have heard her humble remarks quoted in this *recherché* company.

"I hear that he's a bachelor," contributed Mrs. Putnam, a comely young matron. "That will be interesting news to your girls, Mrs. Johnson!"

"He called on my husband this morning," responded Mrs. Johnson, tacitly acknowledging the truth of Mrs. Putnam's remarks with the deprecating air of a mother sure of the good looks of her daughters. "Mr. Johnson says he comes of excellent Vermont stock."

A murmur of approval passed round the room. It was Camden's prudent, if sometimes trying, habit to inquire into the whole connection of any newcomer before it accredited him to its inmost precincts.

"The girls will all be wanting new bodices," said Miss Eastbrook, with the inflection of one momentarily persuaded to condone youthful folly.

"They do say," confided Mrs. Putnam to Mrs. Johnson, "that cap-strings are growing narrower. It's too bad," she continued, "but there's no help for it. Sister Molly has a letter from a friend in Louisville saying that wide strings are quite *passé*."

Louisville was Camden's glass of fashion, and though its reflections arrived sometimes so indirectly as to be a season late, the ladies copied faithfully; there is a tide in the smallest pool. Every member of the Circle immediately registered a private resolve to alter her cap-strings in strict accordance with this hint from the very bull's-eye of fashion.

There was a lull in the conversation which was

broken presently by Miss Nancy Jones, Camden's poetess, who, at the request of her hostess, favored the company by reciting her latest lines, *Flora's Farewell*.

Now a love for poetry is said to keep the heart young, but, unfortunately, it has never been known to act as a preservative of fleeting physical attractions. Miss Jones frankly owned to twenty-nine years, and allowing ten more for the natural exercise of poetic license, she was fast arriving at the age of forty without being either fair or fat. On the contrary, she was thin, and her waterfall was unmistakably streaked with gray. In spite of these unpleasant facts, Miss Jones had never abandoned beau-catchers and bright colors. However, such was the respect in which she was held that her little weaknesses were accepted as the eccentricities that universally accompany genius.

The name of Nancy Jones never appeared in the *Camden True Whig*, but that of Phyllis or the less poetic but romantically vague "Lady contributor" frequently did, signed to the tenderest and most playful effusions. On several occasions it had even added to the charm of *Miss Leslie's Annual* and *The Ladies' Repository*. When charged with the authorship of these lambkins in verse, Miss Jones would blush and sigh, or simper and toss her curls, tacitly confessing the soft impeachment. Miss Jones's

favorite volume was *The Language of Flowers*, which she knew with such exactness that she could have carried on a prolonged courtship merely by the exchange of roses of different hues.

A murmur of applause ran round the room as Miss Jones, having ended her recitation, sank, like a subsiding wave, once more into her chair.

"That will certainly fetch Mr. Tibbott," whispered Mrs. Johnson to Miss Eastbrook. Riley Tibbott, a bachelor of the town, was known to be a warm admirer of Miss Jones.

Presently Sally appeared at the door bearing a tray on which stood a silver basket of sponge cake, a jar of preserved ginger, and the crystal goblets now filled with purple-black wine. Jane Eastbrook took the tray, and herself proceeded to serve her guests.

"I declare, Jane," exclaimed Miss Bowman, lifting one of the goblets from the tray and holding it up to the light to enjoy its rich hue, "I never see this set of yours without thinking what bad luck you had with it. For my part, when a set's broken into, I don't seem to care much about it any more." The topic was unfortunate, but Maria Bowman was gifted in the art of starting unfortunate topics. "Rachel Warren," she continued, "is of course a dear creature, but I never approved of the way in which she brought up Judith. The child was al-

lowed to play like a tomboy and her manners were sadly lacking. If she were not in the humor, nothing would induce her to kiss you. Now her cousin, Fanny Potter, was always biddable and would curtsey and put up her mouth sweetly whenever she was asked."

Miss Bowman habitually chirped like a canary, but occasionally she pecked instead. The asperity of her tone caused Mrs. Putnam to whisper to Mrs. Johnson that possibly Maria spoke from experience. The relation between Mrs. Putnam and Miss Bowman had for a long time been strained, threatening the very existence of the Circle. At the county fair both women had for years stubbornly competed for the prize on preserved pears. Whenever they met they smiled affectionately on each other like fond sisters, but it was suspected that there was little love lost between them.

"But Judith was a good-hearted child," interposed Jane Eastbrook. "I shall never forget how she watched one whole afternoon out by the Wishing-Well three silly young redbirds that persisted in tumbling into the middle of the road, where they would certainly have been killed if she had not picked them up every time and carried them back to the hedge. She said once that a blue racer darted out past her, which must have scared her nearly to death, but she stayed by those birds until dark. Her

mother had to send Zack out to find her and fetch her in."

"But the broken goblet?"

It was Mrs. Johnson, one of the newer members of the Circle, who spoke. Somewhat against her will, apparently, Jane Eastbrook was constrained to tell the household tragedy to which Miss Bowman had alluded.

"It happened maybe twelve years ago," she began, "at one of our Circle meetings. Rachel did not come that afternoon, but Mrs. Potter brought Judith and Fanny both. The little girls were sitting there by the door on stools sewing on quilt squares. I was watching them, my goblet in my hand. Fanny was doing beautiful work, but Judith's square was a pucker from beginning to end. I am positive I don't exaggerate when I say that her stitches were half an inch long. I praised Fanny, and she thanked me prettily. Then I stooped to watch Judith. She didn't seem to know I was there, but kept her head bent and her needle going for dear life. Her fingers had pin-pricks on them, and there was one long raised line where she had scratched herself. She wasn't naturally an awkward child, but she went at everything so.

"Clearly it was my duty to call her attention to those monstrous stitches. Not wanting to hurt the child's feelings, I only said, 'Judith, my love, what

dreadfully long stitches you are taking! But I presume you are only basting! Now what do you suppose that child did?"

No one ventured to guess.

"She jumped up," went on Miss Eastbrook, "slapped Fanny in the face, darted past me, knocking my grandmother's priceless goblet out of my hand, and ran out of the room. Judith always was tetchy. We all picked up poor little Fanny, who was crying, and kissed her and gave her a jam tart, and she soon was smiling again."

Scarcely had Miss Eastbrook ended, when to her utter astonishment she heard, from a secluded corner, Charlotte's mild voice:

"Sister, I have always thought that Judith should have had that jam tart."

Miss Eastbrook started as if the contents of a shotgun had been discharged into her back.

"Charlotte!"

The other ladies sat up even straighter than before, a note of interrogation shining in each eye. The mere fact that Charlotte had spoken at all before the whole Circle was unusual; that she had uttered a complete sentence embodying an opinion contrary to that of her sister was a thing unheard of.

"The poor child was hurt so," went on Charlotte, flushed with the consciousness that all eyes were on

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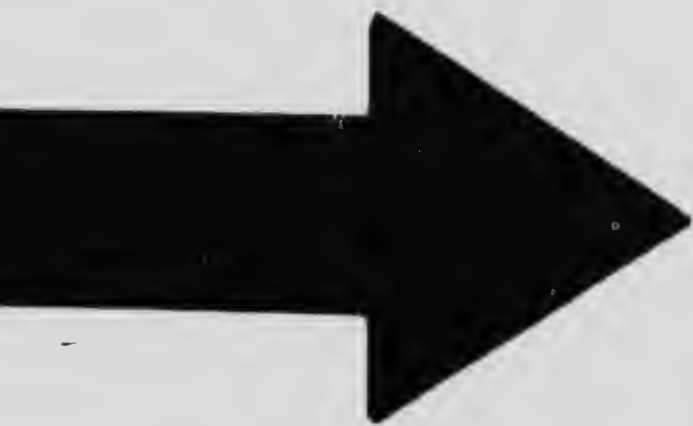
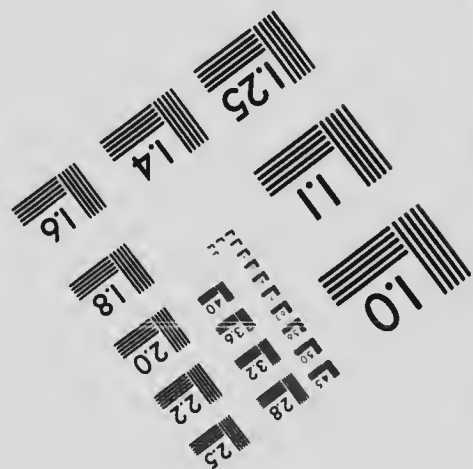
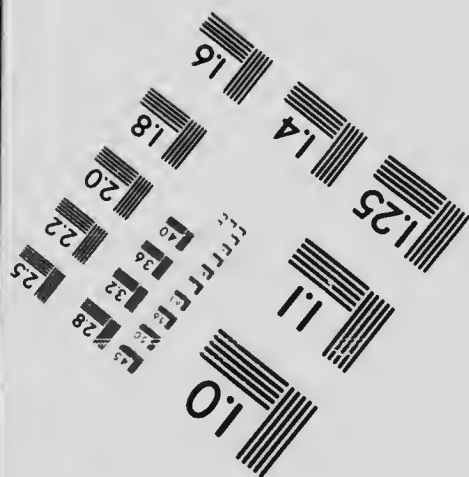
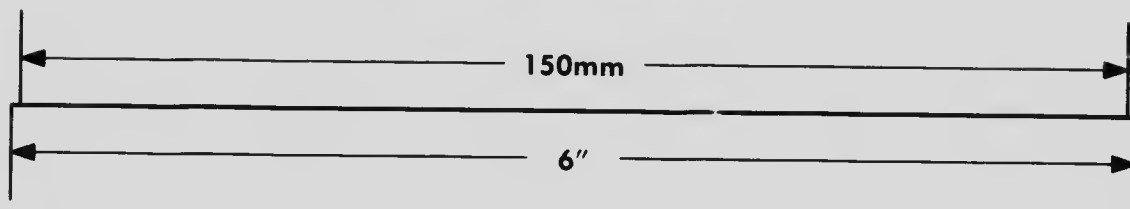
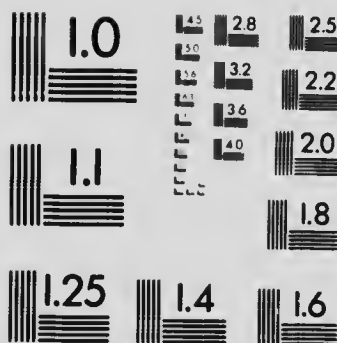
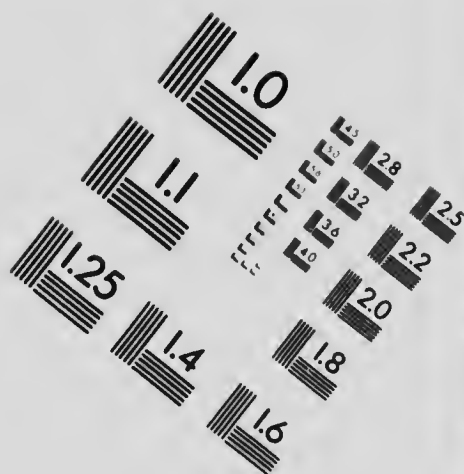
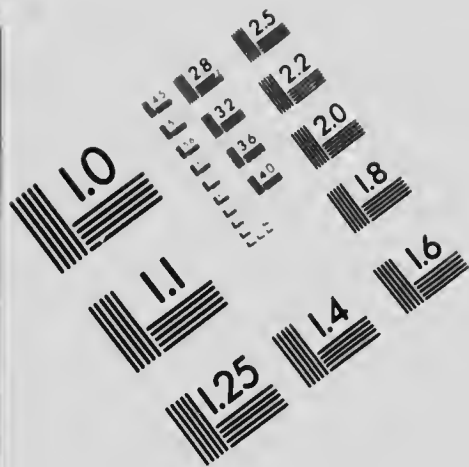


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her, "that she could think of nothing but the pain. She was not responsible for what she did."

The interrogation points in the eyes of the ladies gave way to points of exclamation.

"A few minutes after Judith ran out," went on Charlotte, with a courage that none of them dreamed her to possess, "I slipped away and hurried to my room. I found her there sobbing as if her heart would break. I took her in my arms and soothed her as best I could, until finally she could choke out a few words between sobs, 'Oh, Miss Charlotte!' she cried. 'Only basting! And I was trying so hard! My very best! I could hardly stand it while she praised Fanny Potter so, when she wasn't trying half as hard—'cause it's easy for Fanny to sew, I know it is—but I kept my head down 'cause I was so mad, and went on just as good as I could. Only basting! Oh, Miss Charlotte, I couldn't bear it!'"

As Charlotte reached the climax of this unexpected sequel to her sister's story, her voice trembled and a mist dimmed her eyes.

There was a moment's pause. Then Jane spoke in quiet dignity.

"Sister, I could wish that you had told me this long ago. I never dreamed that I hurt the child's feelings so."

"Oh, Jane," cried Charlotte, "Judith forgot all about it by the next morning! I don't know when

I have thought of it before to-day. And even that afternoon, as the child went home, I couldn't help smiling at the funny figure she made with her eyes red and swollen, her bobbing braids, her big leghorn tied under her chin, and her nice little ruffled apron sadly mussed. By way of consolation I had given her a red apple, and this she held tightly in one fist, while in the other she carried the soaked little wad that had been her handkerchief. Not a word would she say to Fanny, but marched stiffly along as far apart from her as the walk allowed, stubbing her copper toes at every step, oh, so mad!"

The ladies laughed, relieved at having the little incident that had threatened embarrassment pass off so easily.

"I hear that Fanny is coming home Christmas from the Seminary," observed Mrs. Johnson, nibbling at her bit of ginger. "I suppose she'll feel quite a young lady after her two years' finishing."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Putnam, "and if she is any more finished in the art of cap-setting than when she went away, the new minister had better beware."

"May I not give you some more wine?" presently asked Miss Eastbrook of Miss Jones,—a question that hospitality demanded, though she well knew what answer the traditions of the Circle would dictate.

"Thank you, no," murmured Miss Jones depre-

catingly, appearing to waive the subject as one not to be lingered over by a lady. "An elegant sufficiency already, I assure you." In truth she would have liked very well to have had her goblet refilled, but this would have been a solecism of unprecedented proportion.

The gray November twilight had descended, and Sally had lighted the tapers in the heavy crystal-drop candlesticks on the mantel-shelf ere the ladies rose to go. It was a leisurely age with time to write "parlor" and "honor" with "u," and to depart sooner would have been regarded as indecorous haste.

Just then Sally hurriedly came into the room and whispered something in Miss Eastbrook's ear. Miss Eastbrook's brows lifted in astonishment. Excusing herself, she followed Sally out into the hall.

At the open front door stood Judith La Monde, half-timid, half-hopeful.

"Judith!" cried Miss Eastbrook, measuring in a glance the girl's tall comeliness. "When did you come home? And where's your mother?" She kissed her warmly.

Judith looked at Miss Eastbrook with brimming eyes. "I had to come away and leave mother," she said slowly. Then, in a burst of grief, she fell sobbing into Miss Eastbrook's arms. The long strain had been more than she could bear.

"What!" exclaimed Miss Eastbrook, greatly

shocked, "Rachel Warren—? Child, come in!" Slipping an arm about Judith's waist, she kissed her again and drew her into the hall.

No woman living held a keener sense of duty than Jane Eastbrook, and surely it was a duty for her and Charlotte to give shelter and affection to the daughter of their old friend. With more gentleness and tact than Camden usually credited her, she led Judith into the back parlor, and, quietly sending Charlotte to her, permitted the ladies to depart without acquainting them with the news of her return.

That evening Judith ate supper with a readiness that her friends mistook for hunger. She had passed beyond that stage of distress in which physical comforts are rejected for the one beyond that welcomes them, since for a time they arrest the heart-eating.

Later, she was glad when the opportunity came to take her bedroom candle and go up stairs. Once there she lived over again, with a vividness hardly less painful than the reality had been, the scene at Fir Heights, in which she had participated that afternoon. She had gone out to the Heights in the hope of discovering that she was free from Abel; she returned in the knowledge that she was irrevocably bound to him.

Poor Abel! She had never before seen any ne

so ill. His weakness gave him a claim on her fidelity that strength could never have done. She must be true to him, cost what it might! That he still devotedly loved her, his cherishing of the locket she had given him in a moment of passing tenderness was absolute, pathetic proof. And the unfinished house in the field—something told her he had built it for her. In the intensity of this passion that had subsisted year after year chiefly on its own fires, there was something that terrified her.

Her note to Stephen had been an impulse prompted by the belief that one with his magnetic power could surely help Abel. She did not want Abel to die.

On her way to and from the house she had met no one that she knew, for she had ridden on her father's old horse by a bridle-path through the woods, that she had taken in preference to the more direct public road. She felt she could not endure the comments that would be made if she were seen going to Fir Heights. This path had led directly into the back lane, where she had left her horse, finding herself a moment later at the open garden door. She reviewed the scene that had followed, but with no sense of gratification.

Nevertheless, there was one moment that she found herself cherishing. The flash of sympathy between herself and the young minister had given her

an instant's strange, sweet bliss. How quickly, how completely, he had understood her!

She had longed to remain at Abel's bedside that she might help to nurse him, but she had not dared. After speaking to him she had started, her heart full of pity and affection, to address his mother, and had put out her hand. But Mrs. Troop, drawing herself to full height, had given her a stabbing look of scorn and hatred, and without speaking a word had turned away. She had no alternative but to go.

All at once now there darted into her mind the thought that Abel might not recover. If he should die—but with something like horror she recoiled from the bright vision of freedom which that possibility summoned. Still, she did not succeed in banishing it quite. She could no more help its return, indeed, than a caged bird, seeing the door of its prison unexpectedly open, can forbear to flutter its wings in anticipation of soaring out into the blue again. Her thoughts, therefore, took form in two premises, each with its perfectly patent, inevitable conclusion, which kept up in her brain a distracting see-saw :

If Abel should live . . . ? If Abel should die . . . ?

CHAPTER VI

STEPHEN AND JUDITH

The spare chamber which Judith occupied that night seemed pervaded by the spirit of a pure, re-
purposeful Saint Elizabeth. It was a simple room with
nothing more distracting than the ruffles on the
whitest of white curtains that hung at the windows,
and the sheer valance on the high four-poster bed
with its tester, mountain of feathers, orris-sweet
sheets and governor's-garden coverlet.

Nevertheless Judith slept little. She felt she must
hear from Abel every day. But how? To go out
again to Fir Heights was impossible. She even
feared to send a message. She did not blame Mrs.
Troop. Her son was everything to her, and she,
herself, she knew, had appeared to slight his love.
Still, if she could only once talk to her—but no,
everything that she would say would be miscon-
strued. In the light of what she had recently learned
from her own mother, she realized that the antipa-
thy Mrs. Troop felt for her was rooted in the fact
that she was Rachel Warren's daughter. It was too
deep to be dispelled by words. In the meantime it

was something to know that no pains would be spared to promote Abel's comfort and recovery. She must rest in patience until Abel could come to her. She would then make up to him all he had suffered because of her.

The very next day her anxiety concerning him was relieved through Enoch Dowd, who lived on the Belmont farm next to Fir Heights, and who told her that Abel was much better.

Jane and Charlotte Eastbrook insisted that Judith should remain with them. Her youth and loveliness ministered to that mother-craving never quite dormant in any good woman's heart. To Judith the shelter of their kindly roof was grateful, yet it required all her courage to face life anew under its present conditions.

An agent came up from Louisville, and, having placed on her old home a staring placard, "To be sold," hung out a red flag and hawked away for a song the things so dear to her, leaving her only a few of her most intimate personal belongings. Her mother's portrait she hung in her own room at the Eastbrooks'; her piano was set in the recess in the back parlor. Retuned so that its keys sang with all their old mellow sweetness, the piano was welcome to the Eastbrook sisters, for they still missed the music of Charlotte's long-silent harp.

Jane and Charlotte Eastbrook were prominent

members of the Methodist congregation, though they had never formally united with the church. In common with most of Camden quality they had been brought up Presbyterians. But the Presbyterian flock in Camden had never been large enough to hire a shepherd of its own, and as these ladies were unable to conceive of a Sabbath without church-going, they mingled with the more numerous Methodist flock, finding themselves almost as much at home in the sunny pastures of John Wesley as they had been in the gloomy ones of John Calvin. Stephen, therefore, called on them.

He had heard that Judith was living with them—the knowledge caused him to defer the call almost to the limit of the time that courtesy prescribed. He was not at all sure how he should meet this unusual girl between whom and himself, without effort on the part of either, there had been formed a tie. They had met only twice, but under conditions of such emotional intensity that indissoluble links of sympathy had been forged between them. They had shared great unforgettable moments—neither would willingly have forgone them. Their common possession of a secret, slight as it was, was in itself a thread binding them together.

Stephen was troubled about this secret. It was not so much that he had deceived Abel in giving him back the empty locket that harassed him, as that he

could not help being glad it was empty. For a girl like Judith La Monde, in the rounding beauty of her rare womanhood, to marry Abel Troop, so lacking in grasp on life, so limited in aspiration, seemed to him a sacrifice altogether beyond nature. Several times he had gone out to see Abel, and each time his sense of the incongruity of such a marriage had deepened.

Twice he had seen Judith advance to the brink of making the sacrifice and then falter. She was not lightly evading her duty—if duty it was; he had been witness to her struggle to keep faith. Like a hidden sweet at the core of his reasoning came the realization that he had been the sole witness. In effect he had been her confidant. In looking through his pockets ... had come on her note to him and had laid it away among other papers in a drawer, though his real reason for doing so dwelt as yet outside his consciousness in a shadowy limbo of formless hopes and fancies.

He had heard the old story about David Troop and Rachel Warren, and indignantly he denied the right of dead love to impose a claim on warm, living youth. As to Judith's own obligation to Abel, he was at war within himself.

Two totally different strains of blood ran in Stephen's veins. His more genial inheritance argued that as Judith had been hardly more than a child

when she gave her promise to Abel, to hold her to it now would be cruel.

Would it?

The spirit of a remote, grim, pleasure-hating ancestor, by some trick of atavism revived in him, insisted now and then on taking a high hand in his affairs, demanding that he view the whole course of human existence from the top of Plymouth Rock. Stephen was accustomed to call this spirit Conscience, but in truth it performed only the harsh, negative functions of conscience. To the question which, with holy duplicity, it had itself just propounded, it returned now a hard and fast "No." Rather, it admitted the cruelty and in the same breath affirmed the obligation. Since Judith had promised to marry Abel, she could not in honor release herself. The Puritan spirit spoke all the more emphatically because it insisted that Stephen's sympathy for Judith was largely due to personal interest in her. And as there is nothing that Puritanism so delights in as to crush natural, youthful instincts, this spirit bestirred itself until it became fairly rampant with righteousness. Stephen was forced to own that if Judith La Monde had not been a young and supremely beautiful woman he would have given her case only a passing tribute of impersonal pity.

Stephen dreaded, on calling at the Eastbrooks', to meet Judith. Yet when he learned that she was out,

he was definitely disappointed. He had known her as yet only under unusual conditions; they had exchanged, all told, literally some half-dozen words. Would the romantic charm that invested her at the tent meeting, and again at Fir Heights, vanish in a parlor? He was curious to know. She was a new kind of personality in his gallery of human portraits, and he was as yet uncertain how to catalogue her.

In so small a town as Camden it was inevitable that they should meet before long. Circumstances brought this about even sooner than he anticipated. At the church he had formed a small choir, which he himself conducted, but he had not yet found any one to play the little reed organ. Judith was suggested to him. He demurred in his own mind, but as there seemed no real reason why he should not ask her he had almost made up his mind to do so, when Sally Lightfoot appeared at the hotel, bringing him a note. Breaking the old-fashioned seal, he saw that the note was from Jane Eastbrook, bidding him to tea the next evening at early candle-light. The invitation was in itself welcome, and it would afford an easy means of approaching Judith on the subject of the organ. He accepted instantly.

The note, though it appeared in Jane's handwriting, was a *coup d'état* on the part of simple-hearted little Miss Charlotte.

Charlotte Eastbrook was one of those all-giving

souls that bloom chiefly in other people's lives. In youth she had been capable of eloping as picturesquely as you please, but in remote little Camden lovers were scarce, and no one—the pity of it!—had ever asked her to do so.

Though she had never known a passion for any individual man, Miss Charlotte had always secretly admired men in general. Were they not creation's veritable lords, to minister to whom was woman's choicest privilege? Though Judith had not directly confided in her about Abel, Miss Charlotte was convinced that Judith did not love him. She herself was not pleased with Abel, for she liked masterful men. She fondly hoped that Judith would break with Abel and win one of those paragons, to whom she was by virtue of her character and beauty entitled. She and Abel were wholly unsuited to each other, and marriage between them would be a mistake that Miss Charlotte determined to hinder, at least until Judith should have a chance to know other men.

On the tips of her long transparent fingers Miss Charlotte told off the eligible men of Camden.

The list was not long, nor was it promising. Thomas Carroll, tall and white-haired, Camden's banker, and colonel of the town militia, would, she was convinced, never marry. Except for his copper-colored housekeeper, Liza, he had lived alone for years in great simplicity in his colonial red brick

mansion, known as the Red House, on the street just back of the Eastbrooks. It was said that he inherited his distinguished face and bearing from a famous Virginian naval officer of Revolutionary days. The resemblance was marked, though no one in Camden could say whether or not the story was true. As for Carroll, no living person had ever heard him allude to it. Whatever he knew, whatever he suspected, remained locked in his own breast.

About Colonel Carroll's whole history there was a mellow flavor as of old port. Miss Charlotte recalled that, though now a pattern of virtue and the town's foremost citizen, he had once been considered a little wild. He had inherited a fortune, and in extreme youth had gone to Baltimore to enter business. There he had fallen deeply in love with the fascinating Elizabeth Patterson, somewhat his senior, of whom Talleyrand said: "If she were a queen, how gracefully she would reign!" Rejected for the sake of a prince, he had retired broken-hearted to his boyhood home in Camden, where for a year he lived in almost absolute seclusion. All Camden hated Betsy Patterson. At last he had emerged, a man completely changed—gay no longer, but kind and gentle, with whitened hair and somewhat less elastic step, but with all his old erectness of carriage still, his calm chiseled features proclaiming him conqueror of that most difficult of all worlds—the one that Alexander,

in his sighing, forgot. He was without near relatives and he did not seek close friends, but he trimmed his long-neglected garden afresh, and there all the children of the town found welcome. An experience that would have embittered many men had sweetened him.

It was well known that at least half a dozen Camden women held for Colonel Carroll a regard that he could easily have warmed into something more than regard; but none of them entertained any hope that he would do so. His love for Betsy Patterson had been the great, the unmistakable love that a man knows only once in a lifetime.

"No," reflected Miss Charlotte decisively, "Colonel Carroll is hopeless."

There was James Dudley, a lawyer in his early thirties, and a member of the town board, who was a bachelor. She had known Dudley as a boy, and liked him. As he grew to manhood and his talent manifested itself, liking warmed into admiration. But in common with the rest of Camden she had been disappointed when a taste for liquor developed itself in him. No, she could not think of encouraging Judith to marry a man who might ruin her life by his weakness for drink.

The other two members of the board, as Cupid had it, were also marriageable. But Miss Charlotte did not for a moment seriously consider either of

them. Colonel Belmont, president of the board and owner and editor of the *Camden True Whig*, was a widower, but Miss Charlotte thought him unbearably domineering and perhaps untrustworthy. Riley Tibbott, a bachelor, was so conceited that self-immolation would be the daily portion of his wife. Besides, Nancy Jones was supposed to have first claim on his affections, and Miss Charlotte had no desire to encounter the sharp claws of awakened jealousy.

On down the list she went.

One man was old and bald and cross, one was stingy. Still another, otherwise promising, occasionally got drunk as a lord. It was then his unique pleasure, companioned by a brown jug, to coast down a neighboring hill, to be hauled up by a negro, who was rewarded by a swig from the jug. A score of times in one afternoon, perhaps, this process, enlivened on his lordship's part by sundry bursts of convivial song, would be repeated, ending finally when Sisyphus grew unequal to his task. This idiosyncrasy, in itself harmless, might prove trying to a wife's sensibilities.

Amid such a galaxy of masculine charms the advent of Stephen Waters appeared to Miss Charlotte's old-fashioned faith as the unmistakable pointing of the finger of Providence. Observation having taught her that in such matters Providence can be assisted, she suggested to Jane that the new minister must be

lonely, and they had agreed that it would be kind to extend to him the hospitality of their table.

Tea at the Eastbrooks' Stephen found very pleasant. The dining-room, with its great Sheraton side-board, silver-laden; its round damask-spread table and gold-banded service; its beaten biscuit and honey and platter of fricasseed chicken; its translucent mound of jelly, flavored with rose geranium, and the yellow candle-light over all, was inviting. Jane Eastbrook was somewhat subdued, but Charlotte was in rare spirits and entertained him in sprightly fashion. Ordinarily, in spite of the fact that she was the older sister, her rôle in the house had been that of *ingenue*, but to-night she had risen to the rôle of leading lady. Camden was partial to silk attire whenever occasion afforded, and both ladies were somewhat elaborately attired—Charlotte in dove-color, with a bit of cobweb lace at the throat; Jane in damson, formidably fringed.

Though Judith said little, yet before the meal was half over, the question that Stephen had asked himself concerning her personality was answered. Her charm was hers. Shorn of unusual circumstance, merely one of a family group, she was still radiant. Simplicity of setting but enhanced her luster.

Stephen remarked to her that she had been suggested to him as an organist, and asked her if she would play for him.

"Shall I?" She turned to Jane Eastbrook. Ought I, she was asking herself. Jane took counsel with the proprieties during the space of time required for pouring her tea into her saucer.

"There could be no possible objection to your assisting in divine service, my love," she vouchsafed, setting down her cup on the tea-plate.

"None in the world!" echoed Charlotte, with almost suspicious warmth and celerity.

It was settled, therefore, that Judith should attend the choir rehearsal each Saturday night at the church.

Stephen found himself speedily becoming fast friends with Miss Charlotte, and when they returned to the parlor she lent him her favorite novel, *Northanger Abbey*, a thin, worn volume of her girlhood days, whose portrait-frontispiece time had silhouetted in smoky tint on the tissue page, and whose very age seemed to have added a distinct charm, since fine books, like fine people, know how to grow old gracefully. Early in the evening Jane confessed to a headache, and, excusing herself, went up stairs, much against her will, leaving Charlotte to act as duenna, an office for which Jane seriously doubted her discretion. Charlotte filled it to her own satisfaction, at least. She presently asked Stephen to sing for them, and when he and Judith went into the recess off the back parlor to the piano, she remained

in the front room, whence she warmly approved the familiar *Young Lochinvar* and the new *Heart Bow'd Down* that Judith had brought with her from Paris.

In turning over the music on the piano Stephen came across an aria by Haydn of which he had always been especially fond. Judith had never played it, but at his suggestion she sat down to try it over.

Her position displayed to him in full the beauty of her face and figure.

A tall, branching silver candlestick standing on the piano shed on her the mild light of its white tapers. Over her delicately-molded brows her hair rippled down into a soft knot at the back of her neck. She was simply dressed, but with grace of outline. Her pale green cashmere gown fell gently about her, its close round body finished by a sash that fluttered in long ends over the wide flaring skirt. Hanging from her neck by a bit of ribbon, a coral medalion rose and fell with her breathing.

As she played the last chord of the accompaniment and turned again toward him, he was reminded of the way she had looked when she came forward at the meeting in the tent. In the poise of her head, slightly uplifted, there was something lily-like, almost stately, even Sapphic.

"You have it perfectly," he said.

"It's very simple," she deprecated.

"The notes are simple," Stephen granted, "but

they must be played in the old manner. They demand just the quaint, joyous touch that you give them." His praise fell on her ears with a sweeter music than Haydn's.

A second and a third time they went over the aria. Once, when Stephen stooped to inspect a blurred note, he was so near her that her breath touched his cheek. This time it was not until the last lingering overtone had died away that either stirred.

Judith closed the music book. From the front parlor came the sound of quiet, regular breathing. Stephen smiled. "Evidently Miss Charlotte is not partial to Haydn."

Judith laughed softly; she was very happy.

"It's early yet. Must I go? If you will let me stay, I promise to be very quiet and not to waken Miss Charlotte."

The mood of playful badinage that he was showing was giving her new glimpses of him. Why need he go at once?

Stephen turned to the table. The *Young Lady's Guide* lay there. He picked it up and, opening it, saw that certain passages were heavily penciled. Gravely, he read one of them aloud:

Madame Roland, one of the most remarkable women of the last century, says of herself: The same child who read systematic works, who could explain the circles of the celestial spheres, who could handle the

crayon and the graver, and who at eight years of age was the best dancer at the youthful parties, was frequently called into the kitchen to make an omelet, pick herbs and skim the pot.

"Miss La Monde, were you that kind of child? Could you explain the celestial spheres?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, I was always climbing cherry trees and getting my frock torn. But I did not bother about the spheres, and I am quite sure that I never skimmed a pot."

Stephen turned the page. "Attentions from Gentlemen" was the chapter heading. He read:

Young ladies should not accept unnecessary help from gentlemen in putting on wraps or in getting in and out of carriages. Read not out of the same book. . . .

"Really, Miss La Monde," he said, laying down the *Guide*, "does Miss Eastbrook expect you to obey all of these mandates?"

"I am positive," she answered, smiling, "that the *Guide* is on the table for my especial delectation."

"I fear, though, that you do not always heed it. Haven't you been looking over the same sheet of music with me?"

"In Miss Eastbrook's eyes," she responded, laughing, "that would hardly be consistent with the spirit of the *Guide*. But then—"

"But then," he finished gaily, "Miss Eastbrook need never know!"

Neither had alluded to the occasions of their former meeting. It was a silence more significant than speech.

That night, as Judith lay awake reveling in the pleasant glow of the evening, recollection of Abel forced itself on her. She had that day learned that there was no longer any doubt of his recovery. She had rejoiced at the news, and in the next breath had recoiled from the reality of marriage with him that it brought home to her. Despite the resolution that she had made, she began to think of reasons for putting it off. If only she could gain time, something might yet happen to solve the problem in another way. She scourged herself for shrinking thus, but she could not help it. And circumstances favored her. It would be several weeks before Abel could press his suit; the house he had built for her was not yet finished, and she could, besides, plead the provision in her father's will which would not release her before the next summer.

To delay the inevitable in this manner, she told herself, was weak and childish. Had her experience been a little wider, she might have felt less severely on this head, since human nature, in the face of great sacrifices, is not infrequently weak and childish.

Translating the church's traditions of the martyrs

from the illuminated medieval missals into the black and white of fact, we may be sure that, though their spirits embraced the flames, their flesh never did. When they saw the lighted fagots, the temptation to recant was terrible. None the less were they true martyrs. Should the halo be less bright because the poor body flinched as the cruel flames leaped toward it?

Judith's reflections were now resistlessly fixed on Abel. The evening's pleasant glow was gone. She felt as one returning from a happy excursion, or from a play in which, for the time being, the realities of life have been forgotten. She could not sleep until she had conceived a plan for sending Abel some token of her sympathy and regard. She would go to New Alden the next day and order some flowers sent out to him. They would say for her what she was prevented from saying for herself—that she was not indifferent, selfish and cold. And besides giving pleasure to him, they might propitiate his mother.

CHAPTER VII

THE TOWN BOARD

Many times Stephen recalled his evening with Judith in Miss Eastbrook's parlor, and each time it was as though he inhaled the fragrance of a flower. There had been a distinct charm about it, and yet something elusive, that left him unsatisfied. But events occurred to deflect his thoughts into other and wholly different channels.

As he came out of the hotel one morning he saw that something unusual had happened. There were excited groups before the hotel and the post-office. He soon learned the cause. The New Alden stage had been robbed the night before, and a satchel containing five hundred dollars had been taken from Colonel Belmont. Such robberies had occurred from time to time, but, as the losses were seldom heavy, no organized effort had been made to stop them. Stephen wondered at this, and ventured the remark that if Camden and New Alden should unite, the highwaymen could probably be caught.

Because of the robbery the town board, attended by the clerk, was already sitting in special session in

the lower room of the court-house. A high, rusty, sheet-iron stove stood in the middle of the room, and around this the three trustees were gathered, not for warmth, there being no fire in it, but because it afforded so convenient a resting place for their three pairs of legs, which, according as nature had been generous or scant in her allotment, were stretched out high or low upon it.

The longest pair, clad in dingy blue military pantaloons, reposed majestically above the door and at least a foot higher than the head of their owner, Francis P. R. Belmont, who contemplated them thoughtfully, as if in the belief that inspiration, exempt from natural law, may freely rise above its source. With his thick iron-gray hair, deep-set brown eyes, swarthy skin, aquiline nose and black imperial accenting the rather hard lines of his mouth, Belmont was striking, if not positively handsome. He had fought through the Mexican War under Zachary Taylor, riding at the head of a regiment from Kentucky, his native state, and had never discarded either his uniform or his enthusiasm for Buena Vista.

The legs next lower, somewhat shabbily attired in black, were those of James Dudley, by birth and breeding a gentleman. Dudley possessed that type of face that has a natural affinity with stocks and high-rolling collars, a face characteristically Whig:

smooth-shaven and high-colored, with a wide and thoughtful brow, flowing chestnut locks, beaming blue eyes, and an expression of uprightness, courtesy, warm generosity and charming candor.

On Dudley's admission to the bar a brilliant career in a larger world than Camden had been predicted for him. This prediction he partly fulfilled in winning several important legal victories, including the famous Jennings-Borden case. But from time to time he had known periods of dissipation that sapped his courage and were already lining his young and handsome face. Dudley possessed an engaging address, and, despite his weakness, was respected.

The lowest legs, a wizened pair in butternut brown, belonged to Riley Tibbott, a pinched little man nearing forty, with scant hair and skied eyebrows. Tibbott was fondly convinced that he was an orator, and had once aspired to a seat in the Legislature. Extracts from his speeches he had foreseen printed in the capital city press, the full text, plentifully interjected with those impressive brackets "laughter" and "prolonged applause," appearing in the *Camden True Whig*. His ignominious failure even to be nominated had for ever taken all power of initiative out of him. For some time Belmont had completely ruled him. He no longer possessed a backbone, and so weak in the knees had he grown that Belmont was obliged, figuratively speaking, to

hold him up with one hand in order that he might have the satisfaction of bullying him down with the other.

Belmont and Tibbott wore their hats; Belmont, his high, straight, cockaded military one, and Tibbott, his equally high rounded beaver, once white, now a dirty drab, and with the fur missing in spots as if it had been chewed off in a fight. Both hats were tilted far back at an angle so nearly the same that Tibbott might have been accused of trying to imitate Belmont, in which he succeeded as far as might a worsted terrier trying to look like a swaggering bulldog. And both men were puffing away at black pipes, whose thick smoke settled in halos round their devoted heads and spread a pleasant haze of indistinctness between them and those disagreeable facts that all town affairs will now and then disclose—the Banquo's ghosts that even the most skilful manipulation will not absolutely lay.

Had Miss Charlotte looked in on the board, she would have seen no occasion to alter her estimate of its members. Dudley, certainly, was by far the best man of the three, and his present expression of cynical indifference was hardly promising.

The meeting was in the nature of an inquest on the robbery, and, from the trend of its deliberations, promised to close in establishing the fact that the corpse was undeniably and permanently dead.

Bob Lane, the burly, jocose stage-driver, all wampus and top-boots and black-snake whip, had given his testimony. He and Belmont were alone on the trip. They had each shot once, and Belmont's shot had taken effect. But as there were four of the highwaymen, continued resistance had been out of the question. Bob was sorry that the Colonel had risked taking so large a sum by the night stage, but Belmont did not appear to relish his sympathy, and somewhat peremptorily dismissed him.

"How did you happen to be carrying so much, Belmont?" inquired Dudley curiously.

"It wasn't my money, more's the pity," answered Belmont, compressing his lips. "It belonged to Mrs. Troop. She asked me to get it for her out of the bank at New Alden."

"I'll wager it's not hers, either," remarked Dudley, whose legal training led him to trace things to their sources in a manner that was sometimes disturbing. "It was probably Abel's money that he has been saving all these years to finish that house he has been building for his sweetheart. It's hard on them to lose it, on top of Abel's sickness."

"I don't know whose it is," replied Belmont, "but it puts me in a mighty embarrassing place. The important thing is, how are we going to get the money back?"

In a rare fit of courage Tibbott spoke up. "Why

not get out a requisition, Colonel? I believe those fellows go over the river—”

“By God, Tibbott,” interrupted Belmont disgustedly, lowering the majestic legs and pushing back his chair. “You are for ever suggesting some fool thing! Why should they go over into Kentucky? There are plenty of hills on this side of the river to hide in.”

Tibbott owed his place on the board to Belmont, and though he well knew that it was because Belmont expected in consequence to control town affairs, the office of town trustee had its glory and emoluments, and, petty as these were, they swelled the existence of little Riley Tibbott to very agreeable proportions. Besides, by Belmont’s grace, Tibbott was devil and general factotum of the *True Whig*, and he had no idea of sacrificing this enviable distinction for any Quixotic notions of duty demanded by his trusteeship. It would not do for him to anger Belmont. For the rest of the meeting he sat silent, awaiting his cue, like a whipped puppy with its tail between its legs.

“Mr. Waters thinks we ought to organize a posse and hunt them down.”

It was Sam Lawson, the clerk, who spoke. As a being altogether inferior to trustees, whose decrees he must record but in whose vote he had no voice, Lawson sat apart, a lean, unambitious figure with

watery blue eyes and a languid fringe of pale, sandy mustache, at a high old law desk, among whose long-accumulated documents he found room for an ink-stand and a tin box whose contents gave rather more steady occupation to his jaws than his quill pen did to his fingers. Lawson had chanced to be in the sidewalk group with which Stephen had discussed the robbery.

"It sounds all very well to talk about organizing posses," sneered Belmont, "as if the devils were not out of the county by daylight. It seems to me that a preacher might be in more becoming business than running down highway robbers. It's my mind he had better stick to gospel. I notice he's getting thick with that white-livered Carroll! A pair of damned abolitionists! If I'm not very much mistaken, Carroll helps to run an underground railway over which I've lost a couple of niggers."

That a new-comer like Waters should presume to advise in town affairs Belmont appeared to regard as too direct a blow at his own supremacy to be borne. With a masterful air he put up his feet again to their former place on the stove.

Somehow his high-mightiness irritated Dudley more than usual.

"It seems to me, Belmont," he insisted, "that people will expect something done."

"Of course, of course," assented Belmont, with an

impressive wave of the hand. "Aren't we going to send out and scour the country? Lawson," he ordered, turning to the clerk, "get out the marshal and a couple of deputies, right away."

Dudley greatly doubted if, considering the advantage in time that the highwaymen had gained, two deputies were sufficient, but he said nothing. He did not dare intimate what was in his mind—that had the stolen money been Belmont's own, energetic measures to recover it would have been promptly forthcoming.

Silenced on one topic, Dudley brought forward another.

"You want to be mighty careful about this county-seat election, Belmont," he observed. "If these independent fossils out through the country should get it into their heads to vote for New Alden, we'd be done for."

Belmont did not take the suggestion kindly. "I have told you, Jim, that they will vote just the way I want them to. A few more speeches will settle things." He spoke with a lofty air, brushing away Dudley's idea as if it were a mosquito.

Camden was approaching its first political excitement in a war with New Alden, which, having far outstripped its older neighbor in population and wealth, now coveted the honor of being the seat of authority also. Local pride was warm in the matter,

and a strong fight, whose leadership Belmont naturally assumed, would be made.

It was a fight that would proceed nearly, though not quite, on party lines. Camden was unequivocally Whig; New Alden was slightly Democratic; the county was sometimes one, sometimes the other.

Politics in this southern county went mostly by families. A man inherited his father's party principles and prejudices with his blood and name. For at least two generations the Carrolls and the Dudleys and the Eastbrooks and their kin had been stubborn Whigs, and for just as long equally prominent families in New Alden had been red-hot Democrats. If one of the Dudleys aspired to an office, he could count to a man on the votes of every voting relative or connection, far and near, that he and the other Whig families had, and a member of the Democratic stronghold could on his side do the same. So that it was always known the moment a candidate in either party was announced that there would be a solid lining-up for him in certain quarters, and it was pretty easy to reckon just how many votes this would amount to. The small outside, scattering, variable vote, viewed, as it was, by both Whigs and Democrats with ill-concealed disgust, was usually indispensable to victory.

"Any more business this morning, Belmont?" inquired Dudley after a pause.

"No," replied Belmont shortly. He was conscious that, though he had twice silenced Dudley, he had not satisfied him.

The meeting over, the three pairs of legs were lowered from off the stove and once more became means of locomotion for their respective owners. Dudley's carried him straight to a tavern on the next street. He knew he was running up a bill that he might not be able to pay, but there was Belmont—Belmont had paid other bills. The thought rankled, but appetite was strong. It was a habit that Belmont had fallen into of late, settling Dudley's accounts at the tavern. He was quietly working for a seat in the state Senate, and it was necessary that a man of Dudley's ability should be beguiled into neutrality, since he could not be persuaded to lend active support.

Belmont, the capes of his great army overcoat flapping in the wind, with Tibbott trotting pigeon-toed a half-step behind him, crossed the street to a weather-stained building in the middle of the south side of the Square, where he ascended a flight of worn, scooped steps leading to the office of the *True Whig*.

The *True Whig* was the beacon light of its party throughout Henderson County. Belmont himself admitted this in bold-faced type at the head of the first of its four four-columned pages. This was Tuesday,

and the day on which the *True Whig* dazzled the county each week was Friday, which, apart from unwashed windows, may have accounted for the fact that the office, though it was ten in the morning and a bright morning at that, was dark and dingy. Like other earthly illuminators, the *True Whig* required a process of preparation before it shone. On Tuesday the oil was poured in. That is to say, the copy was prepared then. This was a joint task, Belmont writing the editorials, and Tibbott the local news and the half-dozen advertisements.

On Wednesday the wick was trimmed and the lamp polished. This was entirely Tibbott's work, and consisted in putting into type what had been written the day before—getting the lamp mechanically ready to shine. On Thursday the reflectors were put on, which again was Tibbott's task, and meant the weary turning of the old hand-press until the required number of copies was printed. On Friday the wick was lighted and the *True Whig* shone all over the county, being mailed to little way-stations to the number of three hundred copies and placed in private boxes at the post-office to the number of two hundred more. Tibbott again attended to both mailing and selling, and so, altogether, abundantly earned the stipend for which Belmont had engaged his services, but which he somewhat regularly forgot to pay.

The office of the *True Whig* extended clear through the block, with a partition in the middle and a stairway at either end. When visitors, including creditors, whom Belmont did not wish to see, came up one stairway, it was an easy matter for him to retreat down the other, with no one the wiser. The room on the side facing the Square was Belmont's, while the back room was occupied by Tibbott with his type cases, high stool and press, and an old bed lounge on which he slept at night.

Belmont sat down at his desk without removing either his hat or his overcoat. Stephen's remark about the robbery bothered him.

"It would be just like the damned busybody to talk somebody into running against me for the nomination," he muttered.

He sat for a long time perfectly still, thinking, thinking of several things. The immediate thing was, how he was to tell Mrs. Troop that the money he had drawn for her from the New Alden bank had been stolen. Well, it would have to be done; he would have to tell her. He usually visited his farm on Wednesdays, but it would not do to delay breaking the news to Mrs. Troop. He would go out that afternoon.

Belmont's removal from Kentucky three years before had been said to be due to the desire of his invalid wife, who had been a Camden girl, to die

among her own people. Once in Camden, he sought to establish himself politically. In the abeyance of the party's natural leaders—Colonel Carroll and Dudley—the way seemed clear. He had bought the *True Whig* and pushed it. The motto that he placed at its head, "Camden first, and the world afterward," struck a popular note, and the paper soon began, in a small way, to pay. It served, besides, as the unblushing organ of its editor's political ambition. This ambition soared higher than the Legislature, but that, for the present, was his nearest and surest chance.

Belmont had been tolerably fond of his wife, a frail little woman, who, perhaps because she never raised voice or hand in opposition to him, had exercised considerable influence over him. Since her death he had kept her daguerreotype in a drawer of his desk. As he sat thinking now, he suddenly took from his pocket a key and inserted it in the lock of the drawer. On reflection, however, he returned the key to its place without opening the drawer.

