William N Harben

The Cottage of Delight

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BOOKS BY

WILL N. HARBEN

THE COTTAGE OF DELIGHT
THE HILLS OF REFUGE
THE TRIUMPH
ABNER DANIEL
ANN BOYD
THE DESIRED WOMAN
DIXIE HART
THE GEORGIANS
GILBERT NEAL
THE INNER LAW
JANE DAWSON
KENNETH GALT
MAM' LINDA
THE NEW CLARION
PAUL RUNDEL
POLE BAKER
SECOND CHOICE
THE SUBSTITUTE
WESTERFELT

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THE
COTTAGE OF DELIGHT

A NOVEL

BY

WILL N. HARBEN

Author of "Ann Boyd," "Abner Daniel,"

"The Triumph," "The Hills of Judgment," etc.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

John Trott waked that morning at five o'clock. Whether it was due to the mere habit of a working-man or the blowing of the hoarse and mellow whistle at the great cotton-mills beyond the low, undulating hills half a mile away he did not know, but for several years the whistle had been his summons from a state of dead slumber to a day of toil. The morning was cloudy and dark, so he lighted a dingy oil-lamp with a cracked and smoked chimney, and in its dim glow drew on his coarse lime-and-mortar-splotched shirt and overalls. The cheap cotton socks he put on had holes at the heels and toes; his leather belt had broken and was tied with a piece of twine; his shoes were quite new and furnished an odd contrast to the rest of his attire.

He was young, under twenty, and rather tall. He was slender, but his frame was sinewy. He had no beard as yet, and his tanned face was covered with down. His hair was coarse and had a tendency to stand erect and awry. He had blue eyes, a mouth inclined to harshness, a manner somewhat brusk and impatient. To many he appeared absent-minded.

Suddenly, as he sat tying his shoes, he heard a clatter of pans in the kitchen down-stairs, and he paused to listen. "I wonder," he thought, "if that brat is cooking breakfast again. She must be, for neither one of those women would be out of bed as early as this. It was three o'clock when they came in."

Blowing out his light, he groped from the room into the dark passage outside, and descended the old creaking stairs to the hall below. The front door was open, and he sniffed angrily. "They didn't even lock it. They must have been drunk again. Well, that's their business, not mine."

The kitchen was at the far end of the hall and he turned into it. It was almost filled with smoke. A little girl stood at the old-fashioned range, putting sticks of wood in at the door. She was about nine years of age, wore a cast-off dress, woman's size, and was barefooted. She had good features, her eyes were blue, her hair abundant and golden, her hands, now splotched with smut, were small and slender. She was not a relative of John's, being the orphaned niece of Miss Jane Holder, who shared the house with John's mother, who was a widow.

The child's name was Dora Boyles, and she smiled in chagrin as he stared down on her in the lamplight and demanded:

"Say, say, what's this—trying to smoke us to death?"

"I made a mistake," the child faltered. "The damper in the pipe was turned wrong, and while I was on the back porch, mixing the biscuit-dough, it smoked before I knew it. It will stop now. You see it is drawing all right."

With an impatient snort, he threw open the two windows in the room and opened the outer door, standing aside and watching the blue smoke trail out, cross the porch floor, and dissolve in the grayish light of dawn.

"The biscuits are about done," Dora said. "The coffee water has boiled and I'm going to fry the eggs and meat. The pan is hot and it won't take long."

"I was going to get a bite at the restaurant," he answered, in a mollified tone.

"But you said the coffee was bad down there and the bread stale," Dora argued, as she dropped some slices of bacon into the pan. "And once you said the place was not open and you went to work without anything. I might as well do this. I can't sleep after the whistle blows. Your ma and Aunt Jane waked me when they came in. They were awfully lively. The fellows were singing and cursing and throwing bottles across the street. Aunt Jane could hardly get up the stairs and had one of her laughing spells. I think your ma was sober, for I could hear her talking steady and scolding Aunt Jane about taking a dance from her with some man or other. Did you see the men? They were the same two that had 'em out last Friday night, the big one your ma likes and the one Aunt Jane says is hers. I heard your ma say they were horse-traders from Kentucky, and have lots and lots of money to spend. That jewelry drummer—do you remember, that gave me the red pin?—he sent them with a note of introduction. The pin was no good. The shine is already off of it—wasn't even washed with gold."

John was scarcely heeding what she said. He had taken a piece of paper from his pocket, and with a brick-layer's flat pencil was making some calculations in regard to a wall he was building. The light was insufficient at the door and he was now bending over the table near the lamp.

"Do you want me to make you some flour-and-cream gravy?" she asked, ignorant of his desire to be undisturbed. "The milk looks good and rich this morning."

"No, no!" And he swore under his breath. "Don't you see I'm figuring? Now I'll have to add up again."

She made the gravy, anyway. She took out the fried bacon, sprinkled flour in the brown grease, stirred the mixture

vigorously, and then there was a great sizzling as she added a cup of milk, and, in a cloud of fragrant steam, still stood stirring. "There," she said, more to herself than to him. "I'm going to pour it over the bacon. It is better that way."

He had finished his figuring and now turned to her. "Are your biscuits done?" he asked. "I think I smell them."

"Just about," she answered, and she threw open the door of the oven, and, holding the hot pan with the long skirt of her dress, she drew it out. "Good! Just right!" she chuckled. "Now, where do you want to eat—here or in the dining-room? The table is set in there. Come on. You bring the coffee-pot."

Still absently, for his thoughts were on his figures, he followed her into the adjoining room. It was a bare-looking place, in the dim light of the lamp which she placed in the center of the small, square table with its red cloth, for there was no furniture but three or four chairs, a tattered strip of carpeting, and an old-fashioned safe with perforated tin panels. Two windows with torn Holland shades and dirty cotton curtains looked out on the side yard. Beneath the shades the yellowing glow of approaching sunlight appeared; a sort of fog hovered over everything outside and its dampness had crept within, moistening the table-cloth and chairs. John poured his own coffee while standing, and Dora went to bring the other things. His mind was busy over the work he was to do. Certain stone sills must be placed exactly right in the brickwork, a new scaffold had to be erected, and he wondered if the necessary timbers had arrived from the sawmill which his employer, Cavanaugh, had promised to have delivered the night before in order that the work might not be delayed. John sat down. He burnt his lips with the hot coffee, and then pouring some of it into his saucer, he drank it in that awkward fashion.

"How is it?" Dora inquired. "Is it strong enough?" She was putting down a dish containing the fried things and eyed his face anxiously.

"Yes, it is all right," he said. "Hurry, will you? Give me something to eat. I can't stay here all day." He took a hot biscuit and buttered it and began to eat it like a sandwich. She pushed the dish toward him and sat down, her hands in her lap, watching his movements with the stare of a faithful dog.

"Your ma and Aunt Jane almost had a fist-fight yesterday while they was dressing to go out," she said, as he helped himself to the eggs and bacon and began to eat voraciously. "Aunt Jane said she used too much paint and that she was getting fat. Your ma rushed at her with a big hair-brush in her hand. She called her a spindle-shanked old hag and said she was going to tell the men about her false teeth. It would really have been another case in court if the two horse-men hadn't come just then. They quieted 'em down and made 'em both take a drink together. Then they all laughed and cut up."