Something else besides the daguerreotype was in the drawer—something long, black, shining and loaded, that marked the nadir to which Belmont's hopes, in their ceaseless revolutions, at times inevitably descended. He was nervous, and did not care to see it just now. But a train of unwelcome recollections had already started in his mind. Again

he stood on a country road in Kentucky and gazed down at a still form and white boyish face, whose glazed eyes stared blankly up into his own.

"Curse him!" he muttered. "Why can't I forget him? Anybody would think I was just getting over a spree!" Seizing his pen, he began doggedly to write.

Late that afternoon he drove out to Fir Heights. He found Mrs. Troop in the kitchen busily paring apples.

"How is Abel?" he inquired, taking the chair she offered.

"Better, much better," she answered thankfully, pausing in her task. And she told him of the unexpected change that had taken place. Belmont appeared in a hurry, and cut her short with the remark:

"I suppose you have not heard, Mrs. Troop, what happened to the stage last night?" She shook her head and resumed her paring.

"It was held up," said Belmont, watching her narrowly.

Mrs. Troop let her knife fall into her pan. She turned slowly until she faced him.

"You don't mean—" Her face had grown on the instant ashy pale, but her voice was steady.

Belmont nodded silently, grinding his boot-heel in the floor.

"Abel's money gone?" she cried, setting down her apples and rising slowly and rigidly to her feet.

"There hadn't been a hold-up for some time. I never dreamed—some one may have seen me draw it from the bank, you know. I had it in gold in a satchel." He spoke hurriedly, almost nervously, gripping his chair, as if the making of his explanation was exceedingly disagreeable to him. Yet the expression on his face was not one of sheer pity; there was some pity in it, but more apprehension.

"I'm dreadfully sorry it happened," he went on. "But I hope you don't blame me."

"I asked you to get it for me two weeks ago," she said reproachfully.

"Yes, Mrs. Troop, but I've been tremendously busy. Haven't had a spare moment, really, till yesterday. And I like to oblige a neighbor, too."

"Well," said Mrs. Troop in dead tones, "I can't blame you. There would be no fairness in that, and no use. I am the one that is to blame, and I shall have to bear the consequences."

Belmont endeavored to console her with the assurance that every effort would be made to recover the money, but it was useless. Glad to escape, he departed, leaving Mrs. Troop standing in the middle of the kitchen like one stunned. She was saying to herself: "How can I ever tell Abel?"

She had intended to use the money to pay off a

debt on the farm of exactly five hundred dollars. Her motives were mixed: She wanted to rid the farm of debt, and at the same time she had been tempted to put it out of Abel's power to finish the house he was building for Judith.

She had always felt an antipathy for Judith as the daughter of Rachel Warren, who, she contended, had played David Troop false, yet—there lay the sting!—had remained, as she well knew, his secret idol. Not that Mrs. Troop had any reason to believe that he regretted marrying her. Love offering itself has ever been the refuge of those that have sought love elsewhere and been denied. When Abel's birth failed to soften him, she lost her last hope of ever winning his affection. Gladly would she have borne violence from him for the sake of a little tenderness afterward. He had never once referred to Rachel, but she fancied always that she could tell the days on which he had by chance encountered her in Camden. At such times he was silent, irritable and restless. But she had never reproached him. She was thankful to be near him, at least, and to do for him. It was for his sake that she had endured the visits of Judith, hateful to her as they were, for the child had been the image of her mother.

Unable to spend on her husband the affection that she wished, her son had become doubly dear to her.

She was bitterly opposed to his engagement to

Judith, and she had thought that her real reason lay in her belief that Judith was as fickle as her mother. She always insisted that at the last Judith would desert him. Judith's unexpected appearance at his bedside had startled and troubled her, but she endeavored to attribute it not to fixed loyalty, but to an impulse, of which the lightest nature would be capable. She was convinced that his welfare demanded he should go no further with her, and was certain that, once the farm debt were paid, she could bring Abel to agree with her that she had made the best disposition of the money. She could not leave him during his illness, and had therefore asked Belmont to draw it for her, the sight of Abel's check having proved the final, irresistible temptation. As events turned out, the debt remained unpaid, and Abel's money was gone. Ill fortune had intervened, and she had crossed her son's cherished purpose without attaining her own.

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES DUDLEY

"No wonder they call it the Omnibus Bill!" Stephen spoke hotly. In the wide hall of the Kimball House an indignation meeting was in progress. News that Congress had finally passed the series of compromise measures that marked the agitated and momentous session of 1850 had reached Camden by the noon stage. A town's interest in national politics is in inverse proportion to its size. Camden being no exception to the rule, a crowd had quickly gathered at the hotel to pass judgment on the bill.

"Clay has tried to load it up to suit both parties," Stephen went on, turning to the New York newspaper in his hand, which had conveyed the word. "Here's California free, and no slave-trading in the District of Columbia; Utah and New Mexico are to be free or slave, as they choose—that's a sop to both sides—and then, runaway slaves are hereafter to be tracked by United States government officers! One thing is certain—this Omnibus carries too much to travel far!"

"If you'll allow me to differ," spoke up Riley Tib-

bott knowingly, "Kentucky has every reason to be proud of her great son. It seems to me, fellow citizens, that this bill's a piece of profound legislative wisdom."

"Lot of fuss to make about a parcel of niggers!" cut in Sam Lawson, taking a fresh chew of tobacco. Turning slightly, he winked at Bob Lane. Lane winked back.

"Much obleeged," he whispered. "Was afeared the eagle was goin' to scream in another minute."

"It's high time," resumed Stephen, "that the Whig party clears itself of this scandal of slavery. Until the country rises in might and strikes the shackles—"

"Never! never!" cried Belmont, emerging from the bar just in time to catch Stephen's words. His hat was pushed back from his forehead, about which his thick hair lay tumbled; his face was flushed, and his eyes were bloodshot. His whole air breathed challenge

"Anybody who thinks that Southern gentlemen will stand by and see big buck niggers and low-down wenches made the equals of their wives and daughters will get his eyes opened before long!" Belmont's own eyes flashed, and his right hand, tightly clenched, struck a sounding blow on the balustrade of the stairs to which he had advanced. The brass buttons on his dingy uniform shook in sympathy.

He was the only slaveholder in Camden, but by no means the only Southern sympathizer. Feeling about slavery ran high in these border counties, and on the instant the group of townsmen and farmers had become a magazine, ready to be touched off.

"As sure as there is a to-morrow, gentlemen," solemnly declared Thomas Carroll, "slavery will be abolished. It may break up the Whig party to do it, but it will be done. It may cost countless lives, but the lives will be paid. We are moving irresistibly toward a conflict in comparison with which Palo Alto and Buena Vista will seem but a summer's breath. Garrison sees it; Sumner sees it."

The group had turned toward Colonel Carroll in marked respect. He held a unique position in the town—one of great and unqualified esteem. He was a stanch Whig, but, had he consented to enter politics, Whigs and Democrats would have united in electing him to any office within their gift.

"This bill of Clay's," he went on, "is merely an expedient. War may not come soon, perhaps not in twenty years, but it will come."

"For my part," said James Dudley, "I am convinced that the middle men will have something to say—the men who are anxious to save the Union, and with whom slavery is a second issue. There's one in Congress now who's not famous yet like Webster and Calhoun and Clay, but who will be

heard from on this subject, I tell you, unless I miss my mark."

"Who is that?" asked Carroll.

"Lincoln—Abe Lincoln they call him—a lank, homely fellow from Illinois. I heard him once in the Legislature at Springfield. Capital story-teller! And with a grip on things—"

"There's going to be a gol-darned pretty rumpus, I'm thinkin'," said Bob Lane. "And that's when I quit stage-drivin'!" he added emphatically, cracking his long black-snake in anticipation. Bob subsided, but the tip of the black-snake still writhed and squirmed, as if, like its owner, it loved a good fight.

"If ever war does come," remarked Belmont significantly, "it's these blamed preachers—"

"Damn you, Belmont!" broke in Dudley, "what do you mean?"

For a day when gentlemen ripped out the name of the Deity or the devil with equal indifference and as freely as they did their pocket handkerchiefs, Dudley was a most mild and moderate swearer. But this insult flung in Stephen's very face made him furious.

"Shut up, Belmont, or by—" Lane's black-snake finished the sentence with an ominous crack. He had no love for "niggers," but he liked Stephen, and besides, the personal nature of Belmont's attack was repugnant to his sense of justice and fair play.

"Colonel Belmont," said Colonel Carroll sternly, "you forget yourself!"

"By God, sir!" exploded Belmont, turning on him. "how dare you? But I presume I should expect nothing better of a man who gets his title from a squad of greenhorn militia."

"Sir!" Colonel Carroll drew himself to a towering height. "That squad of greenhorn militia may be heard from one of these days."

"—And who declined to go to his country's defense in time of war," continued Belmont sneeringly. "Where were you, sir, I should like to know, when Buena Vista was fought and won?"

"That was an unholy war, sir!" thundered Colonel Carroll.

"And who is reported," persisted Belmont, with livid face, drawing a step nearer, "to descend from a very great man indeed, but, unfortunately, on the sinister side."

"By God, Belmont," cried Dudley, "that's one insult too many!"

His right arm flew out like lightning toward Belmont's jaw. Instinctively Belmont dodged the blow.

The crowd was hot for a fight, and every man in it would have been glad to see Dudley win. But Colonel Carroll, stepping forward, quietly drew Dudley back.

Perhaps there is nothing that so distinguishes a

gentleman as the fact that there are weapons he disdains to use even in self-defense. It was on the tip of Colonel Carroll's tongue to retort that no one would ever accuse Belmont of descending from great ancestors in any manner. Instead, he said only, to Stephen and Dudley: "Gentlemen, don't you think it is time we were going?"

With an oath, Belmont, his arm upraised, started toward Dudley. But on second thought he stopped and his arm fell. After all, a fight now was not the thing for his political prospects. He had quarreled with Carroll before, and somehow had always come off worse.

"It's his fine airs, damn him!" he muttered, hating himself for the moment for his coarseness.

He lingered in hesitation, and then, going down into the street, walked to the Square and ascended the stairs that led to his office. Sitting down at his desk, he took his pen and fell violently to work.

Presently Tibbott appeared in the doorway. "Anything special?" he asked. It was Tuesday, and he liked to get all the copy in early.

"Yes," answered Belmont, without looking up. "I'll give you something by and by."

In entire meekness, Tibbott returned to his desk. He saw that his chief's ire had not subsided, and he ventured into his presence no more that day. He had gathered fewer notes than common, and soon

had them all written out, though his copy, in the appearance of which he was accustomed to take inordinate pride, was not so fair as usual, for Belmont's disturbed condition communicated itself to him as the tidal wave of an ocean backs up into streams that flow into it. In consequence, with the fatal instinct of the true journalist, he had jabbed his paste-brush into his ink-well, whereupon he exclaimed softly, lest Belmont should hear, "Durn it!"—which was as near as his feeble little soul could come to Belmont's ripping "damn"—and recklessly daubed the brush, ink and all, across the paper.

He was curious as to what Belmont was writing. It was probably an editorial on the Omnibus Bill, and, suspecting Belmont of being at heart a Democrat, he wondered how well he would succeed in concealing his real sentiments beneath Whig platitudes.

Leaving his desk, he went to the type-case and began to set up his notes. By the time he had arrived at "Jim Mosley's boy has the chicken-pox" he was out of capital M's. He had just reached for a W to turn upside down as a substitute, when Belmont came in. Throwing some copy on the desk, he said brusquely, "Going out," and went down stairs and into the street. Tibbott dropped his W back into its compartment and hurried to his desk.

"Whew!" he exclaimed as he read, as softly as he had sworn a few moments before, from force of

habit; for he knew that Belmont was gone. "Whew!" Returning to his type-case, he proceeded to set up what Belmont had written.

Colonel Carroll had left Stephen and Dudley at the hotel gate, and Stephen had suggested to Dudley a turn round the Square. He was getting interested in Dudley.

"And Belmont calls himself a gentleman!" fumed Dudley. "That insult to Carroll made me boil! Confound Belmont, anyhow! He's outrageous! He wanted to pick a quarrel with you, that was plain. He's got to be headed off, some way. He runs everybody of any account out of this place that comes in. We'll have a town funeral one of these days, with the inscription, 'Dead of dry rot and bad politics.'"

Stephen laughed. "A fine legislator he'll make!"

"Won't he? Well, he'll get the nomination just the same. The field's clear. And there's this consolation, after all: bad as he is, they'll put up a worse man at New Alden. But where he'll raise the money to make the race with I don't see. It will be a close pull—he'll need all he can get. His paper can't bring him much. And he was in debt when he came here. I shall hate to see him elected, too, for he's a regular guerrilla. Fights anyway to win, you know. And he resents anybody's putting in a word about things. He's running this county-seat war to suit himself. What can you do? There's that stage robbery. The

marshal has come back without a trace of those fellows—I knew he would, with only two deputies, and everything against him. Belmont didn't like your suggestion about getting out a posse, that was evident. He thinks you want to run things." He laughed. There was something very winning about Dudley's laugh. It was frank and boyish and good to hear.

The conversation drifted on to national issues, of which Dudley was evidently a close and intelligent student. He evinced so much reading, taste and discernment that Stephen listened to him with respect and pleasure, saying to himself meanwhile what a pity it was that this fine, magnetic fellow had made so little of his life and talents.

"You are a lawyer, I believe, Mr. Dudley?" he remarked.

"Yes," answered Dudley. "But there's not much to do in a small town like this. Clients are pretty scarce."

"Isn't your office right here somewhere?"

"Yes, just beyond the bank there."

Stephen glanced up as they passed the bank and saw, standing next to it, a small, one-story building. It was innocent of paint, and the sign, "James Dudley, Attorney-at-law," was barely legible.

"There's so little to do it's really not worth while fixing up the office," explained Dudley apologetic-

ally. Stephen said nothing, but a plan began to shape itself in his mind.

In another moment they were again at the hotel gate. The crowd had scattered. William Lewis, in white jacket, was at the door, dinner-bell in hand.

"Come in to dinner with me, Dudley."

Dudley flushed. "I don't think I can to-day," he said slowly. "I'm very much obliged." And raising his hat, he was off down the street.

"See here, Dudley," called Stephen, overtaking him at the corner, "got another engagement?" he demanded, half-earnestly, half-jocosely.

"No," owned Dudley. "I haven't."

"Then come back!" insisted Stephen, grasping his arm in a compulsion that Dudley could not resent.

Dudley went back. Colonel Carroll joined them, and the three made a congenial party. Dudley sustained his part well. It had been some time since he had dined in company, for the simple reason that in his pride he shrank from people before they ever thought of shrinking from him. Contrary to precedent, he had called his own trial and taken the stand against himself. But the moment's embarrassment that he now felt was almost magically relieved by Colonel Carroll's fine courtesy and by Stephen's pleasant heartiness.

As Dudley went away after dinner he cast a rueful glance at his worn, shiny clothes.

"Is it possible I'm as shabby as that?" he asked himself.

Next morning as he was sitting in his office Colonel Carroll came in.

"Good morning, Dudley! I came to see if I could get you to go over to New Alden to-day for me. You know I have an interest in the Queen and Crescent boats. For some time I have been thinking that they are not managed right, or if they are, somebody is getting part of my share of the profits. I can't very well ask Marshall and Morris, my New Alden attorneys, to look into it without rousing suspicion. Now if you could run over and investigate things in a quiet way—"

"I'll go to-day, Colonel," answered Dudley, striving to conceal the eagerness with which he welcomed the commission, the first one of importance that had been given to him in months.

Dudley went to New Alden by the morning's stage. He had once been devoted to his profession, and now as he set himself vigorously to work at a task that fortunately demanded his best skill, something of his old pride and pleasure in its practice came back to him.

The amount of work to be done required his remaining at New Alden for several days. At noon, as he sat down to dinner in the Belvedere House, on the second day of his stay, a letter was handed to him.

It was from Colonel Carroll and inclosed a check covering expenses and a generous retaining fee. Dudley carefully placed the letter in his waistcoat pocket, smiling to himself meanwhile. Life was beginning to assume the aspect of a fairy tale. The waiter eyed him curiously.

"Good news, I reckon, suh!"

"Yes," responded Dudley, in fine humor with all the world, "very good news!"

Having satisfactorily concluded Colonel Carroll's business, Dudley returned home. Word that Stephen and Carroll had "taken him up" had spread all over town, and the sight of him now, sober and attired in a new suit of clothes and shawl, set every group of tavern loungers staring. Dudley knew they were staring at him, but he did not care. He cared now for only one thing in the world, and that was to justify the faith that Stephen Waters had shown in him. He had tried so many times to stop drinking and had failed that he knew he was at the mercy of his own worst enemy, himself. But for Stephen's sake he was making one more effort. Reaching the tavern that he had frequented, he went in and asked for his bill.

"Needn't be in a hurry, Jim," said the barkeeper reassuringly.

"No time like to-day!" responded Dudley as he handed over the money and hurried out.

When he came to his office he paused a moment and surveyed its dingy walls and weather-beaten sign. Then unlocking the door he stepped inside. The bright sun of mid-afternoon was pouring through the windows, making the worn and faded carpet look extremely disreputable. Meditatively he kicked at a hole or two in it. Then he went back into his private room. Everything there, desk and chairs and walls, was shabby. His old friends, Coke and Blackstone and Jarman and the rest in their familiar calf bindings, seemed to gaze down at him reproachfully from their shelves. Something rose in Dudley's throat, but he swallowed it hard, and with a brave air of gaiety took off his high white hat, holding it in his hand.

"Friends," he said huskily but cheerily, too, addressing Blackstone and Jarman and their colleagues, "you think I have forgotten you. And perhaps for a time I did forget. But I don't mean to any more. You—you have stuck to me right through—I'm thankful. It's not fair to you, this rag of a carpet, and no paint, but things are looking up! It shan't be long!"

A bit of news that he had heard in the stage that day came back to him. Fanny Potter was to be home for Christmas; it was Miss Bowman who had told him. He recalled dreamily now a slip of a school-girl with pretty brown eyes and tossing brown curls who,

perhaps five or six years before, had daily passed his office on her way to and from the Academy. As she grew older and prettier still he had warmly admired her and had paid her some attention, but her father had not encouraged their intercourse, and when, two years later, she had been sent away to school it had ceased absolutely. But now life was burgeoning for him once more, and Fanny must be a woman grown, twenty perhaps, sweet-and-twenty!

"Good God!" he exclaimed with a start. "Suppose she had come home and found me as I've been lately!" His right hand raised, the fist clenched, struck suddenly down and back, as if it banished with loathing the old indulgent self. Once more he looked round the office. "Inside and out," he cried, "it's got to be new! Some blessed chance might bring her past again. I guess it won't hurt to do a little clearing out right now."

Remembering that it was Friday, he left the office a moment, however, and walked across the street to buy a copy of the *True Whig*. Belmont was not visible.

"Just got in, have you, Jim?" inquired Tibbott, looking Dudley's new clothes well over.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing!" replied Tibbott wisely, handing over the paper. "Looks as if we might have to print another edition, that's all."

Dudley hurried back to his office, turning over the paper as he went. When he reached the inside page he understood the meaning of Tibbott's remark. Prominently placed there, under cover of an editorial on the Omnibus Bill, was an attack on Stephen Waters. Stephen's name was not mentioned, but there could be no mistaking that it was he who was meant. After a defense of slavery as an institution as old as the Bible and sanctioned by it, the editor proceeded more particularly to discourse on the position of the Methodist Church on the question. "Having already divided North and South over a slave-owning bishop," it ran, "it can ill afford the radical and untimely utterances of a scullion preacher not a hundred miles from here who does not perceive that religion and politics are scarcely a decent combination."

Dudley flung the paper to the floor.

"Damn Belmont!" he cried, appealing for sympathy to Messrs. Blackstone and Jarman. Hearing a laugh, he turned and saw Stephen in the outer office.

"Waters, sue that scoundrel for libel and give me the case!"

Dudley looked very handsome as he stood there, his brown claw-hammer coat accentuating the lines of his slender, sweeping figure, indignation flashing in his dark blue eyes and his chestnut hair tossed back from his fine forehead.

"Dudley, did anybody ever tell you that you look like Sumner?"

"Pshaw!" answered Dudley, nevertheless coloring with pleasure. Sumner was his idol.

"You will sue Belmont, won't you?" he insisted.

"Oh," replied Stephen good-humoredly, "it hasn't hurt me a particle. Everybody sees it's outrageous. Would it really be worth while to sue him?"

"Worth while!" blazed Dudley. "Why, somebody's got to teach him a lesson."

"Yes," assented Stephen reflectively. "And I think that somebody will!"

CHAPTER IX

ABEL AND JUDITH

Judith did not expect to hear at once from Abel about the roses she had sent him. But when a week passed without bringing her a message of any sort, she began to wonder. She knew he was rapidly recovering. Doctor Potter, who attended him from Camden, now visited him only occasionally. But if Abel had wished to communicate with her there was no lack of means, since Enoch Dowd, Belmont's tenant, came to town every day.

As time went on, her wonder changed to keen disappointment. Was Abel angry at her, after all? His mother, evidently, had not been appeased by the flowers. Was she trying to turn Abel against her?

It could not now be long before she would know his feelings toward her. She could not bear to think of his reproaching her, and yet she dreaded to hear him tell his love anew. Why could he not bestow that love on some one who could love him in turn? It was pure, and to the right woman would be precious; to herself it was a burden that threatened shipwreck.

In the meantime new and wholly delightful sensations besieged her consciousness, and not always was she able to deny them entrance.

The weekly rehearsal under Stephen's direction became something to look forward to. She enjoyed the music, and during the intervals of practice the choir made a social group that was very pleasant. At nine o'clock Sally came to walk home with her.

One night after rehearsal was over, Judith lingered for a few moments' additional practice on an anthem for Christmas, which was approaching. When finally she rose from the organ and, drawing her mantle about her, looked down into the dim, shadowy church, the members of the choir were all gone and in the last pew the black janitor waited sleepily to lock up. But where was Sally?

As she was about to step down from the choir-loft into the aisle, Stephen came out from the small room adjoining, which he used as a study. He, too, glanced down into the church.

"May I act as a humble substitute for Sally?"

Judith murmured an acceptance of the courtesy, annoyed for the moment, however, at Sally, for having placed her in a position that compelled Stephen to offer it. "I suppose," she explained as they passed out, "that Sally has been detained by the assiduous gallantries of William Lewis or his rival."

Her way was short, and even had Judith been

alone she would scarcely have been timid—Camden was so peaceable—nevertheless, as Stephen gave her his arm and they walked side by side up the dark street the sense of protection given and received came warmly home to each.

It was a short time after this incident that Sally tapped at Judith's door one morning.

"A gen'leman in de pa'lah ter see you, Miss Judith."

"Very well, Sally. Say that I'll be down immediately."

But a sudden shyness detained her for a moment. Why had Mr. Waters called? She had thought the details of the Christmas music all arranged.

With a touch to her hair, she went down stairs, her step alert, her eyes bright with anticipation. But at the door she stopped short.

A man of neutral, uncommanding figure stood awaiting her, his face white and drawn, his black dress coat, slightly too large for him, setting ill on his stooped shoulders.

"Abel!" she cried.

"Judith!"

They stood silently gazing at each other. Three years before, Abel would have kissed her without hesitation; now something seemed to keep him away from her.

She had gone away from Camden a child, she had

returned a woman, a beautiful woman, so beautiful that he wondered he dared love her. How queen-like she was as she stood there in the door in her morning dress, with her sun-touched coronet of loose braids, in whose meshes feminine strength and delicacy and feminine complexity were interwoven! He had never before seen her in a long dress and with her hair coiled high.

Slowly Judith entered the room and put out her hand. Without the least thought of effect, in a rush of transforming love, Abel fell on his knees and kissed it. During that moment he felt new attuned, and all to harmony. He wondered if his viol felt so after he had turned the keys until the strings were perfectly ready to answer the bow with a chord.

Judith was profoundly moved. Courtly grace like this she would not have deemed possible in Abel. She stooped and gently kissed him on the forehead.

As Abel rose, the prison-shades of his native awkwardness closed about him once more. She could not but see it, but she strove to think only of his need and of her debt.

"Come, Abel. Sit by me and tell me all about yourself. You have been so ill."

Taking his hand, she led him to the sofa by the window. Abel sat down and leaned against its rolling back. He felt very weak. A sudden pallor overspread his face.

"Abel," cried Judith, frightened, "let me get you some wine!"

"No, no! I shall be all right in a moment. It's the first time I've been out, you know." She seated herself near him.

"You can hardly understand what it means to me to see you to-day, Judith," he began. "I was so weak the day you came out to the farm I only just realized that you were there. Sometimes since I have wondered if I might not have been mistaken and only imagined it. And yet I could still feel the pressure of your fingers on mine and hear you say that you'd come back. I didn't care much about getting well up to that time. But after that I could hardly wait." He put out his hand and just touched her hair.

"Do you mind that bit of a curl you gave me once in a locket, Judith?"

"Yes," she answered, reddening.

"I've been so unfortunate as to lose it some way. But you will give me another, won't you?"

"Oh, but my hair is almost straight now!" she replied, shrinking slightly back.

"Did you get my roses?" she asked, wondering that he did not speak of them and wishing to help both him and herself by making the most of this token of remembrance.

"Roses!" exclaimed Abel in surprise. "Did you send me some?"

"The New Alden florist was to take them out," she replied, puzzled. "I wanted to go myself," she continued, "but, but—your mother"—embarrassed, she half-turned from him.

"I suppose," she continued in vexation, "that the florist neglected to deliver them."

Abel was silent. Was Judith's explanation probable? He hardly thought so. It was far more likely that his mother had intercepted the roses and thrown them away. But he could not bear to tell Judith so. His mother had bitterly condemned Judith to him that very morning, and had pleaded with him not to go to see her. He had felt his very being torn asunder when at last he had pushed her gently from him and gone out to mount his horse, and all the way in he was haunted by a superstitious fear that his love could not prosper since his mother was against it.

"Mother does not quite understand you, I am afraid," he said hesitatingly. "She feels that . . . that you are . . . that you have changed." He had been about to say "fickle," but he could not bring himself to use the harsh word even in describing his mother's feelings.

"But I have never thought so! Dear Judith,"—Abel leaned forward close to her—"I have never doubted you! I knew all the time that you did not write how many thousand things there were in that gay, beautiful city that would enchant a girl like you.

But I knew, too, that you could go through all of them and enjoy them and keep your heart true to me all the time."

Judith was suffering agonies.

Must she marry this man whom she did not, could not love? He possessed every virtue that she could name, and yet, for her, he was lacking in all. It would pain him to give her up, but it was better that the pain should come now than later. Come it must, for the act of marriage could not bring their souls together, however indissolubly it might unite their lives. She was about to speak, but he anticipated her.

"Of course I was sorry that you did not find time to write. Every night when there was any chance of getting word from you I would ride to town. It would be late sometimes when I started, and it's a good four mile there and four back, as you know, but I never thought the way long—that is, when I got a letter! When I got a letter, Judith!"

Abel repeated the words with indescribable emotion, and held out his hand open before her as if it had just received a letter.

"When I got a letter I was almost beside myself, I was so happy! I was often ashamed of the letters I had to send back to you. You see, I didn't have anything to tell you about except mother and the farm and what the weather was. And then I never could write in the beautiful, flowing way that you

can, Judith. I've saved every letter that you wrote to me. I had them bound. But then, that doesn't matter so much, for I've got them all here." And Abel's hand rested for a moment on his heart.

Abel had bound her letters, Judith was thinking. But her love—how unaware he was that he had not succeeded in binding that!

"When your letters didn't come any more, of course I missed them. But, some way, I never could believe that you had forgotten me. Hope's like white-top, I think,—it grows of itself, and sun or rain, bad soil or good, seems like, doesn't make any difference. But not hearing from you any more did make me downhearted—"

Abel paused. But Judith was powerless to speak. How could she tell him that she had ceased, absolutely, to love him? Now that she saw his trust in her, greater even than she had imagined, it was as impossible to do so as for one in a nightmare, advancing toward a precipice, to keep from pitching over.

"Often, in the evenings, I would play on my viol. You remember I named it Judith, for you. That viol has been a friend to me! I never had any teaching to speak of, you know, and a good many people think there isn't much music in a viol. Sam Lawson says it's like a log of wood and a saw." And Abel smiled wanly.

"Of course you can't play fandangos on it like Grandfather Kimball does on his fiddle. But I never cared. To me its voice was all the welcomer, it was so deep and true. Well, it seemed as if I could tell that viol every thought I'd had of you all day, and it soothed me. You remember what David says in the Psalm about 'showing dark speech upon the harp'—things you can't tell in words. Sometimes when I was down, I thought you might be dead, and then my viol—its high, faint tones—sounded, I fancied, like the voice of your soul singing in Paradise."

It was love's Pentecost.

Abel sat erect now, looking straight past Judith, almost as in a trance. The recollection of all his waiting and suffering swept from him in full tide. He could not have checked it, even if he had noticed how white Judith's face was and how full of anguish. Dumb she sat, and helpless. How could she answer his rhapsody with the cold declaration that she had changed; how strip his hopes of their wings and leave them fallen, dead?

Abel had ceased seemingly to be conscious that she sat there. The Judith of the lonely days and lonelier nights of the three years of their separation had become to him a spiritual being more real than the real Judith. It was to her that he was speaking.

"I would call to mind," he went on, "every time we had been together, and live it all over again.

How, when you would come to spend a day with us, you would have such fun playing in the apple orchard and casting stones across the pool down among the rushes and the fairy grass! Do you mind the day I cut your name on the old sycamore by the pool, Judith?"

Could she choose but remember? With increasing distinctness the picture of those happy days at Fir Heights forced itself on her.

"Well, do you know, I came on it one day and found it almost grown over. You could hardly trace the letters. Now, it was foolish of me, of course, but that made me fairly miserable for days. It made me realize how time changes things, and people, too. And I thought of the old saying about love grown cold—it never warms again.

"I am so eager, Judith, to have mother know that you are true, that you have been all the time! You see, she has always felt that you were above me, and that we could never be happy together on that account. Heaven knows that you are above me, Judith! But no one in all this wide world could love you better! I'm almost glad that your money's gone—it seems to bring us a little nearer together.

"When you can, when you get time, Judith, I want you to come out to see mother. You'll know how to smooth the way with her and make all right between you. And there's Milly—she's a little orphan cousin

of mine that mother adopted. She's an odd child, but you'll soon be fond of her.

"Most of all I want you to see the house I've built for you!" His face fairly shone. "It's not quite done. I had just begun putting on the rafters when the fever brought me down. I did every stroke of the work from the first that one man could do alone, laid the foundations, planed every log and drove every nail. Working alone, it took a long time, but all the while I thought: When Judith comes back and sees this, she will see my love for her put right out in planks and shingles and doors and windows, plain as a monument. And if I do say it, Judith, it's the prettiest house in the county! Mother and Milly and I call it the palace, just to ourselves. And I've got money laid by in the bank to finish it for you."

For a moment Judith sat in a hush. Then bursting into tears, she bent forward and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, Abel, how you have suffered! Can you ever forgive me?"

Abel, folding his arms about her, found in the sweet rain of her tears balm for all his pain. When he left he took with him her promise to marry him in the summer.

CHAPTER X

EMBERS

It was Sunday afternoon and Mrs. Troop, Abel and Milly, somewhat stiffly arrayed in their best garments, were all in the fire-darkened parlor. Mrs. Troop was reading the last chapter of Ecclesiastes. She had not in years read anything but the Bible, and the book of Ecclesiastes was the one that she read oftenest. She had found life hard, and even Job, with its final escape from all-wise friends, its blessings of fair daughters, fat cattle and long life, was too cheerful. She granted that by calculation one could escape many of the ills of life, but positive happiness had no place whatever among her conceptions.

She was a woman of instant decision of character and of strong, simple beliefs, that temperament and a peculiar early experience had inclined to the supernatural and spiritual. In childhood she had been subject to a nervous malady that no medicine had relieved. One night in her twelfth year she dreamed that she met in a field a man quaintly attired in a long, bright robe with broad, figured border. This

apparition showed her a bracelet of silver an inch wide, curiously engraved, and told her that if she would obtain one exactly like it and wear it night and day it would cure her. The next morning she had reported the dream and drawn the hieroglyphics. The bracelet was made for her and she put it on. That day her malady left her. She had worn the bracelet ever since, and now, as she sat holding her Bible, it clasped her large, strong wrist in regal simplicity.

Abel, who sat near his mother, playing on his viol, was half bent over it, but it might still have been seen that, though they resembled each other in nothing else, the eyes of both were lighted by an intensity that appeared self-consuming. Temperamentally, as the son of blood-related parents, Abel had inherited in a double strain their self-isolating qualities: passionate prejudices, strength to love and equal strength to hate, distrust of the world, resignation to life rather than enjoyment of life.

With the young farmers of the neighborhood and the young men of Camden, Abel had never been intimate. Besides his mother and Milly, his viol had been his only real companion, and at times it had been nearer to him even than they. He had bought it in boyhood in Louisville with the first money he had ever earned. Violoncello was the long name that the auctioneer had given it, and he had pointed out

an almost undecipherable label that affirmed it to be a genuine Stradivarius.

It retained scarcely a hand's-breadth of the varnish that once had floated in amber glory on its surface. It was now almost black, and its bold, graceful scroll had long ago been replaced by a rudely-whittled end of hickory. But the marvelous perfection of its outlines and its exquisitely carved F-holes, still more its tone, testified to a master-maker. Labels often lie,—true, but tone, never! Ah, its tone!

As Abel played now he followed no set piece, but mingled various simple melodies that he remembered or that suggested themselves to him. The brisk, sweet strains of a happy love-song fell from his bow, but quickly they were pursued and put to flight by dark minor ones. Again and again the bright melody and the dark melody alternated. First one rose in triumph, then the other.

He had not yet dared to speak to his mother of his visit to Judith. But now that Sunday afternoon had come, with the chores done and dinner over, he knew that he would have to tell her its result. Dread of the ordeal disturbed his clear joy at the promise that Judith had given him.

Milly, Mrs. Troop's adopted child, small and slight, with dark, elfish locks, sat on the floor in a corner playing with an old red Noah's ark and its host of wooden men and women and animals con-

siderably battered and pathetically lacking in arms and legs and even heads—deficiencies that only endeared them to her. All the while she was half consciously feasting on the rich, seething tones of the viol.

She was a highly imaginative, precocious child of delicate health, who had never gone to school. Abel had taught her to read, and any printed page afforded her unspeakable delight. The house held only four or five books, including one of quotations, an ancient almanac and an odd volume from a set of encyclopedias that Mrs. Troop had once bought of a peddler, and that told a vast deal about everything from "Calvary to Ezra." On all subjects within this range Milly was remarkably well informed, seizing by instinct the meaning of the big words. She liked the funny old weather-saws in the almanac, and fragments of the quotations she had insensibly learned, marveling at the superior popularity of *Ibid* over all other authors. These books she read in the ghostly garret, her favorite reading and play place. If rain were falling, its music on the roof supplied the last element of bliss. Sometimes, in fine silver staccato, it played a quickstep; sometimes, in dull, leaden legato, a dirge; she was ready for either.

But her most cherished literary treasure was the heavy-lidded family Bible with its high-colored pictures of Abraham offering up Isaac, Daniel in the

lions' den and Elijah in his chariot of fire. Many of the shorter Psalms she had spelled out for very rapture in their rhythm, often pausing to wonder at that strange word *Selah* at the end of so many verses, but never asking about it, for her wise little over-soul knew that the moment it was explained its spell of enchantment would be broken. She had bent for hours over the Book of Revelation, and had known by heart all of the Old Testament stories from the time that she could speak plainly.

With a grand flourish Milly produced from her pile of playthings Father Noah, holding him out at arm's length.

"And Noah begat three sons," she recited impressively, "Shem, Ham and Japheth."

Considering his years and the cares of his numerous household, Noah had maintained a surprisingly youthful, not to say juvenile, appearance. His figure was sprightly and his round, rosy cheeks were marred only by white specks occasioned by sundry falls to the hard floor.

"Come on, Noah!" directed Milly. "Come over here and stand by the door of the ark, so. 'Cause it's your place to take the lead. Stick up your arm—there—and keep it up to warn the rest that they must hurry along! Now stay just as I've fixed you while I go back and fetch Shem, Ham and Japheth."

But just as Milly was turning to do this she saw,

glancing back at the ark, that Noah had suddenly sat down, his arm still stiffly pointing heavenward. A frown puckered Milly's forehead.

"Stand up there, Noah!" she commanded, leaning over to straighten her patriarch, but quickly the frown passed.

"Poor soul," she murmured sympathetically, "six hundred years old!"

Noah being once more placed, she returned to her former task and prepared for the next act. Milly never wasted time in pitying her orphan lot. Of her own home she had recollections much less vivid than many of the imaginary events through which her dolls passed. After the death of her parents, almost in her infancy, she had lived first with one relative and then another—all of them poor—carrying with her to each house a rich mental furnishing that clothed its barrenness. Finally Mrs. Troop had taken her. And Mrs. Troop, whom she had learned to call mother, and Abel, who was like a brother, had always been kind. Besides, young as she was, Milly had already begun to regard life as a play of absorbing interest. She was dimly conscious that it had been going on for a very long time before she got her first glimpse of it, and she was too eager to see all she might of what was left to waste time in peevish complaint that the seat assigned her was in the gallery instead of the pit.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Troop laid down her Bible, still open, on her lap and was gazing fixedly out of a side window that commanded a view of the unfinished house in the field. Old fires were smoldering in her breast this afternoon.

She was eager to learn what had occurred between Abel and Judith, but she was too proud to ask. She had guessed the day before, from Abel's elation of step and manner on his return from Camden, that Judith had given him definite encouragement. In the effort to appear as if all were right, she had gone out of her way to do various small kindnesses for him. In reality, she was much disturbed. She was almost certain he knew, now, that Judith had sent him the roses and that she had thrown them away. She dreaded conflict with him, yet she was prepared to defend her course. In her own mind it was entirely justified.

Abel had been asleep when the roses arrived. Through their white tissue covering they had looked like the pink cheeks of a girl beneath her veil. She had immediately resolved to destroy them, but as she opened the paper and gazed on their dewy petals, fresh yet from recent sprinkling, and their delicious odor stole over her, she almost felt that it would be wicked to do this. They were the first hot-house flowers that she had seen or smelled in years. From spring until the fall frosts her garden bloomed with

petunias, live-for-ever, bachelors' buttons and four-o'clocks in coarse-stemmed, rugged abundance. But these roses belonged to another world; they might have lain on the breast of a princess.

Reaction had come quickly.

Judith intended to keep faith, after all! This gift of flowers proved that her appearance at Abel's bedside could not be explained away as an impulse. Suddenly she had comprehended that, for her, Judith faithless was better than Judith true. Every fiber of her being rebelled at the thought of marriage between Rachel Warren's daughter and her son.

There is no balm in Gilead for a jealous heart. Mrs. Troop was twice jealous, once for herself and again for her son. Taking the roses into the garden, she had thrown them down an abandoned well. It was of these things she was thinking now as she sat gazing at the unfinished house.

Mrs. Troop and Abel remained for a long time without speaking, though, as each knew, not far apart in thought. Silence was with them a habit. All the week Abel was out in the fields or away on the hills, and Mrs. Troop moved back and forth from morning to night in the dreary treadmill of farmhouse drudgery. Trained unremittingly from year's end to year's end to think of work, and work only, when the short evenings before bedtime and the longer Sundays came, they did not readily unbend

to rest and social talk. The return of Monday's sunrise with its imperative tasks was to each secretly a relief. The long Sunday was so long.

This afternoon had followed the order of many others. There was no light interchange of trivialities. Imagination was stiff and speech difficult.

"Abel," said Mrs. Troop finally, speaking with some impatience, "haven't you played enough for this afternoon?" She had little ear for music, and besides she almost hated the viol. It always seemed to her when Abel was playing on it as if Judith were in the room standing between him and her.

Abel laid his bow down on a chair beside him, though with one hand he still steadied his instrument. It was coming now—the conflict over Judith—he nerved himself for it.

But before Mrs. Troop spoke again a pause ensued which Milly, talking earnestly to her little group, filled after the manner of a Greek chorus.

"Come on, Shem," she urged in a low, dramatic tone, "come into the ark or you'll be drown-ded. Forty days and forty nights it's going to rain and you'll be swept into oblivion,"—this last she half chanted. Milly did not know precisely what "oblivion" meant, but it was certainly a fine-sounding word.

After many appeals Shem, who, considering his diminutive size, displayed astonishing firmness of

purpose, was persuaded to take shelter within the ark. Having spent so much energy on Shem, Milly had little left for his spouse, whom she marched dutifully by his side.

In turn Ham and Japheth were also warned that they, too, would be drown-ded if they did not flee into the ark, and, after much coaxing, were escorted with their helpmeets under its roof.

At this point Mrs. Troop broke silence and Milly lost her audience, if, indeed, she could be said to have had one. Mrs. Troop heard her mechanically but not sensibly, Abel not at all, and Milly, on her part, would have talked just as quaintly and dramatically if she had been alone in the room.

"Abel," said Mrs. Troop, "it will storm one of these days and ruin the palace."

She spoke with the simplicity and directness of a Fate. She was in no hurry to see the house finished. From the first she had declined to go near it. She thought Abel extravagant in building it. The homestead was good enough for her; it ought to be good enough for Rachel's daughter! But her sense of frugality could not bear that good material and hard labor should go for nothing. Abel lifted his viol and, setting it against the wall, turned toward his mother.

"Don't worry, mother. In another week I can get to work again, and two or three days will put it beyond reach of damage, anyway."

"Hadn't you better let some of the boys help you?"

"Now, mother, you know I can't." Hitherto Mrs. Troop had not ventured so far, and a note of irritation surprised its way into Abel's voice.

"Well, well, Abel, I didn't mean for to anger you. I was only planning for your good."

Again a pause and again the Greek chorus. It was the animals' turn now.

"Come along into the ark, good camels," pleaded Milly eloquently. "See, I will let you march after the elephants. 'Two of every sort shalt thou bring.' You bad giraffe, where's your mate? Oh, I forgot, he's broken. Well, you'll have to march alone. We can't wait any longer. For the floods will descend and cover the earth, and you'll be drown-ded."

Mrs. Troop spoke.

"I suppose, Abel, that Judith is a-going to marry you soon now." There was unmistakable irony in her tones. There was no need to let Abel know that she feared that Judith meant at last to keep her word to him.

Abel flinched like a raw recruit under fire. No one else in all the world could hurt him as his mother could, because he loved her more than he did any one else in the world except Judith.

"In June, mother. That will give me time to finish the palace. Judith is bound by her father's will not to

marry before she comes of age. I must bide my time, and Judith is worth waiting for."

"Well, she'll find another excuse when that one is worn out."

Abel bit his lip and did not answer.

In Milly's corner the antediluvian drama was almost ready for the final curtain. The flood was over and the ark was at rest on Mount Ararat, otherwise a low stool. Milly, herself, was taking the part of the dove, gently waving her hand up and down in imitation of its flight.

"Abel," resumed Mrs. Troop, "I suppose Judith told you that she sent you some flowers."

"She said she had," he answered quietly. The consciousness that it would be of no use prevented him from reproaching her, experience having early taught him to save himself the pain of clashing with her when nothing was to be gained.

"Of course, you think I did wrong to throw them away," Mrs. Troop continued. "But you must not judge your mother harshly, Abel, she's had a deal to bear."

"Mother, you don't really know Judith," he replied earnestly. "If she could come out here for a few days—"

"Very well, Abel, since you think she is a-going to marry you, tell her for me any time you like, to come out and visit us. I'll try to make her welcome

for your sake." Relief at his unexpected levity about the roses had induced her to make the concession.

"Thank you, mother," Abel answered. "But I do wish that you could learn to love Judith a little!"

"Never!"

Mrs. Troop closed her Bible with decision, but she had not raised her voice out of its habitual firm middle key.

No more was said.

In a few moments Mrs. Troop rose, laid her Bible down on the table and went out into the kitchen, where she busied herself in preparing the simple Sunday evening meal of tea and cake. Her calm exterior, controlled by a powerful will, conveyed no hint of the agitation within her breast. Abel had not reproached her about the roses, but she could not hope to come off so easily from that greater revelation yet awaiting her, that his money was gone.

Abel continued to sit for a while, motionless, his eyes fixed on the palace. He instinctively credited his mother with almost supernatural insight, and her ironical remark about his marriage chilled him, despite Judith's promise.

Presently he became aware that Milly was looking at him from her seat on the floor.

"Tired, Milly?" he asked affectionately.

"Yes," answered Milly with sober matter-of-factness, having returned to real life. "Flood's over.

Milly's tired." She often referred to her family by her name as very young children do, a habit that added to her quaintness.

"Play some more music, Abel," she begged.
"Play *Money Musk*."

"Some other time, dear," Abel answered gently.
"Let's go for a walk now."

They were fond of each other, and Milly liked nothing better than rambling with Abel. Hand in hand they walked down the now darkling lane, Milly, though eager to talk, keeping loving silence all the while, because she saw that Abel was disturbed.

CHAPTER XI

CANDLES AND CEREMONY

Christmas Eve of 1850 brought white, glistening snow and a deep blue sky ablaze with stars that seemed to tip the tops of the elms like Christmas candles. On this night every street in Camden and every country road about it led to the home of Colonel Carroll. A grand party was in progress and hospitality shone from every window. Snug cutters and roomy family sleighs dashed up to the gate, and, amid the stamping of horses and the silvery chiming of bells, deposited from under thick buffalo robes their loads of well-bundled guests. As the front door opened sounds of revelry came forth.

Christmastide in Camden was undeniably gay. Camden was willing to be gay whenever occasion offered, and the winter holidays, bringing home the two or three young men and girls away at school, were crowded with family dinners, whist and cribbage parties and parlor dances. New Year's Day was one continuous flutter from shortly after dinner until midnight. Every lady kept open house, and beaux and bachelors punctiliously presented the com-

pliments of the season, finding at every stop pretty girls whose bright glances and lively chatter added spice to the fruit-cake and bouquet to the wine they served. On Christmas Eve the gaiety reached its height, for on that night Colonel Carroll always received in his red brick mansion.

The parlors were already half filled when a small, grizzled man and a girl completely enveloped in a long mantle came in and went up stairs. As the girl entered the dressing-chamber, Maria Bowman emerged, solicitously smoothing the folds of her plum-colored silk as she walked.

"Fanny Potter!" she cried, embracing the girl. "When did you come, dear child?"

"This morning!" Fanny answered, throwing back the long veil that draped her hat.

"Well, we are all delighted to have you! And how glad you must be to get home!" continued Miss Bowman in her bird-like staccato.

"Oh, of course, Miss Maria!" assented Fanny unenthusiastically, sweeping on past her.

In the dressing-room, already piled high with wraps, Fanny leisurely removed her hat and mantle. Taking off her bootees, she put on a pair of giddy little slippers that she produced from her party bag, and then, turning to the bowed cherry dresser, she proceeded, by the light of the sconced candles, to inspect her charms in its oval, gilt-framed mirror.

It was a small, alert, pink-and-white reflection that she saw, with nut-brown tints in hair and eyes and a black velvet brace snugly confining the rosy painted lawn dress. Fanny wondered now, as she discreetly touched up her cheeks with a finger-tip brushed over her red saucer, if Camden had discovered black velvet braces yet.

Carefully she adjusted her skirts in graceful falls over her tilter, arranged the charming love-lock on her left shoulder, bestowed on her cheek a black beauty patch and dusted her small, rosy ears with her powder-puff until they looked like apple blossoms. She did not anticipate a gay evening, but it was always worth while to look one's best. One never knew— As she paused contemplatively, holding her puff in mid air for a final dab, she smiled with pleasure.

It was certainly awkward that while she was thus preening and smiling, Judith La Monde, whom she had always regarded as a rival, should walk in. She entered so rapidly that Fanny did not have time to veil her expression of self-delight before Judith caught its merciless reflection in the glass.