"Dry up, will you?" John commanded. "I don't want to hear about them. Can't you talk about something else?"

"I don't mean no harm, brother John." She sometimes used that term in addressing him. "I wasn't thinking."

"Well, I don't want to hear anything about them or their doings," he retorted, sullenly. "By some hook or crook they manage to get about all I make—I know that well enough—and half the time they keep me awake at night when I'm tired out."

She remained silent while he was finishing eating, and when he had clattered out through the hall and slammed the gate after him she began to partake daintily of the food he had left. "He's awfully touchy," she mused; "don't think of nothing but his work. Bother him while he is at it, and you have a fight on your hands."

Her breakfast eaten, Dora went to the kitchen to heat some water for dish-washing. She had filled a great pan at the well in the back yard and was standing by the range when she heard some one descending the stairs. It was Mrs. Trott, wearing a bedraggled red wrapper, her stockingless feet in ragged slippers, her carelessly coiled hair falling down her fat neck. She was about forty years of age, showed traces of former beauty, notwithstanding the fact that the sockets of her gray eyes were now puffy, her cheeks swollen and sallow.

"Is there any hot coffee?" she asked, with a weary sigh. "My head is fairly splitting. I was just dozing off when I heard you and John making a clatter down here. I smelled smoke, too. I was half asleep and dreamed that the house was burning down and I couldn't stir—a sort of nightmare. Say, after we all left yesterday didn't Jim Darnell come to see me?"

"No, not him," Dora replied, wrinkling her brow, "but another fellow did. A little man with a checked gray suit on. He said he had a date with you and looked sorter mad. He asked me if I was your child and I told him it was none of his business."

"That was Pete Seltzwick," Mrs. Trott said, as she filled a cup with coffee from the pot on the stove and began to cool it with breath from her rather pretty, puckered and painted lips. "You didn't tell him who we went off with, did you?"

"No, I didn't," the child replied, then added, "Do you reckon Aunt Jane would like some coffee before she gets up?"

"No. She's sound asleep, and will get mad if you wake her. Oh, my head! My head! And the trouble is I can't sleep! If I could sleep the pain would go away. Did John leave any money for me? He didn't give me any last week."

"No," Dora answered, "he said the hands hadn't been paid off yet. You know he doesn't talk much."

Mrs. Trott seemed not to hear. Groaning again, she turned toward the stairway and went up to her room.

CHAPTER II

John had passed out at the scarred and battered front door, crossed the floor of the veranda, and reached the almost houseless street, for he lived on the outskirts of the town, which was called Ridgeville. On the hillside to the right was the town cemetery. The fog, shot through with golden gleams of sunlight, was rising above the white granite and marble slabs and shafts. Ahead of him and on the right, a mile away, could be seen the mist-draped steeples of churches, the high roof and cupola of the county court-house. He heard the distant rumble of a coming street-car and quickened his step to reach it at the terminus of the line near by before it started back to the Square. The car was a toylike affair, drawn by a single horse and in charge of a negro who was both conductor and driver.

"Got a ride out er you dis time, boss," the negro said, with a smile, as John came up. "Met some o' yo' hands goin' in. Want any mo' help ter tote mortar en' bricks? 'Kase if you do, I'll th'o' up dis job. De headman said maybe I was stealin' nickels 'kase de traffic is so low dis spring, en' I didn't turn in much. If you got any room fer—"

"You'll have to see Sam Cavanaugh," John answered, gruffly. "If you climb a scaffold as slow as you drive a car you wouldn't suit our job."

"Huh! dat ain't me; it's dis ol' poky hoss. I'm des hired to bresh de flies offen his back."

The negro gave a loud guffaw over his own wit and proceeded to unhitch the trace-chains and drive the horse around to the opposite end of the car. John entered and took a seat. He drew from the pocket of his short coat a blue, white-inked drawing and several pages of figures which Cavanaugh had asked him to look over. A rather pretentious court-house was to be built in a Tennessee village. Bids on the work had been invited from contractors in all directions and John's employer had made an estimate of his own of the cost of the work and had asked John's opinion of it. John was deeply submerged in the details of the estimate when the car suddenly started with a jerk. He swore impatiently, and looked up and scowled, but the slouching back of the driver was turned to him and the negro was quite unconscious of the wrath he had stirred. For the first half-mile John was the only passenger; then a woman and a child got aboard. The car jerked again and trundled onward. The woman knew who John was and he had seen her before, for he had worked on a chimney Cavanaugh had built for her, but she did not speak to him nor he to her. That he had no acquaintances among the women of the town and few among the men outside of laborers had never struck John as odd. There were gaudily dressed women who came from neighboring cities and visited his mother and Jane Holder now and then, but he did not like their looks, and so he never spoke to them nor encouraged their addressing him. A psychologist would have classified John as a sort of genius in his way, for his whole thought and powers of observation pertained to the kind of work in which he was engaged. Cavanaugh half jestingly called him a "lightning calculator," and turned to him for advice on all occasions.

Reaching the Square, John sprang from the car and, with the papers in his hand and the pencil racked above his ear, he hurried into a hardware-store and approached a clerk who was sweeping the floor.

"We need those nails and bolts this morning," he said, gruffly. "You were to send them around yesterday."

"They are in the depot, but the agent hasn't sent 'em up yet," the clerk answered. "We'll get them around to you by ten o'clock sharp."

"That won't do." John frowned. "We could have got them direct from the wholesale house, and have had them long ago, but Sam would deal with you. He is too good-natured and you fellers all impose on him."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," the clerk proposed. "I'll send a dray for them this minute and you'll have them on the ground in a half-hour."

"All right," John said, coldly, and turned away.

The building on which he was at work was a brick residence in a side-street near by which was being erected for a wealthy banker of Ridgeville, and as John approached it he saw a group of negro laborers seated on a pile of lumber at the side of the half-finished house.

"Here comes John now," one of them said, and it was significant that his given name was used, for it was a fact that a white man in John's position would, as a rule, be spoken of in a more formal manner, but to whites and blacks alike he was simply "John" or "John Trott." This was partly due, perhaps, to his youth, but there was no doubt that John's lack of social standing had something to do with it. He had been nothing but a dirty, neglected street urchin, a playmate of blacks and the lowest whites, till Cavanaugh had put him to work and had discovered in him a veritable dynamo of physical and mental energy.

"Good morning," several of the negroes said, cordially, but John barely nodded. It was his way, and they thought nothing of it.

"Has Sam got here yet?" he inquired of a stalwart mortar-mixer called Tobe.

"No, suh, boss, he 'ain't," said the negro. "I was gwine ter see 'im. I'm out o' sand—not mo' 'n enough ter las' twell—"

"Four loads will be dumped here in half an hour," John broke in. "Did you patch that hose? Don't let the damn thing leak like it did yesterday."

"It's all right, boss. She won't bust erg'in." The negro smiled. Evidently he had not washed his face that day, for splotches of whitewash with globules of dry mortar were on his black cheeks and the backs of his hands.

The whistle at a shingle-factory blew. It was eight o'clock, the hour for work to begin.

"Mort'!" John's command was directed to two mortar-carriers, who promptly grasped their padded wooden hods and made for the mortar-bed where Tobe was already shoving and pulling the grayish mass to and fro with a hoe.