Neither Judith nor Fanny had heard of the other's return home, and their meeting was wholly unexpected. They were only third cousins, a degree of kinship that Camden by no means ignored, but which demanded only that they "cousin" each other:

refrain, in public at least, from invidious remarks—loyalty to kin was dyed into the wool of Camden's social fabric—and attend such infrequent family functions as weddings and funerals. In childhood, being almost of an age, they often played together without being real friends. As they grew older and differences of temperament asserted themselves more strongly, they drifted completely apart.

There is little sex in the emotions, and, humanly speaking, no necessary proportion between them and the sublimity or pettiness of the situation that calls them forth. Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, had they met just before the clash of arms at Waterloo, might have entertained toward each other feelings not far from kin to those of these two girls, opposed to each other in disposition almost from infancy, and now suddenly realizing that after a long separation the old conflict was to be renewed.

Judith saw Fanny's predicament and had no wish to prolong it.

"How do you do, Fanny?" Constraint was the sub-dominant note, willingness to forget past friction, the dominant. Fanny caught both.

"La, Cousin Judith! Where did you come from?" She dropped the powder-puff and, turning, embraced her.

Judith, who habitually insisted on submitting the lighter conventionalities, at least, to her own sense

of fitness, suddenly decided that this mode of greeting was one that she did not care for. But there was no escaping it, so she yielded with the best grace possible. She briefly explained how she came to be in Camden.

"I've been away myself, you know, finishing," Fanny volunteered. "I didn't want to come home a bit. When the Seminary's closed I nearly always stay in Cincinnati with Aunt Matilda—mother's sister, you know—but this year she was away, and there was nothing else to do but to come here. Of course I like to be with father, but he's so busy I hardly ever see him. Doesn't Camden seem to you—well, a little dull?" shrugging her pretty shoulders.

Judith had turned away from Fanny and was engaged in finding a place on the bed for her wraps.

"Camden is quiet, of course," she answered, "but I don't find it dull."

"No? Tastes differ, of course. I like excitement and attention myself," declared Fanny frankly, tucking away her powder-puff and red saucer in her party bag. "And the men here,—that funny little Tibbott, for instance! There was Jim Dudley, though—he was a gentleman." She paused meditatively. "He used to speak to the girls so gallantly, keeping his hat off for just an extra second,—it was like a knight or something in olden times. It made me think more of myself, some way. But he drank

and father wouldn't let me have anything to do with him. What has become of him?"

"I think, from what I hear, that he has given up drinking."

"Oh!" said Fanny. "He ought to have done it long ago! Well, Judith, I think I'll go on down. I've kept father waiting an age as it is! I suppose it will be dreadfully poky!" And with a last adjustment of her love-lock, Fanny fluttered out of the room.

Abel had asked Judith if he might not take her to the party, and she had perforce consented. He had driven in to Camden a number of times to see her, and she felt herself irresistibly slipping back into her old relation with him. She was aware that their appearance together at this annual affair of state was equivalent to a public announcement of their engagement, and for this reason she had dreaded the evening inexpressibly. Still, she took a certain satisfaction in going—she had put her hand to the plow and she was determined not to look back.

Besides, a small voice that was not conscience had reminded her that, though she must go and come with Abel, she need not therefore spend the entire evening with him.

Ordinarily Judith was freer than most women from consciousness of her appearance. But to-night she wanted to be beautiful. She was certain that the

moment she entered the parlor below, Stephen's eyes would light on her and that much of the evening he would be with her. Her heart beat high in pure youthful joy as she surveyed her crown of fair hair and the fine lines of her black silk gown, with its low, deep collar of Honiton fastened by her mother's brooch of garnets, giving a glimpse of her throat. Stephen had not as yet seen her dressed for a party—the thought sent into her cheeks a rich glow that matched the fires in her brooch. The wintry stars without were not brighter than her eyes.

She waited in the dressing-room to assist Jane and Charlotte Eastbrook, who had lingered down stairs and who now came in. The sisters had great respect for Colonel Carroll and were desirous that every detail of their elegant, if antique, toilets should be arranged with becoming propriety. As she completed her task, Miss Nancy Jones bore in upon them, and Judith, excusing herself, went out.

"I don't quite understand," Abel said slowly as she joined him at the head of the stairs.

"What do you mean, Abel?"

"Your beauty, dear. It's not the dress—that's plain enough—it's you—you're bright, like a jewel—I never saw you shine so!"

"You think me much more beautiful than I am," her lips answered. Simultaneously her heart was saying triumphantly, "I am beautiful, and Stephen

will tell me so with his eyes!" As one to whom homage is a birthright she floated down the long stairway with Abel.

When they entered the great parlor on the right of the hall, brave with coral-berried holly and branches of cedar, spicily fragrant, they were obliged to wait a moment before they could speak to their host. The most fastidious company could not have asked a finer one than Colonel Carroll. Whether the old story about his birth were true or not, certain it is that as he stood at the door welcoming his guests he looked the Virginia gentleman.

"What a pity it is," sighed Miss Maria Bowman, gazing at him, "that such a home as this should have no mistress!"

Close at Judith's hand stood Fanny, inquiring admirers thick about her. But indifferent to Fanny's coterie, Judith looked on to the farther end of the long room in search of Stephen. Nowhere did she see him. Was it possible he was not coming?

Slowly looking back, her eye caught him standing by Dudley in Fanny's group, which she had glanced over so carelessly. He did not see her.

A pang shot through Judith's heart. But she quieted it with the reflection that before long he must turn toward her. When at last he did so her joy was killed—he bowed without the flash of admiration in his eye on which she had counted.

What could be the matter? Could it be—yes, it was Fanny! Absorption in Fanny had prevented him from seeing her when she entered—yes, it must be Fanny! And yet she could hardly believe it. It would never have occurred to her that Fanny might attract Stephen.

The evening went merrily, and yet with a degree of ceremony that seems naturally to go with candles. Camden folk were not great bodies, but they held themselves with a certain air. When a stranger was introduced, they merely bowed, a formality somewhat disturbing until he fathomed that it was native etiquette.

At ten o'clock every one went out to the big dining-room and, sitting down at a long table stretching through the middle of the room and bearing in the center a sparkling Christmas tree, was served with a hot supper by Colonel Carroll's copper-colored housekeeper, assisted by swift William Lewis, from the hotel, and Miss Eastbrook's Sally, lent for the occasion.

Judith's theory that it was absorption in Fanny that prevented Stephen from noticing her received incontrovertible proof now, for he had taken Fanny out to supper. There was no reason in the world why he should not do so, she granted that; nevertheless, the sight of them together some distance down the table on the side opposite to her rankled. They

appeared to have become excellent friends already. Stephen was talking briskly and Fanny was smiling, showing the prettiest little teeth in the world, distractingly white and even.

Abel, on her own left, had little to say. He wore his dress-coat and manner too seldom to feel wholly at ease in them. Dudley, on her right, was more entertaining, though she caught him glancing down once or twice interestedly at Fanny. Now that the natural joys of life seemed once more attainable, Dudley found himself thinking seriously of Fanny. To do him justice, he felt no reason to regret Judith's company. It even occurred to him that he would like to talk to her often and on the serious problems of life. But it was toward Fanny, whose own life seemed to him a happy solution of these problems, that the direct ray of his admiration was tending, a preference open to objection only in the risk it entailed of his finding that what had seemed a perfect solution was no solution at all, being simply an evasion that would leave him not merely unaided, but forced to face the old difficulties with a dead weight round his neck.

Doctor Potter, with the Eastbrook sisters, whom he liked extremely, one on each side, sat opposite Dudley.

"Dudley, don't you envy me?" he asked banteringly. "Sense on one hand and sensibility on the

other! By the way," he continued, "you go over to New Alden a good deal now—what do you think the feeling is there about the county-seat fight?"

"Warm," said Dudley emphatically. "They're mighty wide-awake, I can tell you." Inwardly he was wondering what had become of Doctor Potter's air of cool disapproval of him.

"That means that we'll have to put up a pretty good fight, eh? Well, I guess we can do it, can't we?" he continued, turning back to Jane Eastbrook, leaving Dudley in high spirits at his change of manner.

Fanny was very well pleased to be with Stephen. It was a welcome surprise to find life in staid little Camden enlivened by the presence of a young man who was neither an ungainly farmer smelling of hair-oil nor a swaggering town-blood smelling of whisky, but a most personable gentleman, mingling an interesting reserve with a delicate alertness to one's presence. Besides, he came from that larger world to which, since she had been away at school, her imagination had persistently strayed.

To close the feast a blazing plum-pudding was borne in—for Colonel Carroll liked to keep up the old customs—and amid much merriment and toasting and pledging of healths it was served.

After supper those of the guests who had long ago drawn their prizes in life's matrimonial lottery or

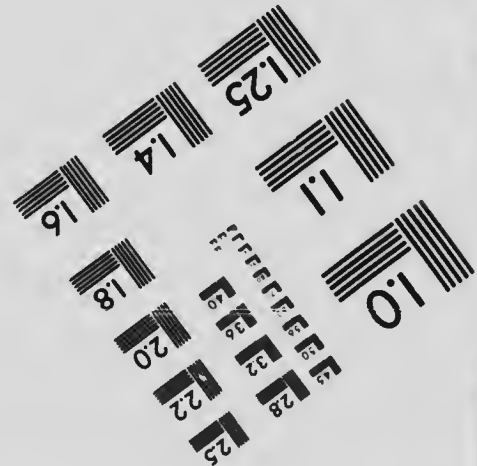
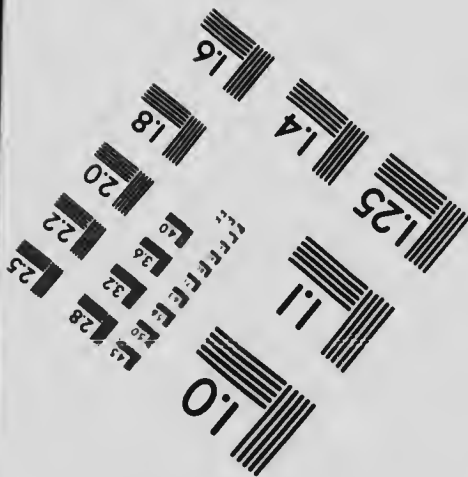
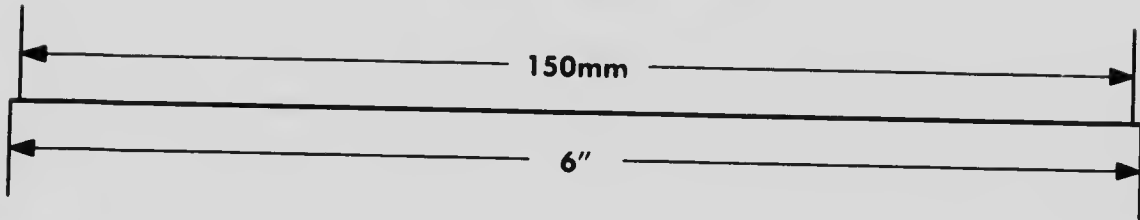
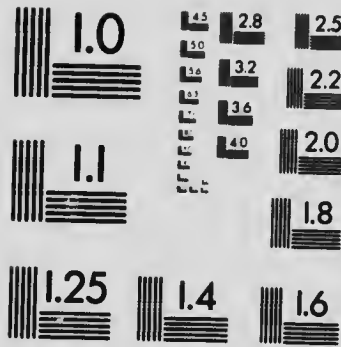
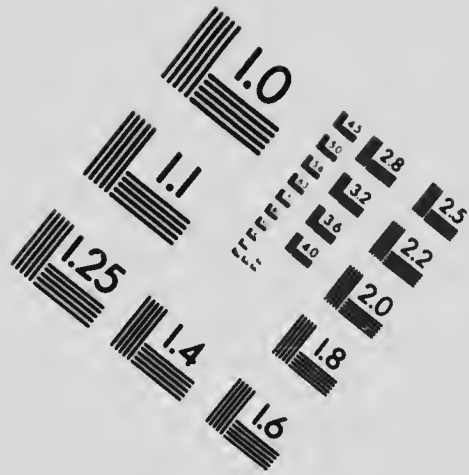
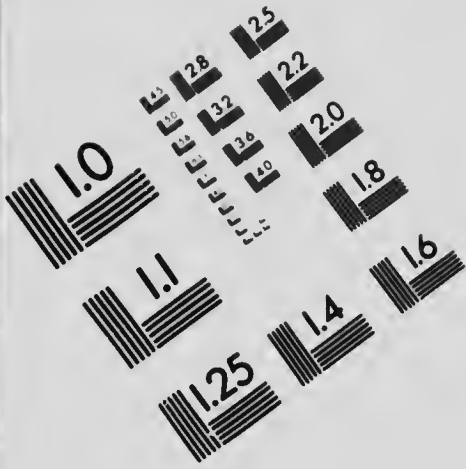
who had indefinitely deferred drawing at all, gradually settled into the corners of the parlor, leaving the middle clear for the young people. Doctor Potter, Jane Eastbrook, Mrs. Johnson and her bald, silent little husband, gathered about a marquetry table, were soon deep in a most exciting rubber of whist, insisting with Sarah Battle on the rigor of the game.

Seated on a sociable near the crackling log fire, Riley Tibbott and Nancy Jones had dropped into what Camden would have called a literary conversation. Tibbott, resplendent in a plaited shirt bosom, a flowered waistcoat of most elaborate design and shining pumps, his thin hair slick with oil, was descanting with prodigious enthusiasm on the merits of Carlyle, to which Miss Jones was listening languishingly with the air of one entirely convinced that though Carlyle might be great, Riley Tibbott was greater.

Just how far matters had gone between Tibbott and Miss Jones, no one in Camden could say. For years he had paid his devoirs to her. It was known that he called on her every Sunday evening, and that he had presented her with a copy of *Friendship's Garland*. He kept a scrap-book devoted solely to her poems, and she never missed an opportunity to hear him speak. But whether or not he had proposed, no one except Tibbott himself and Miss Jones could



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affirm. Colonel Carroll, observing them now, turned with a smile to Charlotte Eastbrook.

"You'll admit that the game looks warm to-night?"

Miss Charlotte shook her head slightly. "I've often seen them so. The angel Gabriel himself couldn't tell whether it means anything or not!"

But Colonel Carroll was not convinced. "It appears to me," he insisted, "very much as if Tibbott lacks only one of being in the king row."

"And you think that the next move is his!" volunteered Miss Charlotte. "Will he ever make it?"

"Certainly he will," replied the colonel gallantly. "That is, if Miss Nancy has not blocked the way. She's a very sensible woman, Miss Nancy, except when she's writing poetry. You know it happens sometimes with the best of us that when the rhyme is in the wit is out. I insist that Tibbott will capture Miss Nancy's affections if she does not absolutely frighten him away."

Again Miss Charlotte shook her head, smiling. "It's not like Nancy Jones to do that!" Carroll laughed. The point had been a moot question between them for years.

Meanwhile Mrs. Putnam and Maria Bowman were engaged in a spirited debate over the virtues of the Man of Destiny.

"How any woman can uphold Napoleon Bor-

parte in divorcing Josephine is more than I can understand!" exclaimed Mrs. Putnam.

"Reasons of state, my dear, reasons of state!" replied Miss Bowman with the zest of the born lover of argument.

"Reasons of state," scorned Mrs. Putnam eloquently, "are nothing in comparison with the sanctities of the marriage tie! I have always felt the deepest sympathy for poor Josephine."

By this time Grandfather Kimball, father of the landlord of the hotel, who had promised to play for the company, was vigorously tuning up. Great age had bowed his shoulders a trifle; it had stolen away his coal-black hair, leaving instead a soft, white furze that stood straight up, giving him a constant air of mild surprise, and it had made him almost stone deaf, so that playing his violin was largely a matter of memory. Otherwise he seemed seasoned, as sound timber is seasoned by the drying out of the watery saps of youth.

He played like one possessed. A compelling magic stole from his bow as it swept the strings. The fires of youth flashed in his eyes, his long, thin body swayed rhythmically from side to side, and ever and again at the height of some mad swell he stamped the floor until the rafters shook. Or, with right hand waving aloft his bow, with his left he plucked from the strings the heart of their mystery and melody.

"Just as spry as ever!" exclaimed Jane Eastbrook, glancing up from her cards. "And you're ninety now, aren't you?"

"Hey?" cried the old man, bending toward her and putting up a hand to his ear.

"I say you're ninety now!" screamed Miss Eastbrook.

"Ninety!" he repeated sharply. "No, indeed! I'm ninety-one. Why, I've outlived three wives! Purtiest gals in the county!" Hurt and mortified that any one in Camden should have credited him with one year less than he had attained, Grandfather Kimball turned away and went petulantly on playing.

"Ninety, indeed!" he muttered very audibly. "Some folks have mighty skittish memories."

"If all of us," remarked Doctor Potter, "were as ambitious to accomplish something in life as he is to live to be a hundred, the world wouldn't know us. He doesn't want to live for the sake of living, but for the distinction of it. His father lived to be ninety-nine, you know, and he vows he'll go him one better."

In steady succession there followed *Weevily Wheat; Come, Philander; The Wind that Blows the Barley*, and *Betty Martin, Tip, Tip, Toe*.

The evening wound up with a Virginia reel, in which simple frolic Camden saw no harm. Round dancing it considered not so much wrong as low.

Dudley would have liked very well indeed to be Fanny's partner, but seeing that she was much sought after, he made the mistake of not asking her. Though knowing his history, she might not have encouraged advances, yet in common with others of her sex she knew how to forgive much in one who should display the excellent taste of admiring much. The sight of him to-night, looking uncommonly handsome and well set up, had revived her early interest in him. Misinterpreting his motive in not asking her, she resolved on some future occasion to teach the gentleman to mend his manners. The execution of this purpose would have to wait, however, until she had determined certainly just how well worth knowing Stephen Waters was.

Judith had half made up her mind not to dance. She feared that Jane Eastbrook might consider it a breach of decorum for her to do so. For herself, she felt that she could join in the simple reel without want of affectionate remembrance of her mother. It would, not unlikely, be the last chance of the kind she would ever have, and she had youth's high, healthy delight in dancing. Still, in her surprise and disappointment at Stephen's suddenly changed attitude toward her, she lacked zest for it. On the other hand, if she did not dance she would very likely be thrown with Stephen, and this prospect she did not welcome. Her decision was made for her.

"If I might dance with the daughter of my old friend!"

Judith turned,—Colonel Carroll bowed low before her. She gave him her hand; with gallant grace he took it.

In his youth Colonel Carroll had been a famous dancer. Now as the blooming young woman and the white-haired, ruddy-faced man courtesied low, advanced to the center and back and passed under the arched hands held high, every other couple knew themselves forgotten. All eyes were bent on these two. Judith was easily the most beautiful woman on the floor and Colonel Carroll the finest gentleman. Even Dudley in comparison was ordinary.

"The whiter his hair gets the more he looks like—" whispered Mrs. Johnson to Miss Jones. Miss Jones nodded. The august features and powdered queue of Carroll's reputed ancestor were well known in the town.

"How *could* Betsy Patterson refuse him for that bourgeois Bonaparte!" cried Miss Charlotte to her sister.

"Rachel Warren again, in her youth!" said Jane, following with tender eyes Judith's lyric, swaying movements, the perfect complement to her partner's vigor and poise.

Stephen's eyes now persistently followed Judith, but she was unaware of it. If he would not notice

her she did not care, she told herself. She abandoned herself completely to the gaiety of the dance. Stephen observed that she moved very differently from the rest of the girls, most of whom were a degree too vigorous. Fanny stepped daintily enough, but Judith's quick glide was more to his taste.

Never once did his glance leave her as she threaded the mazes of the reel. Nothing, he vowed, could be more entrancing than to see her *dos à dos*. Methodist minister that he was, open to criticism for remaining to watch the harmless pastime, a mad desire seized him to enter it himself, take Judith's hand and dance with her.

"I declare!" observed Maria Bowman at his side, "by the time New Year's is over we shall all be completely worn out!" He did not hear her.

As the last note of the fiddle sounded and every one stopped short, breathless, flushed and laughing, a chance step brought Judith directly under the pearl-berried love branch that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. Instantly some one kissed her. It happened so quickly that for a second she did not know who had done it. Turning, with riotous heart, she saw that it was Abel.

For the first time in her life she was angry with him. To be sure, it was a mistletoe kiss, and did not necessarily mean anything. Besides, he had the right—yes, there was the sting! It was because he

had the right! She glanced up at Stephen—he was looking straight at her. A furious blush warmed her face and her neck—that he should see that Abel had the right to kiss her! Abel would not have kissed her if there had been no special tie between them. She knew that, and she knew that every one in the room knew it. If it had been Dudley—but gallantry and light ways were no part of Abel's equipment.

"You're not offended, are you, Judith?" Abel asked anxiously as they started up stairs for their wraps. He was half frightened at his own temerity. The temptation had been irresistible. Judith hesitated.

In the parlor the few guests that remained had gathered about the flickering log fire, where, with candles blown out and every one sitting at least a foot from his neighbor, Riley Tibbott had begun certain ghost stories which he told annually with the most thrilling effects. From the depths of the kitchen, where festivities were just now in full swing, came the voice of William Lewis, singing to the vibrant plunkings of his banjo:

Yo' gal's a sweet gal, but my gal's neat—
Sweet-a-little, sweet-a-little, sweet, sweet, sweet!
F'un de crown er her head, ter de soles er her feet—
Feet-a-little, feet-a-little, feet, feet, feet.

Why rebuke Abel now? Judith reflected. It was

all over; Stephen had seen— Besides, had not Abel the right?

"No," she answered quietly, "I didn't mind," and went on up stairs. She could have wept with disappointment and vexation, but she was obliged to control herself, for the dressing-room was crowded with girls, all of them, it seemed to her, gay over some little triumph of the evening. Her own happy pride was completely undone. The party had been for her an empty show. Every one else there seemed possessed of some secret of life that had been withheld from her. Amid all the company she had felt alone and lonely. The babel of careless voices about her now besieged her ears without penetrating her brain. It was as though they spoke in an unknown tongue. It had been a bitter night and more bitterness was to come.

As the party broke up, chance, aided by a certain pretty girl, had found Stephen and Fanny talking together in the hall. Fanny's father had been called away earlier in the evening. It was natural, therefore, that Stephen should offer to walk with her the three or four short squares that lay between Colonel Carrol's house and her home, a nest of a cottage that stood half hidden in shrubbery at the top of a hill.

Just outside of the door, and this was pure chance, the mantle that Fanny wore became unfastened and

all but dropped off. Fanny's hands were both occupied in holding up her spreading pink skirts, and so Stephen had to gather it up for her and fasten the clasp at her throat.

"The stupid thing!" murmured Fanny, her lashes drooping softly over her flushed, round cheek and her coral lips pouting ever so slightly. Judith saw it all from the head of the stairs where she stood waiting for Abel. Fanny was pretty, there was no denying it!

The winter night in its ermine mantle and starry crown had no beauty for Judith's eyes as she walked home, wretched and heart-sick, with Abel.

Abel dimly felt that something was wrong between them, and it was with an effort that he asked, as Judith was about to bid him good night :

"Mother wants you to come out and visit us one of these days, Judith. You will come, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," she answered quickly. "Whenever it is convenient, let me know." Abel little suspected the advantage that Stephen's attitude had given him; if he had asked her to marry him at once she would in her despair almost as quickly have consented.

That night the fires of jealousy raged in Judith's heart. She tossed and slept, and in her sleep moaned, then woke and tossed again. Fanny! Stephen had spent almost the entire evening with Fanny and not a word had he spoken to her! She knew now that

she loved; Stephen Waters. Had she been bound to Abel a dozen times over it would have made no difference. When love began she could not have told, for love's beginnings are wrapped in mystery like a new-born babe. But that she loved him she knew to her sorrow, and he—he did not love her!

How was she to know that on that very day Abel had poured forth to Stephen the full story of his love and waiting for her? How was she to know that the spirit of the Puritan ancestor had rebuked him for his growing interest in her; that it was in consequence of this that he remained away from her all the evening; that despite it he had nevertheless resented Abel's kissing her, and that he thought Danny Potter a very pretty—doll!

CHAPTER XII

RACHEL WARREN'S DAUGHTER

"You haven't been to see your cousin Fanny yet, have you, Judith?" observed Miss Eastbrook one morning in the new year, as she carefully poured the breakfast coffee from the decorous silver pot into egg-shell cups.

"No," Judith admitted. "I must go. I'll go to-day," she added, perceiving something of rebuke in Miss Eastbrook's tone.

That morning, accordingly, she climbed the hill that led to Fanny's house.

Up to the night of the Christmas Eve party Fanny had been, in the equation of her life, an ignored, really an unknown quantity. That night had served to raise her to the *n*th power in interest. Still, smarting with recollection of what had then occurred, she shrank from seeing her. But she did not wish to offend Fanny by appearing rude. Perhaps, after all, now that they were women grown, they might really be friends. She bore Fanny no ill will for the countless small conflicts of their childhood and early youth; she definitely remembered none of

them. Surely they must both have become more sensible. She determined to like Fanny, and this determination warmed and strengthened with every step.

She found Fanny ripping up a blue silk party dress, whose lace flounces already lay in a white heap on the floor.

"La, Judith, how do you do?" said Fanny airily. "La" was one of the fine-ladyisms—capable, the single, melodious little syllable, of infinite variation—that Fanny had brought home with her from the Select Seminary. The actress who captivated her prospective manager by the many meanings that she could put into "Yes" could easily have been surpassed by Fanny with "La."

Fanny took Judith's hat and mantle. "You won't mind if I go on ripping, will you?" she said after a few minutes. "I haven't a sign of a dress to wear except my pink lawn, and I've already worn that here twice.

"There's really more going on here than I had imagined," she chattered, once more spreading the voluminous skirt, wrong side up, over her crossed knee. "I didn't bring many things with me from Cincinnati; it did not seem worth while. So I really must get something ready."

"How are you going to make it?" asked Judith with interest.

Reaching for the latest *Godcy's*, which lay open, face down, on the floor beside her, Fanny handed it to Judith.

"That will be very pretty," assented Judith, looking at the elaborate illustration.

"It is always well to have something on hand, you know," Fanny continued.

Yes, thought Judith, in case Stephen Waters should chance to be about.

"Do you know," volunteered Fanny, "I've almost made up my mind not to go back to the Seminary—at least not this term."

"It would certainly be hard for your father to let you go. He must be very lonely, living all the time by himself."

"Oh, father doesn't mind!" replied Fanny easily. "He's used to it. In fact, I haven't mentioned it to him yet."

Snip, snip, went Fanny's sharp bright scissors up the long gored seam.

"Have you another pair of scissors, Fanny?" asked Judith after a moment's pause. "I can rip the seams on this side, if you like."

"Oh, will you?" cried Fanny in a spurt of genuine gratitude. "That will be very good of you! Then I shall get done twice as fast!"

So Judith drew up her chair and the wide silk skirt was spread parasol-wise over both their knees, and

two pairs of shining scissors went snip, snip. Judith's offer of help had been dictated by a double motive: she wanted to help, and she foresaw that the occupation, slight as it was, would relieve her largely from the necessity of talking. Somehow she found no satisfaction in talking to Fanny. Everything she said seemed to melt instantly on the surface of a cool indifference. It was impossible to make an impression. She longed to speak of Stephen, but she did not dare. Besides, she disdained to sound Fanny about him.

Fanny spoke first.

"I hear that you and Abel Troop are going to be married, after all," she remarked. "Look, Judith," she continued, holding up a breadth of the silk, "do you think that spot will come out? Sherry! My partner at a dinner at Aunt Matilda's spilled it! I could have killed him!"

Judith took the spotted breadth of silk and examined it. "I doubt it. It's rather a bad stain. Yes," she added, "Abel and I are to be married."

"Soon?"

"Oh, no! Next summer!" Judith calmly resumed ripping, but Fanny's scissors remained idle for a moment.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to go away out there in the country and live, Judith. Mercy, I should simply die of lonesomeness! And Mrs.

Troop —so dark and stern! But I suppose you won't mind. You don't care for company as most girls do."

A stab from the point of Fanny's pretty little scissors could not have hurt Judith worse, but Fanny, to do her justice, was quite unaware that she had caused pain. When she thought of other people's feelings definitely at all, it was always with the comfortable conclusion that they must be several degrees less exquisite than her own.

"Yes, I think you would be lonely," responded Judith, not feeling called on to uncover her heart-tragedy to Fanny. The friendship with Fanny, for which she had begun to hope, did not now seem among the immediate probabilities. She continued to rip steadily and rapidly at the blue breadths, and at last, when the skirt fell completely apart, she said good-by and started.

As she walked home she almost regretted that she had not, after all, directed the conversation to Stephen, so eager was she to hear how well Fanny had come to know him. Could this have anything to do with Fanny's decision not to return to the Seminary? She herself had not seen Stephen, except at choir rehearsal and at church, since the night of the party. They had not been alone together for a moment and their conversation had been concerned wholly with the music of the service. She was aware

that she accorded to him an influence on her life out of all proportion to the length of their acquaintance, and reasoned against it, finding her argument perfect and her conviction unassailable; but every time she was alone and idle the argument had to be repeated, for the influence reasserted itself indomitably.

Several weeks went by thus. Then, one afternoon, Abel came in accordance with the promise she had given him to take her out to the farm. She was ready, waiting for him in the parlor when he drove up in his spring-wagon behind a raw-boned sorrel horse. Visiting at Fir Heights seemed merely part of the destiny of marrying him, which she saw inescapably before her now and which she no longer had any impulse to resist. A desire to seize on life in all its fullness had from childhood characterized her, but the disappointment and humiliation she had suffered at the Christmas Eve party had for the time being well-nigh quenched it.

"Judith," Abel said as they started, "I've always wondered how it was that Mr. Waters came out to see me that time. But the other day I learned from him that it was you who sent him. So I really owe my life to you. I was just at the turn, they say. How did you happen to send him?"

"I had heard him at a meeting the night before," she answered, the slightest possible confusion in her

manner; "and I felt sure that he could help you. I didn't know then that you were so very ill—I only thought of his being a comfort to you and your mother."

"He certainly has been a comfort," assented Abel emphatically. The road was rough, and he was obliged to give steady attention to his driving, so that her embarrassment passed unnoticed. "We both set great store by him, and Milly just worships him. He came out a good many times before I got up, and twice he's stopped a-Sunday evening on his way home from Bethel and eat supper with us. He preaches at Bethel every month. We all went over last Sunday to hear him, and I tell you he had a congregation! There wasn't an empty seat."

"It's just the same in Camden," said Judith, recovered now. "There has never been any one like him there. The church is crowded every Sunday and his tent meetings are doing great good among the river people. But the biggest thing he's done," she added, "is to reform James Dudley. Everybody is thankful for that."

"We had a long talk," resumed Abel. "I had left the horse at the livery stable, and as I was walking past the church he opened the door and I stopped to speak to him. We got to talking about his work, and pretty soon he asked me to come in. I declare I don't know how he's done so much. It seems to me

that he has visited every family living within miles of Bethel. He knows more people in the country now than I do. From what I hear I believe he could call the middle names of all the babies. And he can talk crops with the farmers.

"He likes our hill country, even over t'other side of Blue River, where it's so lonely you can ride half a day without seeing a human face. One time, he told me, he missed the road and when night fell there wasn't a farm-house in sight. By and by he came to a deserted cabin, and he just lay down on the floor, with his saddle-bags under his head. He said he'd never forget that night. There were chinks in the roof, and he could see the stars as he'd never seen them before. I told him he ought to carry a pistol on such rides, but he wouldn't hear to it. He said he'd never slept better. He told me so much about his work that I was kind of drawn to him, and almost before I knew it I had told him about you and me, that we are to be married in the summer. I thought you wouldn't care," he added in a sudden fear that she might be vexed.

"No," she answered, her heart swelling in contradiction within her, "I don't care."

For the rest of the way they spoke but seldom. Abel perceived that Judith did not wish to talk and he had no desire to urge her. They had now reached the steeper part of the road, where sometimes the

wagon tipped and her mantle or her flowing dress touched him. These touches thrilled him; he was beginning to feel sure of Judith.

It was Judith who broke the silence. Abel had been methodically urging the horse to go faster when, with an effort at brightness and humor she exclaimed, "Abel, why don't you sell this old sorrel and get a better horse?"

"Sell him? Why, Judith! This is Jess! Don't you remember Jess?" He turned to her in pain and surprise.

"Oh, Abel, it is too bad that I should have forgotten! Why, I have ridden on his back dozens of times, I suppose. Oh, Abel, don't!" she added, putting her hand on his arm as he reached for the whip. "Don't use the whip on Jess! Why should we hurry, anyway?"

"There's no need to hurry," Abel admitted. But he was provoked at his good old horse, whose slow pace had apparently annoyed his sweetheart. Why had he not bought a fast young horse to drive her home? Why? Because he had believed that she would prefer to ride behind her old friend, and she had not even remembered him! In that moment the long years of faithful service that Jess had given Abel suddenly and for ever lost value. He resolved to sell the horse when he could.

When they came to Indian Creek he was tempted

to take toll for the ford from Judith's lips, after the generous old country fashion, but he dared not. Despite her assurance that she had not been offended by his kiss at the Christmas party, he had felt that she was.

A thaw had set in that morning and it now began to rain, not violently, but slowly, steadily. Abel had to stop the horse and hoist the huge umbrella of faded blue, the wagon's only protection against weather. Thus sheltered he would have enjoyed the delicious moisture of the air had he not feared that under this wet blank sky the country would look lonely to Judith.

They had reached the foot of the home lane.

"Judith, do you mind the old sweet-apple tree that we used to drive under and gather a whole wagon full of apples from?"

"Oh, yes," she answered quickly. The recollection was vague, but still it existed.

"Do you mind which tree it was?"

Judith hesitated. She was anxious to retrieve herself in his eyes for her failure to remember Jess, and exerted her memory to the utmost.

"It was the big tree in the far corner of the orchard, wasn't it?" she ventured at last hesitatingly.

"Oh, no!" Abel's voice fell in spite of his effort to hide his disappointment. "All the trees on t'other

side the orchard are sour. The sweet-apple tree is the one up nearest the house. Don't you mind?"

"I'm afraid I don't," she was obliged to own, self-accusingly and humbly.

Abel told himself that he could not fairly expect her to remember Jess and the old tree, with its store of luscious sweets, after Paris. But he was afraid to draw her out further, and she was equally afraid to venture any recollection lest she wound him afresh. Neither spoke again until, as they gained the top of the slope, Judith caught sight, beyond the fir-buried homestead, of the unfinished house in the field.

"That is the palace, isn't it, Abel?" There was a tender light in her eyes.

"Yes, Judith," he replied in grave joy. "That is the palace."

"Isn't it too large and handsome for me,—I mean for us?" she continued hastily with a little blush. "And you built it almost all yourself? Why, Abel, it is a palace!" Without knowing it she had been close to tears, and now they ran hot and fast down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Judith, love," said Abel, taking her handkerchief from her hand and gently pressing it against her eyes. "I built it for you to be happy in."

"And so I shall be, my dear. At least, if I am not," she added quickly, "it will be my own fault."

By this time they had reached the garden gate. Jess stopped of his own accord and Abel, jumping out, helped Judith to alight.

With a timidity unusual in her, and for which she could not wholly account, she followed him around the side of the house to the front door. Because of the firs no grass grew about the house, but the ground was strewn thickly with brown cones. How grim and dark the firs were!

Mrs. Troop opened the door. She had seen Abel and Judith drive up the lane, but had been unable to bring herself to meet them at the gate. For an instant she uttered no word of welcome, but stood stock still, staring at Judith. She had schooled herself for this moment for many days; nevertheless she was not quite ready for it.

"Come in," she said civilly, and extended her hand. Abel, thinking that it might be wise to leave them alone together for the moment, had gone to put up Jess.

On the day of Judith's first visit to the Heights Mrs. Troop had been so grief-stricken and confused that she had not observed her in detail. She had expected to find her resembling her mother even more than as a child, but she had not been prepared to find every tint and contour repeated.

Judith took Mrs. Troop's hand and then, in an impulse of courage and affection, bent forward and

kissed her. Immediately after she felt convicted, in an indefinable way, of having taken a liberty. Mrs. Troop had not expected the kiss; she had almost shrunk from it.

"You are damp," observed Mrs. Troop, surveying Judith's mantle and skirt. "Perhaps you had better go up stairs and put on dry clothing."

Judith assented, and, taking her bag, followed Mrs. Troop up the narrow box stairs leading from the living-room. She was beginning now to recall vividly her childhood visits to the Heights and was hoping that she would be allowed to occupy the tiny unplastered chamber over the kitchen, hardly more than a cubby-hole, where she used to sleep so soundly. But no, Mrs. Troop led the way to the large spare chamber in front against whose windows the mystic-pointed firs rustled, and there left her.

Judith remembered the spare chamber well because she had once been frightened there. She had discovered, in a pane of glass in one of the windows, the curious print of a hand. She had looked at it and then had run crying down stairs to Mr. Troop, fearing she knew not what.

She went to this window now and pushed aside the chintz curtain. Yes, there was the curious hand-print, looking like some strange runic symbol. Against the eaves of the house the Druidic firs scraped and scratched out a sad, insistent, dry-toned

recitative. A shadow of her girlish fear fell on her, and hurrying to the door she called, "Oh, Mrs. Troop, I wonder if I could have my little old room!" But Mrs. Troop had disappeared down the stairs and had shut the door near their foot behind her.

Ashamed, really afraid to go after her and ask for the other room, Judith closed the door, removed her damp clothing and replaced it with dry. Then she went down stairs. Mrs. Troop was nowhere to be seen, and she sat down alone, feeling somehow uneasy in the living-room.

Everything in this living-room was just as it had always been since her earliest recollection: the bare, dark, uneven floor, the yawning fireplace, with its tall cupboards on either side, on the mantel-shelf between them the framed wreath of immortelles that once had lain, she guessed, on Abel's father's coffin; the moon-faced wall-sweep clock, the colored print of the *Last Supper*, the low sunken ceiling, across which dried fruits were strung; the wide-paneled doors, the narrow windows, outside the imprisoning firs. It was not a cheerful room.

She was glad when, in a few moments, Abel entered, though the sight of him gave her a little shock.

He had taken off his black Sunday clothes and had put on his gray corduroys stained with red clay. The air of self-watchfulness always about him when he wore his other garments was gone; he was at ease

now, a type of unnumbered generations of the patient sons of Adam, rude tillers of the soil, leaning on the ancient promise that while the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease: going back beyond this to the immemorial time when the earth was literally mother earth and the first man was made of it.

The kitchen door through which Abel entered remained half open. Judith caught sight of a dark head with two large eerie eyes peering at her from behind it.

"It's Milly!" explained Abel. "You remember I told you of her. She always runs away when any strange body comes. Here, Milly!" he continued, turning and catching the child up in his arms. "Come and see Judith."

He brought her in half-fearfully, lest the silent, shrinking attitude she invariably manifested toward visitors should wound Judith. But Milly showed no reluctance, and the dark eyes and thin face expressed wonder rather than timidity. Scarcely had Abel deposited her in Judith's lap, and Judith's arms had gently clasped themselves about her, when she fairly burst into speech.

"Are you a princess?" She looked up at Judith as one looks at a star.

"No, darling," answered Judith, smiling. "Just

a sister for you, if you will take me. Do you want me?"

"Oh, so much!" cried the child passionately. "You are so bright and beautiful! Milly loves you!"

"Milly, Milly!" exclaimed Mrs. Troop, coming hastily in, "you will wrinkle Judith's dress!"

"Oh, mother, let me stay!" begged Milly.

"Yes, do," Judith pleaded; the child was an unexpected boon. Mrs. Troop could say nothing more.

"Who would have believed," she murmured to herself bitterly as she returned to the kitchen, shutting the door after her, "that Rachel Warren's daughter would ever install herself in my house, and win the love of both my children, and me powerless to lift a hand?" She was tempted to try to discourage Milly's evident affection for Judith, but she was too intelligent a woman not to recognize, on reflection, that such a course would be useless.

Abel was disappointed at his mother's reception of Judith, although he told himself that he ought not to be; Judith's beauty and goodness were bound to win her before long.

"Judith, it has stopped raining," he said. "Wouldn't you like to go over and look through the palace?"

Judith shrank from inspecting her future home, but she did not like to hurt Abel by seeming indifferent. Besides, the ordeal was one that she must

meet some time during her visit, and it would be as well to face it now. She rose and threw around her the shawl that Abel handed her from a peg. He himself went to the kitchen door and opened it.

"We're going over to look through the palace. You'll come, too, won't you, mother?" he asked, somewhat hesitatingly.

"I haven't time now," she answered, without stopping her work.

Judith followed Abel down through the long orchard aisles and across a meadow, to the bare, red-brown field beyond, in which the palace stood.

On the hillside to their left a flock of sheep was grazing.

"They are right growthy sheep, aren't they?" remarked Abel with satisfaction, halting to watch them.

"Yes," she answered, her attention caught by the quaint adjective, not by the appearance of the flock.

They were now in full view of the palace. Abel had not yet opened the lane up to it, and its situation in the inclosed field seemed peculiarly secluded and inaccessible. Unfinished and uninhabited, in the amber twilight it looked more lonely than the dark wood not far beyond.

The front door of the palace was barricaded with timbers from the inside, and Abel went around and entered by the back to remove them. Left alone,

Judith walked to the end of the porch and stood there by a window, through which she peered. It was too dark to determine anything satisfactorily, however, and her eye turned to the duskening scene without. As it did so it fell on three words written on the door-check.

The words were, "Abel Troop's folly."

She comprehended instantly. Once, she remembered, a ne'er-do-well named Hines had built in the neighborhood a large fine house that he had not been able to complete, and that had been suffered to fall to ruin. It had been known far and wide as "Hines's folly."

Without doubt the whole neighborhood believed that she would never marry Abel. It was some idle boy, probably, who had expressed this belief in the scrawled words.

One thing was certain: Abel must not see them. Running down the steps, she picked up a piece of moist clay, and, returning, completely obliterated them.

She had scarcely tossed the clay away and dried her fingers of its stains when Abel threw down the timbers and opened the door before her.

"Come in, Judith." There was a thrill in his voice of deepest pride and yearning. "Come into . . . our . . . home!" Taking her hand he led her in.

Together they went through the house. Every-

thing, Judith saw, was elaborately convenient. Her obligation to the patient builder loomed mountains high. Why could she not love him? Surely, he was love-worthy!

"As soon as I get some firs planted," Abel remarked, as they started back to the homestead, "the place won't look so bare."

The desirability of firs about a house was in his mind evidently a thing to be taken for granted, and Judith could not gainsay him.

The palace was so conspicuously new that it appeared an alien thing on the landscape. But as they approached the homestead Judith saw that it accorded well with the monotones of field and twilight sky. By the action of the elements through long years the old house had been seasoned all over to a black brown. It was no alien. Earth to earth was its motto. Silently, slowly, but resistlessly, nature was reclaiming as a whole what man had taken from her as timber and clay. Already the earth had sent up slender but stout creepers that had caught hold of the walls like tiny relentless hands, as if at last to draw them down bit by bit into its bosom.

The firs that sheltered, or rather menaced, the house were in keeping with it. Dark, geometric, inscrutable, against the evening sky they emblazoned the fortunes of this ill-starred family. They appeared always to have been old, these firs. Even the

low ones looked like dwarfed, aged trees. And they were always the same. The pageant of the seasons was nothing to them. The balmy airs of spring made them no greener; hot summer parched them not; they were indifferent to autumn's glory, and stoically they endured the blasts of winter. The brightest sun of mid-summer might be shining, but within their branches twilight perpetually abode, stealing out thence at evening time to overspread the world. And whether north wind or south, east wind or west were blowing, they sang always in a minor key. In the February gloaming they stood like phantoms, fugitive spirits by some wizard touch imprisoned in fantastic shapes, sullen, forbidding, relentless, voiceless save for moanings and whisperings, for ever lost to joy.

The amber light had faded out from the west and night, a night without moon or stars, was falling swiftly, softly, as falls a garment.

Judith shivered.

"You're cold," said Abel, drawing her shawl more closely about her.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT THE FIRS SAW

The recurrence of market-day took Abel, much against his will, with a load of wine-saps to New Alden the next morning.

"You will let me help you with the work, won't you?" Judith asked Mrs. Troop as they rose from the breakfast-table. Only the feeblest rays of daylight had as yet straggled into the room, and the candle in its pewter holder in the center of the table was still burning. It was five o'clock,—the Troop household rose regularly at four, summer and winter.

"There's really very little to do to-day," replied Mrs. Troop distantly.

"Oh, surely there is something—" Judith wanted to be of service, and she felt, too, that without occupation the day would be intolerably long. Idleness she dreaded of all things, for it forced her to think of Abel and it inclined her to think of Stephen, and neither subject contributed to her peace of mind.

"Oh, mother," cried Milly eagerly, "can't Judith

make my new red dress that Abel gave me for Christmas?"

"Very well," said Mrs. Troop, though with some reluctance. And so, what with cutting the soft pretty stuff and fashioning it and trying it on delighted Milly, the day passed with unexpected rapidity. When finally the dress was done, Milly won Mrs. Troop's consent to keep it on, that Abel might see it when he came home.

At the supper-table that night Abel appeared disturbed. He talked much more than was his wont, and at times his face clouded.

Milly waited impatiently for him to speak of her dress. At last, surprised and hurt, she said, "Abel, don't you like my pretty new dress? Judith made it for me to-day."

"Yes, dear, it's nice," he answered with a hasty glance at the dress that keenly disappointed her.

"Did your apples sell well?" Judith asked him.

"As well as I had calculated," he replied indifferently. It was evident that the cause of his agitation was not connected with the sale.

"I heard a piece of news to-day," he remarked in a tone of almost equal indifference. "Did you know, Judith, that Mr. Waters is to be married?"

"No," she answered, a startled look leaping into her face. "To whom?" She felt rather than saw that Mrs. Troop's eyes were on her.

"To Fanny Potter. It's all over Camden, it seems, though it was in New Alden that I heard it. Lane told me. Jim Dudley was passing, and Lane said he supposed Dudley would be pretty badly cut up about it."

"That will be a very good match," remarked Mrs. Troop casually, still watching Judith, well aware in her own mind that Fanny was the last person to make a minister's wife. Recalling a remark of Abel's the night before that it was Judith who had first sent Stephen out to see him, she had begun that interesting mental process known as putting two and two together.

Supper over, Judith undressed Milly and put her to bed. She then made one or two more efforts to draw Abel out about his day in New Alden, but without success. Becoming convinced finally that he wished to be alone, she bade him good night and went up stairs to her own chamber.

The gaunt, spectral firs, looming strangely vague and magically tall that night in the light of the crescent moon, witnessed as they peered in at the upper and the lower windows of the homestead, two dramas, each of which was acted with tragic intensity.

Above there was but a single actor, Judith, who, as soon as she had closed and bolted her door, threw herself on her bed in anguish. This scene was re-

vealed only by the moonlight, in whose witching beams the firs, waving their branches in the night wind, cast on the wall fantastic, restless shadows like the figures of morris-dancers. And it was all silence save for their low chanting and the moans that now and then escaped Judith. The only action came when, rising from the bed, she flung herself, face down, on the floor. She felt that she must get down, low, low down, unconsciously impelled perhaps by some survival of an ancient pagan hope of thus propitiating an offended deity. One so crushed as she could not get too near the earth.

Prostrate thus she lay for the remainder of the night.

If Stephen were to marry any girl in the world but Fanny Potter she could have borne it, she told herself. But for Fanny to have him, Fanny, who would never appreciate him, who could not appreciate him, was unbearable. Fanny might indeed possess him, but he belonged to her. The long years of companionship that she foresaw Fanny enjoying with Stephen made her own lot seem harder than ever. She was neglected, forsaken. In the world's teeming abundance of life and happiness her hopes were as the too-luxuriant sprigs put forth by a hedge which a gardener ruthlessly prunes away.

For hours she strove, dry-eyed, to calm herself. The cords of her throat grew tense, her heart seemed

literally to rise in her mouth, and she could not swallow. It was not until a pallid dawn stole into the room like the shade of the day that had died the night before, rather than a day new-born, that she surrendered herself to sobs that tore and hurt her with their violence, yet relieved her.

Below, the scene had two actors, Abel and his mother, beyond themselves with passion, and uttering words that neither ever after quite forgot or forgave. Abel had retired to the parlor when Judith had gone up stairs. The room was never used on week-days and there was no fire in it, but he hardly noticed this.