John hung up his coat on the trunk of an apple-tree into which some nails had been driven, and took his trowel and other tools from a long wooden box with a sloping water-proof lid. He was about to ascend the scaffold when he saw Cavanaugh approaching and signaling to him to wait.

The contractor was a man of sixty years, whose beard and hair were quite gray. He was short and stocky, slow of movement, and gentle and genial in his manner. He had been a contractor for fifteen years, and had accumulated nothing, which his friends said was owing to his good nature in not insisting on his rights when it came to charges and settlements. Widows and frugal maiden ladies would have no one else to build for them, for Sam Cavanaugh was noted for his honesty and liberality, and he was never known to use faulty material.

"Mort' there! Get a move on you, boys!" John was eying his employer with impatience as he approached. "Fill all four boards and scrape the dry off clean!"

"Wait a minute, John!" Cavanaugh said, almost pleadingly. "I want to see you about the court-house bid. I want to mail it this morning."

"What! And hold up this whole gang?" John snorted, impatiently.

"Oh, let 'em wait—let 'em wait this time," Cavanaugh said. "Where are the papers?"

With a suppressed oath, John went to his coat and got them. "I haven't time to go over all that, Sam," he answered. "Wait till dinner-time."

"But I thought you was going to look it over at home," the contractor said, crestfallen, as he took the papers into his fat hands.

"Oh, I've looked them over, all right," John replied, "and that's the trouble—that's why it will take time to talk it over."

"You mean— I see." Cavanaugh pulled at his short, stiff beard nervously. "I'm too high, and you are afraid I'll lose the job."

"Too high nothing!" John sniffed, with a harsh smile. "You are so damned low that they will make you give double security to keep you from falling down on it. Say, Sam, you told me you was in need of money and want to make something out of this job. Well, if you do, and want me to go up there in charge of the brickwork, you will have to make out another bid. I'm done with seeing you come out by the skin of your teeth in nearly every job you bid on. When a county builds a court-house like that they expect to pay for it."

"Why, I thought— I thought—" Cavanaugh began.

But John broke in: "You thought a thousand dollars would cover the ironwork. It will take two. The market reports show that steel beams have gone out of sight. Nails are up, too, and bolts, screws, locks, and all lines of plumbing material."

"Why, John, I thought—"

"You don't keep posted." John glanced up at the scaffold as if anxious to get to work. "Then look at your estimate of sash, doors, blinds, and glass. You are under the cost by seven hundred at least. And where in God's world could you get slate at your figure? And the clock and bell according to the requisition? Sam, you made those figures when you were asleep."

"Then you think I could afford— I want the job bad, my boy—do you reckon I could land it if I raised my offer, say by fifteen hundred?"

"You will have to raise it four thousand," John said, thoughtfully. "Think of the risk you would be running. If the slightest thing goes crooked the official inspectors will make you tear it down and do it over. Look at your estimate on painting," pointing with the tip of his trowel at a line on the quivering manuscript which the contractor held before his spectacled eyes. "You are away under on it. White lead is booming, and oil and varnish, and you have left out stacks of small items—sash cords, sash weights, and putty."

"Then you think this won't do?" Cavanaugh's face was turning red.

"Do? It will do if you want to present several thousand dollars to one of the richest counties in Tennessee. Why, one of those big farmers up there could build that house and give it to the state without hurting himself, while you hardly own a roof over your head."

"You may be right about my figures," Cavanaugh muttered. "Say, John, I want to get this bid off. Leave the bricklaying to Pete Long and come over to the hotel and write it out for me."

"And let him ruin my wall?" John snorted. "Not on your life! His mortar joints are as thick as the mud in the cracks of a log cabin. I'll do it to-night after I go home, but not before. I don't believe any man ought to let one job stand idle in order to try to hook another. To-morrow is Saturday. They couldn't get the bid anyway till Monday. There will be plenty of time."

As John finished he was turning to the scaffold. "Well, all right," Cavanaugh called after him. "That will have to do."

CHAPTER III

When the steam-whistles of the shops and mills of Ridgeville blew that afternoon at dusk John descended from the scaffold and put his tools away. He was the last of the workers on the spot, and when he had put on his coat he went around to the side of the building and with a critical eye scanned the wall he had worked on that day.

"It will look all right when it is washed down with acid," he mused. "That will straighten the lines and tone it up."

He was too late for the car and walked home. He found Jane Holder in the kitchen, preparing supper. She was a slight woman of thirty-five, dark, erect, with brown, twinkling eyes and short chestnut hair which had not regained its normal length since it was cut during a spell of fever the preceding winter. Touches of paint showed on her yellowish cheeks, and her false teeth gave to her thin-lipped mouth a rather too full, harsh expression.

"Oh, here you are!" She smiled. "I know you are hungry as a bear, but I had my hands full with all sorts of things. I was sewing on my new organdie and got the waist plumb out of joint. Your ma promised to help fit it on me, but Harrington, one of those horse-dealers, come by in a hurry to drive her to Rome behind two brag blacks, and she dropped me and my work to get ready. She is always doing me that way. She makes a cat's-paw of me. May Tomlin is going to have a dance at her house to-night and wrote Harrington to bring her. She left me clean out, though when May stayed here that time I was nice to her and introduced her to all my friends. Your ma didn't care a rap about me. She was going, and that was enough for her."

John simply grunted and turned away. He had not heard half she said. On the back porch was a tin wash-basin and a cedar pail. He wanted to bathe his face and hands, for his skin was clammy and coated with sand and brick-dust, but the pail was empty, so he took it to the well close by and filled it. He was about to return to the porch when he saw Dora, the woman's skirt pinned up about her slight waist, coming from the cow-lot with a tin pail half filled with milk.

"I had trouble with the cow," she said, wistfully, in her quaint, half-querulous voice. "While I was milking, she turned around to see her calf and mashed me against the fence. I pushed and pushed, but I couldn't move her. Once I thought my breath was gone entirely. The calf run along the fence, and she went after it, and that let me loose. I lost nearly half the milk, and Aunt Jane will give me the very devil about it. Well, Liz— I mean your mother's gone for the night, and we won't need quite so much. She's been drinking it for her complexion. Some woman told her—"

"Oh, cut it out!" John cried, with a suppressed oath. "You chatter like a feed-cutting machine."

He took the water to the porch, filled the basin, and washed his face, hands, and neck. He was just finishing when Dora came to him with a tattered cotton towel. "It is damp," she explained, apologetically. "I ironed them in a hurry when they were too wet. They ought to have been hung out in the sun longer, but the sun was low when I got through washing, and so I brought some of them in too soon. Your ma and Aunt Jane use the best ones in their rooms, and leave the ragged ones for us."

"You forgot something you promised to do, brother John," she added, timidly, as he stood vigorously wiping his face and neck.

"What was that?" he mumbled in the towel.

"Why, you promised to send a nigger to cut me some stove-wood and kindling. I tried to cut some myself to-day, but the ax is dull and I had trouble getting enough wood for to-night and in the morning. Will you send him to-morrow?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I'll make one of the boys come over and cut it and store it under the shed. There is a lot of pine scraps at the building. I'll send a load of them over, too."