That afternoon he had discovered that his hard-earned money had been drawn from the New Alden bank. He was both puzzled and angry. What could it mean?

Ordinarily he withheld nothing from his mother's knowledge or possession. But about this special sum he had felt differently, and, knowing that his mother realized how sensitive he was regarding everything that pertained to Judith, he considered that she had been high-handed and ruthless in drawing it without asking his consent.

Mrs. Troop felt that Abel had discovered his loss, and determined that she would not evade his reproaches. Although her reason told her that she had done wrong, her heart, aflame with jealousy of

Judith, who won love so frankly on all sides, and of Rachel Warren, who lived again in her, refused to listen.

"What is the matter with you?" she began, coming into the room and taking a seat near him.

"What is the matter!" echoed Abel reproachfully.

"Mother! how can you ask?"

"I suppose you went to the bank this afternoon," she answered in the levellest tones she could muster.

"Mother! how could you! Do you mean to thwart me about Judith at every turn?" Abel shifted nervously in his chair.

"Thwart you, Abel? That is a hard word to use to your mother, who has always done for you day and night. You think a vast deal more of Judith La Monde, who has never done anything but bring misfortune on you." Her voice rose to a tight, strained pitch in spite of herself.

"Mother," exclaimed Abel, rising, "that is one thing that I will not bear even from you. You shall not blame Judith, in my hearing, at least."

Mrs. Troop rose also, and Milly, lying in bed in the adjoining room, awakened by their loud tones, listened terrified, understanding far more of what was said than would have been thought possible by either speaker.

Mrs. Troop shrank into silence a moment, but for only a moment; the hatred within her was not to be

choked down now. "Well, there is just one thing I will say, and I want you to remember it, Abel. Judith will never marry you, mark my words!" Mrs. Troop knew that this was the cruelest thing she could say, because she knew that Abel himself was never quite sure of Judith, but she felt compelled to uphold herself, and the most certain way of doing this was to destroy his faith in Judith. So she spoke deliberately. Abel winced and did not contradict her.

"You are surely aware," she continued, gathering courage from his silence, "that Judith, with her high notions, feels herself above you. She is not adapted to our way of life. What can a girl of her family and education have in common with us? The strongest love can't go against nature. Even if Judith loved you, which she does not, that love would not make her happy on this out-of-the-way farm with you. It's against reason. What would that fine lady, her mother, have done out here, I should like to know, with the spinning and churning and candle-making, and all the rest of the hard work?"

She paused, for there was something about Abel's continued silence that frightened her. But Abel did not speak, and she was almost forced to go on, half aware, too, that she had reached an emotional climax at which she would be likely to say things that she would repent as long as she lived.

"And Judith, I tell you, at the last moment will

serve you precisely as her mother, with her soft ways and beguiling face—”

She did not finish, for Abel, coming close to her and looking straight into her eyes, said: “Mother, on my life, I believe you are jealous of Judith’s mother yet!”

It was the first time in his life that he had ever referred to his father’s courtship of Rachel Warren, of which he had always known. Mrs. Troop retreated a step and her face first blanched, then reddened. This shot equaled her own. Its aim was as sure and its power to wound even greater. She forgave even less easily than her son.

“Taunt me if you will, Abel! You will rue it bitterly one day. This is another of the misfortunes Rachel Warren and hers have brought on me and mine. You never gave me a harsh word in your life until now. Suppose I am jealous! Who wouldn’t be?” she demanded fiercely. “Didn’t I have to bear all my husband’s life to see him miserable for Rachel’s sake, when she had played him false and never loved him as I did? Was that easy? Did he love my son? No, you were not Rachel’s. Could I bear that easily, do you think? And this girl, who is Rachel over and over again to the turning of an eyelash, face and mind, body and soul, has it been easy for me to have her here in my house, making Milly love her as well as you? My God, what haven’t I

borne! and now to be humiliated by my son—Oh, Abel, you have broken my heart! How could you? How could you?" She sank into a chair and, covering her face with her hands, she sobbed.

"Mother, you are unfair! Judith isn't to blame for her mother's fickleness—if she was fickle. Anyway, I couldn't help loving her,—it's grained in me. And as for every one's loving her, I'm sure that's not her fault. Instead of its making you hate her as it does, it ought to make you see how lovable she is. I don't understand why you are so disturbed about my marrying her. She's not going to live in this house, and as for the farm, that's yours. I'll never touch a penny of it in your lifetime, though, unless father left a will, and I don't think he did, I suppose it's part mine."

Mrs. Troop did not heed this last sentence, but rising again, caught at the first one the moment that Abel finished.

"Judith is not to blame for being her mother's child, but that does not prevent her from inheriting her falseness. Those Warren women are like false fires luring men into swamps. There is a curse in Judith's blood. I can't bear the sight or touch of her." Her words rose sharply in pitch and intensity, ringing through the still room like a pistol-shot.

"Mother, you are beside yourself! You don't know what you are saying."

She scarcely heard him, but reverted to her early objection of insuitability, on which, after all, she based her strongest hope. "You and Judith can marry if you will, but you will never be mated. Now, a girl like Mary Dowd—"

Abel made a gesture of despair.

"Mary is not handsome, but she is a clever worker and a girl in your own station in life. She would be glad —"

"For pity's sake, mother!" cried Abel, putting up his hands imploringly. Mrs. Troop forbore. She had not for a moment really hoped for his marriage with their nearest neighbor's daughter, but she had a blind feeling that she must somehow beat down Abel's position by every argument she could muster.

"Have you considered, too, that Judith couldn't possibly be happy here? Suppose I do smother my dislike for her, which I shall have to do, I reckon, we shall never be fond of each other. She knows how I feel well enough, though I've never breathed a word of it to her."

"You are mistaken, mother. Judith would love you now if you would only let her."

Mrs. Troop laughed contemptuously. "Well, she doesn't love you and never will. It's my opinion she already thinks more of some one else."

She looked to see Abel disturbed at this, but she was disappointed. His love-light burned steadily,

and this oil so suddenly thrown on it caused it to flare only ever so little.

"Who?" He spoke quietly and after a deliberate pause.

"She is mightily interested in Stephen Waters, if I am not mistaken."

"Pshaw, mother!" And Abel laughed in relief.

"Did you see the way she looked to-night at supper when you told her about him and Fanny Potter?"

"Why, mother, you can't scare me that way! And please don't insinuate that Judith isn't true. Her life is an open book! There isn't anything that she would conceal from me."

"That was what your father thought about Rachel."

"Mother," cried Abel desperately, "I don't see why you should revile Judith's mother so. If she hadn't married La Monde you would never have got my father at all."

To his dying day Abel cursed himself for this speech. The look his mother shot at him would have killed him, if looks could kill. In a gentler tone he went on: "What became of my money, mother? Where did you put it?"

Before they had begun talking Mrs. Troop had dreaded beyond expression the discovery that still awaited Abel, that his money was irrevocably gone.

But now she did not mind telling him; she was cruelly glad to do it.

"I never received it. It was stolen from the stage the night after Colonel Belmont drew it from the bank."

Abel threw up his hands in despair. "Mother! I can't marry Judith then! I can't ask her to live here. And you've not told me, and let me go on with her—do you know what you have done?"

He went close to her and stood still, looking at her as if he could not comprehend her action. Every particle of his habitual mildness had vanished. "What did you mean to do with my money?"

"I wanted to pay off the debt on the farm," she answered doggedly.

Abel compressed his lips with a mighty effort at self-control.

"Mark what I say, Abel," she continued slowly, as though fearing the effect of her words, "Judith La Monde will play you false one day as surely as we both live."

His answer was a blow that struck her right temple.

The next moment he was kneeling abjectly at her side.

"Mother, mother, forgive me!" He caught her hand and held it imploringly. But Mrs. Troop forcibly withdrew it. Retreating from him a little space,

she stood erect, quivering with indignation. The blow, though it had hurt but slightly, was still a blow.

With the mien of one pronouncing a curse she cried, "Never, never! I shall never forgive you! Marry Judith La Monde to-morrow if you like. I shall not utter another syllable against her. But remember, it was all along of her that you struck your mother! She will bring you misery and not happiness, and I hope she may!"

Whether Abel could have succeeded in inducing his mother to soften her terrible words or retract them altogether, he never knew. Having spoken them she turned and went into her bedroom, leaving him standing like one stupefied.

CHAPTER XIV

MIDNIGHT AT THE PALACE

After breakfast the next morning Abel asked Judith to go into the parlor.

"Judith," he said in great dejection, "I've got bad news. My money is gone. It was stolen the night the page was held up. Mother had drawn it from the bank."

"That is dreadful, Abel."

"I've turned it all over in my mind," Abel went on, "and I don't suppose there's the least chance of getting it back. It's been so long now. But that would be nothing if it didn't mean that we can't be married as soon as I had expected. But if you would be willing to put up with less, much less than I had meant you to have, I can sell some of the stock and by August, anyway, get the things we shall need most."

"Don't be unhappy, Abel. I'm sorry you've lost the money,—you worked so long and hard for it. But really, simple things will please me best." She spoke quietly, but her heart beat with the anguished

fluttering of the wing-broken bird that has accepted its cage.

After all, since she must live, she was thankful that life had for her its task, which would be trying to make happy this man who was so devoted to her. As Cardinal Richelieu, in Bulwer's play, draws about the unprotected orphan girl a circle, forbidding any man to enter under penalty of the curse of Rome, so she would encircle Abel with a tender affection that the ills of life should not penetrate. Of himself he did not have strength to withstand them.

At the breakfast-table Judith had noticed a blue mark on Mrs. Troop's forehead, but she did not dream how it had come. She had indeed surmised that Abel and his mother had quarreled, for their voices had reached her in tones of unmistakable anger, but she did not guess that the quarrel had directly involved her.

And Mrs. Troop? The long, heavy-laden hours of night, during which her eyes had not once closed, had broken her spirit.

She knew that her son had always fondly loved her, and that he would ever strike her she deemed incredible. What power over him Judith had! And since she swayed him so strongly now, how absolute would be her control after they married! Rank fears and furtive suspicions entered into her brain and began to fester there.

She appeared so fagged that Judith could not help asking, later in the day, "Mrs. Troop, are you ill?"

"I am perfectly well," Mrs. Troop answered coldly.

Judith longed to say or do something, anything, that would break the wall of constraint that Mrs. Troop steadily imposed between them. But perceiving that her efforts were hopeless, she rose and went up stairs, ostensibly to sew, really to be alone.

As she started Milly called to her.

"Oh, Judith, won't you get my doll for me out of Abel's room? He carried it up last night to mend it."

Judith entered Abel's room, which had been his father's before him, on Milly's errand. She did not see the doll anywhere, and it occurred to her that probably Abel had laid it away to dry in the high, old secretary that stood by the window. This secretary was familiar to her. It had mirrored upper doors, many compartments below, glass knobs and a general air of mystery that said, "I've a secret drawer, but you can't find it." There was, in fact, a tradition about the house that the old secretary did possess such a drawer, and, as a child, she had searched for it on rainy-day visits to the Heights, never discovering it, yet certain always that it was there.

She opened a drawer on the right of the secretary,

and there sure enough, freshly glued, lay the doll. She reached in, but found that the glue had stuck it to the bottom of the drawer. A little care and force were needed to get it safely out, so she now put both hands into the drawer and pulled. This brought out the doll uninjured, and she was about to push the drawer in again when something small and oval flew out to the floor. When she took hold of the doll she had accidentally touched a spring below it, revealing the secret drawer for which she had searched so many times in vain.

Stooping, she picked up a miniature. In a frame of faded violet velvet she saw, triply reproduced on its ivory surface, the beautiful face of her own mother in girlhood. There was a full front view and on either side, turned toward it, a profile, as if three sister lilies should lift their beauty on a single stalk. The lips all but parted in a smile; it was a happy face. Judith had never seen the miniature before. Her mother, she reflected, must have given it to David Troop many years before when he was her suitor. How much that thought brought up to her!

Judith looked long and lovingly at these speaking likenesses. How she wished that her mother yet lived to comfort and counsel her, for she alone of all human beings fully understood her! And then suddenly there came into her mind a realization of what Mrs. Troop had borne all these years. She loved her

beautiful mother, but she pitied from the bottom of her heart the plain woman who had suffered innocently because of her. In the light of those long years of heart hunger and humiliation she could not resent Mrs. Troop's treatment of herself.

Suddenly Milly's voice came crying up the stairway, with a note of impatience.

"Did you find the doll, Judith?"

Judith hesitated a moment. She was tempted to keep the miniature, but this seemed in a sense like robbing the dead. Returning it to the drawer, therefore, and snatching up the doll, she went down stairs.

That day Milly had played about the house as usual, but she had done a great deal of thinking. She thought she understood pretty well why Mrs. Troop was so disturbed. But certain things were to happen that puzzled her sorely.

That night she found herself suddenly awake and alone in the bed. She had been dreaming, she thought, that Mrs. Troop had risen. Now she knew that her sensation had not been a dream, but a reality. Hardly had this conviction forced itself on her when she saw a thread of light below the closed door leading from the bedroom into the living-room. She heard Mrs. Troop's voice in low, excited tones. Between her words there was complete silence. Evidently she was talking to herself. Presently Milly

heard her rise. The crack of light below the door disappeared. She heard the front door open and close. Mrs. Troop had left the house!

Wondering why she had gone, alarmed at the state of mind in which she felt her to be, Milly lay still for some time, hoping every moment for her return. At last she could remain there no longer. Terrified, she crept out of bed and stole into the living-room. It was silent, dark and empty. Abel had been called away for the night by the death of a neighbor. She and Judith must be alone in the house.

She was afraid to go up stairs and call Judith, for whenever she climbed the stairs in the dark, Something always climbed them just behind her, sending dreadful shivers up and down her spine. It was this Something, she was sure, that made the stairs creak so very much louder at night than in the daytime. If she pretended not to be scared and walked slowly, It walked slow. If she ran, It ran. It had never yet grabbed her, nor had she been able to muster up courage to turn round and look at It, but she knew that It was there.

Not daring to go back to bed without knowing where Mrs. Troop was, led at last by instinct, Milly felt her way into the parlor by the light from dying logs in the fireplace, wondering why it was that the chairs and tables, so harmless by day, had become

such dreadful creatures, and that the corners of the room, deep in shadow, were filled with nameless terrors. The loud ticking of the clock in the living-room seemed the beating of her own heart. Arrived at last at the south window in the parlor, she tried to peer out, but all was dark.

No, on that very instant there gleamed from the palace windows a tiny light as of a candle flame. Mrs. Troop was in the palace!

Milly did not know what to make of this. She knew that Mrs. Troop had refused steadfastly to visit the palace. Why had she gone there now alone in the dead of night? Chittering with fear and cold, she stood at the window for some time watching. The dual voice of the night wind reached her, now loud and fierce, now tiny and piteous, as though some one big and cruel were hurting some one small and helpless. On a distant hill a light flashed and she heard the faint yelping of dogs: it was a solitary racoon hunter.

Presently the tall, deep-toned clock began to strike. It was an old clock that had struck off the hours for Abel's father and for his father before him, and it spoke with the measured solemnity of age: one — two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight — nine — ten—eleven—twelve. Every stroke fell on Milly's heart with a burden of mystery and terror; never before had she been up at midnight.

Milly was right in her conjecture. Two hours before, Mrs. Troop, tortured again this second night by sleeplessness, had finally risen, and, lighting a candle, had tried to read her Bible. But she was unable to fix her mind on it.

"Abel, my son Abel, has struck me! And he is going to marry Rachel's daughter!" she cried aloud.

Very likely when she became old and helpless they would find some pretext for sending her away to the poorhouse. It lay across bleak hills only a mile from the Heights, and she was familiar with the loathsome wrack cast up there by the sea of life: the evil-faced, toothless old women, the gibbering negro, the baby born on the place. Send her there? She would kill herself first!

Uncontrollably restless, she laid her Bible aside. At last she rose and started up stairs, bent on a purpose that had been brewing in her mind all day. It was wholly possible that her husband had left a will, though she had never heard him speak of one. She would search for it now in the hope of discovering that, contrary to Abel's surmise, the farm had been left entirely to her, not in joint ownership with him. If the farm were only hers she would feel wholly independent of him.

She went first to the garret, where she eagerly examined the contents of an old chest filled with deeds, letters and family papers; the will was not there.

Then she bethought herself of her husband's secretary in Abel's room. Seating herself in a chair before it she opened one drawer and compartment after another, only to find them entirely empty. Finally she pulled out the drawer on the right,—and the fair face of Rachel Warren stared up into her own.

She snatched the miniature out of the drawer and looked closely at it; its beauty, the half-smiling curve of the red lips seemed to mock her. She set the miniature up on the open shelf before her.

All thought of the will left her. Once more she was a girl, too poor to have a home of her own, living near Camden at the home of her uncle, David Troop's father. There drudgery had been her portion from the first.

While Rachel Warren had known as many lovers as she cared to coquette with, she herself had toiled. She looked at her work-roughened hands; she could not recall a time when they had been smooth,—Rachel's had always been silken soft. There are some natures for whom time mercifully soothes sorrow and humiliation, but Mrs. Troop's was not one of these. Every year of her life had added a drop to the bitterness of her cup.

She now realized that all his life long her husband had cherished this miniature, and that he had made the secret drawer its safe hiding-place. And yet, curiously, but in perfect accord with her character,

the discovery did not in the least alter her love for him. Jealousy only fanned love and made it burn the more. Primitive emotions rose in her, almost untempered by reasoning. Would this woman, dead at last, never cease to trouble her?

Rising finally, she picked up the miniature and gave it one last execrating look. Then turning to the drawer whence it came, she once more consigned it to dust and darkness in its old receptacle under the large drawer, which she shut tightly.

Blowing out her candle, she went to the south window of the room, a window that commanded a view of the palace. At first she could see nothing, but by and by she fancied she could make out, amid the shadows of the night, a darker shadow. It was the symbol of all that she hated. Her curiosity about it had always been strong. Why not go now and inspect it? The opportunity that Abel's absence offered was propitious,—she would not for anything have him know that after all her refusals to visit it she was at last yielding to the desire to do so.

She went down again into the living-room whence, still carrying her candle, she stole out of the front door and hastened through the orchard and into the open field beyond. She was only half-dressed, but the chill air was grateful to her, for her brain was on fire. Entering the front door of the palace she relighted her candle, which the wind had

blown out, and held it high before her. Truly, a fine house for Rachel Warren's daughter!

In her own youth a young farmer who was about to marry would have thought his bride handsomely provided for if he had built for her a two-roomed cabin of hewed logs, chinked and daubed, with one window filled with greased paper in each room. Here was a parlor as large as that at the homestead; here was a living-room and there a third room, that she took to be a dining-room; the homestead had no dining-room, the large kitchen serving both to cook and eat in. And the bow-window! Were there a half-dozen bow-windows all told in the county? There were two stairways, front and back, with carved banisters. Up stairs she found three sleeping chambers. What need was there for more than one? None, except that the bride might not feel cramped in her new home.

No device for convenience or attempt at ornament escaped Mrs. Troop's eye. Returning down stairs after a close inspection, she seated herself on a carpenter's bench in the hall, placing the candle at her side.

For a long time she sat there, forecasting and remembering.

At last the smell of something burning roused her. Turning, she saw that a small heap of shavings close to the candle had taken fire. She watched

with a dull lethargy one thin papery curl after another blaze, blacken and fall to cinders.

Meanwhile Milly, having conquered her fear at last, crept up stairs and softly opened Judith's door.

"Judith," she whispered.

Judith started and sat up in bed. Milly, in her white nightgown, stood beside her, all of a tremble.

"Why, Milly! What is the matter?"

"Oh Judith! Mother's gone! And I was afeared to stay in my bed."

"Mrs. Troop gone?" Judith sprang out of bed and put her arms about the frightened child. "Gone where?"

"To the palace!"

"To the palace?" echoed Judith in astonishment.

"Why has she gone there? How do you know?"

"I missed her out of bed, and then I saw a light in the palace."

"I wonder what is the matter!" said Judith, hastily slipping on a loose dress and slippers. She wondered if Mrs. Troop would think she was spying on her if she followed her. How unfortunate it was that Abel was away!

"Judith," said Milly, still trembling, "I know what's the matter! Abel and mother had a dreadful quarrel!"

"A quarrel, Milly? What about?"

"About you!" Milly could hardly bring herself

to say this. "Why doesn't mother love you, Judith?"

"I can only guess, dear. Love is a strange thing. It comes where it listeth, like the wind." And for a moment bitter thoughts of Fanny, secure in the possession of Stephen's love, crowded Mrs. Troop from her mind.

Throwing around her a heavy cloak, Judith took a candle and hurried down stairs, out of the front door, past the ghostly firs, and down through the orchard, where she was obliged to feel her way. To be alone in the country on any moonless, starless night is to experience darkness as for the first time. To Judith's senses, preternaturally sharpened by intense anxiety, it was an entity, a thing visible.

She had not gone far when one of her slippers fell off. The rough clods in the field cut and scraped her foot, but she did not pause.

She was perhaps half-way to the palace, when suddenly a light shot up within it. Sick with horror, she stood stone still a moment, her hands clasped before her, and prayed aloud, "What shall I do?"

But the next moment she gained the porch. The front door stood wide open, and in the hall, just below the stairs, a great heap of shavings blazed.

"Mrs. Troop. Mrs. Troop!" she called wildly, "where are you?" No answer. The silence was vocal with a thousand terrors, and the fire before

her burned brighter and brighter. The banister of the stairs would catch in another instant.

But it did not catch, for Judith, pulling off her heavy cloak, threw it over the flames and smothered them. In an ecstasy of thankfulness at having arrived in time to save the house which, had the fire got more of a start, must have burned to the ground, she dropped, weak and agitated, on the bench by the stairs.

She thought of Abel. How terrible it would be for him to know what his mother had tried to do! He would never forgive her. She had seen him in anger once or twice—a slow, dumb rage, that obsessed and petrified him until he could no more bend to entreaty or explanation than a flint.

Abel must never know, instantly she resolved that. With a broom that she found near the front door she swept up the charred shavings; then ascending the stairs to an unfinished upper chamber, she gathered a heap of fresh shavings, which she carried down and placed over the charred ones.

But where was Mrs. Troop? It was just possible, Judith reflected, that in the brief time she had been in the palace, Mrs. Troop had returned to the homestead. But this was not likely. She must find her. The fit of madness that led her to fire the palace might lead her on, perhaps, to self-destruction.

Passing out through the kitchen, Judith left the

house by the back door. There were no steps to this door and the wind had blown her candle out, but she jumped easily to the ground. The next moment she stumbled on . . . something.

It was Mrs. Troop, prone and motionless. Was she dead? Judith felt her face and hands and found them warm. Had she suffered a stroke? Judith's fingers, passing over the back of Mrs. Troop's head, felt something warm and viscid trickle through them. Evidently, Mrs. Troop, unaware that steps had not yet been built for this back door, had fallen.

Judith considered. Should she go back to the homestead and ring the bell? The nearest human being was Colonel Belmont's hand, Enoch Dowd, and it was doubtful if he would hear. She had no notion whether Mrs. Troop was badly hurt or not. Suppose that she should die! There was but one thing to do, and that was to get Mrs. Troop home herself. With her handkerchief she made a tolerable bandage that checked the flow of blood, then half-carrying, half-dragging her heavy burden, she started, Mrs. Troop, partly reviving and groaning with pain, helping herself somewhat.

It was almost half an hour after Judith had left the homestead before she reached it again. Milly stood in the open door watching. Judith sank down with Mrs. Troop just inside the door. "Get a light, Milly! She's not dead!"

Milly lighted candles and together they carried the injured woman, once more insensible, into her room and lifted her to her low bed. Milly remembered that Mrs. Troop had some hartshorn up stairs. She found this and gave it to Judith, who stooped and held it so that Mrs. Troop might inhale it. How she wished for Abel!

"Milly, darling," she whispered, "you must never let any one, Abel most of all, know about to-night. You can keep a secret, can't you?"

"Yes." And Judith knew that Milly could and would keep this one to her dying day.

Milly then ran out to the back porch and rang the big bell. But no one came. It was not long until Mrs. Troop opened her eyes and put her hand up to the bandage in dazed silence.

"Let me die," she said at last bitterly; "I want to die."

"No, no, mother," implored Judith, kneeling at the bed and seizing her hand. "I want you to get well and live with Abel and me always, you and Milly." Mrs. Troop's eyes closed, but soon she opened them again.

"Did I fall?"

"Yes. At the back door. Do you remember?"

"But how—how do I come here in bed again? Did Abel come home—" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

"But you do not understand," cried Judith. "It was not Abel—I carried you."

Mrs. Troop withdrew her hands. Her face worked convulsively. "Well, that is more than I would have done for you," she said finally, as if the words forced themselves from her. "But I wish you had let me be! I'm a wicked woman," she groaned. "I must have been crazy! In the morning when Abel comes, when he sees—" Again she hid her face in her hands.

"I put the fire out," said Judith quietly.

Mrs. Troop looked at her a moment and then she almost screamed, "Oh, but when Abel knows that I have tried to burn it, that will be just the same."

"Abel will never know!" Judith's voice had sunk until in sympathy and yearning it matched the deepest tones of Abel's viol. She felt humble before this woman, who was sick unto death of the malady that was eating her own heart out.

"You won't tell Abel?" Mrs. Troop uttered these words slowly, as a child repeats words in which it has been told of some new uncomprehended bliss.

Judith shook her head. "I swept up the ashes and put down fresh shavings."

"I ought to get down on my knees before you," said Mrs. Troop; "but I didn't know that anything like that could be in Rachel Warren's daughter." And drawing Judith to her she kissed her.

CHAPTER XV

AT THE WISHING-WELL

It was almost a week before Mrs. Troop could get up, and Judith remained at the farm over Sunday, taking care of her. Abel was overjoyed at the new affectionate relation existing between his mother and Judith, though he could not understand it. However, he did not strive long to do so; the happy fact sufficed him. And Judith was glad, too.

Abel drove her back to Camden on Monday morning. As they neared the Eastbrook house Judith saw one of the prim front doors open quickly, and Charlotte and Jane Eastbrook, still in their white breakfast-caps, came out on the sunny step. Charlotte ran down to the gate to meet her. Both she and Jane greeted Abel kindly, but they soon bore Judith off between them into the house.

"It's been like a funeral without you!" cried Charlotte affectionately, helping her to remove her wraps.

"I don't see how we can ever let you go away from us again!" declared Jane. To Judith, Camden seemed very cheerful after Fir Heights!

"How did they get on without me at church yesterday?" she asked, as she started up stairs to her own room.

Miss Charlotte hesitated. "Fanny Potter played," she answered finally.

"Fanny!" echoed Judith in astonishment. Well, why not, she reflected. At the Seminary doubtless Fanny had had some musical training, and it was natural that in her own absence Stephen should ask her to play. But the thought of Fanny's filling her post stung. Probably, now that Stephen was to marry Fanny, he would prefer to have her play every Sunday. No sooner was Judith in her room than she went to her desk and wrote Stephen a brief formal note, stating that if he could get some one else to take the organ she would like to be relieved from it, and pleading necessary preparations for her marriage as her reason.

Hardly had she put the note in the post-office before she regretted it. Her opportunities to be with Stephen would cease before long,—even for the present they were few, all told, and she was voluntarily cutting off most of them. If she had consulted the pages of the *Young Lady's Guide*, she would have learned that no proper-minded girl allows herself to care a farthing for a man who is engaged to marry another girl; but having no great faith in the *Guide*, she did not seek the aid of its glib precepts.

Perhaps Stephen would not accept her resignation; probably, surely, he would not. In a fever of fear and hope she awaited his reply.

Several days passed before it came. It was as formal as her own, and more brief. He regretted that she wished to give up the organ, and added that Miss Potter had kindly consented to take it.

"He need not have said that," commented Judith bitterly. "Of course she will take it. It is well that I wrote; it was just what he was waiting for me to do." She felt, somehow, a lack of fidelity in Stephen. There had existed between them a compact unspoken and unsealed save in the code of glances and silences, yet understood by each, and he had been false to it.

Fragments of the gossip about Stephen and Fanny had reached the ears of Fanny herself and left them tingling pleasantly. Hitherto she had regarded Camden as dull, but with Stephen well within the radius of her charms and Dudley hovering as near as he dared, life there had suddenly taken on new zest.

Toward Stephen, Fanny had already begun to experience those little thrills and throbs that mark the early stages of the love game. It was not that she vulgarly sought him as a husband, but each time they met she had made little overtures of friendship, as a butterfly naturally puts forth its deli-

cate antennæ on approaching an object of fresh interest.

From day to day she put off telling her father that she did not wish to go back to Cincinnati for the remainder of the term at the Seminary or, indeed, at all. She scarcely knew how he would receive such an announcement. They were not companions, this father and daughter, and Fanny somehow realized now that the fact that they had been separated for long periods of time since she had been grown, did not of itself account for this state of affairs. She wondered dimly without actually deploring or setting herself to consider whose fault it was. Her mind had never dwelt on her father much longer than to receive the impression, common to most of Camden, that he was an odd, silent man with few strong likings and a crusty indifference for the world in general. Yet Fanny knew certain facts that did not readily reconcile themselves to this view,—she had known him to drive cheerfully many miles into the country on freezing winter nights to bring red and lusty infants into the world or to ease the dying hours of men and women in homes whose poverty made these visits necessarily pure charity; and sick children, brought by anxious mothers to the house for him to see, she had known him to take into his arms with all the tenderness of a tender woman.

As the end of her vacation drew near, she was compelled to inform him that she wished to alter her plans. Unconsciously he made it easier for her by asking her, on the morning of the last day of her vacation, as they sat at breakfast,

"Will you take the early or the late boat tomorrow, Fanny?"

His matter-of-fact tone hurt her a little, in spite of the fact that she was intent on gaining her object with him. It would have been pleasanter if he had wanted her to remain with him and had spontaneously suggested that she should do so. She would have liked to feel her presence contributive to his comfort and happiness. Without ever having made a single definite effort to render it so, she had pleased herself, during these recent days, by assuming that it was, chiefly from a vague sense that this would be the natural and comfortable way. Her father's tacit, unconscious admission that his scheme of life did not intimately include her was a bit of a shock. She rose, and going to him, put her arms about his neck.

"But, father. I'm not going back!"

"Not going back?" he repeated, setting down his coffee-cup and looking at her in undisguised astonishment.

"No, I am a woman now, and my place is with you." It was a pretty speech, and he realized that

she looked as pretty as a picture making it. "Don't you want me here with you?" she continued cajolingly.

"Yes, of course," he answered hastily, evidently puzzled. "But not until after you have finished your education, my dear. Your Aunt Matilda will be expecting you back. And as young as you are, it's best—it's best, you see, that you should be with a woman relative," he added, hardly knowing what to say.

"But I'd much rather be with you," replied Fanny, a demisemiquaver in her voice, betraying that she was close now to tears. Her father's insistence alarmed her. It was her first real test of her power with him, and she had no idea how much combativeness he might show. She resented, too, his not wanting her as a companion after her assurance that she was ready to become one, for how could he know that she was not giving him precisely her real reason for wishing to remain in Camden?

"But I am away so much of the time at night," he protested, "and you will be alone in the house. You won't like it, and I doubt if it's quite safe." Hitherto he had satisfied his conscience about her in the thought that he was giving her an expensive education, proceeding under the immediate guidance of his wife's sister. She had never been a child after his own heart, and in bringing her up, after his

wife's death, he had, from a reasoned-out loyalty, done by her as he knew his wife would have wished him to do had she lived. He had lived with his wife on terms of the barest civility and for her sister Matilda he entertained no more affection. But she was a woman who could impart that knowledge of the world and its society that a girl of Fanny's pronounced inclination craved above all things. He had carefully given Fanny what he had believed, when grown, she would be glad to find herself possessed of, having known instinctively that ideas of his own would be alien to her. Now here she was, coming of her own volition back to him, to be taken care of under his own roof, instead of marrying from her aunt's as he had always supposed she would, in proper course of time, do. He was vexed at her for urging what he considered to be a mere whim.

"No, no, I shan't be afraid!" she pleaded, tears gathering on her curved lashes.

"Well, well," he answered, touched at last by this sign of filial affection, and patting her awkwardly on the shoulder, "you shall stay, of course, if your heart's set on it. I'll write to your aunt to-day and explain that you'll not be back."

Fanny was clever enough to suppress the note of triumph from her voice as she answered, "Thank you, father. I do really want to stay here with

you." And as she spoke, a ray of tenderness for him, summoned by his genuine consideration for her, visited her, saving the speech from being wholly untrue.

One afternoon, some weeks after she had begun playing the organ at church, she started, all a-flutter, to attend a meeting of the Camden Circle at Miss Bowman's. She had heard that Stephen was to be present and she anticipated an interchange of glances, smiles and significant "ohs" among the members. Many girls would have dreaded this, especially as no engagement existed, but Fanny looked forward to it as something to be blushed over prettily and secretly enjoyed. Indeed, within her busy brain visions were already dancing of Stephen and herself plighting vows before a marriage altar, and moving away to a city where they could live on a scale not possible in Camden. So strong a man as Stephen, she felt, would surely not remain long in a small town like Camden.

As Fanny expected, Stephen was at the meeting and the ripple of excitement that she had counted on was distinctly perceptible. Judith did not come. Zack, their old family servant, who had gone to live in a cabin down by the river, was not well, and she was spending the day tidying up his room, getting his dinner and reading to him.

From her seat by the window Fanny suddenly

heard Miss Eastbrook ask Stephen, "Do you expect to come back to Camden Circuit after the next conference?"

"I think there is no doubt of that," he answered emphatically. "I hope to spend a good many years in itinerant work. It belongs to the young men."

At these words Fanny's blushings and flutterings quite died away. That Stephen's ambition might not coincide with her own, she had not paused to consider. Disappointment clouded her face and she became suddenly intent on counting the threads in her lace work.

Miss Charlotte, sitting opposite Fanny, could not read her thoughts completely, but she did read a warm interest in Stephen. Could it be true, as she had heard, that they were to marry? She did not believe it. She had come to like Stephen greatly and she credited him with more taste and judgment than to fall in love with Fanny. She had never abandoned her hope that Stephen and Judith would one day marry. To be sure, she had begun to fear that in this regard the ways of Providence were less scrutable than she could have wished, but Miss Charlotte was not one who gave up a desire easily. Remarks that Judith had dropped about her visit at Fir Heights had convinced her that she was wholly unhappy in her engagement to Abel. Miss Charlotte determined that these two friends of hers

should not be parted, at least not by gossip and misunderstanding. Men in Stephen's position had sometimes been virtually compelled to marry women whom they did not love. She resolved to let Stephen know the danger into which he was drifting.

Casting about for means wherewith to do it, Colonel Carroll came into her mind. She knew that he was Stephen's closest friend, and he was, moreover, a man to whom a delicate mission could safely be intrusted. He called regularly at the house on Friday mornings to bring Jane and her his copy of the *Liberator*; she would see to it this week that he came inside so that she could talk to him.

When he came, somewhat earlier than usual, Charlotte met him at the door. She was glad that Jane was out. Jane, she knew by instinct, would not approve of what she termed match-making.

Carroll held the *Liberator* open in his hand. "I tell you Garrison's thundering at Clay," he said fervently, pointing to the page before him.

"Come in and read it to me!" cried Miss Charlotte; she and Jane were both firm abolitionists.

"Just listen!" began Carroll, as they sat down in the parlor. "'Henry Clay, with one foot in the grave, and just ready to have both body and soul cast into hell, as if eager to make his damnation sure, rises in the United States Senate, and pro-

poses an inquiry into the expediency of passing yet another law by which every one who shall dare peep or mutter against the execution of the Fugitive Slave Bill shall have his life crushed out.' ”

But, dear as was the cause of freedom to Miss Charlotte, another cause of infinitely less consequence was uppermost in her heart this morning. After Colonel Carroll had talked out his first enthusiasm on Garrison's article, this white-souled little old lady, with an air that would have done credit to Scotland Yard, led the conversation to church matters and then to Fanny.

“Fanny's frivolous playing ruins the service!” she declared.

“I agree with you perfectly,” answered Colonel Carroll. “Perfectly!”

“It seems a pity,” she ventured, “that Mr. Waters is so taken with Fanny,—don't you think so?”

“Taken with her!” exclaimed Carroll. “Oh, I can't believe it! Fanny's a little coquette, of course, but Stephen is not so easily caught. He walks home with her from choir practice, as a simple courtesy I don't doubt, and he may call occasionally. But that's as much because he likes her father as anything else, I fancy.”

Miss Charlotte was relieved, but she did not feel that her mission was quite ended.

"People are talking, at all events," she observed pointedly.

"Well, in a small town that is to be expected," replied Carroll. "Rest assured, it will get around to Stephen in due time."

When Colonel Carroll left, Miss Charlotte felt satisfied that she had enlisted him as a co-conspirator. The effect was precisely that for which she had hoped. Astonished that his simple courtesies had been misconstrued, and not a little annoyed, Stephen withdrew them. Miss Charlotte had no reason to regret the only time in her life that she had tattled.

One evening not long after Colonel Carroll's call, as she and Judith sat in her room up stairs, she remarked casually,

"Stephen Waters has shown good sense in letting Fanny Potter drop."

"But they are to be married!" cried Judith.

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Miss Charlotte.

"Surely he has courted her!" Judith insisted. She seemed, by some rare, incredible chance to have touched a magic spring that had thrown a flood of rosy light on the world.

"I don't think so," replied Miss Charlotte decisively. She was convinced that Fanny had done all of what could really be called courting.

Judith did not stop to consider how it came that

Charlotte knew that Stephen had not cared for Fanny. It was enough that she did know. She reminded herself that it ought not to make any difference to her whether Stephen Waters were free or not, but she was obliged to own that it did make every difference.

Stephen, meanwhile, was wondering if the gossip about Fanny and himself had influenced Judith in giving up the organ. The excuse that she had pleaded was so very transparent that he had not for a moment accepted it as her real reason. He had not for a long time exchanged a word with her. He saw her every Sunday in church, where she sat in the Eastbrook pew near the front, Jane on one side and Charlotte on the other, as if May had slipped in between November and December. But at the close of the meeting she always left among the first. When they chanced to meet on the street, she appeared absorbed and had only a conventional greeting for him. He felt that he must see her and talk to her at least once more,—it was intolerable that she should continue in the belief that he was a philanderer. It would be impossible to explain completely why he had remained away from her at the Christmas Eve party, but he could at least let her know that Fanny was nothing to him.

All of Stephen's days now were battle-days. He tore up the two notes that Judith, during the course

of their acquaintance, had written him, and immediately after regretted that he had done so. The situation was curious: he would have walked to the uttermost ends of the earth if only he might be near her; she lived within a half-dozen blocks of him and he durst not go to her. In every other house in and about Camden he felt free to call; from the one house where he longed to call, he must remain away. Life was to him but as a maze, up and down whose twisting aisles he strode impatiently, hoping ever at the next turn to meet Judith.

The snows of winter melted, the frozen earth thawed, and spring came on, at first slowly, then with a mad rush. The willows along Indian Creek leaved early, spreading mystical green veils between the gaunt sycamores. A few days of coaxing weather—and the whole earth was a-wearing of the green. March had scolded, April wept and at last May smiled. One warm moist night men went to bed on a world bare and scentless and sober of hue; they woke on a world blossomy and fragrant and fair. The red-bud and haw bloomed, apple-orchards had unfurled their pink and white loveliness and rows on rows of young plum trees, exquisite as bridal bouquets, made the air redolent with their perfume.

On a balmy afternoon toward the end of May, the spring called irresistibly to Stephen, and his

youth and love answered. An errand took him up the street and as he passed the Eastbrook house he caught a glimpse, back in the green brambled garden, of Judith in a white dress. As he came back down the street he stopped to speak to her. She had on her hat and was just starting to go to Zack's cabin. They walked down the street together.

It is in the color that best becomes her that a beautiful woman is most beautiful, but it is in white that she is adorable. A feeling akin to worship stole over Stephen, as from time to time his eyes rested on Judith.

It was a glad day. April's chill was out of the air and summer's dust and heat and glare were not yet come. The lusty elms, rejoicing in the sunshine, waved new-green branches to the growing world.

"I have scarcely seen you for weeks, Miss La Monde," said Stephen as they left Zack, stronger and grateful. "Won't you walk out into the country a little way with me? A day like this makes me restless. 'Then longen folk to gon on pilgrimages.'"

Miss Charlotte's unexpected contradiction about Stephen and Fanny had taken Judith's citadel of resolution by storm and left her absolutely unfended. She, too, felt the call of spring, as lithe young branches feel the stirring of sap in their veins.

"There's a thrill about spring," she said as they strolled out past the toll-gate, "that no other season gives you. It's as if the earth were breathless with surprise at its own beauty."

Of their first two meetings, in the tent and at the Heights, they had, as it were, tacitly agreed not to speak. As time went on, it became more and more difficult to allude to them, and, indeed, neither had any inclination to do so. They had grown sacred, like shrines in a temple, to be uncovered only once or twice in a lifetime and viewed in speechless reverence.

"I was extremely sorry that you felt compelled to give up the organ," Stephen remarked. "Miss Potter's playing does not really add to the service."

There was a moment's pause, significant to each, then Judith spoke.

"I couldn't go on with it. I am so occupied, not with things to do, but I have so much to think of. Coming back home as I did after having been away so long, I find old duties and obligations pressing. I am afraid that I shall fail utterly in meeting them. I don't know—oh, it is so hard to choose the right when neither way seems right!"

Helplessly, pleadingly, implicitly, she looked to him to set her right. A hundred Luthers could never end confession. That instant she had risen to a perception of her need of Stephen. She did

not merely love him,—his thought of her, his possible approval or disapproval, had become the plain song of her life to which the rest was but a descant.

Stephen started. He knew that it was of her relation to Abel that she spoke. How could he advise her? On any other subject—the spirit of the Puritan ancestor came to his rescue.

“You have stated,” he replied with slow reluctant gravity, “one of the saddest problems in the world. If one has formed an obligation on which another has built his life, I see no way of escape from it. Certainly, no happiness founded on another’s sorrow could be real or lasting.”

Hardly had the words passed his lips before his heart failed him and he became distracted with fear that he had answered her harshly.

By this time they had reached the edge of town and the murmurs of Indian Creek came to them.

“Let us walk down to the Well,” Stephen suggested.

“It must be beautiful there now,” she answered assentingly. “I have not once visited the Well since I came home. perhaps because I feel myself grown too old for its romantic fancies,” she continued, smiling.

The Well was reached by a path that gradually and enticingly wound down into its green retreat. The spot was Edenic. The ground was low and

overgrown with a tangle of Lushes that had served to screen many a lovers' tryst. A hundred delicate flowers bloomed there. Golden buttercups gleamed among the grass, bluebells swung daintily on their slender stems, shy violets and frail wind-flowers hid at the foot of mossy stumps. The rich scent of May-apple blossoms spiced the air.

The Well itself was sheltered by a slight structure open on both sides, hardly more in fact than a shed, but, as it was all of rough bark and luxuriantly overgrown with wild honeysuckle, it formed a bower that fair Rosamond and her royal lover would not have disdained. According to a tradition handed down from the Indian tribe that formerly inhabited the locality, any wish framed here, especially at the witching time of a full May moon, and followed by a drink of the cold delicious water, would be fulfilled.

Beyond, overhung with sycamores that bathed their smooth white limbs in its cool current, a brook babbled like an infant without telling tales. The trees and bushes were thickest here, and, in their safe pleached shelter, birds of brightest wing and sweetest note nestled and sang. The cardinal, uttering his peculiarly soft, caressing call, flitted in and out of the higher branches; bob-white whistled his gayest; the pewit, and the rarer red-winged blackbird had their haunts here.

They sat down on the rustic bench in the well-house and Stephen drew from his pocket a magazine.

"A friend in Baltimore sent me yesterday the last copy of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. It contains a new poem by Poe. May I read it to you?"

"Yes, do," she answered, thinking what a happy place to live in the world is, after all!

In a low voice he began :

" 'It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived, whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee ;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.' "

The strength of speech and the music of song blended in Stephen's reading. The plangent melody loosened Judith's thoughts ever so slightly and set them rocking on a sea of emotion. The sea was wide, and they were out on it before she was aware. On, on, she drifted until she had forgotten everything except that she and Stephen were at the Well together and alone. The fascination of his voice and manner were complete.

Closing the magazine he proposed laughingly that they should each make a wish and then drink from the well. Taking tender young leaves from a festooning grape-vine near by he formed of them two



Stooping, he filled one and gave it to her *Page 241*



chalices that Hebe herself might willingly have borne. Stooping, he filled one with the cold bright water and gave it to her. Then he filled his own.

"The wish!" he cried, holding it high.

"The wish!" she echoed faintly.

They drank, and Stephen threw away his cup. Coming to Judith's side he took her cup also.

She was fair in her white flowing dress and black gipsy hat with its bunches of red roses under the curving brim just above each delicate ear. Red as roses newly opened were her softly parted lips.

"This is a charming spot," she murmured in the drowsed tone of one who has drunk a potion.

"What did you wish?" Stephen drew a little nearer, tossing away her cup.

"What right have you to ask?" she protested, but with her eyes in thrall to his. If she could ever be anything to him but Judith, he thought, it would be Stella.

He did not answer. With a single step that brought him close to her he bent and took her unresisting hand.

"Once?" His voice was unsteady and so low that near as he was it barely reached her.

"Once? . . . Judith?"

Down in the tangly hollow behind the Well, the brook was babbling beneath the white sycamores like an infant. It would tell no tales. And from

the bluebells and the violets came a chorus of fairy voices crying "Yes! It is only for once! Yes!" It was May, and they were young and they loved each other.

Her eyes fell. His lips touched hers.

Then she started back. Abel trusted her and she was deceiving him! Many times she had walked to this very spot with him!

"Oh," she cried passionately, "I wish that I had never known you!" And turning from him she ran rapidly up the path to the road.

Stephen stood still, gazing after her until she disappeared. Humiliated at his own weakness, feeling that she must hate him, he did not dare to follow and entreat her pardon. Ought he not to have known without this lesson, he asked himself bitterly, how idle it was to attempt to grasp even for a moment this prize that the resistless roll of life bade him renounce? And how could he ever meet her again!

Cloud mountains reared their purple mystic shapes in the western sky and above them the setting sun glowed in sacrificial fires, as at last he left the dell.

Meanwhile, Judith, walking slowly and solitarily homeward, burned with the memory of his kiss. Undreamed-of bliss! Heaven lay at her very feet! But it was not hers to enjoy for long. Was Stephen only playing with her or did he really love her?

To gain a moment's respite she would allow herself to believe that he did, but straightway Heart and Conscience began their inevitable conflict, two voices from one soul:

"God forgive me!" cried Conscience sharply, as a child cries out in the night.

"There is nothing that needs forgiveness," asserted Heart recklessly. "It was right. He loves me!"

"And I love him." admitted Conscience pathetically, "but it was wrong!"

"It was right!" insisted Heart stoutly. "We belong to each other!"

"It was wrong," repeated Conscience solemnly. "I belong to Abel!"

And so it went.

Many times she wondered what had been Stephen's wish. Blushing she confessed her own: that she might marry him, not Abel. She had been very wicked,—but she did not unsay the wish.

CHAPTER XVI

A BARGAIN

The cessation of Stephen's attentions, slight as they were, left Fanny like a boy on a holiday whose splendid Roman candles have all been shot off and who stands dazed, still holding in his hand the last dead, dark stick. She was piqued and angry at Stephen, and though in her heart she could not blame him, she felt herself in a position of some embarrassment. But she was careful to hide all traces of her disappointment, in which she succeeded so completely that she reduced comment to a minimum. Camden, at first puzzled, finally concluded that there had never been anything serious between Stephen and Fanny.

Dudley, like the rest of Camden, was puzzled for a time, and then infinitely relieved. He had envied Stephen: his evident favor in Fanny's eyes, but, grateful to him as he was, he had felt it impossible to become his rival for her hand. As it became buzzed about that Stephen was no longer attentive to Fanny, he was at first astonished, and then, seeing in Stephen no trace of the disappointed

lover, he instinctively laid the whole story at the door of the Camden Circle.