After supper, which he had with Jane Holder and her niece in the dimly lighted dining-room, he went up to his room and prepared to work on the estimates for Cavanaugh. He was very tired, and yet the calculations interested him and drove away the tendency to sleep. Down-stairs he heard Jane laughing and talking to some masculine visitor. He had a vague impression that he knew the man, a young lawyer who was a candidate for the Legislature. John had been approached by the man, who had asked for his vote, but John was not of age and, moreover, he had no interest in politics. In fact, he scarcely knew the meaning of the word. Politics and religion were mysteries for which he had little but contempt. He used to say that politicians were grafters and preachers fakers, though he did believe that Cavanaugh, who was a devout Methodist, was, while deluded, decidedly sincere. He heard Dora's voice down-stairs as she timidly asked her aunt if she might go to bed.

"Have you washed the dishes and put them up?" Jane asked.

"Yes, 'm," the child said, and John heard her ascending the stairs to her room back of his. She used no light, and he heard her bare feet softly treading the floor as she undressed in the dark. Soon all was quiet in her room, and he plunged again into his work.

Finally it was concluded, and he folded the sheets on which he had written so clearly and so accurately and went to bed. It was an hour before he went to sleep. He could still hear the low mumbling, broken by laughter, below, but that did not disturb him. It was his figures and estimates squirming like living things in his brain that kept him awake till near midnight.

The next morning he decided to walk to the Square, that he might stop at Cavanaugh's cottage and hand him the papers.

The little house of only six rooms stood in another part of the town's edge. Close behind it was a swamp filled with willow-trees and bracken, and farther beyond lay a strip of woodland that sloped down from a rugged mountain range. There was a white paling fence in front, a few fruit-trees at the sides, and a grape-arbor and vegetable-garden behind. Mrs. Cavanaugh, a portly woman near her husband's age, was on the tiny porch, sweeping, and she looked up and smiled as John entered the gate.

"Sam's just gone down to the swamp to see what's become of our two hens," she said. "He'll be back in a few minutes. He'd like to see you. He thinks a lot of you, John."

"I haven't time to wait," John explained, taking the papers from his pocket and handing them to her. "Give these to him. He will know all about them."

"I know— I understand. They are the bid on that court-house." She smiled broadly. "Sam was awfully set back. He told me all about it last night. He admits he was hasty, but, la me! he is so anxious to land that contract that he can hardly sleep. You see, he thinks maybe it is our one chance to lay by a little. You see, Sam hasn't the heart to charge stiff prices here among Ridgeville folks, but he feels like he's got a right to make something out of a public building like that one. He says you insisted on a bigger bid and he is between two fires. He wants to abide by your judgment and still he is afraid you may have your sights too high. You see, he says some of the biggest contractors will send in bids and that they will cut under him because they are bigger buyers of material."

"Sam's off there," John said, thoughtfully. "He can borrow all the money he needs for a job like that and he can get material as cheap as any of them. The main item is brick, and that is made right here in town, and the stone is got out and cut here, too."

"You may be right," the woman said. "But to tell you the truth, John, Sam is afraid you are too young to decide on a matter as big as this deal. Several men he knows have advised him to make as low a bid as possible."

"Well, if he cuts under the estimates I've made in those papers," John returned, "he'll lose money or barely get out whole. I want to see him make something in his old age. I'm tired of seeing folks ride a free horse to death. He may be underbid on this, and if he loses the job he'll curse me out, but I'm willing to risk it." John turned away. "Just hand 'em to him," he said, from the little sagging gate, "and tell him that is my final estimate. If he wants to change it he may do so. I'm acting on my best judgment."

Half an hour later, as John was on the scaffold at work, Cavanaugh crossed the street and slowly ascended the ladders and runways till he stood on the narrow platform at the young mason's side. He held a long envelop which had been stamped and addressed in his fat hand. John saw him, but, being busy cutting a brick with his trowel and fitting into a mortar-filled niche a bat of exactly the right size, he did not pause or speak. It was his way, and had so long been his way that Cavanaugh had become used to it.

"Hey, hey! Get a move on you down there!" John shouted. "This mort' is getting dry!"

"Hold up a minute, John!" the contractor said. "My wife handed me the papers. I wrote the letter and stamped it and put in the bid exactly as you had it and was on the way to the post-office with it when I met Renfro going in the bank by the side door. You know he expects to lend me the money if it goes through—my bid, I mean—and he asked me what I was going to do. I told him, and he wanted to look over the bid. I let him, and he looked serious. He said he thought you was too steep, and if I wanted to get the job, why, I'd better—"

"I know," John sneered. "He thinks he knows something about building, but he is as green as a gourd. I've given you my judgment—take it or not, Sam, as you think fit. As big as I've made that bid, I'm afraid you will be sorry you didn't make it bigger."

"Renfro says young folks always aim too high," Cavanaugh ventured, tentatively. "He's got the money ready, he says,

and wants me to win."

John was cutting another brick in halves. His steel trowel rang like a bell as he tossed the red brick like a ball in his strong, splaying hand. Cavanaugh took a small piece of a tobacco-plug from the pocket of his baggy trousers and automatically broke off a tiny bit and put it into his hesitating mouth:

"I want that job, John," he faltered, as he began to chew. "I've set my heart on it. It is the biggest deal I ever tackled, and I'd like to put it through. I want me and you to go up there and work on it. It would be a fine change for us both."

"Well, I don't want to go if it is a losing proposition," John said, as he filled his trowel with mortar and skilfully dashed it on the highest layer of bricks. "And if you cut under my estimate you will come out at the little end of the horn."

Cavanaugh stood silent. A negro was dumping the contents of a hod on John's board and scraping out the clinging mortar with a stick. When the man had gone down the cleated runway and John was raising his line for another layer of bricks, Cavanaugh sighed deeply.

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, John. I'm going to mail the bid just as you made it out and trust to luck. I'm going to do it. I admit I've been awfully upset over it, but I can't remember that you ever gave me wrong advice, young as you are. My wife says I ought to do it, and I feel so now, anyway."

It was as if John had not heard his employer's concluding words. He was standing on his tiptoes, leaning over and carefully plumbing the wall on the outside.

"Yes, I'm going to drop it in the post-office right now," Cavanaugh said, as he started down the planks. "After all, there may be a hundred bids sent in, and some of the bidders may have all sorts of political pulls."

Again John seemed not to hear. He was tapping a protruding brick with the handle of his trowel and gently driving it into line. "All right—all right," he said, absently, and he frowned thoughtfully as he applied his plumb to the wall and eyed it critically.

CHAPTER IV

The residence on which John was at work was almost finished. He was on the highest scaffold one morning, superintending the slating of the roof, when, hearing Cavanaugh shouting on the sidewalk below, he glanced down. The contractor, with his thin alpaca coat on his arm, was signaling to him to come down.

"All right," John said. "In a minute. I'm busy now. Don't throw the broken ones away," he added to the workers. "Stack 'em up. We get rebates on them, and have to count the bad ones."

"Right you are, boss," a negro answered, with a chuckle. "Besides, we might split somebody's skull open."

"Oh, come on down!" Cavanaugh shouted again, with his cupped hands at his lips. "I want to see you."

"I can't do two things at once," John said, with a frown and a suppressed oath. "Say, boys, get that next line straight! Look for cracked slate, take 'em out, and lap the smooth ones right."

He found Cavanaugh near the front fence. The contractor was fond of jesting when he was in a good humor, and from his smiling face he seemed to-day to be in the best of spirits.