Dudley recognized now that his opportunity with Fanny had come. Contrary to general expectation he had not once fallen back into his old weakness and he was gradually regaining his once excellent practice. Doctor Potter's friendly attitude had continued, and he knew that he was free to call on Fanny. He adored her. On the night of the Christmas Eve party she had appeared to him so charming that he had since seen her and thought of her, not in the harsh atmosphere of reality, but in a delicate *milieu* in which she dwelt apart from other women. But he was naturally a proud man and he did not yet feel sufficiently confident of himself or sure of his position in the town to make advances to her.

He knew that, slowly at least, he was regaining the unqualified respect in which he had once been held. At a party caucus he had risen, for the first time in several years, and spoken in a brilliant, telling strain.

Belmont had called the caucus. It was his secret hope to rush his party into a pledge that should practically bind it to nominate him at the approaching county convention. But to his surprise things did not turn his way. He was aware that his attack on Stephen had made him enemies, but though the

caucus might not want him, was he not the only available man?

Even before the chairman's gavel had called the caucus to order, Belmont was aware that there was a new element in it that might or might not be friendly to him. Colonel Carroll was present, and with him Stephen. Tibbott had been primed to suggest Belmont's name, but he did not have a chance to do so. The caucus politely declined to pledge any name at so early a day. Inconsistently, however, it received with cheers an announcement from Stephen Waters, who was called on to speak by Doctor Potter.

"Speech, speech!"

Stephen smiled. "I only want to say, gentlemen—if it is right for so recent a resident to speak at all—that I believe that by the time of the convention we shall have no trouble in finding a good candidate, one that will be eminently acceptable to all of us. I have, indeed, Colonel Carroll's permission to inform you—the announcement affords me the greatest pleasure—that if at that time the party desires his services, failing the appearance of any other entirely satisfactory man, he himself will accept the nomination."

It was then that Dudley had spoken. As Stephen had risen, a mad desire for the nomination had darted into Dudley's mind. He believed that he

could win if he had the chance to run. But at the mention of Colonel Carroll's name he resolutely put his own ambition aside. Briefly, but fluently and forcefully, he thanked Colonel Carroll in the name of the community for reconsidering his earlier decision never to accept any office and then he reminded the caucus that nothing must be left undone to secure to the county the honor of his nomination and election. Amid cries of "Good for you, Dudley!" he sat down, flushed with the knowledge that he had done well in the eyes of men who long had regarded him with pity or contempt.

Even Tibbott applauded timidly until he caught Belmont looking at him with thunder on his brow. Belmont was furious. He felt that his chances for the nomination were practically gone, though he by no means abandoned hope. On the contrary, he determined to fight openly, secretly, desperately this antagonistic influence inspired by Waters.

When, on the following Tuesday, Bob Lane, driver of the stage, bent on the friendly purpose of communicating to Tibbott certain items of news for the paper that he had heard in New Alden, strolled into the office of the *True Whig*, he found him absorbed in setting a long piece of copy. Bob was fairly on him before Tibbott became aware of his presence. Tibbott reddened and, with a muttered explanation, hastily put the copy aside. But it was

too late. Bob had read in Belmont's bold hand, three lines, entire. He made no allusion to their contents, but jocularly imparted his news and then went down into the street again.

Reaching the sidewalk he paused meditatively and whistled. Then, his face lighting up, he cracked his black-snake and went off to hunt up Sam Lawson; the two were soon deep in conversation. At first Lawson listened to him reluctantly, but as Bob talked on, he appeared to yield more and more. He even forgot to chew, and when the two separated they shook hands as on a compact.

On Bob's departure, Tibbott put up his copy, and resumed the task of setting it. Belmont came into the office shortly after, but Tibbott neglected to mention Bob's visit, for the reason that Belmont was already glowering, his steady condition since the night of the caucus. So the beacon lamp of the Whig party was, as usual, filled, polished, and lighted, and by Thursday night was ready for shining. That is to say, the five hundred copies of the paper were folded and stacked in neat piles in Tibbott's room.

The old lounge on which Tibbott slept was covered with threadbare carpet through which the broken springs protruded with painful anatomical suggestiveness. He had slept there for so many years, however, that he knew exactly where to lie in order to avoid these improvements on the Inqui-

sition, and so it was not their fault that he found himself awake soon after twelve that night. He heard a noise of footsteps and was about to jump up when a firm hand restrained him.

"Keep quiet, damn you! We haven't any quarrel with you. But if you tell—" Tibbott knew the voice perfectly well, and equally well he knew that resistance would be useless. He kept quiet and quaked.

Bob struck a match and, lighting his lantern, set it on Tibbott's desk. For an instant he surveyed the stacks of folded papers and then he advanced toward them.

At this Tibbott poked up from the bed-covers a neatly night-capped head. "What—what are you going to do with them?" he gasped, horrified.

"Little man," answered Bob patronizingly, "you go to sleep. The less you know about this affair the better for you." Tibbott's head promptly disappeared under the covers.

Bob took one copy and, folding it, put it away in an inner pocket of his coat. Then, with Lawson's aid, he picked up the papers, carried them noiselessly down the stairs and dumped them into the stage which stood waiting outside. Next, unlocking the forms in the press, they effectually pied the type. For a moment, then, they stood, regarding the empty corner where the papers had lain.

"Giminy, but I'd like to be here when Belmont comes in the morning!" exclaimed Lawson in unwonted loquacity.

Bob blew out his lantern, and then he and Lawson descended the stairs and drove out to the creek, into whose depths the entire edition was ignominiously dumped. A second time Belmont's attempt to set the town against Stephen Waters had failed. Nor were the five hundred *True Whigs* all that was destroyed that night. With them went their editor's hope of nomination.

When Belmont entered the office the next morning—Tibbott had discreetly fled at daylight—and saw that his papers were gone, he stopped short, thunderstruck. Recovering himself a little, he proceeded to consign to the devil's abiding-place Stephen Waters, Colonel Carroll and anybody and everybody else connected with them. By just whose hands his papers had been destroyed, he did not care. It was enough that a strong force, including Dudley—Dudley, his once indifferent tool, Dudley who had struck at him—was rising against him. He had counted absolutely on the nomination and had made promises right and left. Now this unexpected influence had come between him and his hopes as swiftly as a train shunts in between a waiting traveler and some fair view. Locking the office, he strode down stairs and into the street.

Although ignored by the caucus, he knew that he was still an important factor in town and county politics. He still dominated the town board in most matters, although Dudley now acted in entire independence, and even Tibbott had once or twice behaved with pugnacious importance. More consoling, however, than his power on the board, was the fact that the county-seat fight still lay practically in his hands. He believed that in that game, at least, he held the master card. How best to play it most surely to win revenge on his enemies and advantage for himself, was now his absorbing problem.

Directly across the way stood the stage about to start for its morning trip to New Alden. The sight suggested that he should go there himself. He had no errand in New Alden, but it would be a relief to get out of Camden for the day, at least. He did not choose, however, to ride in the stage, where there would probably be other passengers to whom he would be obliged to talk. Hiring a horse at the public stable, he rode so hard that he beat the stage into New Alden by a half-hour.

All the morning he wandered aimlessly, like a belated convention delegate crowded from the headquarters hotel into an out-of-the-way house where there is no blaring band, no noisy crowd, and no joy-radiating candidate. He walked out St. Charles Street past high yards, stone-walled, and straight-

pillared houses overhung with charming little Romeo and Juliet balconies. He went down to the wharf and watched the unloading of a freight steamer. At noon he strolled into the Belvedere House, not from hunger, but for the sake of passing, amid the bustle of its lobby and dining-room, an hour of the long heavy day. Just as he seated himself at an unoccupied table, he felt a slap on the shoulder.

"Hello, Belmont! Don't be so exclusive! Come over here with us!"

Belmont turned and recognized in the tall, red-whiskered man with prominent watch-chain, plaid waistcoat, creaking boots and stogy, his old acquaintance, Dick Morgan. Morgan was a New Alden lawyer and rather popular, although by men of his own profession he was regarded as something of a shyster and pettifogger. Politically, his principles were determined by his environment. Living in New Alden, he was a Democrat for the same reason that would have made him a Whig had he lived in Camden. In New Alden the tree of Democracy flourished, dropping, frequently, fine juicy plums, whereas the tree of Whigism dropped none at all. Personally, also, he was one of those men who take color from their immediate associates. Walking with a minister, he seemed the essence of respectability, but in company with a bartender he looked as if he had just broken jail. He and Belmont had

once been associated in a business transaction that required a little juggling of the public funds, and he had done the juggling. Belmont was not especially glad to see him, but the long morning had softened his mood, and the sight of any friendly face was welcome.

At the table to which they turned, there was already seated a third guest whom Morgan introduced as Jack Hyman. Hyman was small, oily, glib-spoken and cuffless, with a soiled dickey, mean, huddled features and a powerful odor of cheap whisky. Belmont did not see his offered hand.

Dinner being brought, Belmont found himself unable even to pretend to eat. Not so Hyman. He had ordered approximately everything on the bill of fare, including several wines, and immediately began to attack, with the gusto of one accustomed to dine on rum and a sandwich, the small fleet of steaming side-dishes that surrounded him a foot deep. Morgan watched him for a moment with a half-smile, and then noticed Belmont's abstraction.

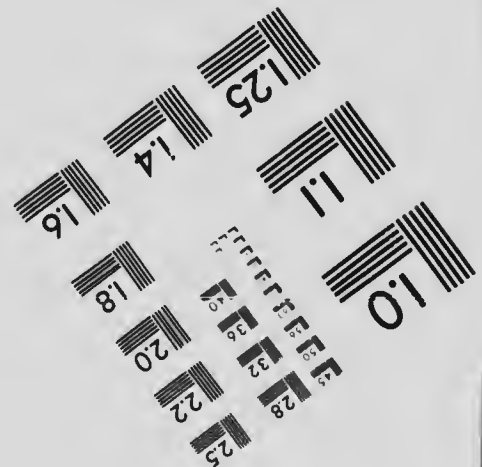
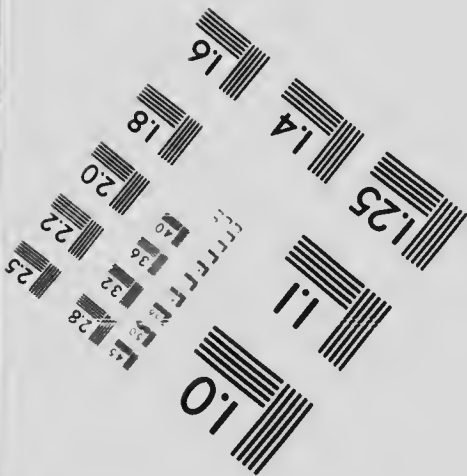
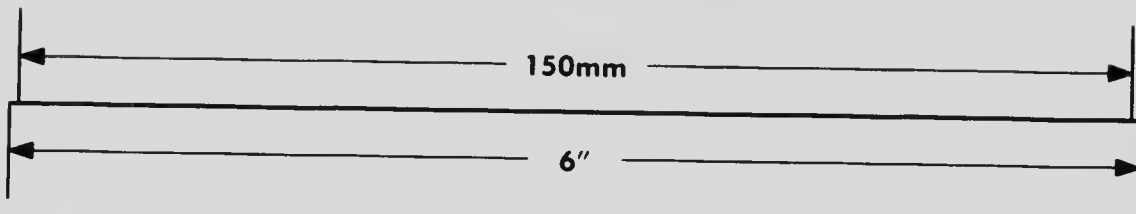
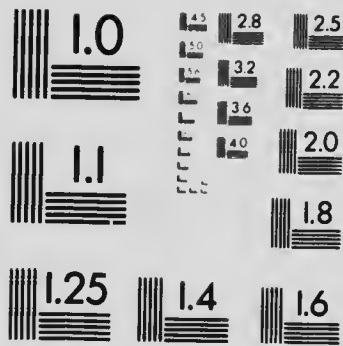
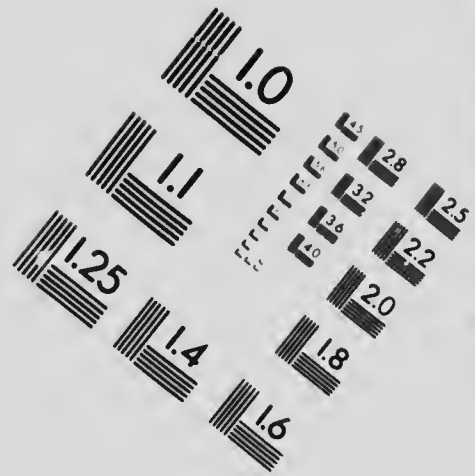
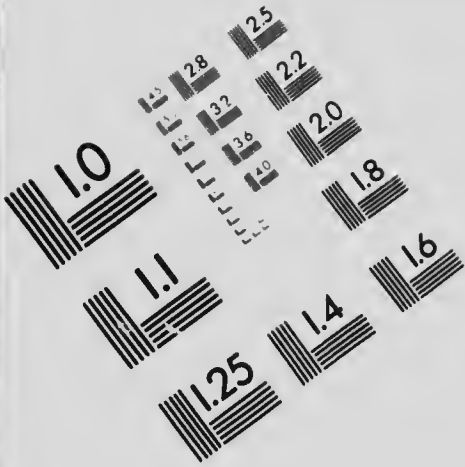
"What makes you so glum, Colonel? Anything up?"

Belmont hesitated. "Oh, nothing," he answered, glancing at Hyman. Morgan nodded understandingly.

"Jack," he said, rising, "if there's anything you've forgotten, just ask the waiter. Colonel Belmont and



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I are going up stairs to talk over a little piece of business."

In a private upper room, Belmont told Morgan, first of the destruction of his papers, and then, one confidence begetting another, the entire story of his political downfall.

"I've got the whole town against me," he confessed finally. "They wouldn't give me the nomination now for love or money. This new, nigger-loving preacher wants Carroll to take it, and of course nobody can run against him."

"What did you ever leave Kentucky for, Belmont?" asked Morgan curiously. "Weren't you pretty well fixed down there?"

"Oh," replied Belmont with a shrug, "I've still got a handful of niggers there. But my plantation's been encumbered for years, and then my wife, you know, had consumption, and she begged to come back up here to her folks. Once I'd pulled up—"

"I see," said Morgan somewhat elaborately, as Belmont's pause threatened to grow embarrassing. He studied the rose garlands in the worn brussels carpet for a moment in silence. Then he looked up, straight at his companion.

"Belmont, do you really want this nomination?"

"Like hell!"

"Got any money?"

Belmont hesitated. "Some," he said at last.

"How much?"

"About five hundred."

"Well, I guess we could give it to you over here, not this time, it's too late now, but next time certainly."

Belmont started. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Of course, as your Methodist preacher would say, you'd have to undergo a change of heart. Your principles—"

"Principles be damned!" interrupted Belmont. "How could you fix it?"

"As you know," answered Morgan, his eyes reverting to the rose garlands, "I came on the town board here last spring. I haven't wasted much time since. And that fellow Hyman down stairs has helped me. He's rather disgusting, I'll admit, but he's useful. And he doesn't demand much,—I feed him now and then and he's perfectly satisfied. Now he and I and you, and one or two others that I can manage, ought to be able to pull this thing through."

"For a consideration, I reckon?" inquired Belmont significantly.

Morgan smiled blandly. "Certainly," he assented, "for a consideration."

Meantime in the dining-room, the entire fleet of side-dishes had surrendered to Hyman and he had

drunk a glass of apple-jack on top of them and still Morgan and Belmont had not returned. He decided to go up stairs and seek them. "Do they mean to shake me?" he muttered.

At the head of the stairs he paused and looked down the low narrow corridor, heavily laden with kitchen odors, at the long double row of closed doors, each with its polished gilt number. He wondered behind which number Morgan and Belmont were. Why had they gone off and left him? If they had any little matters to arrange, he wouldn't peach.

Just then a door at his right opened and Morgan stepped out. He had a pencil in his hand and a map of the county well marked up.

"Had enough, Jack?" he called cheerfully. "Come on in! I was just starting after you."

Hyman obeyed with alacrity. He suspected that there was a game on, and he was keen to be in it. It proved to be a bigger game than the one he had thought he scented—merely the familiar barter and sale of a seat in the Legislature. Hyman was a bit dazed at its magnitude and audacity, but he knew how to keep mum when his own interests were involved, as he was soon made to see they were.

Within the room, both the swayed bed and the marble-topped table were covered with papers bearing elaborate calculations. In the conference that

ensued, it was decided that Belmont should, for the present at least, abstain from further attacks on Waters.

Next week the *True Whig* appeared as usual, except for a notice expressing the editor's regret that, owing to circumstances over which he had no control, the previous issue of the paper had not reached its patrons. The real explanation was for months known only to three or four persons. Lawson had consented to help Bob destroy the papers only on promise that the whole affair be kept a profound secret. Even Stephen did not know for a long time, for they recognized that however much he might resent Belmont's attack, he could not countenance such a means of thwarting it. Tibbott fairly ached to blab, but after Lane's threats he dared not. And Belmont, to his amazement, never once alluded to the matter.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NOMINATING CONVENTION

July came, bringing the day of the nominating convention. To this day the Whigs of the county had looked eagerly forward. More than one man wished to present Colonel Carroll's name, but all agreed that the honor belonged to Stephen Waters.

The convention was held in the lower room of the court-house. The rusty old stove had been taken out, and at the farther end a speakers' platform, draped in bunting, had been erected. On the stand, beside the silver luster water-pitcher and glass by whose aid, paradoxically, a whole flood of eloquence was to be kept flowing, a big bunch of red roses nodded expectantly. Above the platform, surmounting the august features of Washington, its silken folds filling sentimentally in the breeze that wandered through the open windows, hung the starry banner.

Camden's town band, stationed just outside the door, played heart-stirring martial music. Now its fifes and drums rattled *Yankcc Doodle*, only to be followed and entirely outdone by the stately trom-

bones lengthening and shortening their shining tubes in the proud rolling measures of *Columbia*. By nine o'clock the room was packed, though only the fortunate wearers of white badges marked "Delegate" were admitted. With every zephyr the badges fluttered anticipatively, and the loose bunting about the platform alternately swelled and flattened, like hope in the breast of a candidate.

The Square was black with men and women. About the windows not an inch of space remained. Late comers offered money for these advantageous places and were refused. Beneath one window Black Betty, a revolutionary three-pounder, had been dragged, and on its long cylinder tiptoed a half-dozen small boys to whom the day was an extra Fourth of July. Toward the iron fence that inclosed the Square, the crowd was scattered, disclosing patches of summer's green carpet. In a shady corner a lemonade stand thrived. Outside the fence, in solid black array, horses and vehicles were hitched so closely that wheels all but locked. The streets were paved with golden sunshine, along which the waving branches of the elms etched lanceolate borders.

The convention was organized and the congressman of the district, who was taking a little vacation in the interests of his country, sounded the keynote. This consumed two hours of time that seemed

to the eager crowd outside a sizeable fragment of eternity. The honorable gentleman was a noted spellbinder. He had been born strong of lung, and at Washington he had acquired eye-glasses, a willowy bend and other manifestations of polish.

When he began speaking a stately mane flowed back from his brow; when he finished a wild fringe tossed over it. In a grand retrospect he found not a single syllable of a single plank of a single platform of his party to alter. The great national questions had been settled, settled right and settled for ever, by the Whigs.

The recent war and the problem of slavery, wedges that threatened Whig integrity, he smoothly disposed of in safe and obscure generalities. Resting a thumb easily in his breeches pocket, he discoursed largely on national finances, drawing rounds of applause, not a little of which was furnished by men who seldom heard a jingle in their own pockets. He lauded the faithful and exhorted them to renewed zeal. To every Whig leader, from President Fillmore down, he paid superlative tribute. He denounced the new custom in the Legislature and in Congress of pairing off, and was sure that the convention's nominee would not stoop so low. And, rising to indignant heights, he pounced with swooping forefinger on Democracy, abusing it until it had not a leg left to stand on. He closed with an in-

gloriously wilted stock and a mopyy brow, but with the swelling assurance that he had said the X-Y-Z and ampersand on Whig issues. Amid a roar of applause he took his seat.

James Dudley, sitting back near a window, clapped with the rest. But in his heart he was puzzled and hurt. He could not understand why he had not been asked to open the convention,—a wonder removed from ordinary vanity by his simple knowledge that he was conceded to be the best speaker in the county.

Thud, thud, fell the chairman's gavel. The applause died away and Riley Tibbott rose.

Tibbott was hardly aware that Camden did not share his own estimate of his oratory. Of the three members of the town board he spoke the oftenest and said the least. He might be called tin-tongued. His periods had all the showy glitter of the cheapest of metals and they resounded with nothing more sonorous than its empty clatter.

Tibbott begged the attention of the delegates while he urged the claims of a man ready to render the Whig party signal service. "Gentlemen," sinking his voice to a whisper, "this man is at this very moment in your midst. Possibly the more sagacious among you have already suspected his identity."

On the waves of disinterested enthusiasm, Tibbott's voice rose at the beginning of each sentence

and fell midway, his right arm and clenched fist striking woodenly out and back in recurrent emphasis, like the piston of an engine laboriously getting up steam.

"It would be superfluous to eulogize this candidate or his labors on behalf of the party. The giants of the forest murmur this statesman's name in the breeze, the loud waves of ocean thunder it! The finger of Destiny, gentlemen, points to Francis P. R. Belmont." Acting as proxy for Destiny, who did not appear to be on hand, Tibbott turned and pointed his mean little forefinger oracularly at his chief.

Tibbott sat down amid applause evoked largely by gratitude that the unavoidable preliminaries to the real business of the day were at last over. Belmont had not the slightest hope of the nomination, but he had judged it desirable as a bluff that his name should be presented.

Again the thud of the chairman's gavel. There was a final clearing of throats. Through the crowd outside word was passed that Stephen was about to speak. The jam at the windows grew instantly greater; there was a last shifting from foot to foot, and then dead silence.

"Gentlemen," began Stephen. "I feel it a great honor to address you at this convention. I confess that I have never known a prouder moment. We all have a right to feel proud to-day. As I stand on this

platform I see before me the faces of men desirous that one of their best citizens shall represent them. The ambition is honorable and, as we are happy to know, it is to be gratified. I have the honor, gentlemen, and the very great pleasure, of presenting to you the name of a man identified with the county and its best interests; a man of unquestioned integrity and of brilliant intellect; a man whom the children in the streets love and whom all men respect; a man of pure ideals and of tested purpose. In short, gentlemen, I have the honor to present to this convention the name of James Dudley."

Stillness was never stiller than it was in that room at that minute. The surprise was complete. No one apparently beyond a half-dozen of the more prominent delegates throughout the county whom Stephen and Colonel Carroll had intrusted with their plan, and who had enthusiastically acceded to it, had thought of Dudley as a possible candidate. A dark horse, who did not himself know that he was to be entered in the race, was something for which they were not prepared.

To be sure, every one recalled that Colonel Carroll had agreed to run only on condition that no other acceptable man could be found,—a condition which, at the time, had been regarded as merely nominal. Closely as Dudley's reform had been watched it had not occurred to any one apparently

that it was making him not merely acceptable but, all things considered, the most acceptable man in the county. He was a much younger man than Colonel Carroll and ambitious to rise, whereas to Colonel Carroll entrance into public life would mean a sacrifice of ease and retirement; he was a more brilliant speaker and a better mixer. All this the delegates recalled in a flash, while Colonel Carroll himself warmly seconded the nomination. And then they rose, and yelled for Dudley.

And Dudley! His hat in his hands, he sat bowed, literally stunned with the surprise and joy and honor of it. It dawned on him now that Stephen and Colonel Carroll had meant all along that he should be nominated, that is, if he kept straight.

It would not have taken the proverbial feather to knock down Francis P. R. Belmont.

When Stephen spoke Dudley's name, Belmont's breath seemed to leave his body. For a moment he was all but insensible. Returning consciousness, however, brought a full sense of how completely he had been ignored in the matter of the nomination. The convention had been railroaded. Hot anger rashed out all over him, but quickly it gave way to cold despair. Dudley's election—and he believed that Dudley would be elected—would be an insuperable obstacle to his own advancement. Carroll would probably have retired at the close of a single term,

leaving an indifferent man to follow; Dudley would remain in politics permanently.

But the demands of custom were imperative. Slowly, and with leaden step, he walked to the platform and mounted it. His swarthy skin had paled and the muscles of his face twitched.

"Gentlemen, I wish to indorse the nomination of our fellow citizen, Mr. James Dudley." He paused. The effort that he was making was heroic and his audience appreciated the fact. When Belmont spoke he invariably made an impression, chiefly by egotistical force and driving will. He was brass-tongued.

"We are most of us surprised that his name has been brought before the convention,—I fancy that Mr. Dudley himself is surprised. But that he will do honor to his town and county we none of us doubt. I withdraw my own name in his favor. I move that Mr. Dudley's nomination be made unanimous."

Dudley was nominated by acclamation

They were calling for him now, calling *his* name—Dudley!

Summoning all his courage, he walked to the platform. Instantly the room became quiet with a tense, all-pervading hush like that on a hot August night when you can hear the corn grow. The whinny of a restless horse from outside the Square served but to accent the silence.

If Tibbott were tin-tongued and Belmont brass, Dudley had a voice that rang through the room like a silver-toned bell.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking straight into the faces intently upturned to him, "by the trust that you so generously manifest in me, I am encouraged to accept this nomination. I thank you."

This was every word that he spoke. He lingered on the platform for a moment, blushing like a girl who has just accepted a proposal of marriage, and quite as happy, and then he started to his seat. But no sooner had his foot touched the floor than he was captured by frantically-yelling, hat-waving men, who shook first one hand and then the other, or both if they could get them, slapped him on the shoulder, and circled round him like mad Indians. On the instant the town band, at a signal from Colonel Carroll, struck up *Hail to the Chief!* The green banners of the elms waved approvingly.

Stephen's ruse had been a dangerous one. But his great popularity, Colonel Carroll's sanction and Dudley's own magnetism proved a winning combination.

As the convention adjourned Dudley sought out Belmont.

"That was a generous speech of yours, Belmont," he said heartily, holding out his hand. "I want to thank you for it."

Belmont did not take his hand. "You are very welcome," he answered coldly, turning away.

Dudley looked after him pityingly. "I wonder why it is," he reflected, "that one man's success so inevitably rises on another man's failure!"

In a council of war held at the hotel that night, Dudley's campaign was mapped. The Democratic convention had taken place in New Alden two days before, so Dudley knew his opponent, a New Alden fire-eater, editor of the *Jacksonian*, and an older hand at politics than himself. It would be a pitched battle. Of his own town he was sure. He would have to attack his opponent first on his own field and then stump the county, laying stress, as far as possible, on national issues, and trying to break down party traditions.

The nomination meant more to Dudley than any one else in Camden guessed. It promised realization of the golden hopes of his youth, and it meant that he could now venture to wait on Fanny Potter without fear of a humiliating dismissal.

Under the circumstances Fanny had abandoned her early resolve to punish Dudley for his backwardness, and he saw that she was disposed to welcome his advances. Yet he found the making of a formal declaration, which he essayed the evening of the day following the convention, extremely difficult. He was genuinely modest, and, in paying serious ad-

dresses to a woman for the first time, he united a youth's shyness with a man's delicate appreciation. He did not, in consequence, share the youth's awkwardness; his trepidation merely lent to his avowal a freshness and sincerity that any woman might have been proud to receive.

There was so much to propose to!—Fanny herself, to begin with; and, though she was just what any fond lover would have termed husband-high, Dudley dreaded her “no” quite as much as if she were a Juno. Then there was Fanny's waterfall, most elaborate, and her enormous hoop-skirt, completely hiding her chair and supporting quantities of lace and ruffling, beneath which the tips of her slippers, carefully crossed on a low stool, looked like specks; and there were the long, voluminous angel sleeves, giving, when she raised her arms to restore to place a straying curl, such fatal glimpses of slim white wrists and tapering, blue-veined arms; and, the evening being chilly, there was a fleecy *sontag* about her bare, sloping shoulders—all of which made her a formidable personage, at least to the quaking heart of her lover.

He spoke simply and directly.

“Fanny, I came here to-night to ask you to be my wife. I'd have asked you long ago, but there's been a devil tormenting me—no, that's not fair. I won't blame any creature but myself, even the devil. I've

been miserably weak. I'd almost forgotten what it was to feel like a man, when Waters pulled me up. I feel now as if I'd got the upper hand. I don't want to seem too confident; God knows I've reason to doubt my strength. But I've been straight, as you know, for a good while—and now that I've got the nomination—that was why I wanted it most, Fanny—”

Fanny blushed and leaned a little toward him, one hand resting on her knee, more touched than she had ever before been in her life. Dudley knew he might take the hand; it trembled, ever so slightly, within his own.

“Fanny,” he finished, feeling as if he held a little white fluttering bird, “that was why—that I might ask you.”

Fanny accepted Dudley with a nice adjustment of the emotions outwardly, and with an inward eye fixed on the brilliant vista of legislative sessions at the state capital. Dimly, afar off, she even saw the open door of Congress, for the party leaders were already referring to Dudley as available representative timber.

In return for what he gave, he would require of her nothing but a series of exquisite appearances. She understood exactly her status with men, and was entirely satisfied with it. She was acute enough to perceive that women much her superior in intel-

lect and moral force often bored them, and she was content to remain a simple dispenser of charm.

The Jessamy bride never looked fairer to Goldsmith than did Fanny to Dudley the morning of their marriage. This delicate creature was his—he could not comprehend why such bliss had been bestowed on him. Their engagement had been but of a few weeks' duration, for Dudley was an eager lover, and had consented to wait only until Fanny could have her new gowns made in Louisville.

CHAPTER XVIII

"O RUDDIER THAN THE CHERRY!"

Wheat was already cradled and oats were not yet ripe. To farmers this brief interval brought comparative leisure, and Stephen determined to hold a protracted meeting at Bethel, opening with week-day preaching at ten o'clock, a basket dinner at noon, and a second sermon in the afternoon.

Bethel was too small even to be a dot on the county map that hung in the court-house at Camden. Probably the original inspiration for its existence lay in the crossing of three roads. Four houses and a decaying water-mill, openly used for the distilling of whisky and apple-jack, kept alive the name. Just beyond Bethel, in a small clearing, its forefathers slept beneath slanting undecipherable headstones, while perhaps a mile farther, on a knoll in the middle of a walnut grove, stood a rude structure of logs, its namesake chapel.

The country was the wildest in all that region. The hills were almost mountains, and at their foot glided a deep river, on whose bosom blue mists hovered so perpetually that it was known as Blue River.

Into such solitudes the early Methodist circuit rider was the chief bringer of the living Word. His was the voice crying in the wilderness, *Make straight the way of the Lord.*

As Stephen rode out to the meeting he stopped at Fir Heights. To his surprise he found Judith there, and alone. She had yielded to Abel's importunity to spend a week at the farm, and was dressed, like the farmer's wife that she was soon to be, in a faded blue delaine, whose soft neutral tint only accented her radiant bloom. The sight of her, in appearance already a member of this lonely, cheerless household, suddenly realized for Stephen all that marriage with Abel would mean to her. It assumed proportions positively tragic.

Gradually Abel's love for Judith had ceased to wear to Stephen the aspect of unselfish devotion. Rather, it seemed intensely, if unconsciously, selfish. If Abel were not absolutely absorbed in securing his own happiness, he must surely have seen that he was demanding of her a sacrifice almost beyond the power of flesh and blood to make. Generosity and fine appreciation required that after their long separation he should at least offer to release her. At this point the spirit of the Puritan ancestor spoke up; it was unfair to demand of Abel the broad view of life that such an offer required. He was narrow by nature; he had lived narrowly; therefore, he could not be

expected to act otherwise than narrowly. To absolve Judith from her promise to him because of his narrowness would be to make duty an empty name.

Stephen did not dismount.

"I can't stay. I've an all-day meeting at Bethel. I just thought I'd stop a minute to see Abel."

"This is Abel's day for going to New Alden," Judith explained. "And Mrs. Troop has gone to stay with Mrs. Dowd, who is ill."

"And Milly?"

"She went with Mrs. Troop to play with Annie Dowd."

Stephen lingered a moment and then rode back down the lane.

At twelve o'clock he closed his sermon. He declined several invitations to share bountiful baskets, and instead mounted his mare and rode back to the Heights. All the morning he had been haunted by his recollection of Judith as she had stood talking to him in the dark, fir-guarded doorway—so fair and young and warm with zest of life, and the impulse had come to ride back and take dinner with her—she must certainly be lonely.

Ordinarily Stephen was not a hard rider, but today, when he reached the Troop gate, his mare's flanks were wet with foam. The side door stood open, and with a light knock he entered the living-room.

Judith was not there. Passing on to the kitchen, he saw why she had not heard him. She was churning, and the steady chug-chug of the dasher had drowned his knock.

For a moment he watched her in silence. She was half turned toward him, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, disclosing arms of health's warm, creamy tint. At the neck of her dress one or two unfastened buttons permitted the white throat to show. A large apron almost covered her dress, protecting it from splashes, and adding the housewifely touch that only an apron can give. Dancing in through the vine-latticed windows, the sunlight had passed the noon-mark, and every moment drew nearer her, as though it sought her for its playfellow in the great, dim room. A painter would not have disdained the scene, either for the solitary, bright-crowned living figure, or the setting, for through long years of smoke rising from the red-mouthed fireplace, the bare poplar walls and raftered ceiling had been stained the color of cherry, waving off toward the corners into a deep mahogany, like the rich tones in Flemish interiors.

Stephen fancied that Judith lifted the dasher wearily, though more with the weariness of monotony than of fatigue.

"Let me do that!"

Forgetting that she was unaware of his presence,

he started toward her. The dasher dropped from her hands, and she turned to him, her face as pink as a peony.

"Why did you come back?" she asked in startled tones.

"I feared that you were having a long, lonely day. Forgive me for frightening you—you seemed so tired."

"I am tired!" There was a world of revelation in the words.

"I will finish the churning for you." And Stephen advanced and grasped the dasher.

"No, no!" she answered, the color in her cheeks deepening. "Don't, please!" And quickly she took hold of it again. They both laughed.

"Bother the churning!" cried Stephen. "And give me some dinner, won't you?"

"But I haven't any," she replied ruefully, "except that ash-cake on the hearth and the fresh buttermilk in the churn." It had not seemed worth while to provide more just for herself. "If you will wait—"

"Ash-cake and milk!" interrupted Stephen. "What sensible man would want more, I should like to know,—that is, if there is enough of it; for I am sure that no appetite was ever quite equal to mine at this minute."

In sudden glee, Judith moved about the kitchen, preparing such a meal as Corydon and Phyllis might

have eaten, promising, meanwhile, to accompany Stephen back to Bethel for the afternoon meeting. Her air of weariness had vanished. Her step was lilted. While Stephen refreshed himself at the well, she turned once more to the churn, and, finding that the butter had come, ladled out the big golden lumps and rapidly worked them into a mold in a wooden bowl, which she finally carried out to the spring-house. Taking the ash-cake from the hearth, she placed it smoking on a platter on the white-scrubbed table. Then she filled a pitcher with buttermilk from the churn, poured from it two glasses, and last added plates.

"Come, sit down!"

"It's positively idyllic!" declared Stephen, surveying the table. "Crisp cake and buttermilk! No, you must let me break up the cake!" he insisted, as she started to take hold of it. "You will burn your fingers!"

It was necessary to wait for each bit of the cake to cool before it could be eaten, and this prolonged the meal beyond the time that its simplicity would ordinarily have required.

About it all there was, as Stephen had said, something idyllic, but the bare table, the coarse blue ware and the ash-cake and the milk had not everything to do with this. Perhaps it was summer in warm airs and the red clover's perfume, in bird cadenzas and

the humming of honey bees stealing in through the wide open doors and the leafy windows; perhaps it was the picture of rustic beauty that Judith made, cotton-gowned and bare-armed, and with the sun treasure-trove, now quite touching her hair. More than all, it must have been because two young beating hearts were there, heedful of no one and of nothing but their own youth and robbing life.

Stephen appeared to be in no haste. He was genuinely hungry, and ate vast quantities of the ash-cake, much more than his share, he protested. As for Judith, she ate little, and barely tasted that. To refill Stephen's glass was ambrosia to her. At first she felt constrained from recollection of what had happened at the Well, but not for long. She could not be angry with him. She felt that already she had made too much of what on his part had doubtless been but a spring day's folly. It seemed years since she had known a holiday, and, banishing all regret for the past, all dread for the future, she entered on this one recklessly, madly.

Stephen was in holiday mood, too, and he insisted, when at last they finished, on helping her to put away the milk in the cool spring-house and on brushing up the few crumbs that were all that was left of the ash-cake. They had lingered so long at the table that he found now, on looking at his watch, two o'clock already approaching.

"Come," he said gaily, "let us go!"

Together they left the gloomy house and went out into the lush summer.

"But how can I go?" Judith stopped short in sudden disappointment. "Abel has the spring-wagon and both of the horses."

"You shall ride and I will walk," said Stephen authoritatively. And he helped her to a sidewise seat on his mare, which, poorly supported though it was, the animal's steady pace rendered feasible.

So they fared forth down the red, undulating road.

On either hand wild roses, Queen Anne's lace, black-eyed Susans, lady's paint-brush and fire-grass grew riotously. Ironweed, in purple splendor, belied its plebeian name, and stately mulleins lifted their golden candlesticks singly and in clusters. From fields of white buckwheat and red clover a faint, sweet incense rose. The earth and all its green things obeyed the psalmist's behest, and with a myriad delicate voices praised the Lord. Every branch, bud, leaf and blossom was stirring. The cup of life was fairly running over. Squirrels and rabbits bounded away before them. Waxwings and flickers and cardinals darted from bush to bush. Summer and love were all about them, and everything under heaven's blue bow was rife with joy.

Though the sun was not oppressively warm, it was

pleasant to come now and then on some shady bend in the road, through whose tall trees the wind murmured its antiphonal music, like the sound of many waters.

Stephen and Judith proceeded leisurely, drinking their fill. A stranger meeting these light-hearted young wayfarers might easily have mistaken them for man and wife newly wed.

Judith had seen no reason to change her dress for the simple week-day meeting in the little country church. She had merely taken off her apron, pulled down her sleeves and slipped on her white sunbonnet. Was ever any other article of feminine apparel so alluring and altogether bewitching as a sunbonnet? At once it invites and it flouts. Its ruffled front and flying streamers give to the soberest, discreetest face a demure simplicity, but the little curtain bobbing up and down behind plainly says, "Beware!"

As Judith rode by Stephen's side the last vestige of care slipped from her. Her eyes grew luminous, her color ruddy, she breathed lightly, and her speech was half song. In spontaneous snatches she confided to him many incidents of her life abroad and her journey home. In her whole air there was a wilding fascination that he had never observed in her before.

A mile or more from the house they turned into the road that William Henry Harrison had caused

to be cut out of the hills. On their left, many feet below, flowed Blue River, while on the right rose rocky, beetling cliffs.

Just as they reached this turn a man ran to meet them. Trees were being felled on top of the cliff and at any moment might crash down across the road. He warned them not to try to pass.

"You had better go back, Miss La Monde," said Stephen. But even as he spoke he saw her face fade. He hesitated. "No; I will go ahead and see if there is really any danger." He did so, and presently shouted to her to come on. They passed safely on to the church. At sight of Stephen the scattered congregation began to assemble. Judith, who knew no one, taking a seat alone near the rear.

Stephen had not been preaching long that afternoon before he noticed that the air had become tense and heavy. Horses hitched just outside the church began to whinny and paw the ground. Two men rose apprehensively and went out. There was a foreboding hush. Through the windows Stephen saw that the sky was overcast and that a storm was gathering. He closed the meeting hastily.

By the time that he and Judith started home, a dun-colored cloud, in shape curiously like an outstretched hand, was swiftly extending itself over the sky. The trees shivered and moaned; the void was in travail with the approaching storm.

Before they had gone half a mile, both riding, the cloud-hand had spread until it threatened the entire valley, leaving no blue sky visible except between its long, sinister fingers, that stretched down until they appeared to clutch the hill-tops. To reach the Heights before the storm should burst was now plainly impossible, and Stephen anxiously considered what might be the nearest shelter.

He thought of returning to the church, but the wuthering of the wind warned him that they could not reach it in time. He remembered that across the river, and a short distance within the wood beyond, was a cave that a farmer lad had once shown him. To seek refuge there was their best course.

Hard by was the only bridge for a mile, a frail, picturesque structure, swung like an inverted rainbow from tall posts on either side of the river at a height forbidding to any but the stoutest nerves. It was wide enough for foot passage only. Hitching his mare to a sapling, Stephen led the way to the bridge.

"Take my hand, and don't look down!"

Passively she obeyed. Only once did she glance below, and that was when, midway, the bridge swayed perceptibly in the strong, rising wind. She shut her eyes, and when they reached firm ground again Stephen saw that she was white and faint.

The cave in which they sought refuge was at no

great distance from the road, but it was out of all sight and hearing. So dense was the wood about it that one might pass within a few yards of it without suspecting that it was there. As they entered the wood great slow drops of rain fell. A sharp climb was necessary in order to reach the cave, and when finally they stood safe within its irregular shelving mouth both were breathless.

They were none too soon.

In the lower end of the valley the storm suddenly burst and rapidly traveled northward toward them. Like the tread of an army, like the roaring of the sea, it came on. Rain fell in torrents, and hail, a swift fusillade of white bullets, cruelly rending helpless leaves and tender blossoms.

Below them the wood was like a confused battle-scene in some heroic age. Great oaks smote each other, poplars shivered and turned pale, slender beeches bent like forward princes, and virgin sycamores tossed their long white arms distressfully. A dart of lightning slivered a huge walnut to its base. Meanwhile the thunder, stately and rolling, resounded like the detonations of distant, mighty cannon. Above, in a series of dissolving views, the heavens each moment disclosed a skyscape of new and dreadful grandeur.

It was one of those hours when Nature, ordinarily passive, thinking, apparently, that men in their pride

grow foolish, steps in to show them how petty they and their devices are, and how their cultivated fields and their cleverly-built bridges exist but by her sufferance.

The fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. A run across which they had easily stepped became a raging torrent, escaping its banks. Already the lower portion of the path by which they had come was covered with water. One by one low ferns and bushes disappeared. Pools were becoming lakes, whole fields were inundated. It was as though the world were drowning before their very eyes, and only they two were left.

In the majestic presence of the storm Stephen and Judith felt themselves but as atoms, secure by their very insignificance, yet nerve-shaken. Crash succeeded crash, as in the warring of far-off worlds. Sometimes, in the hurly-burly, they could not hear their own voices.

"Come farther in!" shouted Stephen, as a torrent of rain dashed against the huge boulders at the cave's mouth. In order to avoid being drenched, they clambered back over the rough floor until they were well under the roof.

A thunder-clap, loud as the bursting of abysmal forces, reverberated through the cave. Some elemental influence released by it seemed to communi-

cate itself inevitably to both. Their hearts leaped within them.

Instinctively they drew nearer each other.

"This is dreadful!" exclaimed Stephen. "How I wish I had not asked you to come!"

"Don't say that!" Judith cried, with an intensity of emphasis that startled him. "It has been such a happy day!"

"Are happy days so rare with you, then?" He looked at her keenly.

She was silent.

"To-morrow—" he began.

"Let us not think of to-morrow!" she almost entreated. "Let to-morrow take care of itself." She felt a blind wish that it might rain on for ever.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly. "I did not mean to remind you." He understood of what she was thinking,—“to-morrow” would bring her one day nearer marriage with Abel.

Within the last few moments the air in the cave had cooled rapidly. Judith shivered.

"You must put on my coat." Despite her protest, he took it off and gave it to her. He did not help her put it on, for suddenly he had become afraid.

The fury of the storm was now somewhat abated, but a wall of rain at the mouth of the cave still shut them in. To speak further on the subject they had stumbled on seemed to each secretly impossible.

Equally impossible would have been the utterance of trivialities, for they felt that the Lord God was in the storm. It was one of those infrequent hours when level human life is suddenly exalted to epic heights. A barrier of silence rose between them, and they listened speechless to the insensate beating of the rain and the sougling of the wind.

All at once forked lightning rent the sky, illuminating the farthest and gloomiest recesses of the cave. By its flash Judith saw that Stephen was standing on the very brink of a black chasm that might be many feet deep. A cry rose to her lips, but instantly she stifled it.

"Look!" she said quietly.

She pointed to a stalagmite of curious formation that grew just in front of her. In the same breath she sprang toward him, seized his hand and drew him forward.

"If you had stepped back—" she cried, trembling with horror.

Turning, he saw the peril from which she had rescued him. But he could not think of that.

Her touch had left him hot all over as a burning coal. He loved this woman! For the first time he fully owned it. He loved her, she loved him, and she was bound in honor to another man! In that moment he understood that a man may literally sweat blood.

After the lightning came brattling thunder, and after the thunder great darkness.

"Where are you?" cried Judith.

Instinctively she put out her hand. It met his. She clung to him. He put his arms about her. . . . The storm outside was as nothing to the storm within their breasts.

CHAPTER XIX

"THOU SHALT NOT COVET"

When next the lightning flashed, it seemed to Stephen to trace on the walls of the cave that clause of the tenth commandment that hitherto had borne for him no more meaning than for an infant: *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.*

In the brief moment of their embrace, after the inner storm had subsided, there had been an instant in which they seemed to float together in fathomless space. They had forgotten the earth; they had forgotten time and eternity. But the flash of lightning recalled them to a sense of these things—and Abel. Slowly Stephen released Judith, and she drew back from him.

And then there began in Judith's mind that torture of doubt that has fastened itself on every woman who has loved since the world began: had the white flower of her womanhood lost, in his eyes, even an infinitesimal shade of its whiteness?

"Oh, what will you think of me?" she cried, covering her face with her hands, even in the darkness.

"I shall always think well of you," he answered in

a strained, unnatural voice. The words did not reassure her.

Stephen felt this, but he could not add to them, though he longed to do so. In effect, Judith was the wife of Abel Troop as truly as if she wore his wedding ring. His embrace of her had been a grievous wrong to Abel.

"It's growing lighter now," he said after a pause. "And the rain has ceased. We must go."

"Yes," she repeated dully, "we must go." Their brief hour alone together was ended.

The journey back through the wet gray world was very different from their joyous sun-attended progress of the early afternoon. Stephen allowed Judith to make her way unaided down the rough hill and through the thick wood as best she might. The path was slippery, and had it not been for the low friendly branches of trees on either hand she must more than once have lost her footing and fallen. In silence Stephen strode before her, showing only once that he was aware of her presence. That was when a bush caught her dress, and she was compelled to stop and release herself. He waited until she came up with him, and then they went on again, single file, as before. The trees dripped on them as they went, and low rumbling thunder continued to break forth, as if the angry elements were as yet but half appeased.

The entire world about them had become blurred. The outlines of the hills were softened into indistinctness, trees and bushes were veiled in mist, everything was saturated. All around, as far as the eye could reach, the line of horizon had faded out, and sky and earth were dissolved in one. Objects no longer presented themselves in sharp individuality, but were half effaced and merged with their neighbors in thick, wavy Corot masses.

When Stephen and Judith reached the road they walked side by side, but each looked straight ahead. Judith was thankful that the wall of her sunbonnet hid her face from him. Stephen spoke now at times, always impersonally; she answered in monosyllables. The evident intensity of his repentance stunned her.

The frail swinging foot-bridge had been swept away, and a wide detour was necessary in order to reach the large wagon-bridge below the village of Bethel. On this side the river there was neither road nor path. Across muddy fields, into which her feet sank at every step, and over rocky stiles, she followed him as a prisoner, too wretched to wish to escape, might follow his jailer. Her heart was lead. She still wore Stephen's coat, so long for her that it flapped at her heels, but she had no consciousness of the incongruity her appearance presented.

When they had crossed the bridge and redoubled their way as far as the village, Stephen halted.

"Hadh't you better stay here for the night? I will go on and get the mare and then ride back to the farm and tell them."

"Oh, no, no! I could not think of doing that!" She was beginning to feel that even if nothing had happened she ought not to have gone with him to the meeting, and to return as soon as possible seemed the best amends that she could make.

Both were wet and chill and cheerless. In Stephen's heart was a sensation that amounted to guilt, rendering him remorselessly chary of speech and kindness. A sickening fear came over Judith that, once rid of her, he would never speak to her again.

She did not blame him. For what had occurred in the cave she was wholly responsible; her weakness had tempted him. But surely he would forgive her! Words were impossible, but as they reached the mare and Stephen turned to untie the hitching-strap, she timidly put her hand on his arm.

Silently Stephen glanced back at her as in sheer surprise. Then he went steadily on untying the knot and securing the strap in the ring. The spirit of the Puritan ancestor had him in firm grip. Tears started into Judith's eyes as she withdrew her hand. How he despised her! Formally he helped her to a seat on the mare, and they started back.

When they came to Indian Creek he checked the mare and surveyed the angry, fast-rising ford.

"It's not really dangerous," he decided, mounting before her, "but you had better put your arms around me.—Molly might stumble."

Humbly Judith obeyed and they crossed in safety. As they went on, Stephen from time to time briefly remarked on some sight or object by the road—a hayrick swept away, a tree uprooted, a field of corn cut to pieces by the hail. She perceived that a sense of chivalry impelled him to try to make the situation somewhat easier for her than it would have been in dead silence, but she felt that it was only chivalry. She little dreamed of the effort it cost him to make even these impersonal remarks.

Darkness was closing in about them when at last they reached the Heights. Weary and cramped and heart-blighted, Judith slipped to the ground, assuming not to see Stephen's offered hand. In silence she took off his coat and handed it to him, careful that her eyes should not meet his.

For some moments she had been disturbed for a new reason. The road from the Heights on to Camden was, she feared, after the phenomenally heavy rain, dangerous, now that night had fallen. She must ask him to stay at the homestead, hard as this would be, and despite the fact that she knew he would not want to do so.

"Spend the night here. will you not?"

She tried to speak as if nothing had happened.

But she was bewildered and terribly hurt. During the moment of his embrace she had been sure that he loved her, but all since had been confused and contradictory.

"Thank you, no," he answered quickly, and, she thought, distantly. "With good luck I shall be home in an hour. I hope you haven't taken cold."

"Oh, no!" she answered, numb with misery.

"Good night!" said Stephen somewhat shortly, and, springing into the saddle, he rode rapidly off down the lane.

Judith reluctantly entered the house. Mrs. Troop and Milly were there, having foreseen the storm and returned before it broke. The explanation of her own absence Judith found it difficult to make.

"Why didn't Mr. Waters come in here to stay all night?" Mrs. Troop asked. "That's a bad ford down by Dowd's," she went on, without waiting for Judith's answer. "I've known two men drowned there in my time."

"Abel won't attempt to come home, will he?" asked Judith anxiously.

"Oh, no!" replied Mrs. Troop. "He's never left New Alden. He knows these fords too well."

"I must go up stairs and put on dry clothes," Judith said, thankful for an excuse to be alone. Once in her room, after compelling herself to change her dress and shoes, she blew out her candle and

went to the window that overlooked the lane. Pressing her face against it, she peered out into the thick night.

Her fears for Stephen's safety had been fully confirmed by Mrs. Troop's experienced words. She herself had heard that the creek rose with incredible rapidity. Her mind's eye pierced the gloom and she saw the narrow, swollen stream, the steep descent, the rapidly nearing horseman. A foot or two to the right or left,—and his mare would plunge beyond her depth. She regretted that she had not urged, and, if necessary, begged Stephen to remain at the Heights. If he were drowned she would be to blame; but for her he would undoubtedly have stayed at the homestead for the night.

Half an hour crept by.

Then she heard a faint, far-off "Halloo!"

Unspeakingly relieved, she ran down stairs and, calling to Mrs. Troop, lighted a lantern and hurried out with it to the garden gate. She could see nothing. But from the wet lane the plashing of hoofs reached her. In a moment the figure of a man leading a horse emerged from the nebulous dark.

"Oh, I have been so afraid for you!" she cried involuntarily.

"The ford is raging," explained Stephen, "and Molly stumbled. She's badly sprained, I fear. I shall have to stay here, after all."

It had begun to rain again.

For three days Stephen was forced to remain, water-bound, with Judith, under Abel's roof. And during every waking moment of every one of them—and he slept little—his storm-born love, like an undesired child demanding right to live, thrived, despite his honest endeavor to throttle it, and grew apace.

Rain fell ceaselessly. To Stephen and Judith the three days and nights were as an eternity on the rack. The house was inexpressibly dreary. The shadow of the firs lay athwart it, and their monotonous plaining was like some remembered tune that iterates itself until the brain is half crazed. In the fireplace in the living-room, damp logs smoked and sputtered in ineffectual efforts to dispel the chill and gloom. Outside, the prospect was no better. Beyond the dripping funereal firs, lay a soaked wilderness. The house was as completely isolated as if it were on an island, for each of the three roads leading away from the lane to Bethel, Camden and New Alden, respectively, was crossed by the swollen and impassable creek. Never before had he realized how remote from other human habitation the homestead was. Not a roof, except that of the unfinished palace, was visible; Dowd's house, the nearest, was wholly hidden behind a hill. The place seemed as solitary as an eagle's eyrie and as grim. Stephen

felt that a year at Fir Heights would drive him mad! And Judith was to live there!

Judith found some relief in the routine work of the house, but for Stephen there was little but sheer endurance. Several times each day he went to the barn and rubbed on his mare's knee a liniment that Mrs. Troop gave him. By the second day he saw that the liniment did no good, but from pure necessity for occupation he continued to go out and put it on. And he tried to read. But between him and the page before him came ever the humiliating recollection that he had wronged Abel. He had doubly wronged him, as friend and as pastor. To be forced to accept the shelter of his roof was hateful. Unsparingly he reproached himself for having gone back to the Heights at noon to see Judith. What had occurred in the cave was the natural result of that act of self-indulgence. After what had happened at the Well, he ought never to have risked being alone with her again. Were he in the position of an ordinary man with ordinary responsibilities, his offense would have been great,—as a minister, who ought to be to other men an example in all things, it was beyond pardon.

The almost constant presence of Mrs. Troop and Milly made it necessary that Stephen and Judith should speak and act as naturally as possible. They succeeded to a degree at which they marveled. In

that moment in the cave when they had clung to each other, it was as though the lightning had bared their very souls. What each had read in the other would not be ignored. Life would never be the same to them again. Far down the future, as far as their thought could reach, it was already invested with new meaning. Each had given the other something that could never be given back. Milly begged Stephen to play with her. He could not refuse, but he entered into her games with poor spirit and she found him unexpectedly dull.

The meal hours were the most difficult of all.

"Will you say grace, Mr. Waters?" asked Mrs. Troop, as they sat down to the supper-table the first night. It was with difficulty that he summoned the simple familiar words and he was conscious that in uttering them his voice faltered. Mrs. Troop appeared not to notice anything unusual, but Milly glanced curiously from him to Judith. With each succeeding meal it became harder for him. What right had he to pray, and at Abel's table?

The situation grew hourly in intensity. The very beating of the rain became irritating. The world without was a blank. Not a voice nor a human token of any sort came to them from it. Within the house the four persons were thrown intimately together. Milly enjoyed the storm for the grandeur and reality with which it enacted the drama of the

flood that she had so often played with her small Noah's ark. Mrs. Troop endured their situation passively.

"It's the greatest storm hereabouts in years!" she declared. "Before Abel left he looked at the sky and said he thought there would be weather by night."

It seemed to Judith at times that if she did not cry out she would stifle. The conviction that Stephen looked down on her, that she had fallen short of his ideal of her, was all but intolerable. A wild wish came to her that she might take the thing called heart and remorselessly crush it so that it could never feel again. She could not have wept if she had dared to do so,—the fountain of tears had turned to stone. She yearned to entreat from Stephen a word, only one word of pity and comfort. Gladly she would have crept to him on her knees and begged his forgiveness. With the desperation of one sentenced to die, who is yet allowed a last plea that may avail to save him, she chose phrases and framed sentences that might come near expressing her feeling, finding all totally inadequate. Finally, however, she succeeded in formulating a confession that would have served to convict a criminal. Twice when she knew that he was in the living-room alone she started to go to him and make this confession. But the remembrance of his look of

cold surprise when he was unhitching the mare held her back. By degrees her suffering dulled her senses. She neither saw nor heard distinctly, she moved automatically.

She, too, thought of Abel. She knew that he trusted her absolutely. He had believed in her through long absence and silence. He had known of her friendship with Stephen and had not, she was sure, doubted her for an instant. To betray such faith was sin.

When at last she could bear this self-torture no longer, she forbore, submerging herself in a wave of that sad, immense self-pity to which in dire extremity human nature abandons itself. She was not to blame,—over and over again she repeated this. In the grasp of nature and of circumstance she had been but as clay in the hands of the potter. She would submit to the destiny that was closing in on her, although maintaining always that she was not at fault. Thus in its hour of agony does every soul partake, without bell, book or candle, of supreme unction and absolution.

She had paid for her holiday dearly. It was no longer possible to face the future with a single heart. In her supernormal state the felling of the trees on the cliff became almost a portent that had been designed to warn her to turn back. How blindly she had persisted! She would have given

all that was most precious to her to live again that short afternoon and live it differently. For the first time the full pathos of "yesterday" came to her: a bit of life's weft hopelessly miswoven, never to be untangled. And yet, in that innermost chamber of the soul where truth abides, she could not regret Stephen's embrace. The storm, the thunder and lightning, their waiting together in the lonely cave, seemed all a phantasmagoria in which she, a lost child, terror-stricken in the darkness, had intuitively reached out for protection, and found it. And so, though she thought sometimes of Abel, it was with Stephen that her thoughts were most. Would she ever again be to him as she had been?

Some moments found her derelict in deadly calm on a sea of limitless despair; during others, she rocked helplessly between opposing tides of fear and hope. Gradually, the tide of hope rose highest.

Surely he would relent!

On the morning of the second day as he came down to breakfast she looked hopefully at him; he took no notice. Noon came and night, and he remained distant, unapproachable. When, on the third morning she found him still unchanged, she could hardly control herself. Her fortitude was failing fast.

"What makes such shadows under your eyes, Judith?" It was Milly who asked.

"I did not sleep well," Judith answered, glancing at Stephen who stood at a window, staring out at the rain. He appeared not to hear either question or answer.

This day promised to pass as had the first and the second. But toward evening the rain stopped and the sky sullenly and slowly cleared. Later, a drowned moon peered out vaguely through vapory clouds.

"I reckon we've had rain enough for one spell," observed Mrs. Troop, glancing out of the window as they all sat at supper. "There's been a deal of good corn ruined," she added anxiously.

"The fords will be passable to-morrow, will they not?" Stephen asked.

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "Indian Creek falls fast when it once begins."

That night, when, soon after eight o'clock, Judith went up stairs with Mrs. Troop and Milly, they left Stephen sitting beside the center-table in the living-room apparently reading. Judith lingered, allowing Mrs. Troop and Milly to precede her up the stairs and there was an instant's pause between their good night and hers. Her very heart strained for some inflection of kindness in his voice meant for her. But a toneless, general response was all she heard.

Cut to the quick, she went on up stairs. He could

not have misunderstood her appeal; he had coldly ignored it. She formed an iron resolve not to intrude herself on him again even ever so little. In the morning he would return to Camden. He would be obliged to lead his mare, but he would go. She would never again have a chance to right herself with him. She would let him go, if he would, without showing mercy.

The old clock in the living-room struck ten. It struck eleven. The house had long been still. But Stephen had not come up stairs. In the flame of her love Judith's resolution melted like wax. Softly she opened her door, stole along the passage and down the stairs. The door near their foot had been left open. She halted within it.

Stephen sat turned toward her at the table in the middle of the room, writing. In the light of the candle his face looked white and haggard. He wrote rapidly and intensely. Several sheets of manuscript, apparently finished, lay scattered on the floor near him. She was not aware that she made the slightest sound, but presently he looked up. The pen dropped from his fingers. Softly she closed the door behind her.

"Stephen!"

All the wealth of her woman's love, all her yearning for his pardon were in the word. Of the fact that she spoke to him by his given name she was ab-

olutely unaware; she was instinctively addressing him with that complete naturalness and simplicity common to moments of overwhelming grief. She was as one who has come to take a last leave. In the very lines of her figure was eloquent pleading. Her hair, loosened from its coil, hung about her face in bright masses. How young and pitiful she looked! He rose awkwardly.

Slowly, and as if by great effort, she descended the remaining steps of the stair. He was making it so hard for her! Would he never speak?

"Stephen! It was all my fault!"

Silence. He was not even looking at her. With eyes on the table he nervously fingered the pages of manuscript that lay there.

"Stephen! I wish that the lightning in the cave had struck me before I . . . before . . ."

"Miss La Monde! I must beg of you not to stay here!" He dropped the manuscript and looked sternly at her. His tone and his formal address wounded her like arrows. But she could not go back. Of all her picked and chosen phrases, however, not one came to her aid.

"Stephen, won't you forgive me? Can't you? Have I been so very wicked that you can not forget it? Oh, let us blot out that afternoon as if it had not been!"

"We can never blot it out!"

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"We can never blot it out!" *Page 59!*



He spoke slowly, bitterly. His hand clenched itself on the table.

Tears choked Judith so that for a moment she could not reply. How utterly unworthy he held her! Not for an instant did she doubt that he was right. But she must go nearer to him. She must utter what was in her heart.

"Stephen! Haven't I suffered enough? A terrible weight has been crushing me, hour by hour, and yet I have not dared to cry out."

He turned from her, his face now as red as it had before been white.

"Stephen! Have you no pity?" She spoke in the softest low voice. He half turned back, but still avoided her gaze.

"It's not a question of pity." Despite his evident effort to control himself, his voice shook slightly.

For answer Judith moved a step nearer him. On the page of manuscript lying uppermost on the table she read across the top these words: *I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.* She looked up at him uncomprehendingly. Then, in a flash she understood. Those were the words of the repentant David. Stephen was writing a sermon based on his experience with her in the cave!

"Stephen! How could you?"

In wounded pride and amazement at what seemed

his utter heartlessness, she gazed at him. Her head was lifted, she seemed tall. But her lips quivered and her bosom heaved. A queen betrayed by him she had deemed the most loyal subject in all her kingdom might look so. She did not dream that the writing of the sermon had been a penance suggested by the inexorable spirit of the Puritan ancestor.

Stephen's cheek flushed. He stooped hastily and began to gather up the scattered sheets lying on the floor. Could it be that he felt he was yielding and had sought thus to regain himself? When in a moment he again stood erect there was no trace of struggle.

In that moment Judith's pride had passed. How could she question his act, she who was the cause of his sin?

"Perhaps it is right, Stephen . . . if you can do it. And you will preach it?" She gasped and shook her head, aghast at this Rhadamanthine sternness. "But you may be right. Doubtless you are right." Her submission was complete.

Again he looked down, this time as though something had stung him.

"Stephen," she went on quietly, "I feel that this is the last time we shall ever talk together. I mean it is the last time that you will allow me to talk to you, for you will not talk to me. And so I should

like to speak of one or two things . . . that you may understand a little better and not think worse of me than you must . . . I know that in your eyes I seem weak and changeable. Perhaps I am so. The night that I went forward at the meeting and then went back—you must have thought that very strange. Do you know why I went forward? It was to make a vow that I would be true to Abel. Your voice and the words in the hymn about coming drew me. And when I was almost there . . . something . . . the sight of you . . . I couldn't go on!"

She stopped short, terrified at the boldness of her words. But if Stephen considered them bold, he did not show it. Almost, she thought, she would rather he had done so than to have remained so silent, so inscrutable. Outside, against the window panes, the branches of the firs rustled,—the sound was like a low, mocking laugh.

"When I wrote to you and asked you to come out here to see Abel, I was thinking of him . . . And the locket—I did not mean to be deceptive about that. I was only troubled lest he should miss it and be unhappy. Of course, for an instant, I was glad that it was empty. I couldn't help being so. And I thought that you were glad, too."

Stephen glanced up quickly at her. They seemed somehow to be changing places, she becoming judge

and he culprit. But at once he saw that nothing was further from her thought.

"The rehearsals were pleasant. But I see now that I ought not to have gone to them. I felt as if you and I were roaming together in a new country—the country of friendship—I never suspected that danger lurked there. All the time I have meant to be true to Abel. I still mean to be so. He's dear and noble and good. But it's not easy, Stephen! It's terribly, terribly hard!"

Sobs came fast, shaking her frame. Presently she recovered herself, though her voice trembled.

"When I came home to Camden, after having been away so long, I thought I was leaving life behind me. But I see now that life is not lived only in crowds and cities. If we three, you and I and Abel, had been cast away on a desert island, our tragedy would have happened just as surely as it has happened here.

"I know that your ideals are far above mine -- that you can surrender nobly to what you feel is right. If I had your strength! But you see, I shrink! That part of me that was rooted in Abel years ago is there still. But I've grown above it—I couldn't help doing so. All I ever gave him is his yet,—is it a fault to have gained a greater capacity for giving?"

Still he did not speak.

"And if I regret our wrong to Abel less than you do, it is partly because, being a woman, my conscience is my heart, and partly because, being a woman, my love is everything to me."

Desperate now, she caught his hand. Had she shown her heart for nothing?

"Miss La Monde! I can not . . . can not permit this! Besides, it's too late!"

Still clinging to him, swaying like a wind-snapped lily, Judith sank to the floor. But Stephen stooped, and lifting her, thrust her slightly back.

A crimson tide swept into Judith's face, flooding it with shame. One look she gave him, crushed, helpless, piteous, unreproachful—it smote him to the heart. If she had uttered another word he must have caught her to his breast. But with drooping head and the low convulsive sobs of a child that, after cruel punishment has been told to be quiet, she turned from him.

His eyes followed her as slowly she mounted the stairs. As she opened the door and continued her way up the dark flight, a look of anguish overspread his face. With ineffable longing he lifted his arms to her. He stood thus after she had passed the turn that hid her from view, after he heard her step in the passage above and knew that she was once more in her room. If he had dared to yield ever so little! If he could have trusted himself to explain!

His only safety had lain in silence, even though that seemed to leave her to bear the heavier part of the burden. If he had so much as called her Judith—

At last his arms dropped. His eyes fell on the sheets of manuscript. For a moment he stood looking at them, irresolute. Then, seating himself, he seized his pen and with set lips went once more to work. Hour after hour he wrote. At dawn he rose and, gathering up the scattered sheets, went to the fire and thrust them in.

The spirit of the Puritan ancestor smiled grimly.

CHAPTER XX

THE COUNTY-SEAT ELECTION

Stephen found life, following his return to Camden after the storm, one unmitigated torment.

His love for Judith had broken on him with the cumulative force of a fever that has long lurked in the blood. Hitherto he had succeeded in repressing it, refusing it countenance, putting it aside, absorbing himself in his church work and his efforts to help Dudley. But now it would no longer be denied. In the morning it rose up with him, all the day it companioned him, at night it followed him in his dreams. He knew now that he had loved Judith from the moment she had come forward at the tent meeting.

Conference was approaching; he dreaded it. He held a soldier's sense of loyalty to his revered bishop. Besides, considering Stephen's youth, there existed between them a relation of unusual affection and transparency, begun during Stephen's days at the theological seminary, where they had first known each other as teacher and student. Under ordinary circumstances he would have looked for-

ward to their meeting with warm anticipation. Now he feared to meet his bishop's quiet searching eye.

He sought to gain at least a measure of calm by a rigorous adherence to the personal requirements of the *Discipline*. Rising regularly at four, he spent two hours in prayer, meditation and severe self-examination, and he fasted daily. His senior preacher at New Alden, noticing how thin his face had become, asked him one day if he were ill.

It is the supreme cruelty of love that it deprives the lover of his interest in all wonted occupations. Stephen's apathy became so marked that his friends noticed it, though Colonel Carroll was the only one that divined the cause. He believed his friend to be a man of stainless honor, yet he recognized that the stress of a terrible temptation was on him. He longed to let fall some word of counsel from his cool vantage-point of more than sixty years, but as this was impossible, he sympathized in silence. In the meantime he thought no less of Stephen for being human. He had no wish for a perfect friend; Achilles, he reflected, had he been wholly invulnerable, would have been intolerable to live with.

Stephen's mare had grown steadily worse from her sprain and could not be ridden for many weeks. Carroll offered to lend him a horse of his own and Stephen had half accepted the offer. But one day at noon he saw Stephen standing in front of the

hotel stable, giving directions for the care of a raw-boned sorrel. A short way down the street he thought he recognized Abel.

"Why, Stephen," Carroll remonstrated, "you haven't bought that wind-broken sorrel, have you?"

"Yes," Stephen answered. "Why not?"

"How much did you pay?"

"Seventy-five dollars."

"Well, it wouldn't be hard to beat you in a horse trade."

"Oh," replied Stephen in the tone of one who does not care to pursue the subject, "Jess is not handsome but he will serve my purpose."

As a matter of fact, Stephen was not at all deceived in his bargain. He knew he could have done much better for the price that he had paid for Jess. But he also knew that Abel was anxious to sell the horse and he had hoped, in buying him, to ease, in some infinitesimal degree, his own overwrought conscience.

The day of the county-seat election drew near. Belmont, as president of Camden's town board, and Morgan, occupying the same position in New Alden, constituted two members of the special judges' board that would count the votes. To Stephen's surprise he was asked to be the third member. As he saw no reason why he should not serve, he agreed to do so. He was glad to be useful to the

town, and he felt the need of being as busy as possible, seeking in occupation to put his love aside, a thing to be reckoned with later.

Secretly he was anxious about the election, because of the strong fight that he knew New Alden was making, although, like every other resident of Camden, he was reluctant to believe that there was really any danger that New Alden would win. A victory for New Alden, he felt, meant a victory for slavery and corrupt politics. In Camden, Dudley's influence was bound before long to oust Belmont, and the future there was promising.

The day before the election chanced to be the one on which he went regularly to New Alden to confer with his senior preacher. Dusk was falling as he was about to mount his horse in front of the Belvedere House to return home. Just then he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw a man roughly dressed, like a flatboat-man.

"Beg pardon, sir. But you're a minister?"

"Yes. Does any one want me?"

"That's just it," was the answer. "There's a man living down on the river a piece whose child is dying."

It was not yet seven o'clock. In the west faint sunset fires still smoldered. Stephen followed where the man led, down the rough cobbled street toward the wharf and into an alley way.

"We're almost there," he called back. "I'll just go on and tell them you're coming."

There were a number of shacks along the river in which lived sometimes solitary flatboat-men, sometimes whole families of poor whites. In one of these not far distant, a lantern was burning. Toward this shack the man bent his steps. It was almost dark here by the river, for a line of tall warehouses shut out the light that still lingered on the hill.

In front of the shack Stephen's guide halted. The door opened as Stephen approached and he entered. His guide entered after him and closed the door.

Before it was fairly shut, the lantern was dashed to the floor. In the darkness Stephen felt himself surrounded by men. He struck out right and left, and was aware that he gave at least two memorable blows; his arms were caught and held—

When he came to himself he was at first sensible only of a vast dimness. He was lying on a hard, level surface. Away down at his right he saw two spots of light. His head hurt fearfully, and he was very weak. Something dark and soft nuzzled up to him. It was a cat.

What cat was it? Where was the dying child? He dimly remembered entering a shack—his arms—he was lying on them; they were horribly stiff and cramped; he tried to move them; they were

pinioned. He managed to rise to a sitting posture and by a great effort to release them.

Consciousness returning more fully, he now realized that he was in a great, high-vaulted, disused store-room fantastically cobwebbed and containing only piles of rough lumber. The spots of light that he saw were windows. A high thick door was but a few steps from him; slowly he raised himself and made his way to it. It was locked, and the sound of its heavy knob, as he rattled it, echoed bafflingly back at him through the emptiness. The lean, lonely cat purred and mewed with pleasure at his presence.

With every moment his mind grew clearer. His head thumped but his strength was returning. How long had he lain there? Was it the morning or the evening twilight of the next day? Was the battle over in Camden?

He was now certain that he had been decoyed and assaulted at some one's direct instigation. But what enemies had he? Was it possible that Belmont had a hand in the matter? Could it be that in the matter of the election Belmont was playing into Morgan's hands? He recalled that of late Belmont had been surprisingly conciliatory; he wondered that he had not from the first distrusted the invitation to serve on the election board. It almost seemed as if he had been asked to serve merely to give the election

a show of fairness. In his absence, Belmont and Morgan would at the last moment substitute some paid worker of their own and the victory would go to New Alden. But why should Belmont want New Alden to win? He could not fathom that. The pain in his head was not conducive to thought. But it was plain that it had all been a trap, into which he had walked with infantile simplicity.

He felt in his pockets; his watch and his money were gone; not a serious loss all told. But theft had been only a pretext in the assault, of that he was sure. There were too many of his assailants—three at least—for any ordinary case of waylaying. The whole thing was prearranged.

A determination arose desperately within him to escape if it were possible to do so. He resolved to see what chance lay in the windows. By grasping for support at the dusty lumber piles by the wall, now resting, now hitching along, Black Puss rubbing herself encouragingly against his legs, he at last reached the nearest one. It was open.

The afternoon sun shone high.

The voting had been going on in Camden for hours.

Directly before him, although perhaps five hundred yards away, rolled the Ohio River, gleaming in the sunshine like molten gold. The old warehouse, in whose topmost story he was a prisoner,

stood on a flat barren common. A scraggy sycamore of great height, growing within two yards of the window—just out of reach—was the only living thing in sight. Looking out of the window to the right and left, he saw that it was fully half a mile to any other building. He looked down at the front of the warehouse; it was absolutely plain, without shutters or jutting sills that would aid descent. Even if he had been in possession of all his strength, escape down its sheer precipitateness would have been out of the question. Again he looked at the sycamore; no human being could have jumped to its branches.

A palatial steamboat with a band of music aboard passed down the river, so near that he could see the faces of passengers lounging on the deck, and so far that the shout that rose to his lips died away inarticulately as he recognized its uselessness. It might be hours before a human being would cross the common. Indeed, there seemed no reason why any one should come at all unless it was to a small, rickety boat-landing at his right, beyond calling range. Everything depended on his getting to Camden before the counting of the ballots began that night. And he was as helpless as Robinson Crusoe. Colonel Carroll and Dudley would be utterly mystified at his absence; they would not have the slightest idea where to search for him.

Suppose he should not be found at all but should die there, like a rat in a hole.

Instantly, that last night at Fir Heights came back to him. How inexorable he had been! Oh, if he had only been a little kind, a little tender! He would have given worlds to be able to recall one accent of sympathy that he had bestowed on Judith. He had been wholly cruel, and now he might never see her again.

Once more he surveyed the bare common. Then he dropped down by the window and gave up.

"Me-ow, me-ow."

He felt a gentle pressure against his leg. In his despair he had forgotten Black Puss. The reminder was welcome, and he returned her courtesy with a caress. She sprang purring into his lap and curled up comfortably.

What seemed to Stephen like two hours, and was probably a quarter of that time, passed thus. No one had appeared on the common. Two packets had puffed slowly by without stopping.

"Chink-a-pink!"

It was a bobolink, cheerily perching himself on one of the highest branches of the ungainly sycamore. Black Puss sprang to her feet, her eyes glowing like live coals. All at once Stephen straightened up, too. Hurricdly he began to feel in his waistcoat and breeches pockets. From one of the latter he

produced a scrap of lead-pencil. Not a bit of paper could he find anywhere. But his shirt-cuff would answer as well, and quickly he tore it off. On the smooth-laundered surface he wrote a dozen words. Then with his handkerchief he bound the cuff, written side up, about the cat's neck.

Rising, he grasped her by the scruff and with all his might he flung her toward the nearest bough of the sycamore.

Any living creature except a gaunt wiry cat would have dropped to death midway. Black Puss caught frantically at the tip of the bough, lunged in uncertainty for a moment, and then digging her hunger-sharpened claws into the wood, obtained a firmer hold. Bobolink had, before this, flown in fright. Slowly, bearing her singular burden, Puss worked her way to the main trunk, down whose slippery sides she sometimes scrambled, more often slid, to terra firma, her nine lives intact.

In spite of an ugly pricking at the back of his head, Stephen watched her, fascinated. What would she do? His message, if it fell into hands the least intelligent and friendly, would bring him speedy release. Leisurely Puss crept across the common, stopping now and then to sniff at dump-heaps.

At the boat landing she hesitated and began to scratch at the white incumbrance about her neck. Stephen held his breath. If she succeeded in loos-

ening it, there was small chance that any one would ever pick it up. No, he had tied it on securely. But he congratulated himself too soon. Puss, lazily abandoning her scratching, gazed about her for a comfortable resting-place. A hole in the rotten floor of the landing, saturated with warm sunshine, tempted her, and in she crawled, even the tip of her tail disappearing. Stephen groaned and fell forward in utter blackness.

It was nearly four o'clock on the most eventful day that Camden had ever known. Between the leafy branches of the elms, the late afternoon sunshine fell athwart the grassy Square in slanting, tremulous bars of gold.

The contest for the county-seat exceeded in excitement anything and everything else that even Grandfather Kimball could recall. Camden men, gathered thick in and about the Square, periodically assured each other, with somewhat more force than real confidence demanded, that the day was theirs. New Alden, though twice as large as Camden, had, they pointed out, the big end of the fight to make. The more canid ones admitted, however, that New Alden had not fallen short. Wagons loaded with paid voters, who had otherwise been too indifferent to appear, had driven up at intervals during the day; the taverns were crowded with drunken men,

shocking Camden's peace-loving citizens with their swearing and their carousing. Not a few of the enemy, who had loudly proclaimed their intention of staying on the ground to see fair play, had straggled off home, exhausted with heat and excitement. But scores still remained on guard.

From the open gate to the court-house steps stretched a narrow rope aisle up which the voters of the county marched one by one to cast their ballots at the poll just inside the door. There had been sharp challenging, and every man of voting age in the county had voted, it was believed. But the poll was still kept open to give any possible belated ones a chance. Belmont and Morgan strolled about through the yard, now conferring with some zealous lieutenant, now exchanging a friendly word, as became party leaders and judges who were above the strife and broil of the herd.

On Camden's side there was increasing anxiety over the absence of Stephen.

When Colonel Carroll and Dudley learned, early that morning, that Stephen had not returned from New Alden the night before, they had been somewhat disturbed, but they agreed that it would be best to keep this fact to themselves. They looked all the morning for Stephen to ride in. By noon, the fact of his absence had become generally known. Every hour that followed sharpened Camden's fear.

Over and over again his failure to return had been considered and every possible explanation, it seemed, had been thought of. No one openly doubted Belmont's loyalty, but the burden of Camden's hope and trust for the day had reposed in Stephen. For the first time people realized how much they had come to depend on him. And now at this critical hour he was absent. To be sure, he would not actually be needed until the poll closed and the counting began, but every one would breathe more freely if he were on the spot.

"It's going to be close," Carroll admitted to Jane and Charlotte Eastbrook, who came up to him as he stood just outside the iron fence at the corner of the Square. "However, possession's nine points of the law."

"I wish that the constitution of this state would let me cast one ballot in my lifetime," said Charlotte fervently. "To think, that after we've been the county-seat for almost fifty years—" She turned toward her sister, expectant of rebuke, but in Jane's eyes an "amen" was shining. "Come, Jane," she continued, "there's no use in our staying." And they walked on home.

"I can't understand what keeps Stephen!" exclaimed Carroll to Dudley, as for the hundredth time they paced up and down the Square.

"It's certainly very strange," responded Dudley.

"By the way, I heard an ugly story about Belmont yesterday. Lane told me."

"Well," answered Carroll, "I'm not surprised. I've always had a suspicion that he left Kentucky because he had to. Sentiment about his wife and her relatives had precious little to do with it, I fancy. What was the story?"

"It seems," replied Dudley, "that he killed a man in a duel down there in a way that was little short of cold murder. These Kentuckians, you know, have no objection whatever to gentlemen firing bullets into each other in defense of their sacred honor, but they do insist that the thing shall be done according to the code. Belmont, it is claimed, violated the code in a flagrant manner. His antagonist, it seems, was just a boy—hot-headed probably—who made some remark reflecting on Belmont's political integrity. They exchanged a couple of shots without effect, and then the boy wanted to back out. Said he'd retract, and all that. He'd never been in a duel before and he had been told that Belmont could cut a cord in two at a distance of over twenty feet. Belmont's second advised him to let the boy off, but he insisted on another shot. He escaped with a grazed shoulder; the boy lay dead in the road. Stirred up a scandal all over the county. People were hot about it and from what Lane says they're getting hotter at the notion of his

running for the Legislature. They're going to bring him to trial if they can."

"Do you suppose he knows?"

"I've an idea he may. It has seemed to me for a week or two that he looks shaky. However, you can't tell much about him. He knows how to keep cool under mighty strong fire. But I declare," he broke off, "I can't stand this suspense any longer. I'm going to New Alden and find Stephen. It's time he was here." Within five minutes he was galloping past the toll-gate toward New Alden.

The hands in the court-house clock pointed to ten minutes of six. Stephen had not appeared, nor had Dudley returned. Belmont threw a significant glance at Morgan, who nodded understandingly, whereupon Belmont privately despatched a negro with a message to a certain man waiting for it in a tavern on the next street.

"We must make an announcement, I suppose?" he queried.

"Certainly," assented Morgan.

Belmont accordingly went to the door. Mounting the steps and raising his voice so that it could be heard to the farthest corner of the now darkening Square, he said: "Gentlemen, voters of Henderson County: Mr. Waters, to our great regret, not being here to take his place on the election board, Mr. Morgan and myself have agreed on a well-

known and honorable citizen of New Alden, Mr. Max Hyman—”

“Why, here’s Waters!” The shout came from the farthest edge of the black crowd. “Or his ghost,” added the same voice, in a suddenly altered tone.

The crowd fell back as Stephen, supported by Doctor Potter on one side and Dudley on the other, walked feebly up the rope aisle. His face was scarcely less white than the bandage about his head. He did look more like a ghost than himself.

He dropped into a chair and, without explanation to Morgan and Belmont, helped to begin the night’s work. It was evident that he was keeping up only by a supernatural effort, and toward midnight his pallor became frightful to see.

The whole count passed without the exchange of a word beyond what was unavoidable in handling the ballots. It ended as day was breaking, with fifty-seven votes ahead for Camden. And then Stephen Waters seemed to let go his hold on life. As the door was opened and the weary, anxious men outside crowded in, he fell over on the table that but for him had been Camden’s Waterloo, without breath or motion.

But outside a great cheer rose, and Black Betty, run to the front and ammunitioned, boomed out the joyful news of victory. Away back among the quiet

hills men heard and rejoiced that Camden had won.

Colonel Carroll and Dudley, aided by Doctor Potter, revived Stephen and in the early dawn drove him to the hotel. Later in the day, propped up on pillows, he gave a circumstantial account of his capture.

The adventures of Puss after she disappeared within the hole in the floor of the boat landing, he could not fully relate. But as far as he had been able to trace them they included a fight with a yellow dog on whom she used her claws so freely that his yelps brought to the rescue his owner, a tow-headed boy out fishing. The boy noticed the white cuff tied to the cat's neck and, being a curious boy, he coaxed the cat to him and succeeded in cutting off the cuff with his pocket knife. He could not read all that had been written on it, some words having been smeared with the mud that Puss encountered under the landing. But he did make out "man"—"warehouse"—"help," whereupon he vented a prolonged whoop of astonishment and then streaked as straight as his bare legs could carry him to his father's shack under the river bluff. Within an hour Stephen was on his way to Camden behind two horses, hired at the hotel stables and driven at a dead run by his rescuer. On the way he had met Dudley.

"I have no more doubt that Belmont is at the

bottom of this than that I'm alive," exclaimed Dudley when Stephen ended. "He and Morgan had made a bargain over this election."

"Neither have I," said Colonel Carroll. "But what proof have we?"

"No direct proof in this case," admitted Dudley. "But other things have happened of which we may get proof. I have always believed that there was something queer about that stage robbery,—Belmont hushed it up so. It's my opinion he's crooked all the way through. I've sometimes doubted whether the money was actually stolen from him. He's always been hard up. He came here in debt, and yet I know that he was prepared to pay liberally for a lot of votes in case he was nominated. The question is, where did he get the money?"

"Tibbott could tell us how well the paper is paying," suggested Carroll. "But no, we'll not do that."

"I don't believe we need to know that," mused Dudley. "There must be other clues."

"The pathetic thing about it," said Colonel Carroll, "is that he's not wholly bad. He's personally brave and under happier circumstances would probably never have done anything really mean and dishonest. But his vanity has been the death of him. It's hard to tell how to deal with such a man. If people were like lumber, and you could sort them

absolutely, putting good here and 'culls' there, life wouldn't be half so hard. But we must probe this thing to the bottom. We can't have Belmont selling the town under our very noses."

That afternoon the three men drove quietly to New Alden. Stephen identified the shack in which he had been assaulted and the warehouse where he had been imprisoned. Both were empty and barren of clues. As they drove back up the hill they saw Lane in front of the Belvedere House, engaged in stowing parcels away in the boot of his stage.

"Lane," asked Dudley suddenly, "do you remember about what time it was that the stage was robbed last fall?"

Lane gave a bulky package a final shove and then paused to think. "'Twas the middle of November, or thereabouts," he said at last.

"You're sure it wasn't earlier?"

"Oh, no! It may have been a few days later. But they waited till the roads got bad, givin' 'em a better chance at us, and we don't have bad roads till 'long about the fifteenth or twentieth."

"Thank you. Excuse me just a moment, will you?" And jumping from the buggy, Dudley walked past the hotel and turned the corner. It was a quarter of an hour before he returned with a dated check in his hand and, joining Carroll and Stephen, drove with them back to Camden. There Carroll,

consulting his file of the *True Whig*, found that Lane was quite right in his recollection about the robbery.

Next morning as Belmont sat at his desk writing, he heard some one ascend the stairway nearest him. Glancing up he saw Dudley enter.

"Good morning, Jim," he called jocularly. "I'll see you in just a moment."

But Dudley observed that, in spite of his jocoseness, Belmont looked haggard. His eyes were dull and bloodshot, and the flesh beneath them was puffy. He was about to resume writing, when the door opposite opened and Stephen and Colonel Carroll came in through Tibbott's room, closing the door after them, to that gentleman's intense disappointment.

The pen in Belmont's fingers fell.

"To what do I owe the honor?" he asked with a show of sarcasm and a large sweep of the hand as they approached.

"I reckon you know, Belmont, as well as we do," answered Dudley quietly. "We have decided, Colonel Carroll, and Mr. Waters and I, that you have got to get out of Camden."

Belmont started ever so slightly.

"May I inquire what body this committee represents?" he asked, still sarcastic.

"See here, Belmont," answered Dudley, "bluff won't work now. You might as well face the music.

You've got to go. And you can be mighty glad that we're letting you go, too."

"What business is it of yours whether I go or stay?" Belmont demanded.

"The business of honest citizens to put a bad man out of their town," replied Dudley squarely.

"Suppose I won't go," Belmont sneered.

"You will, though. Listen! We believe, we three, that you kept Abel Troop's money, and we suspect that you meant to sell the election to Dick Morgan—just why, we don't know, but for a good solid reason we don't doubt!"

"By God, sir!" cried Belmont, rising and taking a step toward Dudley, "how dare you? And without a shadow of proof, too!" Dudley and his companions exchanged glances.

"You are perfectly right, Colonel," Dudley continued. "We have not a scrap of proof. But we are convinced, just the same, that we have the facts. You drew that money out of the New Alden bank on the twenty-fifth of October, didn't you?"

"I don't remember the date precisely. Why should I?"

"Well, it does not matter whether you do or not. For the bank's records show that was the date. Here's the check. The money was paid to you in gold."

"Well, what of it?" asked Belmont roughly.

"Just this. Your game's played out. It's not at all likely that you carried that amount in gold about with you for three weeks until the stage robbery which, according to the files of your own paper, occurred the night of November sixteenth."

Belmont retreated a step behind his desk, as if all at once he felt the need of a bulwark. He looked waxen now, and theatric, in his faded blue uniform and his coal-black imperial.

"How dare you, sir? How dare you insult a gentleman in his own office?" he cried. "In Kentucky you would be called out for this."

"Call away," retorted Dudley promptly. "Der-ringers or Colts?"

Belmont's eyes flashed deadly hatred from under their thick ambushing brows.

"Well?" he said defiantly, "it means nothing to me, all this opinion and surmise." But the muscles of his face twitched, although almost imperceptibly; and many a cause has been lost by weakness of the facial muscles.

"Oh, but it means everything to you!" insisted Dudley. "It will kill your paper, you know, when it gets out. However, it's not all we have to offer. My legal associates in New Alden, Marshall and Morris, inform me it's notorious that this nudging fellow, Hyman, is in Morgan's pay. We are pretty sure that he could be induced to tell all about the

game that was worked on Mr. Waters. Hyman, you know, is just the kind of chap who turns state's evidence."

Belmont dropped heavily into his chair. He looked sick and pasty.

"I didn't mean to keep it at first," he groaned. "Why didn't she ask somebody else to get it for her? I needed it just then—the campaign was coming on—I could have made it up to them later—everything went against me!" . . . His head sank forward on the desk. They could not choose but pity him.

"Belmont," said Colonel Carroll mildly, "we have no desire to ruin you. But you must pay back that money and you must leave Camden. If you will do these two things we will hush the affair up."

"Why don't you go back to your plantation in Kentucky, Belmont?" asked Stephen.

Belmont half raised his head. His face was livid.

"I can't go back to Kentucky. I—I killed a boy down there!" he almost shrieked. "I can see him now, lying dead in the road! If he hadn't looked so innocent and young—! But I will leave Camden," he added more firmly. Rising with a kind of pathetic dignity, he stood at bay. "Yes, I will leave Camden," he repeated very slowly, as in far-away retrospect.

With a lightning movement he pulled open the

drawer at his right and from it snatched something black, shining and loaded.

"Belmont, for God's sake!" cried Stephen, rushing behind the desk.

But he was too late. There was a loud report. Belmont staggered, threw up his hands and fell prone, shot through the heart.

CHAPTER XXI

JUDITH AND ABEL

To Judith her life at this time was like a play in which she acted without question a part assigned to her. Significant events followed each other closely, as fleeting as fire pictures, as inexplicable as dreams. Her wedding had been set for early in September. A week before the day Mrs. Troop died suddenly. She had not for some time been well, which she attributed to the unaccountable loss of her silver bracelet, over which she had brooded. Death knocked thrice at her door in the short space of a single day—and none has been known to resist that third summons.

It was at noon that Mrs. Troop was first stricken. Toward evening the news reached Judith. Accompanied by Jane Eastbrook, she went out to Fir Heights at once. As they drove up the lane they noticed that the house was brightly lighted. Abel himself had searched out every candle that he could find, impelled by a despairing hope that death would find it harder to steal in on his mother thus. Except

to do this, he had remained immovably by her bed ever since he had carried her there.

At Abel's request Judith took charge of the house. Doctor Potter was in attendance; Milly had cried herself to sleep on the settle. Toward ten o'clock Mrs. Troop stirred uneasily.

"It seems so dark," she murmured.

Abel ran into the living-room and brought a large candle that stood on the table there. He placed it on the dresser beside his mother's bed.

"Judith," said Mrs. Troop calmly, "I'm going to die." She spoke thickly and with difficulty, but her spirit was unperturbed. The strength of the hills had been hers always; it did not fail her now.

Reaching out, she took Judith's hand and placed it in Abel's. "Don't wait on my account. Be kind to her, Abel. David . . . Take care of Milly. I've been as good to her as if she was my own; I knew what it was to live out. No, don't wake the child, . . . best so. I feel," she added feebly, "like sleeping myself. Farewell!" her head dropped back on the pillow.

"Mother!" cried Abel in agony.

She did not answer. She never spoke again. Gradually she sank into a stupor and by midnight she was gone.

By the next day news of Mrs. Troop's death had spread, and kith and kin on both sides of the house,

all distant, some of whom Abel had never seen, began to arrive from twenty miles around. The neighbors came also, some anxious to help, others impelled only by curiosity. From among the many that offered to assist, Judith selected two kind, motherly women, who, without specific direction, set themselves at once to baking and stewing. They knew that three meals daily would be expected by the visitors, and it would be a discredit to the family if at every one of them the table were not heaped with good things.

Meanwhile, in every room except the still parlor where Mrs. Troop's body lay, and in an upper chamber where the two neighbors that had watched by it through the night slept heavily, there was talking and laughing, a little subdued, but very cheerful, for a country funeral is, after all, a kind of feast. Children played and sang, and visits were exchanged between families that met only on such occasions. Not that any one had a thought of disrespect to the dead woman. She was freely spoken of and with feeling as a good wife and a faithful mother.

If ever Judith had felt bound to Abel, she felt doubly so now.

He sat in the parlor, trying vainly to realize that his mother was lost to him for ever, or walked alone in the garden. He received the awkward, kindly consolations of his neighbors apathetically and spoke

seldom. Occasionally Judith needed him; he obeyed her like a child, leaning on her absolutely.

Stephen came out to conduct the funeral. But he and Judith met only for an instant. A bright blush overspread her face, but otherwise she gave no sign that anything extraordinary had happened between them. Before the hour for the service he watched her at a distance as she quietly accomplished one duty after another, sometimes of necessity conferring briefly with Abel, and blending in her demeanor such affection and serenity that her movements fell on his ear like cadences in a line of perfect poetry. He felt that her presence must be to Abel not merely consoling, rather it was compensating. No man could be utterly desolate with that benison upon him.

Nearly fifty vehicles of one kind and another followed the heavy old hearse down the lane and on to the burial ground, beyond Bethel. In the first carryall, wrapped in sorrow, Abel, Milly and Judith sat with Stephen. Other carryalls followed, and then came large, clumsy farm-wagons, accommodating whole families, and after these, the smaller spring-wagons. From vehicle to vehicle down the line the signs of mourning steadily diminished until at the spring-wagons they disappeared entirely. Scarcely subdued hilarity reigned there and not a little sparking went on, for these spring-wagons were occupied

mostly by girls whose gay hat ribbons fluttered back in the wind, seeming to say to the horseback riders, who brought up the very end of the line, "Follow us, young men!" which they were nothing loath to do.

After Mrs. Troop was buried, Abel drove Judith in to Camden.

Sometimes Judith had almost determined to tell Abel that she did not love him, and thus break absolutely with him. But quickly a dark picture of possible consequences to him had unfolded itself before her. She could see that every day he grew more like his father. Was it not almost certain that loss of her would ruin him, as loss of her mother had ruined his father?

And there was another obstacle to this course that her reason in repeated onsets failed to level: Stephen Waters would despise her if she did.

Again, in another light, it seemed like doing Abel a wrong to marry him when she did not love him. A question that he asked her now as they neared town impelled her to speak.

"You feel like being married, just the same, next week, don't you, Judith?"

"I don't think that your mother's death should make any difference," she answered slowly, "but Abel,—I almost feel, as the time draws near, that I ought to tell you—" She stopped short in distress.

"Tell me what, Judith?" he asked quietly.

"That I fear I don't love you as a woman ought to love the man that she is about to marry. You are dear to me beyond words, and yet, perhaps, some other woman could give you more love, better love, than I can. I don't want to cheat you. I am afraid sometimes that I am pitiably weak and changeful, not worthy of you, indeed." Mercifully her veil half hid her face, so that he did not see all her anguish.

"Why, Judith," Abel replied gently, "you're just nervous and overwrought. Mother's death—I know you thought a deal of her. And as to any other woman's love, I wouldn't give one jot of yours for all the rest of the love in the world."

Judith was silent. There seemed nothing more to say. The current of life was proving itself too strong for her, and, ceasing for a time to resist it, she let herself be borne along on its surface.

In the length of Judith's and Abel's engagement Camden had seen nothing unusual. Long engagements were the rule in Camden, where there was a deep-grained conviction that in such matters it would not do to be hasty. Bachelors of all ages had been known to call annually on faithful spinsters for the express purpose of asking the great question, and to depart without doing so, cautiously deciding to wait one more year. Even after an engagement or a tacit understanding had been reached there was likely to ensue a long halt. Something in

the air invited procrastination. Camden married at leisure, and, if it repented, did so at leisure. As to the amount of happiness in store for Judith and Abel, opinions differed, but it was generally agreed that they had taken plenty of time to think it over.

Early on Judith's wedding-day, before she had risen, a faint tap sounded at her door, and Miss Charlotte, holding something small and round, ran in. She came up to the bed and kissed Judith and then she showed her what she had brought—a china jar, from which a delicious attar of roses escaped.