"No use finishing the roof," he said, squinting along the north wall of the building. "That wall is out of plumb and has to come down. Great pity. Foundation must have settled. That's bad, my boy."

"Well, it was *your* foundation, not mine," John retorted, seeing his trend. "What do you want?"

Slowly Cavanaugh took a letter from the pocket of his baggy trousers and held it in his fat hands. "What you think this letter is about?" He smiled with tobacco-stained lips.

"How the devil would I know?" John asked, impatiently.

"Well, I'll tell you," Cavanaugh continued. "It is from the Ordinary of Chipley County, Tennessee. He says he is writing to all the many bidders on that court-house to let 'em know the final decision on the bids. He was powerful sorry, he said, to have to tell me that I was nowhere nigh the lowest mark. Read what he says."

Wondering over his friend's mood, John opened the letter. It was a formal and official acceptance of the bid made by Cavanaugh. Without a change of countenance John folded the sheet, put it into the envelop, and handed it back. Some negroes were passing with stacks of slates on their shoulders.

"Be careful there, Bob!" he ordered, sharply. "You drop another load of those things and I'll dock you for a day's pay."

"All right now, boss," the negro laughed. "I got erhold of 'em."

"Well, what do you think?" Cavanaugh's gray eyes were twinkling with delight. "Lord! Lord! My boy, I feel like flying! I've laid awake many a night over this, and now it is ours. Gee! I could dance! I told Jim Luce about it at the post-office just now. He is going to write it up in his paper. Gosh! I'm glad this house is finished! We are foot-loose now and can set in up there whenever we like."

It was like John Trott to make no comments. He was watching the workers on the roof with a restless eye. The air resounded with the clatter of the hammers and the grating of the slates one against the other as they were selected and put down.

"You are an odd boy," Cavanaugh said, with a pleased chuckle. "What are you looking at up there?"

"They are not on to that job." John frowned. "Those coons work like they were at a corn-shucking. They don't drive the nails right. They are breaking a lot of slate and losing enough nails to shingle a barn."

"Oh, they are all right." Cavanaugh spat and chewed unctuously. "Gee! What if they do break a few slates? We are in the swim, my boy, and we'll give that county the prettiest court-house in the state, and the people will appreciate it." Therewith, Cavanaugh put his hand on John's arm and the look of merriment passed. "I've got to say it, my boy, and be done with it. You kept me from making a dern fool of myself and losing the little I have saved up. If it hadn't been for you—"

"Oh, cut it out, Sam!" There was an expression of embarrassed irritation on the young man's face. He was turning to leave, but Cavanaugh, still holding his arm, drew him back.

"I won't cut it out!" He all but gulped, cleared his throat, and went on: "I owe you my thanks and an apology. Only yesterday I got weak-kneed because I hadn't heard from up there, and told Renfro and some others who wanted to

know about the bid that I had done wrong to listen to as young a man as you are. I said that, and even talked to my wife about it the same way, and now we all see you was right. John, I don't intend to let you keep on at your old wages. You are not getting enough by a long shot, and from now on I'll give you a third more. I'm going to make some money out of this deal and you deserve something for what you have done."

John looked pleased. "Oh, I'll take the raise, all right," he said, with one of his rare smiles. "I can find a use for the money."

"Say, John"—Cavanaugh pressed his arm affectionately—"this will be our first jaunt away any distance together. We can have a lot o' fun. I'm going to order me a new suit of clothes, and I am going to make you a present of one, too. You needn't kick," as John drew back suddenly, "it will be powerful small pay for all the figuring you did at night when you was plumb fagged out."

"Well, I'll take the suit, too," John said, and smiled again. "You are liberal, Sam, but you always was that way."

"Well, we'll go to the tailor shop together at noon," Cavanaugh said, delightedly. "You can help me pick out mine and I'll see that Parker fits you. You have got some shape to you, my boy, and you will cut a shine up there."

Leaving his employer, John ascended to the roof again, this time through the interior of the almost finished house, and out by a dormer window. The old town stretched out beneath him. To the east the hills and mountains rose majestically in their blue and green robe under the mellow rays of the sun. A fresh breeze fanned John's face. A man near him broke a slate by an unskilful stroke of the hammer and raised an abashed glance to John.

"It is all right, Tim," he said. "I'm no good at slating myself. You are doing pretty well for a new hand. Say, Sam's landed that court-house contract."

The nailers and their assistants had heard. The hammers ceased their clatter. Cavanaugh was seen standing in the middle of the road, looking up at them. A man raised a cheer. Hats and hammers were waved and three resounding cheers rang out. Cavanaugh took off his straw hat and stood bowing, smiling, and waving.

"Lucky old duck!" Tim, who was a white man, said, "and he was afraid it would fall through."

John's glance roved over the town, the only spot he had ever known. Beyond the outskirts ran the creeks in which he had fished and bathed as a ragged boy. Toward the south rose the graveyard a mile away. He could see the dim roof of the ramshackle house in which he had lived since he was five years of age. John looked at his watch.

"Get a move on you, boys," he said, in his old tone. "Say, that last line is an eighth too low at this end. Lift it up. Take off the three slates this way and nail 'em back. Damn it! Take 'em off, even if you break 'em. I won't have a line like that in this job. It shows plain from this window."

CHAPTER V

Two weeks later Cavanaugh and John left for Cranston, the Tennessee village where the new building was to be erected. They had on their new clothes and were smoking cigars which Cavanaugh had bought. Some of the negroes and whites who had worked under them came to the depot to see them off, and they all stood on the platform, waiting for the train. There was much mild gaiety and frequent jests. Cavanaugh was quite talkative, but John, as usual, was silent. The men had jested with the contractor about his new clothes, but no one dared to allude to John's. Indeed, John seemed unconscious of his change of appearance. But for his coarse red hands, his rough, tanned face, and stiff, unkempt hair, he would have appeared rather distinguished-looking. A bevy of young ladies of the best social set of the town, accompanied by several of their young men associates, had gathered to see one of their number off. They passed close to John, but paid not the slightest attention to him, and they made no impression on him. That there was such a thing as social lines and castes had never occurred to him. He saw the young lawyer who stealthily visited Jane Holder join the group and stand chatting, but even this gave him no food for reflection. In regard to extraneous matters John Trott seemed asleep, but in all things pertaining to his work he was wide awake. His mental ability, strength of will, and dearth of opportunity would have set a psychologist to speculating on his future, but there were no psychologists in Ridgeville. Ministers, editors, teachers, fairly well-read citizens, met John Trott almost daily and passed him without even a thought of the complex conditions of his life and of the inevitable awakening ahead of him.

When the train came, John and Cavanaugh said good-by to their friends and got aboard. They threw their cigars away and found seats in the best car on the train. It was the first trip of any length that John had ever taken, and yet he did not deport himself like a novice. Cavanaugh bought peanuts, candy, and a newspaper from the train "butcher," but John declined them. His employer had spoken to him about some inside walls and partitions which had to be so arranged in the new building as to admit of some alcoves and recesses not down in the specifications, and John was turning the matter over in his mind.

A few miles from Ridgeville a young couple got on the train and came into the car. The young man was little older than John and looked like a farmer in his best clothes. He was flushed and nervous. His companion was a dainty girl in a new traveling-dress. They sat near an open window and through it came showers of rice, a pair of old slippers, and merry jests from male and female voices outside.