"Dear heart," she exclaimed, "this is the sweetest rose-jar I ever made, I do believe, and I've made a score in my time, I reckon. Some don't have any luck with their jars, but I always do. It's just because I put in plenty of salt. I wanted to bring you something that would always make you think of me," she continued tremulously, holding out the jar to Judith, and then with a little sob her head dropped down on the counterpane.

Judith took the jar, and for an instant a ghost of a smile played at her lips. It was so quaint, so lovely, so like Miss Charlotte to do this!

Miss Charlotte raised her head and passed her arms around Judith's neck, her tears trickling down and making tiny damp spots on the pillow. She thought she knew where Judith's heart lay.

"Honey, you have to have the salt as well as the

roses. I know that things are bitter to you now, but in the end they will be sweet, as sweet as this rose-jar. I'm an old woman, and I've found it so. If I were gifted like Miss Nancy," she added meditatively, "I'd write a poem on that."

"It is a poem just as you say it, dear Miss Charlotte," cried Judith, as she lovingly kissed her friend, "you are a poem yourself."

At her wedding that afternoon Judith wore a simple white muslin with one of Miss Charlotte's pale yellow tea-roses at her breast. There was only a little company, including Fanny and Dudley, with the black awe-filled faces of old Zack and Sally in the background.

Judith spoke her marriage vows calmly, despite the fact that Stephen Waters pronounced them. She had thought of saying to Abel that she preferred to go to New Alden to be married, but he and Miss Eastbrook, also, would have thought this strange. She had asked Colonel Carroll to give her away; he had little sympathy with the marriage, but he could not refuse the request. As she entered the parlor on his arm and took her place by Abel's side she dared not look before her.

"Judith, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband. . . ." The words fell on her ear with the faint inarticulate roaring to be heard in a sea-shell. They ceased, and there was silence, broken

by a low gurgling sound from Miss Charlotte's corner. Poor Miss Charlotte! Was this the end of all her fond planning?

Judith's response did not falter. She heard her lips utter it with a will independently their own, but when Stephen took her right hand to place it in Abel's he found it icy cold.

The same exterior will that upheld her through the ceremony enabled her to receive the kisses and congratulations. As quickly as possible, however, she signified to Abel her readiness to accompany him, and they escaped. The strain of the hour over, she could hold up no longer. All her strength had gone toward maintaining an outward show of calmness. Like some lonely cottager, who has exhausted his store of hearth fagots in lighting his windows to frighten away prowlers, she was left within, utterly destitute of warmth and cheer.

On the way to the Heights she strove constantly but ineffectually to still the tumult at her heart. Why, oh why did a merciful God permit a woman to love a man who did not love her? It was no fault of hers that she loved Stephen Waters, instead of the man to whom she had just been married. Ah, to have had *him* for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death should them part!

Instead she had virtually bidden farewell to him.

It came to her now more and more, with every mile that the horse put between her and Camden, that she would scarcely ever see Stephen again. After what had occurred he would avoid coming out to the Heights or stopping there on his way to and from Bethel, and she felt instinctively that in marrying Abel she had severed the ties that bound her to Camden. Of all the hard cases in which love is put by the criss-crosses of life, hers was surely the hardest. Separation with love is hard, but on a thousand invisible cables love builds its own bridge across which it journeys. And nearness with love unreturned is hard, yet in the mere beholding of the loved one there is a kind of sad solace; but separation accompanied by the belief that one is despised inflicts pangs that the devil himself might pity. To no living soul could Judith pour out her anguish. It was so deep a shame for a woman to give her heart unasked that she could not seek assuagement even from kind Miss Charlotte.

Was life not merely hard, was it a colossal blunder, as well? She was conscious of a capacity for loving beyond what is usual and far beyond what Abel could receive. Merely in the economy of natural forces it seemed a pity that this love should be wasted.

As they neared the homestead she was oppressed by a feeling that she could not escape from it if she

should try. The narrowing of the road into the lane, and the sudden termination of the lane at the garden gate, together with the bold situation of the house, combined to form a physical climax that said to her almost audibly: "I am the end of your journey. Here is your destination."

The day was bright, but she thought that never before had the firs looked so black. She had observed that country people, with cheerful impartiality, plant firs both where they live and where they are to be buried, and she felt that for her these, planted for the first purpose, would serve the second. Assuredly their changeless garb of rusty mourning fitted them for the office.

From the firs she turned her eyes to the orchard. Straightway one of her childhood fancies recurred to her. On sunny days like this one, when she had visited the Heights, she had loved to lie by the hour in the long sweet grass beneath the fragrant, embowering apple trees, gazing up at the fleecy blue sky that appeared to rest directly on their ancient, knotted upstretched arms, so near that she felt blissfully cradled in its azure softness. The sky was as blue to-day as it had been then, but it was very far off.

"Shall I finish the palace, Judith, so that we can live there by and by?" Abel asked, suddenly breaking in on her reverie.

Judith considered a moment. The homestead,

after all, had endearing associations for her; the palace had none. But she did not want to hurt Abel.

"It will take so much money and so much hard work," she ventured. "Really, why should you? We shall be perfectly comfortable in the old house, and it wouldn't seem right to close it."

"Well, it's just as you say," Abel answered, in a tone revealing that he, too, preferred to live on at the homestead. So the palace remained unfinished, garish and useless—verily, Abel Troop's folly.

At the gate Judith alighted from the wagon, and, taking Milly's hand, entered the house by the side door. Abel went to stable the horse.

Judith's recent visits to the Heights had taken away from the homestead the strangeness that it would otherwise have had for her. Yet she paused now to survey it anew. It was to be her home. On this mellow autumn afternoon it was dismal enough. What must it be in the dead vast and middle of the winter, with the winds wailing and howling about it, and the firs, black against the snow, sobbing out their melancholy song?

With Milly she went up stairs to change her white dress for a dark one. But at the head of the stairs she stopped short.

The door of the front room stood wide open. Within, she saw that various small fresh furnishings had been arranged. In a vase on the dresser

a bunch of late flowers had been placed. Altogether, the touches, homely as they were, gave the room the unmistakable air of a bridal chamber.

Judith's face on the instant grew white as her dress. Stooping, she seized Milly in absolute terror.

"Milly, Milly, I can't! I can't!"

"What is the matter?" the child asked, much frightened. But Judith did not answer. She went into another room and changed her dress, and then she descended the stairs and began to get ready the supper.

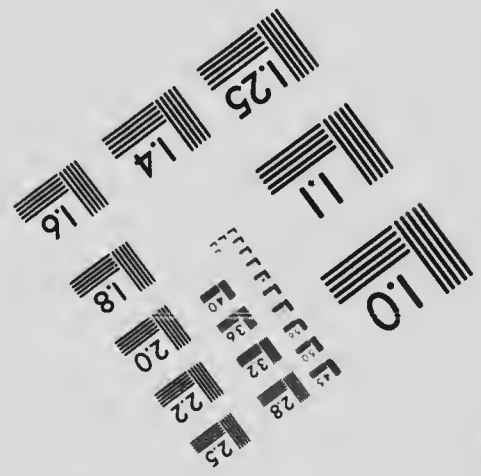
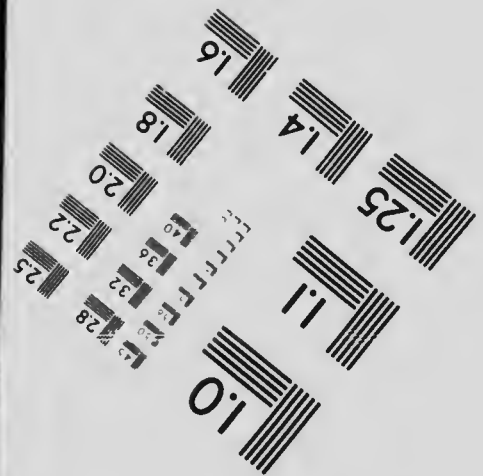
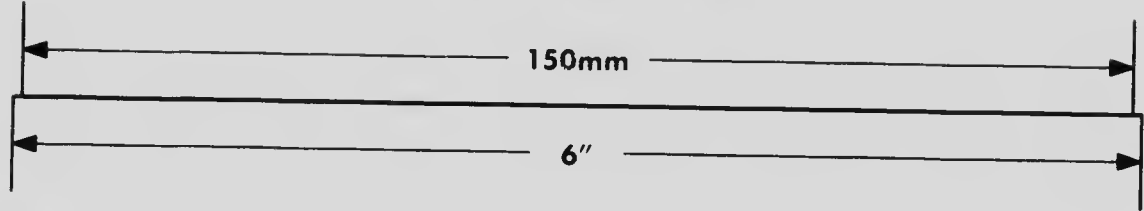
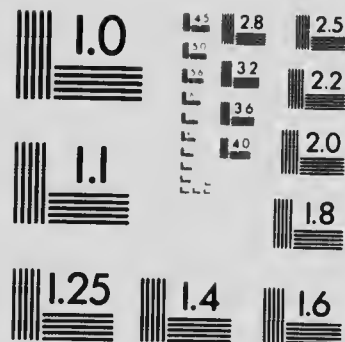
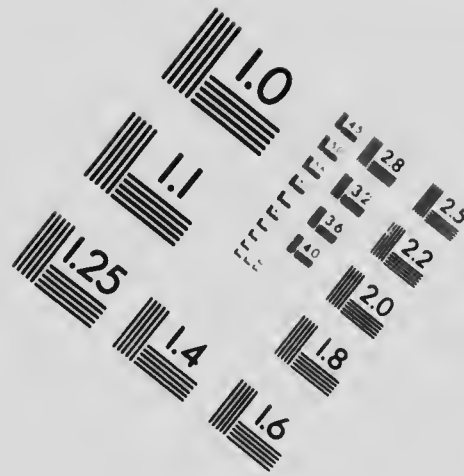
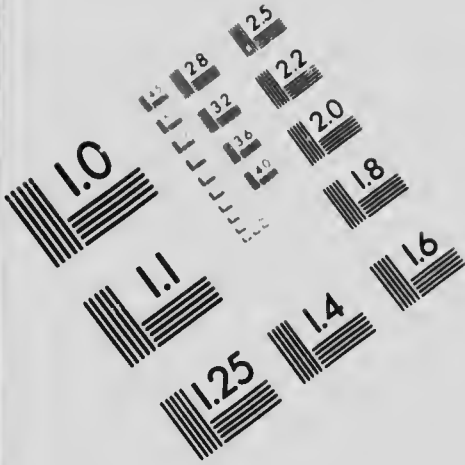
A little before dark Enoch Dowd brought her piano, which he had hauled out in his big wagon. In respect to Mrs. Troop's memory Judith had refrained from bringing her mother's portrait. The piano was set in the living-room, where, with its pearl-inlaid case and slim, turned legs, it stood, a thing of elegance and beauty, apart from the rest of the house.

"Why don't you have it put in the parlor, Judith?" asked Abel.

"That room is closed so much," she answered. "But what would you think, Abel," she continued impulsively, "of keeping it open all the time? And don't you think this room would be more cheerful if the wreath were put away up stairs—" The expression on his face warned her to desist.



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"It would wear out the carpet so fast, Judith, to use the parlor every day," he replied cautiously, anxious to please, but unmistakably surprised at the suggestion. The parlor and the spare chamber up stairs were the only rooms in the house that had carpets. "We don't really need it, do we? And the wreath's been there so long—" Habit was stronger even than love.

"Oh yes, Abel, let us leave everything just as it is! I was only wondering how it would seem to change the house about a little."

She saw his face lighten as he left the room; evidently alterations of any sort about the place would hurt him.

Milly stole up to the piano. She had been very silent all the afternoon,—a funeral and a wedding, the first of either that she remembered, and both in one week, had given her much to ponder. Timidly she tried the effect of placing a finger on one of the keys. Middle C sounded mellowly through the room. Judith went to the piano and showed her how to strike the full chord.

"Oh, Judith, will you teach me to play? Why, Judith, you're crying!"

"I'm crying because I'm thankful, Milly—so thankful that I've got you! Yes, I will teach you. We'll have our first lesson to-morrow" To teach Milly, to lead her into girlhood and womanhood,

would go far toward making life at Fir Heights livable. The child's breadth of sympathy and keen intelligence gave promise, in her maturity, of far exceeding Abel's, and already made her a companion in a sense that he was not.

As they were sitting down to supper the kitchen door opened without a warning knock and a man half-bent beneath an enormous pack and with a lean, grinning, red-capped monkey on his shoulder, stepped into the room.

"It's old Martin Nick," explained Abel to Judith. "He brings his trinkets and dress-stuffs through this part of the country about twice a year. He's an odd creature, but I never heard any harm of him. Good evening, Martin," he continued, rising and going toward the man. "Sit down and rest your pack."

"Thankee," responded the peddler glibly, loosening the straps that secured his great pack.

Judith had risen from her chair as the peddler entered and now stood gazing at him with startled eyes and parted lips. His figure, even when erect, was low and squat, his skin was like parchment and he had but one eye, facts that did not, to her mind, wholly account for the sinister effect of his presence. She did not know that throughout the country children invariably shrank from him, and that mothers had only to threaten that old Martin Nick would "get them" to frighten the most rebellious into in-

stant subjection. He seemed a strange, even an ominous guest for her wedding night.

No sooner had the peddler entered than Milly retreated a step behind her chair. But this served only to draw his attention to her.

"Here, little girl, I've got something for you!" he exclaimed ingratiatingly, letting his pack slip down on the kitchen settle. Opening it he fished out a tiny box, from which he took a ring set with a green stone. He held it out temptingly.

Milly's eyes sparkled, but she would not come forward to take it.

"Here, Jocco, take the ring to the little lady!" Obediently Jocco leaped down from his master's shoulder, doffed his red cap, and, grabbing the ring in his two front paws, started toward Milly.

"Oh, no, no!" she screamed, running for refuge behind Abel. Nor could she be induced to come closer when the peddler set going his poppet-show for her sole benefit, though the sight of the odd little figures dancing up and down fascinated her.

Judith was obliged to overcome her prejudice against old Martin sufficiently to echo Abel's invitation that he remain and eat supper with them. At the table he proved garrulous, telling, among other things, a shocking tale of a murder that had been committed in the neighborhood a few days before.

"It was pretty nigh down to Bethel," he said,

watching with malicious glee the effect of his words on Milly, who was still trembling with fright. "The man was a stranger. Had a little money and a watch, maybe. Anyway, his body was found thrust away among the bushes yesterday by some men who were clearing out brush. There was a hole clean through his skull!"

"Horrible!" cried Judith involuntarily. The peddler was by this time eating greedily, and he only laughed, as though the finding of dead men's bodies with holes through their skulls were one of the prime jests of life. Suddenly Judith recalled that Stephen was holding meetings that week at Bethel chapel, returning each night to Camden. Could it be possible that he would be in danger of such a fate as this stranger had met? She knew that his opposition to Belmont had made him enemies, but now that Belmont was dead,—nevertheless, the possibility lingered in her mind, and she found herself regarding the evil-eyed peddler with an apprehension closely akin to Milly's open terror.

After supper the peddler tarried. He insisted on pouring out the contents of his big pack, though Judith warned him that she would make no purchases.

"He expects to be asked to stay all night," remarked Abel aside, in a low voice, to Judith. "I suppose we'd better keep him."

"Oh, please don't, Abel!" she answered. "I could not bear to think of spending the night under the same roof with him."

At length, receiving no invitation to remain, the peddler restraped his pack, and with Jocco once more mounted on his shoulder, strode sourly off down the lane.

"That looks a bit hard," remarked Abel, watching him.

"I'm sorry to be inhospitable," Judith replied, "but I was almost afraid of him. I half suspected him of having a hand in that murder himself."

After supper Abel went out to the barn lot to milk. Milly was tired and Judith took her up stairs and put her to bed. The child had not fully recovered from her fright at the peddler, and Judith sat by her until she fell asleep. She had barely left her when she heard the tramping of feet in the lane and the garden. Looking out of the window, she saw a score or more of young men and boys. On the instant there began a merry ringing of bells and blowing of horns. Just then Abel came up stairs. They met in the narrow passage, dimly lighted by the rising moon, before the open door of the flower-decked chamber.

"It's our shivaree," explained Abel. "They always have one hereabouts, after a wedding. I am afeared it will disturb you, but it's all done in such

good nature that I should hate for to send them away. I asked Dowd to take them out a jug of cider, and I hope after they get that they won't stay long."

He took her hand. Gently she withdrew it.

"Abel," she whispered, "our ways part here."

"Judith!"

He fell back a step. She could not see his face distinctly, but amazement and agony were in his tone.

"If it were anything else, Abel . . . my life . . . anything but that!" She turned from him and hid her face against the wall.

"Oh, Judith!"

If only he would protest she felt that it would be easier. She half-turned to him again.

"You see, Abel, I must tell you. . . . I know that I'm cruel, but I don't love you, Abel, that is, in the way that you love me. I would if I could. God knows that I wish at this moment I could. You know I tried to tell you once, as we were coming home from the funeral. That was why I stopped writing to you when I was in Paris. Then when I came back and found you I! I was so troubled and sorry that I—it's been such a battle, Abel, you do not know how I have striven to be true to you. You would not blame me if you knew!"

Pitifully silent, he stood, wringing his hands in his grief and humiliation. She forgot her own

wretchedness in his. She hated herself for shattering him so.

Outside, horns and whistles blew lustily, and more and more merrily rang the bells: bells of every sort, cow-bells, sheep-bells, bells big and little. Homely kitchen kettles and tin pans added their shrill noise. And, besides, some one was madly beating an old drum, while from a fiddle came the piercing-sweet strains of an old marriage melody that rode on the din of the grosser instruments like the cry of a Valkyr above a battle charge.

"You won't insist . . . will you, Abel? I beg by all that is kind and good in you that you will not! Because, Abel, it ought to be a sacrament . . . and without love it can not be.

"You will think that I am not acting fair—that I ought to have told you before. I know that I ought. But oh, Abel, such things have happened, so many things, that I haven't had time to think. I was bent on giving myself completely to you. I did not realize all that meant until . . . oh, forgive me, Abel!"

In the garden the din had subsided, as if the promised jug of cider had appeared. Jokes and laughter and somewhat rough badinage ensued as it was handed from man to man. Finally the high piping voice of Grandfather Kimball sang out in the satisfied tones of one who has pulled long and deep.

"Boys, that's the real juice of the apple! Cider-sweets, I'll be bound! Just the thing to drink a bride's health in. By jiminy, I never seed a handsomer woman! And I'll be ninety-two my next birthday, boys, ni-ne-ty-two, and I've married three wives myself. Purtiest gals in the county!"

Warned by the tangy contents of the jug, the men began now to ring and blow more merrily than ever. Judith could hardly endure to hear them. There was one thing more that she must say to Abel.

"If you do not want me, now that I've told you," she spoke humbly, "I'll go away, far away. You have the right . . . it would only be fair."

"No, no," he groaned, "I can not let you go. I'll take what you can give. What must be, must!"

Never entirely recovered from the fever, shocked by the sudden loss of his mother, Abel stood now like one mortally stricken. She could not help him, and so she left him.

It was not long before the crowd in the garden departed, satisfied that it had started the bride and bridegroom properly on their life journey together. After its pandemonium the night seemed doubly still.

More like a dirge than a marriage song was the fitful tapping of the weird firs against the windows of the empty bridal chamber. "Never, for ever," they seemed to say; "for ever, never."

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE WILDERNESS

It had required all of Stephen's power of will to utter the words that had bound Judith to Abel. That night found him emotionally wrecked.

He had resumed, at Bethel a week previous, the protracted meeting that the storm had interrupted. For the first two or three nights the church had been crowded, but as the novelty of the meetings wore away the numbers dwindled. With acute conscientiousness he had endeavored to throw himself into his work. He exhorted, he sang, he prayed with all the might and fervor he could command, but with discouraging results. But this night was worst of all. The congregation was small and he himself powerless. Men and women yawned and young people tittered over whispered confidences. Not a single person came to the altar. He did not blame his hearers,—he knew only too well that the fault lay in himself. He had become an unworthy vessel.

Fagged and disheartened, he closed the meeting somewhat earlier than usual and started home. But before he had ridden a mile he deliberately dismount-

ed and hitched Jess to a beech tree at the side of the road. He was resolved to endure the buffetings of the last month no longer. He would have it out with himself, the devil, God Almighty, or whosoever his adversary might be, that very night.

Pulling off his heavy stock, he threw it across the saddle bow. He then descended the hill, through the dark trees, to Blue River and flung himself full length on its grassy bank. He took off his hat, and thrusting back his hair, bared his hot forehead to the breeze.

It was a strange, beautiful night. A full harvest moon, luminous, round, rosy, sailed benignly through the heavens like a stately, well-found ship. And the stars—the Milky Way, exquisite as a bridal veil; blue Vega, yellow Arcturus, ruddy Antares, and a myriad lesser nameless fires! The sky blossomed and burned with them, they were so thick and so bright. He watched their rhythmic quaking; were they fearful, being so near the celestial throne? Moon and stars flooded all the valley with their glory, making it "rich and like a lily in bloom."

The hills—his beloved hills they had become!—a dark, patient, encircling brotherhood, bathed their scarped brows in the silver serenity. Among them peace had its habitation. Dearer than any mountains were these hills on which men lived and toiled. Rome itself, he reflected, is sacred less because of its

shrines than because of the generations of pilgrims whose feet have pressed its pavements.

On the bosom of the river the moonbeams slept—so earth reflected heaven's tranquillity. At his feet rippled a slight eddy, the waves from which, lapping the bank with a sound as delicate as the brushing of a lady's silken gown, deepened rather than disturbed the sense of quiet. From a cabin somewhere in the hills floated a plaintive melody sung by a negro voice. The song was humble and the voice rude, but soft stillness and the night touched them to heartbreaking pathos. When the song ceased there remained the sibilant voices of the wind.

The peace and the beauty of the scene mocked his raging soul. The whole place seemed haunted by Judith's presence. Within a stone's throw of where he lay was the cave to which they had fled to escape the storm. In his thought ever since that hour, she had pervaded it like a perfume. As every wind that blows over the Ægean Sea and every wave that breaks on it murmurs the name of Ulysses, so in all this valley every leaf that rustled in the night wind whispered "Judith."

'And straightway the spirit driveth him into the wilderness.

How startlingly human was the Christ's temptation as St. Mark told it! Driven, yes, he himself was driven. He was no longer his own master. And

he was in a spiritual wilderness compared with which the lonely scene before him was as the "garden inclosed" of Solomon's *Song*. He was in a wilderness, and he had lost his bearings.

"Converse sparingly and conduct yourself prudently with women." Thus the *Discipline*. He understood now—yes, he understood. The Church fathers had been wise. If the woman were young and lovely, doubtless it would be safer not to converse at all. But if her youth and loveliness were wasting as in a desert, what then? That is not your affair, came the answer. Whose is it, then, he demanded fiercely. Some one ought to help.

By nature's law, and it was easy to assume that this was also God's, Judith belonged to him by right of highest appreciation. Abel did not, could not, rightly value her. Had they been living in the fifteenth century, he could have challenged Abel to mortal combat and have carried her off in reward for superior prowess and skill. Nineteenth-century ideals prevented any such summary action.

She had offered him the largess of her love, and he had been forced to turn away. And this was her wedding night.

If only he could see her oftener! A way instantly suggested itself. Why should he not stop regularly at the Heights whenever he preached at Bethel? No one in Camden could find fault with so natural and

convenient an arrangement, and Abel, he knew, would welcome him. Surely she needed him. To see her certainly once each month, silently to watch over her,—this prospect unfolded itself, gilded fair with a show of what is honorable and good. But beneath the gilding there was that which was so black he dared not look on it. *The kingdom of heaven is within you*—true, but so also is the kingdom of hell, and to-night Apollyon, and not the Prince of Peace, was reigning.

Questions crowded thick on him, mocking his courage, baffling his spirit. Why had he ever been appointed to Camden Circuit? Why had he become a minister? Who was he that he should presume to instruct men? Why had he been born into the world at all? The answer might be as high up as Heaven, as deep down as hell; he could not find it. It was all a riddle.

He thought of his uneventful boyhood and the years he had spent in preparation for the ministry; in comparison with his present state they seemed infinitely simple, infinitely happy, infinitely peaceful. The advice of Job's wife, to curse God and die, seemed good.

As he lay gazing up at the stars, suddenly they began to shoot here and there. But there was one that remained quiet and steady. It quivered as if there were a heart beating in it, but it did not fall. It

was larger than the other stars, and of a ruddy gold color, like Judith's hair, he thought, that made it quite distinct from the small, silvery white stars, and it was set in a field of blue to itself, so that it shone all the brighter.

And as he lay, wide-awake it seemed, and yet in a dream, he found himself at the bottom of a deep, dark well, whence he could see only a small disk of the sky. But in it was the bright gold star—his star—and while he gazed he thought that it slowly descended toward the well. As it came, the sky appeared to fall away from it like a mantle, and lo, it was Judith!

She came floating, floating, down to the mouth of the well, and for an instant hovered there, making it light and glorious to the bottom. He called to her; he reached out his arms; he strove to rise and clamber out, that he might embrace her, but he could not. And Judith? She floated away and up, up, up to the far-off sky, and became a star again.

"Judith!" he cried aloud, and at the sound of his voice he awoke. His sleep had lasted a few moments only, and had left him unrefreshed. The moon and the stars were still shining, but on his spirit a horror as of great darkness fell. Slowly he rose. Before him glided the river. It was not wide, but it was deep, and at the bottom lay rest,—kind, shadowy, enveloping, soundless, fathomless rest.

The little waves at his feet purred caressingly, coaxingly. The river was deep and so still . . .

Meanwhile, at the Heights two lonely souls kept vigil. Abel had lain down in his own room, but not to sleep, for he was sick with wretchedness. And yet, he could not blame Judith. How blind he had been all along! His mother's instinct had been right. It was impossible that Judith should love him and wish to marry him. And he had given her no opportunity to withdraw. With bitter regrets he saw the supreme unconscious selfishness of his course.

Judith lay awake through long hours. She thought of the glassy pool set in tall rushes down in the glade near the orchard, beside which she used to play with Abel, and in the bitterness of her soul wished that she had drowned in it before she grew up to break his heart and her own. From the wood back of the house she heard the mournful hooting of an owl.

Rest was impossible. She had not even undressed. Her throat ached and her temples throbbed. There was a fever in her brain. From Miss Charlotte's rose-jar, which she had placed on the chest near her bed, delicate odors stole forth, like sad, sweet memories of days that were past for ever. Suddenly, from under its woolen cover in Abel's room, she heard one of the strings of his viol snap. She could lie still no longer. Rising, she crept along the pas-

sage and descended the stairs. A shaft of pearly moonlight irradiated the living-room. She opened the front door and stepped out into the beaming night.

As she did so she heard a faint whinny. Surprised, she walked down to the gate. Jess cantered up and, thrusting his head down to her for a pat, mutely asked admittance at his lifelong home.

The return of Stephen's horse at this hour of the night and the sight of the empty saddle terrified Judith. The story of murder that the peddler had told them at supper came vividly back to her. What better chance could one who wished to rob or murder have than Stephen's lonely ride home from Bethel? Abel himself had told her that Stephen never carried a weapon. At that very moment he might be lying wounded or dead by the roadside. Some one must search for him.

Should she call Abel? No, lest in revealing to him her fear she reveal more than fear. She must find out the truth for herself. It might be wrong, but to go back into the house and leave Stephen to his fate—she could not do that. He had been unspeakably cruel to her, he had humiliated her to the very earth, but she must go to him.

Carefully she opened the gate—she fancied that the firs were watching. She led Jess to the foot of the lane, all the while stroking his neck so that he

would not whinny, and from time to time glancing nervously back. Was she getting afraid of shadows? She did not suspect that the firs were not alone in their watching.

She mounted Jess and began to ride slowly toward Bethel. The moon shot its silver rays into every hedge-corner, and she could plainly see that they hid no dreadful secret. On she went across the creek, past Bethel—lonely hamlet of the living, past the little graveyard—scarce lonelier hamlet of the dead. She could now see the walnut grove within which stood the church.

Just this side of the grove she espied something white lying in the middle of the road. She dismounted and picked it up. It was a stock.

Almost suffocating now with fear, she tied Jess to a low-branching beech. No thought of loneliness or of personal anger visited her—she was strung beyond both. Convinced that at any moment she might stumble on Stephen dead or dying, she hurried up the knoll under the walnut trees and across the grass to the church. She was surprised to see that the door was half-open. Fearfully she stole up to it.

Within, at the far end, kneeling before the rude altar, Stephen Waters prayed aloud.

After gazing a moment at the river, a trembling of shame at the temptation that it suggested had

seized him from head to foot, like an ague. Back to the road he had fled, as one pursued, not stopping until he reached the church. There he wrestled with his adversary. Through an open window the night airs were wafted, touching his hot temples as gently as the hand of a friend. But the blessing he sought was not to be lightly won.

Alone in the dimness and the silence, with uplifted face, and with hands clasped before him, he entreated compassion as one sorely beset: "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul." His voice was low and it shook, so that at first Judith caught only parts of sentences. Distressed at finding him thus, she nevertheless breathed deeply in relief at beholding him alive and unharmed.

She felt she ought not to stay and listen to this outpouring of his inmost heart, but involuntarily she lingered.

His voice rose slightly now, and came to her in perfect distinctness. He told of a great love that he had striven against in vain. Uttered in indescribable fondness, a spoken caress, she now heard her own name—Judith.

Startled, she fell back a step. But on the long grass her foot made no noise. In the moonlight her face was as the face of a Shining One for joy. She could not go now. Instead, she pressed as close to the door as she dared.

At midnight in the lonely church Stephen Waters was confessing his passion to the Almighty. Over and over again she heard her name, spoken now in the white heat of love, again in humblest contrition. No other human being would ever hear him speak as he was speaking now. This was first love and last love and only love. She had often been moved by his voice, but to-night, beneath its rich and thrilling tones, she vibrated like a chord-swept harp.

He pleaded her youth, her exceeding great beauty, her goodness. His sin had come on him unawares. He asked forgiveness for his wish at the Well that he, not Abel, might wed her, for the stolen kiss, the embrace in the cave, and his failure in the week's meetings. He besought that she might find peace, if not happiness, that his sin might not be visited on her. He entreated that in some way it might be given to her to understand why he had been cruel to her. He poured forth his love as an oblation. His voice sank finally to a mere whisper and, as if his very heart had dissolved in anguish, ceased abruptly.

And Judith! to stand there less than thirty feet from him . . . the lighting of her face in joy had quickly died away. How she pitied him! The maternal solicitude that is half of every good woman's feeling for the man she loves would not be stifled. Yearningly she lifted her arms toward him. If only

she might go to him, kneel at his side and comfort him! The wish was flame-pure. Of her own burden she thought not at all. She longed only to bear his also.

He loved her! At last she knew it! The kiss he had given her at the Well was a true kiss. And that supreme moment in the cave! Her instinct had not been at fault there. He did love her. She dared not consider if to have known it sooner would have made life different to her. She was bound irrevocably, bound rightly, she believed, to Abel. If one of them must miss life's supremest joy, she was glad that it was not Abel, yet for one human ineffable moment she exulted in Stephen's love.

Hark! he was speaking again.

His voice chilled her now. There was no fire left in it. It was the ashes of the voice that had prayed before. Stephen vowed, as far as human will could go, to put her out of his heart and life for ever. He asked for strength to keep this vow.

"O God, whom I can not see, but in whom I believe, and toward whom I would grow, help me now!" Again he was silent.

Tears burned in Judith's eyes. She was to be cast out, forgotten. It was right, but could she bear it? She felt that for the present she might be able to do so, but the long future? She was so young! She saw the years creeping toward her, creeping past—

palpable veiled figures in unending procession. Slowly, silently, they would bind her hand and foot; at last they would stop her mouth, and carry her captive, helpless, speechless, away with them on their long march.

Only in its serene, clear-visioned moments can the soul lay hold with satisfying sureness on the hope of immortality. No such support stayed Judith now. Man lives but once, was as high as her faith could soar, and that one life she and Stephen were to spend apart.

"I shall grow old, and he will grow old," she whispered, locking her hands tightly, "and we shall not be together!"

The tender night sighed.

Scarcely had its exhalation died away before, dropping to her knees on the doorstep, Judith silently offered up her vow with Stephen's. Henceforth she would think only of Abel,—her husband. With single heart she would love, honor and serve him until death should part them. She had been wrong that night; she would tell Abel so—she would submit—

As she rose to her feet a faint cry of anguish escaped her lips.

Stephen sprang to his feet, turned and faced her.

"Judith!"

For a moment he stood looking at her, pale, and

haloed by the moonlight. Something in her face told him that she had heard all. He went to her.

"You know, now."

Whether joy that she knew or sadness that they were for ever parted most filled him, he could not have said. In the conflict of emotions he did not even wonder how she came to be there.

Perhaps no relation can exist between men and women so fine as that founded on love impossible of realization. The ecstasy of mutual recognition enters into it, and the nobility of sacrifice. Something of this thought came to both Stephen and Judith and made the moment bitter-sweet.

What Judith would have said in answer to Stephen she never knew. For at that instant she heard a step. Abel stood before them.

His garments and his hair were disordered; his face was white with rage.

"So this is the reason! You have deceived me, and I find you here in the middle of the night with your lover!"

"Abel," cried Stephen, "you are wrong. You must not say that."

But Abel would not listen.

"And you!" he said bitterly to Stephen. "I trusted you, and you have robbed me!" He turned again to Judith.

"Curse you and yours! You are Rachel Warren

over again! Mother understood you well enough until you wheedled her over, at the last. You and your mother have brought misery into our family for two generations! You're like the cheat in the wheat."

"Abel," entreated Judith, "you are doing me a terrible wrong. Let me tell you." She caught his arm, but he shook her roughly off.

"Be gone, you ——!" His last word was an old country epithet that carried its vile meaning plump on its face. Seared with shame, Judith shrank back.

"Abel Troop, withdraw that word!" Stephen raised his right arm for a blow that would have felled Abel as a great ax fells a tree. But at that instant Abel dropped to the ground helpless before them. His mother had died of a stroke. Was he dead? No, but unable to speak, unable to move hand or foot.

Together they took him up. And Stephen, mounting the horse, lifted him across the saddle-bow. He himself sat behind, supporting Abel. With Judith walking silent at his side, he bore the stricken man home through the white night.

When they reached the Heights, Stephen helped Judith put Abel to bed.

"I will stop at Dowd's and then go on and send the doctor. But I don't think that he will die."

"He will live," answered Judith. "And I shall care for him."

A moment they looked into each other's eyes. Their throbbing love had been put away into a tomb which they themselves were now required to seal. From outside the window the low threnody of the firs came to them.

"Good night!" said Stephen, turning toward the door. His voice sounded like that of one who has long been in prison where he has been denied speech with human kind. It had neither color nor cadence.

"Good-by!" said Judith.

It was to their love rather than to him that she spoke.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COUNTY FAIR

“Walk up, ladies and gentlemen! Walk right up! Here is the greatest show on earth! Why, ladies and gentlemen, we have here the human sword-swallower, the living skeleton, the only genuine lady snake-charmer! Each and every act exactly as depicted on the canvas! Come inside and see the smallest little clown on earth! We will take off his head and pass it around among the audience, and then paste it back on again! All for twenty-five cents, a quarter of a dollar! Children half-price! Infants in arms free! Each and every act—” The remainder of the showman’s harangue was drowned by the bag-pipes of his rival, whose unearthly shrieks were intended to turn all attention to the superior attractions of the performing pig, the seven Sunderland sisters with their trailing hair, and the strongest-jawed man in the world.

It was afternoon on the last day of the Henderson County Fair.

The fair-ground, with its half-encircling grassy slope, forming a natural amphitheater shaded by tall

sycamores, elms and walnut trees, was famous for its beauty, and when, during fair week, it overflowed with farmers and farmers' families and farmers' horses and cattle from many miles; when near the wide entrance gate poppet- and tumbling-shows set up their painted tents when in the big hall cool green melons, yellow pumpkins, pink and purple grapes, royal plums and sun-kissed peaches, in cornucopian heaps, made the eye glad and the mouth sorry; when drinks of every kind, from a mug of sweet cider to a snort of whisky or a tumbler of peach and honey, were offered at mighty frequent intervals; when around the shining oval race-track hawkers and peddlers and fortune-tellers had little booths, before which pretty girls hovered in delight; when sheepish country swains, with their white-slippered brides, contended for the prize to the handsomest couple; when, in a small center ring, blooded horses showed their gaits round and round the judges' stand, finally wheeling up about it at the crack of the hostler's long lash; in mid-afternoon of a golden September day, with the first rustle of fall in the air and a deepening haze over the hills, the scene, especially if viewed from the amphitheater, with the crowds streaming to and fro like multi-colored ribbons winding in and out of a loom, with the town band playing, the cries of fakirs, the melodious expirations of hurdy-gurdies, the shrill crow-

ing of chickens, the deep grunting of pigs, and the bells on the big wagons jangling, was picturesque and lively.

No man, woman or child in Henderson County missed the final day of the fair who could by hook or crook get there. Long before day the country people rose in order to get an early start, and by sunrise all the roads leading to Camden presented a spectacle as of moving caravans, each with its nimbus of white dust. In town, business was practically suspended; even the undertaker had closed his doors, though not without chalking on them that he could be found at the fair.

The basket dinners, round which old neighbors and distant kin renewed acquaintance, were over, and most of the men had gone to the north end of the grounds for a final look at the Kentucky thoroughbreds, the sleek cows and the monster hogs entered for prizes there. The women meanwhile were crowded in and about their own hall at the opposite end, where were displayed the pastries and preserved fruits, on certain fortunate articles of which the judges were to tie the blue and red ribbons that meant joy supreme for one, joy stung with regret for a second, and heart-burning, tears, envy and rebellion for the rest. Oh, the rejected jams, jellies, cakes and loaves of bread! Beautiful as they were, delicious as their makers had confidently believed

them to be when entered, having failed to take ribbons, they were henceforth but a plague and a vexation. Too good to be thrown out, the cakes were yet dough, and every mouthful of the bread was sour and heavy.

Small wonder, then, when rivalry was intense and choice difficult, that at least two of the judges—Jane Eastbrook and Marcia Johnson—wore an air of anxious importance. The judges occupied a platform in the middle of the hall. Miss Eastbrook and Mrs. Johnson sat in whispered conference behind a table on which stood two glass jars of sugar pears. The pears were put up whole, white and perfect in crystalline nectar, one jar as much like the other as pears from the same orchard and preserved in the same way, though by different hands, could be. One bore the name of "Maria Bowman," the other that of "Matilda Putnam." Miss Nancy Jones, the third judge, seated at a slight distance from the table, paid little heed to the contest, regarding herself as a creature much too fair and fragile to perform so prosaic a service. She considered that in gracing the platform and smiling at her friends about it she was accomplishing her whole duty to man.

Mrs. Johnson and Miss Eastbrook had elected to wear, on this momentous afternoon of prize-awarding, their best black bombazines as befitting their

grave office; but Miss Jones had been unable to resist the allurements of a most elaborate white muslin, adding, around her neck, a long green gauze scarf that floated freely about her willowy figure, secured only by the clasped coral hands which she never omitted from her toilet.

It was on the respective merits of the two jars of pears that the judges were deliberating, their sense of responsibility in no degree lessened by the impatient women crowding round the platform and hazarding eager and audible guesses on the outcome. In the background, awaiting a verdict with what fortitude they could muster, stood Miss Bowman and Mrs. Putnam themselves. Each woman had won six blue ribbons at previous similar contests. This was the thirteenth year of their competition, and would place one or the other ahead again. The hour possessed, therefore, all the excitement of a neck-and-neck race.

Mrs. Johnson, who had been holding Miss Bowman's jar to the light, set it down, and Miss Eastbrook set down Mrs. Putnam's, which she had been holding up. Then they looked at each other perplexedly and sighed. Each jar contained just so much white, firm, syrupy pear-perfection, and that was all that could be said.

Mrs. Johnson sighed again.

"It's almost four!" exclaimed Miss Eastbrook in

low, nervous tones. Four o'clock was the hour at which the announcement of prizes was expected.

"We haven't tasted yet!" remarked Mrs. Johnson.

"That's true," assented Miss Eastbrook, in a brighter voice, thankful that one more test remained. So each unscrewed the lid of a jar and anxiously took up a spoon. Mrs. Johnson's hand trembled as she put her spoon in and brought out a little of the rich syrup. Miss Eastbrook's hand was firm, but her cheek was burning red. From the crowd around the platform not a sound was now to be heard, with the exception of an occasional hysterical laugh that only added to the tenseness. Every eye was fixed on Mrs. Johnson's face as, slowly lifting her spoon, she tasted its contents.

"Delicious!" she murmured to Miss Eastbrook.

"Delicious!" echoed that lady the next instant, lowering her own spoon. Mrs. Johnson then gave the jar from which she had tasted a little shove and took the jar from which Miss Eastbrook had been tasting. In went the spoons again, and again both judges sipped.

"Equally delicious!" desperately murmured Mrs. Johnson, laying down her spoon.

"Equally delicious!" desperately repeated Miss Eastbrook, laying down hers.

"What shall we do, Jane?" asked Mrs. Johnson.

"I declare, Miss Nancy ought to help us decide!"

"Miss Nancy, fudge!" retorted Miss Eastbrook. "I'd as soon expect support from a Virginia creeper as from Nancy Jones! We must decide ourselves, Marcia Johnson, and we've only two minutes to do it in. Look at the clock!"

Mrs. Johnson looked and saw that the crucial moment had indeed almost arrived. But on the instant an inspiration seized her.

"Jane," she gasped, "have you considered what an awful temper Maria will be in if we don't give her the prize? You are certainly aware, Jane, that she has a tongue—"

"Maria Johnson, you've saved both our lives! If Maria Bowman didn't get this prize we would both have to leave Camden. Get out the blue ribbon, Marcia."

Mrs. Johnson took from the table drawer a blue ribbon and Miss Eastbrook tied it on Miss Bowman's jar. Then she tied the red ribbon on Mrs. Putnam's. As she did so a long sigh of relief broke from the eager watchers, and they turned to see how the competitors bore their respective portions of triumph and humiliation. But before any one had found time to congratulate Miss Bowman, there was a noise of something falling. It was poor little Mrs. Putnam, who had fainted from the long standing, the suspense and the disappointment.

Miss Bowman found herself deserted, a lonely

victor without acclamation, for every one hurried to "poor, dear little Matilda," effectually hindering her restoration for several minutes.

Judith had brought Milly to the fair that afternoon. For herself, she had not cared to come. Once it had been a gala place for her, but those days were for ever ended. But she was unwilling that Milly should miss it, and so she had asked Mrs. Dowd to come and sit with Abel. She never left him for long, never at all except as she was compelled. He sat up now for most of the day, but he never spoke, nor did he make any attempt to do so. Not a word had he uttered since his seizure. Judging from the faint yet happy smiles that often visited his face, she judged that memory, as well as speech, was affected, and that all recollection of the terrible scene at the church had passed from his mind. His expression was usually one of childlike simplicity and trust; there was neither physical nor mental pain in it.

Judith and Milly had not gone far into the fair-ground before they met Miss Charlotte. Joining her, all three of them walked up to one of the shady hill-side benches, whence the kaleidoscopic scene could be viewed entire and in comfort. In silence for a time they watched the shifting groups below, swelling, breaking and forming anew, like huge bright bubbles.

Miss Charlotte appeared troubled. Judith wondered what could be wrong. Finally Miss Charlotte remarked: "Judith, did you know that Stephen Waters is going away from Camden?"

"Going away?" Judith controlled her agitation.

"Yes. I knew that you'd hear before long, so I thought I might as well tell you." Judith understood; Miss Charlotte thought it best that she should hear the news from her rather than from any one else.

"He came back from conference last night. He's to go farther West."

"Farther West!" faltered Judith.

"Yes, as a missionary."

"Is he going—soon?" Judith managed to ask, half incoherently.

"Immediately. He preaches his last sermon Sunday. Tuesday morning he takes the early boat."

As Judith listened, the heart that she had believed dead within her leaped, and then died a second death. She had thought that she had absolutely surrendered Stephen, that she was leached of all emotion regarding him. Now she realized that hope and longing depart when life departs, not sooner. Subconsciously she had counted on Stephen's remaining in Camden, where, sometimes, at a distance at least, she would see him. Now he was going, and to the other side of the world. It was unlikely that

she would ever behold him again. The thought pierced her,—she experienced a bodily pang, the heartache that is more than metaphor.

Should she go in to church Sunday morning to hear him preach for the last time? she asked herself as she drove home with Milly from the fair. No, she might not be able to hide all traces of emotion. And her presence would make the meeting harder for him.

Conference had called to New Alden the ministers of the district—young men eager for larger responsibility, men with families hoping to stay where they had begun to feel rooted, old men inured to change and too near superannuation to care whether they were moved or not. And until the last hour of the last session no man knew his destiny.

Stephen had gone in a wholly unsettled frame of mind. He did not know whether he wished to be reappointed to Camden Circuit or not. Sometimes he felt that he could not endure the pain of living near Judith and seeing her suffer without being able to help her. In these moments he almost determined to ask for another appointment, but this, he felt, would be cowardly. Again the thought of going away from Camden and of separating absolutely from her for ever was like a knife-thrust.

The bishop's invitation to go to a Western mission circuit had come as a surprise, and he had ac-

cepted it as providential leading. He was relieved to know that he was going where there would be absorbing, rigorous work to do, that would save him from dying of utter desolation. Thought of Judith's courage sustained him, and her eyes,—wherever he went, he would be star-led.

Now that his departure was definitely determined, he was glad that so little time intervened. Awkward explanations could be the more easily curtailed. He was himself stunned by the suddenness of it all.

Not until he entered his pulpit on Sunday morning and faced the overflowing congregation, did he feel the poignant thrust of saying farewell. The little old town had woven its spell on him as on others.

It was the settled belief in Camden that nowhere else could it be so good to live. Camden folk granted to their state capital its due importance, adding, an indisputable fact, that it was "new"; Washington was their Mecca, for they were born patriotic; New York was a city of admitted, though vague, wonders. But it was the general steadfast opinion that these and most other places lost by their location; they were so far off! This attitude was perhaps illusory, but it bred a deep and sweet content; Stephen had come to share it with the rest.

As he rose from the customary silent prayer and faced the congregation, there was a startled murmur at the change that had taken place in him, and more than one anxious whisper passed that he looked ill. It was not so much that he had lost flesh, as that flesh itself had become a medium of more perfect purity for the soul's light to shine through.

By great effort he succeeded in not giving way, and even those who felt his going most deeply felt also a thrill and a glory in it. He preached from that sweet saying of Saint John, uttered in mellow age, *Beloved, let us love one another.*

All day Saturday, all day Sunday, all day Monday, Judith found herself hoping against hope that Stephen would take some means of seeing her, if only for an instant, or of sending her a word of farewell. No message of any sort came. It was best so, she knew; yet if only she could see him once more, even if she could not speak to him, even if he did not see her!

That night as she lay listening to the low lamentations of the firs, it came to her that if she should rise early in the morning and walk to a point on the river directly south, perhaps two miles, she could watch the steamboat, on which he would leave, pass by. She could return before Abel would miss her. Would it be right to go? Yes, for to

her Stephen was the same as dead and this would be no more than taking a last look on his face. She resolved to go.

As she rose, the first cock crowed. The "masque of midnight" was ended, the drama of sunrise was about to begin. She glanced in at Abel's open door; he slept on, peacefully unconscious of her movements.

By the time that she had gone half the way, solitary lights began to glimmer in the dark infrequent houses far back along the road. Each of these lights represented the awakening of a household to its humble tasks. In this steady and doubtless unquestioning return to them before the cheerful day-dawn, there was something at once pathetic and noble. It would seem enough, she commented with bitterness, that men and women should rise with day to toil, seeing that they did not cease toiling until day was done or long after.

And now the morning star appeared, a splendid pendant on the breast of dawn. The world was no longer black, it was pearl; slowly-lifting mists and hazes veiled it.

A part of Judith's way led through a forest of beeches, so thick that hundreds of them were no larger round than a child's waist. Already, the first ambrosial airs were astir, and waiting for them in the hushed twilight—a gigantic score—were

these tall, straight, slender, black tree-trunks, with smooth-stemmed branches supporting regular rows of countless, alertly-poised leaves, like so many notes, whose symbols they interpreted in symphonic waftures.