"Bride and groom," Cavanaugh whispered, nudging his companion. "She is a cute little trick, ain't she? My, my! how that takes me back!"

The entire car was staring at the self-conscious pair, who were trying to appear unconcerned. The train moved on. John was no longer thinking of his work. His whole being was aflame with a new thought. Strange, but the idea of marriage as pertaining to himself had never come to him before. The sight of the pair side by side, the strong masculine neck and shoulders, and the slender neck and pretty head of the girl with the tender blue eyes, fair skin, and red lips appealed to him as nothing had ever done before.

"That is the joy due every healthy pair in the world," Cavanaugh went on, reminiscently. "Life isn't worth a hill of beans without it. These young folks will settle down in some neat little cottage filled with pure delight—that's what it will be, a cottage of delight for them. He'll work in the field and she will be at home ready for him when he gets back. Look how they lean against each other! I can't see from here, but I will bet you he is holding her little soft hand."

For the next half an hour the couple was under John's observation. He found himself unable to think of anything aside from his own mind-pictures of their happiness.

Cavanaugh was full of the idea also. "It is ahead of you, too, my boy," he said. "You are old enough and are now making enough money to start out on. Pick you some good, sweet, industrious girl. There are plenty of the right sort, and they will love a man to death if he treats 'em right. Look, she's got her head on his shoulder, but she's not going to sleep. She's just playing 'possum. There, by gum! he kissed her! If he didn't I am powerfully mistaken. Well, who has a better right?"

The pair left the train at a station in the woods where there were no houses and two wagon-roads crossed and where a buggy and a horse stood waiting. Through the window John saw the bridegroom leading the bride toward it. Beyond lay mountain ranges against the clear sky, fields filled with waving corn and yellowing wheat. The near-by forests looked dank, dense, and cool.

"It is ahead of you, too, my boy!" The old man's words rang again in his ears as the train moved on and the pair and their warm faces were lost to view. John took out some notes he had made in regard to the masonry of a vault in the new building and tried to fix his mind on them, but it was difficult to do. The mental picture of that young couple filled

his whole being with a strange titillating warmth. Within an hour his view of life had broadened wonderfully. He was not devoid of imagination and it was now being directed for the first time away from the details of his occupation. He could not have analyzed his state of mind, but he had taken his first step into what was a veritable new birth.

"It is ahead of you, too, my boy!" Nothing Cavanaugh had ever said to him could have meant so much as those words. A home, a wife all his own. Why had he never thought of it before? He was conscious of a sort of filial love for the old contractor that was as new as the other feeling. He was conscious, too, of a new sense of manhood, and a pride in his professional ability that was bound to help him forward.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when they arrived at Cranston. The Ordinary of the county, at Cavanaugh's request, had arranged board for the two men at the house of a farmer, there being no hotel in the village where board could be had by the week at a rate low enough for a laborer's pocket. So at the station they were met by the farmer himself, Richard Whaley, who stepped forward from a group of staring mountaineers and stiffly introduced himself.

He was a man of sixty-five, bald, gray as to hair and beard, and slightly bent from rheumatism. His skin was yellowish and had the brown splotches which indicate general physical decay.

"My old woman is looking for you," he said, coldly. "She made the arrangement. I have nothing to do with it. She and my daughter do all the cooking and housework. If they want to make a little extra money I can't object. The whole county is excited over the new court-house. They act and talk like it was Solomon's temple, and will look on you two as divine agents of some sort. Folks are fools, as you no doubt know."

"A little bit—from experience," Cavanaugh joked. "The Ordinary tells me you are a Methodist. That's what I am, brother, and I'll love to live under a Methodist roof once more."

"Yes, thank God! that's what I am," Whaley said. "My wife is, too. I'll show you our meeting-house when we pass it. I've got a Bible-class. It is the biggest in the county—twenty-two members."

"That is a whopper," Cavanaugh said. "I'd like to set and listen sometimes. I've had fresh light given me many a day by other men's interpretations of passages I'd overlooked."

"We are very thorough," Whaley responded, warming up to the subject. Then he turned to John. "What church do you belong to?" he asked, rather sharply.

"I haven't joined any yet," John answered. He was slightly embarrassed and yet could not have told why.

"Oh, he will come around all right before long," Cavanaugh thrust in, quickly. "I've got him in charge."

"Well, he is old enough to affiliate somewhere," the farmer said, crisply. "It is getting entirely too common these days to meet young folks that think they can get along without divine guidance. That is our meeting-house there. We are laying off to put a fresh coat of paint on it in the fall."

They passed the little steepled structure and walked on down the thinly inhabited street which was as much a country road as a street, till they came to a two-story house with a small farm behind it. A tall, thin woman in a gingham dress sat on the long veranda and rose at their approach.

"This is the house and that's my wife," Whaley explained. "The property isn't mine. I'm just a renter, but I can keep it as long as I want to. We've been here ten years." He opened the gate and let the new-comers enter ahead of him. They were introduced. Mrs. Whaley shook hands as stiffly as had her husband.

"Come right in," she said, smiling. "I know you've had a hot, dusty train-ride, and I reckon you will want to rest."

They put down their bags in the little bare-looking hallway from which a narrow flight of stairs ascended, and followed her into a big parlor on the right. Here they took chairs. The afternoon sun shone in through six wide windows and fell on the clean, carpetless floor. A wide fireplace was filled with the boughs of mountain cedar, and the hearth had been freshly whitewashed. There was a table in the center of the room, a tiny cottage organ between two windows, and some crude and gaudy print pictures in mahogany frames on the walls. The four individuals formed an awkward, purposeless group, and no one seemed able to think of anything to say. John was wondering what could possibly happen next, when Mrs. Whaley said:

"I know you both must be thirsty. I'll get Tilly to fetch in some fresh water from the well."

She rose stiffly and left the room. "Oh, Tilly! Tilly! where are you?" they heard her calling in the back part of the house. "Leave the churning a minute and draw up a bucket of fresh water. They are here."

Through the open windows from the shaded back yard John heard a girlish voice answering, "I'm coming, mother."

Then there was a whir of a loose wooden windlass and the dull thump of a bucket as it struck the surface of the water. This was followed by the slow creaking of the windlass and a sound of pouring water.

"We didn't come here to be waited on like a couple of nabobs," Cavanaugh jested. "Let's go out to the well. We ought to begin right and be done with it. The last time I boarded in the country I chopped my own fire-wood and toted it in. I'd have washed the dishes I messed up, but the women of the house wouldn't let me."

Without protest Whaley got up and led the way through the sitting-room, dining-room, and kitchen to the well in the yard where Mrs. Whaley and her daughter, a girl of about eighteen years of age, stood filling some glasses on a tray.

"My daughter Tilly," Whaley said, indifferently. "The only one I have left. Her two sisters married and moved off West. Her brother Tom died awhile back."

The girl seemed shy, and scarcely lifted her eyes as she advanced and held out her hand first to Cavanaugh and then to John. She was slight of build, not above medium height, and had blue eyes and abundant chestnut hair.

"Pass the water 'round," her mother instructed her, but both John and Cavanaugh stepped forward and helped themselves. For a moment Tilly stood hesitating, and then she turned to her churn at the kitchen door and began to raise and lower the dasher. She had rolled up her sleeves, and John, who was covertly watching her, saw her round white wrists and shapely fingers. The way her unbound hair fell about her neck and lay quivering on her moving shoulders caught and held his fancy. How gloriously different she seemed from the only girls he had ever met, the bedizened creatures whom he sometimes saw at his home with his mother and Jane Holder! And, strange to say, he almost pitied Tilly for being bound as she was to the two unemotional old people who seemed to rule her as with a rod of iron. What a patient little sentient machine she seemed!

"You'll want to see your rooms, I reckon," Whaley said. "Amelia'll show you up-stairs. The Ordinary said he didn't think you'd be over-particular. They have plenty of air and light."

John was delighted with his room. It was palatial compared to the sordid den he inhabited at home in its constant disorder and dirt. As he glanced about him, noted the snowy whiteness of the towels at the wash-stand, the freshly laundered white window-curtains, and the clean pillows and coverlet of the great wide bed, he had a sense of meeting a new experience in life that was vastly gratifying. He heard Cavanaugh clattering about in his room across the narrow passage, and smiled. The old man's words, "A cottage filled with pure delight," rang in his ears like a haunting strain of music.

CHAPTER VI

They had supper at six o'clock in the big dining-room. The sun was not yet down, and through the open windows and door John looked out on a small but orderly arranged flower-garden upon which the slanting rays of the sun rested. Whaley sat at the head of the table, his wife at the foot. Tilly was not in sight. She was in the adjoining kitchen, and as he sat with his wrinkled hands crossed over his down-turned plate, her father suddenly called out to her.

"Tilly," he cried, "come set down till the blessing is asked, and then you can bring the things in."

Her face flushed as from the heat of the stove, the girl came in and slipped demurely into a chair opposite John and next to Cavanaugh. John had never gone through such an ordeal before, and he felt awkward. He noticed that all the others had lowered their heads, and he did likewise, though he had a certain rebellious feeling against it.

"I don't know what you have been accustomed to," Whaley suddenly said, looking at Cavanaugh, "but I have always held, as a principle, that the head of a house ought to ask the blessing on it; so you will understand, sir, that in failing to call on you I mean no disrespect."

"Oh, not at all," the contractor mumbled. "I think you are right about that. I always do it at home. Of course, if there is an ordained minister on hand, I ask him, but otherwise I don't."

"Well, I don't even in that case," Whaley answered, crustily. "I've always made it a rule, and I stick to it." Then he cleared his throat, lowered his head again, and prayed aloud at some length. John could not have recalled afterward what it was that he had said, for the most of the words used were unusual and high-sounding.

The prayer was no sooner ended than Tilly rose and hastened from the room. She came back almost instantly with a great platter of fried ham and eggs and a plate of steaming biscuits, and began to pass them around.

"What is the matter with your hand, Tilly?" her mother asked, and John, who was helping himself from the dish the girl was offering him, noted that a red welt lay across the back of one of her small hands.

"I burnt it getting the biscuits out," Tilly answered, almost beneath her breath.

"How foolish!" her mother retorted. "You are getting more and more careless. Bring in the coffee next. I want to be pouring it out. Most folks like to start a meal that way."

Tilly disappeared and returned with the coffee-pot. Somehow John, as he ate his supper, found himself thinking of the painful burn on Tilly's hand, and was oblivious of the conversation regarding religious matters between Cavanaugh and Whaley and his wife.

"Now, come set down and eat your supper," Mrs. Whaley said to her daughter, and Tilly took the chair she had occupied while grace was being said. She kept her eyes downcast, and John noticed her long, slightly curled lashes as they rested on her flushed cheeks and her pretty, tapering hands. She said nothing during the entire meal.

When supper was over, Whaley led the two men into the parlor and lighted an oil-lamp which stood on the mantel-piece, for it was growing dark. They had seated themselves when Whaley rose and took a song-book from the cottage organ and extended it to Cavanaugh.

"Have you got this new book of revival hymns down your way?" he inquired.

"I don't think so," the contractor answered, inspecting it.

"Well, it is by all odds the best all-round collection I've ever run across," Whaley said. "Tilly plays all of 'em pretty well, and we have a regular song-service here whenever we feel like it. Do you sing, Mr.—Mr. Trott?"

"No, sir," John replied. "I have no turn that way."

"Well, maybe you'll get the hang of it while you are here," Whaley smiled coldly. "I don't believe there is any way in the world that a man can get to God quicker, straighter, or closer than in sacred song. I've seen a congregation stand out against the finest appeal ever made from the stand, and the minute some good singer started a rousing hymn they were all ablaze, like soldiers following fife and drum." Herewith Whaley went to the door and called out:

"Amelia, let the dishes rest and you and Tilly come in. We want some music."

"Good! Good!" Cavanaugh chimed in, rubbing his hands. "We are in luck, John. If there is anything on earth I like after a hearty meal it is hymn-singing. It takes me back to the good old camp-meeting days when everybody, young and old,

sang, and even shouted when the spirit was on them."

Tilly and her mother came in. The girl went to the organ on which her father was placing the lamp, and sat on the stool. The light fell on her face and John, sitting against the wall on her right, had a full view of it and her graceful figure. Her father had opened the song-book and placed it on the music-rack. Her slender fingers rested on the yellow keys; the red welt on her hand showed plainly, and John wondered if it pained her much. There was no way of deciding, for she showed no sign of suffering. She began to pump the organ with her little feet. She drew out the stops and began to play. She did it badly, but there were no expert musical critics in the room. Whaley and his wife stood behind her and both of them sang loudly. Cavanaugh had never heard the song, and so he did not take active part, though John saw him beating time with his finger and now and then contributing a suitable bass note. Cavanaugh was delighted with the hymn.

"Why don't you join in, little girl?" he asked, gently, as he beamed on Tilly.

"I can't sing and play at the same time," she explained, modestly, catching John's attentive stare and avoiding it, her brown lashes flickering.

They sang some old familiar hymns now, and all three of the singers joined in together.

"I tell you we make a good trio," Whaley exulted. "You've got a roaring bass, Brother Cavanaugh. We'll surprise the natives some night at prayer-meeting. We'll set to one side like and spring it on 'em all at once."

John felt like an alien in the religious and musical atmosphere and was somewhat irritated by the announcement later from Whaley that he always had a chapter read from the Bible and a prayer before going to bed, and, as he believed in retiring early, he suggested that they have the service over with. Accordingly, he removed the lamp from the organ to the table, and from the sitting-room brought a big family Bible. A further surprise was in store for John, for Whaley placed a chair under the lamplight and called on his daughter to sit in it. He smiled coldly as she obeyed and opened the Bible. "You may think it odd, Brother—er—Cavanaugh—you've got a hard name to remember, sir. I say, you may think it odd for me to call on my daughter to read out loud this way. I admit it isn't the general custom, but, the truth is, I discovered that she'd got the habit of not listening to me while I was reading, or commenting, either. So I made up my mind that I'd have her do the reading herself. It has worked pretty well. She is in my Bible-class, and now answers as many questions right as any of the rest, no matter the age or the education."