Presently she met a farmer in a jolt-wagon, taking a load of maiden-blush apples to New Alden. Trusting to his horse, he was leaning heavily back, his head fallen on his breast, peacefully completing his early morning nap. The faithful beast, left to himself, slowly zigzagged along in the path that long experience had taught him presented the fewest stones.

The sky flushed to a faint rose. The old earth was swinging rapidly sunward now. Every moment was laden with seraphic splendor bringing nearer the mystic presence of the Dawn, an hour, in comparison with which that other hour of mysteries—dusk—sinks into insignificance; for if death is marvelous, birth is infinitely more so, and if darkness exudes from the earth, dawn is distilled from heaven, the Shechinah of all ages and for every race. In the forest chantry the first birds chirped sleepily. The day was awakening.

From black to pearl, from pearl to rose, from rose to gold. By the time Judith reached the river, the chirping of the birds had become a mad jubilant chorus, a crown of light stole round the brow of

the hills, and the yellow sun burst through the haze and mists, sultan of the day.

But within Judith's consciousness the morning did not advance beyond its second stage of gray half-light. The glory and the dream of dayspring fled by her almost as by one blind and deaf.

How quickly, how absolutely had come about the fulfilment of Stephen's vow to put her out of his life! She would never see him again. Even if at some remote day he should come back to Indiana, there was no reason to hope that he would revisit Camden.

Ascending a hill that rose steeply from the bank, she selected a point half-way to the top and seated herself on a rock.

Below her the river, transmuted by the sun's rays, lay, as far up and down as the eye could reach, in a broad band of gold, set, perhaps a mile up, with a single small green island, like an emerald. Across the river, the Kentucky shore appeared as an insubstantial pageant of sun-tipped hazy hills. Out of the chimneys of distant houses the dark blue incense from domestic altars curled slowly up against the light blue sky. As yet, no boat of any sort was visible, but she knew that she would not have long to wait. The boat left Camden at six o'clock and soon after must pass the place where she sat.

Presently a noisy packet with belching smoke-

stacks and churning wheel puffed by, heavily laden with freight,—her eyes followed it indifferently.

At this point the river was at least half a mile wide and the steamboat would be in mid-stream. But she had brought a field-glass, and if Stephen were on deck she might, with good luck, be able to see him. Even now, away up the river beyond the island, she thought she saw a white speck. She held up her glass—the speck was moving. It was coming nearer. As it came it grew larger. It was as large as a water-bird now. It moved in a steady sweep like one. Nearer and nearer it came. It was the steamboat. On its side she made out the familiar name, *Queen City*. It ran, she knew, between Cincinnati and St. Louis.

Stately as a swan, on, on it came down the shining river toward her. It was so near her now that she could easily distinguish a single black dot on the hurricane deck and a dozen or more black dots on the lower deck. Soon the single upper dot developed into the figure of the captain, and the lower dots into the figures of passengers, walking or standing. Was one of them Stephen?

Intently she fixed her glass on each in turn. Yes, there he was, standing alone in the stern of the boat. Tall, erect, and strong, with his long black coat and broad-rimmed hat, she knew that it was he. Straight down the river he looked.

The steamboat was now directly opposite Judith. Steadily she kept her glass fixed on Stephen. Its small circumference bound her universe. Almost, she felt that he must turn and see her. But the marvelous lenses that brought him near to her did not bring her near to him.

The steamboat was passing. A tremor ran over Judith, but she still gazed through her glass. The steamboat was passing and with it Stephen Waters was passing out of her life. In the far-off country to which he was going, was it not almost certain that her image would gradually fade from his memory and that he would form other ties? This would be natural and human; she ought generously to wish it for him, but try as she might she could not. The thought wrenched her very soul.

Stately as a swan, on, on, down the shining river went the white steamboat. Behind it in concentric circles, a hundred waves danced in the morning sunlight.

"Oh, how selfish I am!" she cried aloud. "I *will* wish—" But such a wish can be uttered honestly only after much buffeting of the spirit.

Meanwhile, the dancing waves that the steamboat had left in its track, subsided. The bosom of the river was once more calm. But the bosom of the lonely watcher on the hill rose and fell, rose and fell, as if it would never be calm again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FANNY

Dudley made a vigorous campaign. He spoke at school-houses all over the county, sometimes following, sometimes preceding his opponent. Everybody turned out to hear the great men.

In Camden and New Alden there were barbecues, grand night rallies and illuminations, and long processions of cheering voters wearing campaign caps, each with its flaring pine torches, and bearing flags, emblematic devices and all manner of triumphant and elegant transparencies. There were champing, booming bands of music, smiling candidates on caracoling horses, and great floats whose heavy symbolism was pardoned for the sake of the pretty girls, dressed in white muslin and chapleted with roses, that filled them. Each party packed the New Alden opera-house with a mass meeting, and the Whigs, in addition, held a mammoth afternoon rally at the Camden fair-ground, at which Dudley, so his friends said, made the speech of his life.

Dudley won the election by a fair majority and the next day was driven in procession beneath the

triumphal arches of the elms to the tune of *See, the conquering hero comes*. In December, at the opening of the Legislature, he went up to the capital to take his seat. Fanny, now a matron of four months, with many gay anticipations accompanied him.

But she was doomed to disappointment. Dudley's political success was all they had hoped, but it did not open social doors, as Fanny had confidently expected. At first the excitement of living at a hotel sufficiently entertained her. To wander, in her fashionable new dresses, through the long parlors with their deep-piled carpets, damask fauteuils, and hangings of velvet; to catch her reflection in the full-length mirrors; to sit by the window watching the never-ending procession in the streets below, to take her meals in a crowded, lively dining-room,—this was all new, gay and absorbing.

Daily repetition soon rendered it familiar and charmless. And socially it led to nothing. She met the wives of several other senators and representatives who lived at the same hotel; but most of them were like herself, strange, and besides she was not especially attracted to them. One woman, whose husband had been in the Senate during three successive sessions, and who appeared to take the lead in the little coterie, cordially invited her to join it,

but Fanny shrank from her loud voice and showy toilets.

She began by going every day to the low-pillared state-house, but after a fortnight this grew tedious. Law-making proved to be a process altogether different from what she had imagined it. Her first view of the Senate shocked and disgusted her. Many members, especially those who had served several sessions, lounged disreputably, putting their feet on their desks. Reading a newspaper while another member had the floor was common. The air was black and foul with smoke from many cigars. Dudley ranked easily with the dozen or so fine men—she observed that with satisfaction. But there was nothing dramatic and inspiring about the proceedings of the Senate chamber. There were few set speeches, and there was a deal of wrangling about finances that she did not understand, much school-boy chaffing, and frequent calling of the interminable roll. There was one bright exception to this monotony and that was when Dudley made his most important speech of the session, winning instant attention and loud applause. But the memory of that one day was not enough to sustain her long.

The governor's reception, in honor of the members of the assembly and their wives, proved an impersonal and formal courtesy which, after they

had passed the receiving line, left them in a crush of strangers whom Fanny suspected of not representing the social culture of the capital. She felt that they had been asked to a mock feast at which the guests, seated round a bare table, pretended elaborately to be eating.

Occasionally, when Dudley, whose committee work kept him busy, could spare an evening, they went to the theater. Once they saw the brilliant Junius Brutus Booth, again the imperious Forrest, and still again the dignified Macready. But Fanny's eyes sought the audience as often as the stage.

"Where shall we sit?" Dudley asked her the first time they went.

"Shan't we go into a box?"

"Oh, certainly, if you like!"—giving up his own preference for seats less conspicuous.

In the glitter of the hour, seeing and being seen, Fanny partly forgot her lonesomeness and disappointment and was really happy. But, for the most of the season, her keen consciousness that the majority of the residents of the capital hardly knew that the legislators were there, and that those who did know did not appear to care greatly, prevented her from enjoying anything. With Fanny, not to be noticed was to be miserable.

Dudley was aware that she was not happy, but occupied as he was he did not realize the full extent

of her depression. He had experienced some disappointment in Fanny as the nature of her ideals became clearer to him, but with increasing effort he strove to advance himself that he might give her more nearly the life she craved. Their young delight in each other fell away slightly. A sense of injury at what she regarded as his indifference gradually added its bitterness to Fanny's woes. A shrewder woman would have seen that in time her husband's unusual gifts were bound to win an enviable place, and would have regarded this winter at the capital as an opportunity to make, in safe obscurity, valuable observations. But for long-time investments Fanny had neither the talent nor the disposition.

She thought that she would be glad to get home again, and when in June, at the close of the long session, they returned, she was glad. Her two months' absence at the capital, as the wife of a senator, had given her a distinct importance in quiet, stay-at-home Camden, and little censures of homage were swung before her, the perfume of which was wholly agreeable. She was the guest of honor at various tea-parties and an entire meeting of the Circle was by common consent devoted to her recital of the political and social events that she had witnessed.

But when, after a few weeks, life fell once more

into its routine, the old dissatisfaction returned. The summer passed listlessly and when fall came, bringing with it the knowledge that in a few months the cares of motherhood would devolve on her, she rebelled at the prospect. In her scheme of living there was no time or place for children. She was bewildered at her own discontent. A nature like hers regards happiness as its simple due. Others might know losses and heartaches and disappointments, but she had supposed that they would pass her by. She had grasped at happiness, as a child grasps at a toy, with all her might. Maturity of years had not taught her that disciplined hold which, when joy begins to depart, makes a grace of letting-go and of renunciation an art. Of life, with its persistently-reintroduced, not-to-be-ignored guest, Sorrow, she had no glimmering of conception. For a time she tried to persuade herself that she was not well and that it was for this reason she was depressed. But Sorrow is not timid. It took no offense when Fanny assumed not to know it, but calmly seating itself in her presence, remained there until at last she was forced to greet it.

Meanwhile her husband remained of necessity much in politics. There was already talk of a new state constitution, providing for a Legislature that should meet only once in two years, but as yet yearly sessions were the custom. He had been enthusiastic-

ally renominated and had made an active campaign, in the details of which Fanny, confident of success, took slight interest. The night of the election, she heard, about nine o'clock, a group of men in front of the house.

"Absolutely unprecedented!" She recognized the voice as Colonel Carroll's.

"Can't possibly happen again!" This second voice she did not know.

"Cheer up, Jim! We'll all stand by you! Next time we'll give them a licking—"

Her husband was defeated! She had not dreamed of this as a possibility. Her sewing dropped in her lap. She heard him say now, wearily, "Thank you. It may be as you say—but I'm a little staggered—good night!"

The next moment he came into the room. There was no need for him to tell that he had lost; his white face, its muscles sagged, his tired eyes and nerveless figure told it for him.

"Fan," he said miserably, coming closer to her, "I know it's a blow to you. I'm sorry enough for myself, Heaven knows, but I'm a great deal sorrier for you."

"Are you sure? Are the returns all in?" she asked unbelievably.

"There are enough in," he answered gloomily.

"How did it happen?" she asked apathetically,

making no motion toward the caress that would have salved his hurt and for which he was keenly longing.

"I can hardly say. The Democrats haven't at all earned their victory and are not likely to enjoy another in years. Every one says that. I think they are surprised themselves. I've feared it for some time, but I didn't want to worry you until I had to. I'm sure to win next time. Kiss me, Fanny, for God's sake, dear! I'm sick!"

Fanny's lips touched his, but only half her heart rose to them; the rest held suddenly aloof.

"Was anything wrong with your campaign? Was it all managed well? You know you said—" her tone sounded in Dudley's ears like reproach rather than solicitude.

"Heavens, Fanny, you know how I've worked! What more could I have done?" He drew back, wounded. "There, don't cry! Forgive me for speaking to you so, but I'm badly shaken up."

Finding to his amazement that tears and complaints were all that Fanny had for him, poor Dudley left her and took himself despondently to his office. Consoling friends dropped in, he left the office in their company—he did not go home that night. The next afternoon he was carried home insensible with liquor.

In her husband's absence Fanny had remained

alone in the house all the night and morning. Some suspicion of the truth visited her, but she declined persistently to entertain it. Here now was brutal reality before her very eyes.

The men who brought her husband home thought her self-control admirable. She did not scream nor faint nor rage. In silence she motioned for them to lay him on the long couch in the sitting-room; they obeyed with evident consideration for her humiliating position and went quickly out.

The instant they were gone, Fanny's self-control vanished. She cast at her husband one long indignant look, then turning, she fled up stairs.

That the man who had married her should dare to bring this on her! She was beyond words angry, with the blind unreasoning anger of a child striking at a door in which it has caught its finger. Why should she be yoked to this,—she who had always been daintily choice in her companionships?

She would not bear it. She would go away.

She thought of going to her father's house, but instantly she decided against this course. Something told her that he would not approve her leaving her husband under any circumstances. Her aunt in Cincinnati had always petted and indulged her, she would go to her. Hurriedly, lest her husband should waken and detain her, she dressed in her best, crammed a bag full of necessary articles

and left the house. Outside the door she paused and for a moment intently regarded the heavy plain gold circlet on the third finger of her left hand. Turning quickly and reëntering the house, she pulled it off and laid it in full view on the center table, carefully averting her eyes from the unconscious figure on the couch.

The afternoon stage for New Alden had long been gone. She was forced, therefore, to get a horse and buggy at the public stable. She would spend the night at the hotel in New Alden and in the morning take a boat to Cincinnati. She could have waited in Camden for the boat at the home of one of her friends, but this would have made necessary an explanation that she would have died rather than give.

As soon as possible she left the highway for a by-road winding through the woods. This road was less direct and she had never before traveled it, but she preferred it because on it she would be less likely to meet people she knew.

Soon after she entered the by-road, driving at reckless speed, she met a strange farmer who stared, then nodded perfunctorily. She looked straight past him without returning the salute. She had emerged from the dim cloistered way into open country, when suddenly she jerked the horse to a dead stop.

She had forgotten her porte-monnaie.

In her haste to get away she had not once thought of it. At the stable the horse and buggy had been given to her unquestioningly; she realized now that she had not spoken of payment. It had been taken for granted that the next time she or her husband had need of a horse, they would settle the bill. At a strange hotel she could not expect such consideration. Nor could she buy her ticket on the boat.

Night was near.

Never before had she been so far from home alone at so late an hour. She was inexperienced in driving and there were deep fords to be crossed. Worst of all, she might meet a gipsy. But not for a moment did she consider turning back. She would manage somehow to get through the night.

Nervously she drove on, saying to herself that she felt no fear. Already darkness had swallowed up the rocks and bushes and other small objects along the way. It was now slowly merging the hills and trees into vast sable curtains that shut her gloomily in.

From the thick hedges on either hand the insect orchestra was shrilling out its Twilight Overture. The ceaseless monotone irritated her; it seemed to intensify the loneliness. She would have been glad to meet another curious but probably friendly farmer.

Just ahead, at the foot of a steep hill, the road

forked almost due east and west. Which fork led to New Alden she did not know. Suppose she should take the wrong one! She was compelled to own now that she was afraid. Once more she drew rein.

Midway between the two roads she saw, in the darkling shadows, something white and erect like a gravestone. She jumped out and ran to it. Stooping she made out on its face these words: "New Alden, three miles," beside a hand that pointed east; and "Bethel, two miles," beside a hand that pointed west. Fir Heights—Judith's home—she recalled, lay just off the Bethel road.

The road to the east descended into a dark hollow that was apparently an old creek-bottom, over whose rough stones driving would be hazardous. The road to the west ascended a gradual slope on which the last rays of light still lingered. Hurrying back to the buggy, she turned unhesitatingly into the western road. She would spend the night at Fir Heights.

She surprised Judith by driving up to the garden gate just as she had finished milking.

"Judith, I started to drive to New Alden this afternoon and I got lost. I mean that it grew so dark I was afraid to go on. May I stay here with you to-night?"

Something in Fanny's tone and her explanation

as well struck Judith as odd. It was the first time Fanny had come to see her since she had been at the Heights. Assuring her that she was welcome, she took her into the living-room, where she lighted a candle and helped her to remove her wraps. She noticed that, as to dress, Fanny looked very grand, in her brown silk gown that swept the floor behind her. But the small oval face beneath the plumed hat was white and the delicately-curved lips were compressed until only the narrowest red line was visible. Milly, abashed by Fanny's magnificence, hovered in the background in open-eyed wonder.

Judith excused herself that she might go and put up the horse.

"Let me come with you, Judith, mayn't I?" asked Fanny.

"Certainly, if you like. But it's dark in the barn and you may soil your dress."

"I don't mind." And Fanny almost ran after her, keeping close to her. It seemed to Judith that Fanny was nervous. And why did she have a traveling satchel, if she were only going to New Alden?

After they returned to the house Judith prepared supper. Fanny insisted on going into the kitchen and helping her. At the supper-table Fanny saw Abel for the first time since his marriage; his dumb pitiful ways scared her. Her presence plainly agitated him, and both she and Judith were relieved

when the meal was over. Immediately after, Judith helped him up stairs, somewhat alarmed lest the excitement that was visible in his countenance should have ill results.

"Judith," asked Fanny abruptly, as she reappeared in the living-room, "how can you bear to live with *that* before you, morning, noon and night?"

"With Abel, you mean? Why, I love Abel!"

Fanny was silent for a few moments. Then she plunged into a lively recital of town gossip, telling many things that Judith did not know and few of which she cared to hear. She had withdrawn, mentally as well as physically, from the life in Camden. She seldom went to see her friends there and as seldom had visitors from there. Sensitive for Abel as well as herself, she shrank even from having Charlotte and Jane Eastbrook see his distress.

Jane Eastbrook complained that Judith had changed toward them, but Charlotte understood. She had that rare constructive sympathy that, given a certain act or attitude, is able to supply the immensely complicated environment of which it is the outcome. Perhaps a part of this sympathy rose from her acquaintance with pictures; they must be viewed in a certain light to escape showing but as mad daubs, and she accorded to human nature the same privilege.

Concerning Stephen, not one syllable had ever reached Judith. Colonel Carroll and James Dudley must know about him, but she could not ask. Living or dead, he had dropped out of her life as utterly as a stone that is dropped into the sea disappears from earth. She did, indeed, sometimes wonder if he ever thought of her. What dross of selfishness her love for him had ever contained had long ago burned out. She sincerely wished for him a happy love and marriage. But she could not wish to be totally forgotten. No human heart can wish that.

Gradually she had retired into the inner chambers of her own soul, where she found the air, which once she would have regarded as chill, only cool and salubrious. If she was not to enjoy love, to live always worthy of love seemed no mean aspiration, and one not without its reward. She apprehended that men and women are called neither to joy nor to sorrow, but to meet the occasion ever newly rising. She strove daily to meet hers.

She had an undefined fear now that Fanny needed her. What could be the matter? She knew that the election had taken place, though its results had not reached her. Why was it that Fanny did not allude to it? Could it be that Dudley had been beaten?

The evening passed without anything that Fanny

said or did affording Judith a clue to her situation. They went up stairs at last and parted for the night.

Judith continued to feel disturbed. There was something strange about this visit of Fanny's. She pondered it and was glad when it occurred to her that she might go back to Fanny's room and inquire if she would be comfortable for the night.

Fanny's "Come!" in answer to Judith's knock had a startled sound. She had not undressed, being, indeed, half afraid to spend the night in this lonely house with its dolorous-voiced firs and Abel almost like one crazed. She had let her hair down, however, and was mechanically brushing it. As Judith entered she laid the brush on the dresser, and began to plait a loose braid. Judith's eyes, following Fanny's fingers as they moved in and out of the braid, saw that she did not wear her wedding-ring. Could it be—?

Judith stopped mid-way in the room and looked full at Fanny. Instantly, Fanny stepped back until there was a distance of several feet between them; the small brown woman with her cameo face, the fair woman, tall in her trailing white.

"Fanny!" The tone was piercing, but it was tender, too. "Where do you mean to go from New Alden?"

Fanny's fingers ceased their plaiting. "I'm going to see Aunt Matilda in Cincinnati," she answered

sharply. In her tone there was the forced note of the person called on to justify to others a course of conduct that he can not quite justify to himself.

"Fanny, it can't be possible that you have left your husband?"

Fanny did not answer. She remained standing perfectly still, her small white hands clasping her braid, her head erect. But the faintest wave of color stole over her cheek. Moved by an irresistible pity, Judith took a step toward her.

"Fanny! Tell me what is the matter! Perhaps I can help you. Has he been drinking?"

By the slightest downward motion of her eyelids Fanny signified yes.

"And now you are going away from him because of that? Oh, Fanny, don't, don't! Can't you see him when he comes to himself? Can't you realize what he will feel? It will be terrible! Terrible, Fanny, even with you there to help!"

"Judith Troop, you have no right to talk to me like this!" Fanny threw back her head in hauteur.

Nothing daunted, Judith moved still closer to her.

"Has anything occurred to depress him?"

"The election!"

"He was beaten? Oh, that must have been hard! Think, Fanny, how he has adored you! Your leaving him will ruin him. Oh, Fanny, you don't want to ruin him, do you?"

Fanny was stonily silent.

"You asked me to-night how I could bear to live with Abel. It's because I feel that I'm in my place. Fanny, I'm not unhappy. No one can be happy out of his place. If you try to leave it misery will follow you, and no matter how swiftly you fly or how far you go, it will overtake you. We must stay in our places, Fanny!"

Involuntarily she glanced at Fanny's figure.

"Your child, Fanny! Is it a light thing to call a soul out of the unknown? If you can bear to leave your husband, think of your child! You are robbing it of a father's love and a father's protection. Will you do that?"

Fanny's head bent ever so little.

"I can not think that you will do so cruel a thing, Fanny!"

Fanny's head dropped lower still.

"Fanny! Let me take you home!" Judith stretched out her arms. With a sudden forward impulse Fanny dropped within them and rested her head on Judith's shoulder.

"We will go now," Judith went on, "and no one need ever know."

Hastily she dressed and in the dark barn hitched up the sleepy horses, tying her own heavy plow-horse behind Fanny's buggy. She got into the buggy with Fanny and they drove through the night

to Camden. Neither spoke a word, but Fanny, chilled and trembling violently, huddled close to Judith, drawing Judith's arm about her. So they rode.

As they crossed the bridge over the creek and entered Camden, Fanny suddenly started up in terror.

"Judith! Suppose he has waked up—"

"We'll hope not," was Judith's answer, as she drew her arm more closely about Fanny.

When they came to Fanny's house they saw that it was dark and still. Judith got out with Fanny and they went in together into the sitting-room. Tremblingly, Fanny lighted a lamp. Judith's eyes followed Fanny's to the sofa. Dudley lay there sleeping heavily. Evidently he had not moved in Fanny's absence.

Fanny caught up her wedding-ring from the table and slipped it back on her finger. It seemed to her that all her life before she had been a child and that this night she had become a woman.

She snatched Judith's hand and kissed it.

"Fanny," said Judith softly, "I must go now."

"Judith!" was all that Fanny could answer. In the last three hours she had realized that despite his weakness, nay with it, her husband was very dear to her.

"Won't you be afraid driving back alone?" she whispered at the door.

"Not in the least," was Judith's answer. She was too thankful to be afraid.

"My burden is nothing compared to yours," she said humbly.

"Oh, Fanny! It's not a burden! It's a privilege! There, I must go. I must get back to him. I'm always anxious about him when I'm away, for fear something might happen," she continued, taking refuge in the common euphemism with which we cloak death when it threatens one that we love. Kissing Fanny once more, she drove rapidly off down the dark street.

CHAPTER XXV.

"TO OTHER SOULS THE CUP OF STRENGTH"

No thought of self-pity visited Judith as she drove back through the night to her lonely farm home and Abel. For the first moments her mind dwelt wholly on the scene she had just left, especially on Fanny, exalted by her new sense of wifely privilege into a conception of life hitherto beyond her. She pictured the scene in that sitting-room in the morning when Dudley should waken from his stupor; it would be an hour of the bitterest humiliation for him, but love and loyalty would be there to sweeten it. She felt a sense of supreme gratitude, a thrill, even, that it had been permitted her to save Fanny from the step of irrevocable folly she had been about to take, felt herself a humble sharer in that highest of joys,—the creator's. At the moment of all moments in Fanny's life, she had said the words that turned her course toward light and wisdom and honor; she had given the decisive touch that molded Fanny's destiny.

But as she reached the foot of the home lane, her own problem imposed itself. In the bold presence

of Fir Heights it was, indeed, impossible to think of anything else but Fir Heights, and what had happened there. Her earlier dread of the place had passed, and she had come to have for it a deep and solemn love, as the scene of her sōul's highest life. Even the firs, grim and dark though they were, seemed but the faithful sentinels of its peace. Dropping the reins about the dashboard, she allowed the tired horse to pick his way at will up the stony slope. The night was serene and still. In the darkly blue and billowy heavens, a single silver star—lone mariner in that illimitable waste—sailed confidently, new worlds to find. She recalled the night when she had begged for Stephen's mercy and the afternoon on which she had driven up the lane as Abel's bride, but without a quiver, as the dead agony of dead years, long gone by.

Gradually Abel had become to her all that an unfortunate and helpless child is to its mother. Her unceasing regret was that she could do so little for him. She was hands and feet for him, for he could not walk unassisted and was with difficulty moved each morning from his bed to a chair—and with infinite compassion she soothed and comforted him. Often during the first weeks after his seizure she had turned from him to shed unavailing tears, but by a severe struggle she had taught herself to repress these outbursts, resolving in all things to be strong,

that she might be the more to him, and that, perchance, in some way, something of her strength might pass to him. From this resolve had come an unwavering habit of mind. So unbroken was her calm that one or two critically-disposed neighbors remarked that "Mrs. Troop took her husband's sickness easy," but most of them understood.

There were practical questions to be faced daily, and much labor to be done, which helped to divert her mind. With the aid of her nearest neighbor, Dowd and his boy, she herself was running the farm,—Abel would never again do any work. She did all of the milking and churning and gardening in addition to the work of the house, and each week she drove to New Alden to market. This last was her hardest task, but it was made tolerable by the fact that she had never known many New Alden people, and in her print gown and sunbonnet she escaped all recognition, though not a few of those that bought from her remarked, despite her dress, a fineness not typical of gardeners' wives. From Dudley, who had settled up Belmont's affairs, she had received the five hundred dollars belonging to Abel and had immediately paid off the debt on the farm, as Mrs. Troop had once intended to do. This afforded her a mental relief, but it in no way eased the strain of daily living. At best the farm could be made to yield only a bare income, its chief prod-

ucts being an unsurpassed view and any number of great stones.

In the knowledge that Abel suffered little, if at all, either in mind or body, there was incalculable comfort, but the thought that he was to remain helpless and dumb for the remainder of his life was terrifying. Doctor Potter held out no hope of his recovery, nor did he think it likely that death would soon release him from his bondage. Some shock might restore to him his power of speech, though it was likely that power of memory would never return. Even so, Judith felt, this would be a relief,—the strain of his silence wore on her increasingly.

There were many things she longed to tell him,—first and last of all, that she had been true. She wished, too, that he might know his money had been restored and that they were free from debt; with all her soul she longed to penetrate the darkened chamber of his life and lighten it with at least one ray of hope and cheer. There were no means open to her by which she could convey to him her sense of affection and tenderness, except in such acts of material service as might spring from the pity of a stranger. Many times she had striven, gently, to rouse him into response, but never with success, and she could not even be sure that he understood what she said to him.

As she reached the top of the lane the side door

of the homestead opened and, to her surprise, Milly came running out to the gate.

"Judith," she cried breathlessly, "Abel has spoken!"

"When?" asked Judith eagerly.

"Not long after you started. I heard him—his door was open. At first I thought I must be mistaken, it was so low, and his voice was thick. But I crept to the door and listened, and he was repeating your name, over and over again. 'Judith,' he said, 'Judith! Where are you?'"

"Milly, can't you put up the horse? I must go to Abel!" And she hurried into the house and up the stairs to Abel's room. She found him lying wide-awake and with the smile of a little child on his face. Of the agitation that had manifested itself at Fanny's presence at the supper-table there was not a trace.

"Abel," she said quietly, bending over him, though her heart was beating wildly in a tumult of hope and fear, "Abel, Milly says that you want me. I am here, dear Abel."

"That was a good . . . race down the lane . . . this afternoon." His words came haltingly and his voice, as Milly had said, was thick. But that he was speaking at all Judith could scarcely realize, and for a moment she was unable to heed the drift of his meaning.

"You're strong . . . Judith," he went on presently, in a dreamy way. "I had hard work to . . . beat . . . you." He paused and closed his eyes, as though in happy recollection of an afternoon of childish sport.

As the consciousness of the change in his condition overcame her, Judith drew slightly back from the bed lest the startled expression in her face alarm him. Doctor Potter had been right in his prediction; a shock, seemingly the unexpected arrival of Fanny, had been sufficient to restore to him in a slight measure the use of his organs of speech, but memory, as far as recent events were concerned, still hid in a sentineled tower, whence it refused to issue forth. Clearly he was living again those days of cloudless bliss when they had been boy and girl together, the happiest days that he had known in all his life.

Once or twice again he spoke, words that, like their predecessors, came evidently from some vivid mental picture of his early affection and joy in her as an adored girl-comrade. She replied in the same spirit as well as she might, neither daring nor wishing to try to disillusionize him. But it was not long before he ceased, leaving a sentence half finished, and, closing his eyes, slept lightly and soundly. She remained solicitously by him until she was sure that he would not waken, and then

she left him and went down stairs. Faithful little Milly was there, waiting for her.

"Oh, Judith," cried Milly softly, "do you think that he will get well now?"

"Not well, dear, I am afraid, but better, certainly. Just to hear his voice again—we're thankful, aren't we, Milly?" Somehow, she had fallen into the habit of talking inclusively to Milly as to a sister of her own age, rather than to a child, and Milly, understanding, was proud. She stole now to Judith's lap and they sat silent thus together for many moments. At last Judith spoke.

"Milly, I'm going to Louisville to-morrow. I think there may be a doctor there that can help Abel, some one with more experience than Doctor Potter, perhaps. It's only a chance, but we'll be better content if we take it, won't we, dear?"

Milly's answer was to lay her soft round cheek gravely against Judith's.

"And Milly," went on Judith, "do you think you could give up the piano?"

"To help Abel some way, you mean?" asked the child courageously, straightening up once more.

"Yes. I think that perhaps if I got him a wheelchair, he could move himself about the house a little, and that would make the days shorter and brighter for him. It will be expensive, too, to have this doctor come up,—I don't see any other way,

to get the money. We don't want to feel that any comfort that we can give Abel is lacking to him, do we? I am so sorry, for you are learning to play, really learning, but for Abel's sake—"

"Oh, Judith," interrupted Milly in tones that leaped to sacrifice. "I can *imagine* the music, you know, and that will be just as fine as playing. It will be finer," she added triumphantly, bound to make her sacrifice complete.

The next day toward noon Judith found herself in the crowded office of Louisville's most skilful physician. She was compelled to wait almost an hour, speculating meanwhile on whether the ukase of embodied science pronounced in the inner office was to mean as much to any of the others sitting about the room as it would mean to her. Again and again the door of this inner office opened and one and another disappeared behind it. At last her turn came. She stated Abel's case, feeling herself in the presence of authority. The physician listened with attention, even, she felt, with sympathy, then slowly shook his head.

"An operation," he answered decisively, "is the only possible cure in such cases. There is evidently a severe lesion of the brain, and trepanning, as we call it, might have the effect of restoring memory."

"Do you, then, advise an operation?"—the very word carried unthinkable horrors.

"In such cases, my dear Mrs. Troop," he answered reluctantly, "I seldom advise. The decision is one that you must make for yourself, difficult as that will be."

"I don't understand. Why can not you advise me?"

"Because no living person could certainly foretell the result. Your husband might absolutely recover, but if he did not—"

"The operation would kill him?" completed Judith, steadily eyeing him. The doctor nodded silently.

"And the chances for recovery?" pursued Judith resolutely, but growing strangely white at the lips.

"My dear Madam,—one in a hundred, probably."

Judith rose slowly. "I shall not have the operation performed. My husband is not unhappy in his present condition,—I could not take such a risk." And she started to go, but at the first step tottered, fainting, and would have fallen but for the quick arms of the doctor, who caught her as she swayed and helped her to a couch.

"I half wish I had told her to have it done," he muttered to himself as he hurried for water, "it's a terrible future—the man will probably outlive her."

So it was without hope of Abel's recovery or improvement, even, that Judith, a little later, left the

doctor's office, but it was something to be able to find an agent who would send-for her piano and pay for it a sum that would buy the wheel-chair, settle the doctor's fee, and leave a surplus that would certainly be useful at some future time.

For the first few days after Abel was placed in his chair he sat passively, but before long he began to exert himself to push it and within a month's time he could follow Judith slowly about the house. Or, if she were at work in the garden, she would help him down the step and he could then roll himself along the hard-worn path. She saw that he was unwilling ever to be out of her sight, and she planned her work that he might be near her as much as was possible. Not infrequently he spoke her name, repeating it over and over, sometimes as if the sheer sound of it gave him pleasure, again as if he were starting to tell her something of supreme importance. She always went to him, and with all her might endeavored to help him, by sympathy and suggestion, to express the thought or wish that he might have, but he rarely got beyond the name and never spoke more than two or three words distinctly. What more he attempted was so slurred as to be unintelligible.

There were times when Judith was thankful that he could not remember,—it might be best for them both that he should not. No words of explanation

could ever clear her of the charge that he had made against her that night at the church. Only a spontaneous renewal of the perfect trust that he had once felt in her could declare her innocent. Still there were moments when she was tempted to try to recall that night to him in the hope that she might draw from him some word of assurance that he believed in her as of old, but fear that the recollection might torture him and that he might, instead of declaring faith, again pronounce her false, kept her silent.

With late fall the year grew frosty at the temples, and then, as winter came on, became hoary-headed and at last white-mantled, also. One morning Judith noticed that Abel's eyes rested on her steadily for long periods, as though in penetration and study. Presently, as in a flash, his face cleared, and she saw in it, for the first time since his seizure, the look of perfect intelligence.

"Judith," he called, and at the same time beckoned to her. "Judith!" It was the tone of one who, having sat long in darkness, sees suddenly a great light.

"What is it, Abel?" she inquired tenderly, stooping to adjust his pillows.

"Pure," he articulated distinctly and with great effort, pointing to her. She understood. Unspeakably thankful, she put her arms about him and kissed him. That night, without uttering another word, he died.

A week later Miss Charlotte Eastbrook, in her rôle of orderly to Providence, privately wrote a long letter, which she sealed with her old-fashioned red wafer and sent journeying to a Western address that she and Colonel Carroll only of all Camden possessed.

CHAPTER XXVI

"DAY'S AT THE MORN"

Once more Indian summer cast over the world a veil of haze, making it soft like a picture.

In the sheltered valley in which Camden nestles, at the very gateway to the warm South, this season—the most gracious of all the year—lasts late. Then the earth wears autumn's glory without autumn's chill. The frost-fires of September touch the quiet hilltops, and a thousand torch-flames burn there. Then Michabo, the great sun-god, grows drowsy, and, lighting his jocund pipe, smokes steadily for days. Up from its generous bowl the smoke curls lazily, and down over the hills its clouds trail, wreathing the land in purple splendor. The air is like new wine. Golden mornings and golden afternoons make up perfect days. The sun is warm, but even at noon its rays are tempered; nights are cool and restful. Men know that winter is not far off, and this respite of calm and cheer visits their spirits with the thrill of an unhoped-for joy. Within its charmed bounds no nipping frosts may venture, no rough winds blow. Birds linger, flowers are bright.

Evil loses its power over the heart. The purposes of God are manifest. It is a halcyon time.

The early dawn had been swathed in white, tremulous mists, but the red sun, piercing triumphantly through them, rose like a soul rising from its clay. Glinting in its rays, the Ohio River, broad, rolling, was indeed the Beautiful River.

Once more a stately steamboat, gliding in toward Camden wharf, sent out a prolonged mellow boom; to a bronzed stalwart man standing on the deck it sounded like a deep call of joy.

How interminable the journey had seemed; the miles on miles of pathless prairie, the long river up which the boat had seemed barely to creep! How frequent had been the stops for fuel, how long the waits for passengers! Minutes had been as hours, hours as days. Impatiently he had trod the deck as if the very force of his desire must urge a faster turning of the wheels. Now that the journey was at last to end—to end, he hoped, as all such journeys should, in lovers meeting—he had risen at the very peep of day and taken his stand where he might catch the first glimpse possible of home. From down in the hold came the steady, deep pump, pump of the engine, like the throbbing of a mighty heart. “Patience,” it seemed to say to the tumultuous heart above, “patience; I am doing my best. A few moments more,—we shall soon be there.”

Eagerly he surveyed the scene: the familiar little old town, sunny, peaceful, bowery; the red soil warm with welcome; the patriarchal elms, the friendly hills, the bright quiet brooding over all. Fresh from the wild, far-off West, he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful. Was ever sunshine so golden as that in which this town and river shone? His eye, dwelling on the scene, literally rested there. He knew that in this country of hazy hills it was good to live. He felt that he belonged there, because his love was there. He was sure that from among the green spreading tops of the elms he picked out the very roof under which she dwelt.

For a moment thought traveled back beyond Camden to a lonely hill-set house where, two years before, he had parted from that love in bitter anguish; parted, as he believed, for ever. But now the anguish was gone; it was even as though a new beatitude had been spoken: blessed are they that love, for they shall obtain love.

No sooner was the gang-plank out than he had crossed it. Straight up the red street he strode, drinking in deep drafts of the fresh tranquillity. The feel of the firm earth beneath his feet was good. Everything seemed just as it did on that day when he first came to Camden, and yet everything was strangely different, for to the quiet and the sunshine

there was added fragrance—the fragrance of memories.

Early as it was Camden was astir. A lumbering hay-wagon already creaked its slow way down the street. From a barn lot near by he heard the mooing of a cow and the music of swift streams of milk descending into a pail. Blinds were raised and front doors open wide to the morning air and the morning sun. Morning-faced children, at play in yards, stopped at sight of him, stared an instant, and then ran shouting to their mothers to come see who had returned. With up-leaping heart and a glad smile he waved his hand to them; he loved them all.

How beautiful God's world was! Before him stretched a long vista of sun-dappled street; the gray stone and brick houses on either hand looked warm in the mellow light; on the tip of every grass-blade at his feet a pearl glistened; amid the lofty branches of the elms happy birds twittered and sang. High up in the heavens a single swallow was winging its way in pure ecstasy of flight. Not a fleck of cloud marred the blue of the arching sky. Longing about to be realized, hope certain of its crown—they were in the very air! Nothing was too good to be true, but whatsoever was good must needs be true. It was morning, morning everywhere; best of all, it was morning in his heart.

Soon he had reached his little church—*his* church

it would always seem—and here he crossed the street to the Kimball House.

William Lewis, in a starchy white jacket, stood in the doorway, ringing the bell for breakfast. Just behind him, her raiment remarkably gay, her arms akimbo, hovered Miss Eastbrook's Sally. As William caught sight of the stalwart man nearing the house his eyes seemed to stick out of his head, his bell ding-donged more feebly and slowly and then abruptly ceased.

"Proud to see you, suh!"

A grin of sheer delight spread from ear to ear on William's ebon countenance. Sally did not speak, but with a grin that quite matched William's, she ducked.

In the dining-room William could not do enough for the unexpected guest. He fairly ran to wait on him, and in making his accustomed inquiry, "*How* will you have yo' aiggs?" his accents were almost tender.

It was manifest, however, that William had some other cause for excitement besides that of the arrival of this honored guest. His eyes fairly popped; his teeth were dazzlingly white. His face shone all over, as though just anointed with joyful oil. He appeared bursting with intelligence of a highly important nature. At last he could hold in no longer. Having brought hot crumpets and a second cup of

coffee, he lingered with an unmistakable air of being willing to converse.

"What is it, William?"

William lowered his black pate. The matter that he was about to confide to this old friend was not for the whole dining-room.

"It's William Lewis and lady now, suh!"

"Indeed, William! I congratulate you."

"Yes, suh! Me an' Sally Lightfoot, suh, we wuz tied up las' night!"

"Good news, William! Excellent news!" And a piece of silver found its way into William's palm. William continued to be communicative, requiring only the occasional stimulus of a word or a name.

"Colonel Carroll, William?"

"His hair am gettin' whitah an' he am lookin' mo' 'stinguishable ever' day. 'Pears kinda lonesome, though. He'll be mighty glad ter see you, suh!"

"The Dudleys are in Washington, I believe?"

"Yes, suh. Mistah Dudley, he's a Hon'able now." William's accents soared in pride and his bosom swelled. "Jes' nigh 'bout runs things in Cawngress. Bosom frien's wid Mistah Sumnah. Pres'dent Pie'ce mighty fond o' Mistah Dudley, white folks say. Dis niggah pow'ful glad he's roun' helpin' wid de gov'ment! De country am 'proachin' a crisis, Mistah Dudley 'low. 'De ol' Whig pa'ty am dead ez a do'-nail,' sez he, las' time he wuz home. 'I'm a Free

Soilah,' sez he, 'dat's what I am!' An' Mis' Dudley, she mighty pleased wid livin' in Washin'ton. She done 'tend de 'naugeration ball an' all de big receptions."

No longer did William require prompting. Delighted at filling the post of informant, he fairly poured forth the news of Camder

"Mistah Tibbott, he am still speechfyin' an' sawin' de air, but don't seem like folks pays any mo' 'tention den dey used ter. An' he am still co'tin' Miss Jones. Miss Eastbrook, 'pears like she done meller up some ez she gits along, but Miss Cha'lotte gittin' mo' spunky and spicier ever' day. You'd be 'stonished! Since Mistah Troop died, Miss Judith—"

But he was hastily interrupted.

"Well, I'm glad to see you again, William. Glad to hear such good news of you." There are some things too sacred for gossip.

Meanwhile a few squares farther up the street two women, one young, one old, were at work in a tangled dewy garden inclosed in white palings and overhung by tall elms.

There were no set beds in this garden. Beauty was not "cabined, cribbed, confined" in rows; paths wandered at their will. As the old woman, trowel in hand, moved from plant to plant with blithe step and watchful eye, the fresh round faces of white and purple asters looked up at her, gay-chaliced

morning-glories opened sunward, whole constellations of marigolds were shining, and late roses lifted lovely heads all sparkling from amid their green leaves. On vines that clambered over the side door of the house odd little gourds hung, ripe and yellow.

In the green depths of the garden, before a trellis covered thick with delicate hop-vines, the young woman stood on a low wooden stool. She was picking off the long pungent-smelling clusters and dropping them into a basket swung on her wrist. Her loose sleeve, slipped back to the elbow, showed an arm white as milk against the green wall.

The door of the house opened and a tall, somewhat angular woman, whose morning cap softened the severity of her features, appeared.

"Charlotte!" she exclaimed, shaking her head sadly, "no hat! What will become of your complexion? And no gloves!"

"Sister," returned Charlotte, smiling, "will you never give me up?"

With a sigh Jane Eastbrook turned and went back into the house.

As William Lewis had observed, Miss Charlotte, in her old age, had grown astonishingly independent. No longer did Jane tyrannize over her. Without losing in the least her sweetness and transparency she manifested in her late-found freedom a

marked enjoyment. She went where she pleased and when, without so much as an apology to Jane, and she frequently broke a lance in the conversational tournaments of the Camden Circle.

Being at heart devoted to her sister, Charlotte strove to curb this overflow of youthful spirits that in Jane's eyes sadly threatened the dignity of her seventy years, but not always with success. She absolutely scandalized Jane one day walking, without any head-covering whatever, entirely around the Square, her childhood's faded pink parasol screening her from the sun,—it was a bit of delicate high comedy worthy of Lotta.

This morning on coming into the garden she had donned her sunbonnet and gloves, but it had only been a few moments until they were cast aside. With her thin white hair flying about her face, she looked like a dandelion just ready to blow away.

"These roses," she mused, holding up the clusters that filled her two hands, "remind me of the day you came home, Judith, four years ago. I had covered them on frosty nights in order to have a bowlful for the Circle, just as I have done this year. Do you remember that day?"

"Yes," assented Judith dreamily, half turning toward Miss Charlotte for a moment to rest.

"I had the slip for them from Colonel Carroll," continued Miss Charlotte, "and I've been meaning

to bury him a sweet honey-suckle." Laying down the roses, she knelt beside the trailing luxuriant bush and judiciously selected one of its vining branches.

Judith, in her sprigged muslin, standing half-framed by the hop-vines, seemed a part of the soft, fair morning. Like it, she had unfolded a little, but the freshness of the dawn clung about her still. In the meshes of her burnished hair something of its glory and mystery had become entangled, and her eyes, larger, deeper, softer than of old, were as stars whose brightness outshone the dawn. If she had ever been beautiful, she was a thousand times more so now.

Over a year had passed since Abel died.

She still missed him; she would always miss him. He had become inexpressibly dear to her. To do for him, to give to him, had been her sole desire in life. When his release came, she at first murmured; her opportunity to serve him was ended. But time, who, despite men's railings, is more often kind than cruel, showed her that it was best for Abel so. Milly remained to her a sacred duty and a glad privilege. And after a while hope that seemed quite dead began to put forth tender new leaves.

Unwilling to part with the farm, she leased it and, for Milly's sake as well as her own, yielded to the solicitations of her dear old friends, Jane and Charlotte Eastbrook, to live with them. Milly was less

delicate now, and in the healthy companionship of her schoolmates was growing more normal. In Miss Eastbrook's library her eager imagination roamed the highways and byways of romance and history with all the ardor of a knight-errant. She was a docile child, and Miss Eastbrook had great hopes of bringing her up in strict accord with the principles of the *Young Lady's Guide*.

A stranger, observing Judith on this blue October morning, would scarcely have guessed that she was one on whom the hand of sorrow had fallen with heavy weight. For her strength had grown steadily with her need. She had not lost life in acquiescence to fate or fortune, but rather, as one has said, had gained life enough for peace. Seasoned rather than subdued by what she had undergone, the expression of her face had become as placid as a pool. She moved rhythmically. Gradually, so gradually that she herself had hardly known when the transition came, her days modulated from their troubled minor into clear major. Strong, bright, tender, calm, she seemed just ready to enter on the fullness of life, to taste most keenly its delectable moments, to warm and cheer its wintry hours.

Miss Charlotte, having tucked away in its snug brown bed of earth the honeysuckle vine, slowly raised herself. She stepped back from the bush and her eye wandered down the hazy street. It lighted

on a straight, strong, familiar figure, walking rapidly toward the house. Could it be—yes, it was! An instant she gazed on him in pride and affection. Oh, these masterful men! What an adoring wife one of them missed in Charlotte Eastbrook!

“Judith,” said Miss Charlotte in a voice that trembled with happiness, “I have a feeling that Jane wants me.” And forgetting her roses in her haste, she escaped by a side door into the house.

Judith, who had turned again to her hop-picking, did not answer. In alluding to her return to Camden, Miss Charlotte had touched a chord in her memory that was still vibrating. She was thinking of the many things that had happened to her since that other Indian summer day. She hardly knew that Miss Charlotte spoke or that she was alone in the garden.

For an instant only was she alone. She heard a buoyant step on the gravel path; she turned; the basket of hops fell—Stephen Waters stood there, his head bared, in his face unutterable love.

The morning sunshine was bright, but to Stephen it was not so bright as the gold of Judith’s hair; the garden was gay, but he saw only one flower in it, Judith herself, fairest among women.

Each knew that it was for this moment they had come into the world. All else had been but preparation. And the moment was worth the longings, the



Each knew that it was for this moment they had come into
the world *Page 49*

doubts and fears, the hope deferred, the renunciation, the long separation that they had endured. All, all, were coined into this single golden moment. In the overhanging branches of the elms did not the quiring birds trill out a new note of ecstasy?

The sorrow that Stephen and Judith had known they had no wish to forget. They could think of it tenderly and without tears, for themselves even without regret—as the dark root from which sprang the rose of their joy.

In Judith, Stephen beheld more than an ideal. An ideal, springing from self, has self's limitations. One day to the growing self it seems suddenly shrunken and narrow. It would not be thus with Judith. A nature like hers that unfolded slowly, flower-like, would afford ever a new graciousness, a fresh revelation.

There, in the tall tangled garden all gleaming with dew, he kissed her.

THE END