Tilly was blushing as she lowered her head over the big tome with its brass corners and clasps, and John was sorry for her. A storm of rage against her father ran through him. This was dispelled quickly, however, for when the girl began to read in her clear and sweetly modulated voice he sat transfixed by the sheer charm and music of the delivery. Her neck was bare, and he saw her white throat throbbing like that of a warbling bird. He did not grasp the full sense of what she read, for some of the words were unusual to him. Had she been reading in a foreign tongue, it would have been no more marvelous to him. Her flush had died down; her eyes rested unperturbed on the page; one little hand curved around a corner of the big book; the fingers of its mate held a leaf ready to be turned. The lamplight fell into the brown mass of hair that crowned her well-poised head like a halo. Her long lashes seemed mystic films through which he glimpsed her eyes. Looking across the room, he saw Cavanaugh, his rough fingers interlocked over his knee, staring steadily at the reader. Was it imagination or were the old man's eyes actually moist? They seemed to glitter in the light.

Tilly finished the chapter and slowly closed the book, fastening the clasps carefully. She raised her eyes to John's face and quickly, almost guiltily, looked away. Her father had risen and stood holding the back part of his chair with his two hands.

"Now we'll kneel down and pray," he said. "Brother—er—er—Cavanaugh, I don't know what your habit or turn is, but I'm going to ask you to lead if you feel so inclined."

Cavanaugh was rising. "I make a poor out," he said, "but I'll do my best. I—I don't often refuse when called on." He was looking at John almost appealingly. "I—I regard it as a duty to—to my religion and membership."

The strange, alien feeling swept over John again. He had never heard his jovial associate pray, though he had been told that Cavanaugh did so now and then; besides, John felt as if he were being personally imposed upon. He was not religious; he had never even been to church, and here he was expected to kneel down with the others. Whaley and his wife knelt side by side, the worn bottoms of their coarse shoes standing steadily, their heels upward. As John knelt he felt the uneven planks of the floor press into his knees unpleasantly, and he moved them for a more comfortable spot. He had an impulse to laugh over his own predicament, but checked it, for, glancing to his right, he saw Tilly bent over her crude split-bottom chair like a wilted human flower. She looked so weary and so utterly helpless, and yet so brave and patient. As he feasted on her sweet profile he wondered if she, like himself, were thinking of other things than the ceremony at hand. He could not decide. Surely, he thought, she could not be so silly, with that broad brow and those

discerning eyes, as to believe that there was an invisible being away off somewhere who was now listening to what Cavanaugh was saying in his faltering, singsong tone. Somehow he expected absolute truthfulness to be found in the girl. As for the others, they knew what they claimed was untrue. They—even Cavanaugh—were hypocrites, and in their secret souls they knew it.

Cavanaugh's prayer was labored—it did not flow as from the tongue of a man who loves the sound of his own mouthing—and it was soon ended. Whaley's smug omission of any comment on it showed the farmer's estimate of its value or lack of value in any religious campaign.

Now that they were all standing, John found himself near Tilly. He felt that he was expected to say something, for she had raised a dubious glance to his face, but his tongue was tied. How could he speak there under such circumstances when he had never met a girl of her sort on any terms of social equality? He grew hot from head to foot. In kneeling his trousers had caught a white thread from the floor. He saw it and bent to remove it. It was too delicate for his thick, brick-worn fingers to grasp, and he stood awkwardly trying, now to lift it, again to brush it off. He failed, and then he forgot and swore softly. Tilly may not have heard the oath, but something excited her mirth and she smiled—smiled straight into his eyes. He smiled in return, for he had never seen such a smile as hers before. In rippling streams of delight it seemed to go through his whole being. He saw her pretty hand start down toward the thread and then check itself as she noticed her mother looking at her. It was as if she had started to remove the thread herself and decided that the act would invoke criticism from her elders as a thing too forward for a girl to do.

With a laugh that was bold now in its sheer merriment John took out his pocket-knife, opened the blade, and managed to pick up the thread.

"Well, I reckon you are both tired and we are early to bed and early to rise here," Whaley was saying. "You both know the way up-stairs."

There were no formal good-nights exchanged. The Whaleys withdrew to their rooms on the ground floor and John and Cavanaugh went up the stairs. John thought Cavanaugh would go straight into his room, but he followed him into his and helped him find and light his lamp.

"I want to tell you something, my boy," he began, his eyes shifting back and forth from John's face to the jagged flame of the small lamp. "I want to get something out of me and be done with it. I made a regular fool of myself there to-night."

"I don't understand," John said, in surprise.

"Well, I did," Cavanaugh went on, flushed, and in a voice that shook a little. "That prayer of mine was the worst mixed-up mess I ever got off. You see, I never have talked much religion to you boys down home, and as far as I know none of you ever heard me pray out loud in public. Well, I—somehow when I got down to-night I just got to thinking about what *you* thought—you see, I've heard you sneer at the belief I hold in common with many others, and somehow to-night—well, I found that I was thinking more about what you thought of me than what I was prepared to say, and so I balled it all up. I can do first-rate in meeting at home, but I slid from it to-night. Why, I almost heard Brother Whaley grunt when I suddenly forgot what I started to say and switched off to something else. Oh, I made a fool of myself! Now, really didn't you think so?"

"I didn't hear what you were saying," John answered. "I wouldn't care if I was you."

"Well, I *do* care," Cavanaugh muttered. "If ever a man insulted his God, I did mine to-night. I was reeling off a lot o' stuff, but not one word of it was from the heart, and a prayer that don't come from the heart ain't worth shucks. Mine wasn't much more than a song and dance before the Throne, and I'm ashamed of it."

"I wouldn't care," John repeated, still absently.

"Well, I don't know as I do care much about what that old hard-shell codger, or his wife that is just like him, thinks, but I do for that little girl. My Lord! ain't she sweet?"

John stared straight and warmly, but said nothing. He was conscious of the intensest interest and that he was trying not to show it.

Cavanaugh stood slowly shaking his head in the negative way that implies affirmation. "Yes, yes, she is a wonderful, wonderful little trick. While she was reading there to-night I seemed to be listening to the voice of an angel that had just come from behind the clouds. I was shedding tears of joy from every pore of my old body. I could have taken her in my arms and cried my heart out. That is why I wish I could have done better in my prayer. What she read was from her soul. '*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!*' I'll never to my dying day forget them words, and the sweet twist she

gave to them. I never had a child, John, and if I could have had one like her, I—I— And just think of it! They make her work like a slave, even with her little hand blistered like it was to-night! Old Whaley thinks he walks side by side with God in all his rules and regulations, but his child is one of God's own glories, and don't you forget it."

Turning suddenly, as if overcome with emotion, Cavanaugh stalked out through the door and crossed the passage into his own room. As John undressed he heard the old man's heavy tread on the floor. A window was raised. There was sudden silence. Cavanaugh was looking out into the starlight.

John was tired, but he remained awake till near midnight. Fancies filled his mind which he had never had before. Why did he think so often of the bride and bridegroom he had seen on the train that morning?

"It is ahead of you, too, my boy," Cavanaugh's words rang in his ears. Could such a thing be for him, really for him? How could it be? He had given no thought to women. He had never dreamed of marriage, but to-night the sheer idea of it was fairly tearing his being to shreds, and the flame of the impulse had risen in the face of a girl—a poor, abused, misunderstood girl. The world lay before him. He would rise in his trade, and earn money which he would lavish on the little filial slave he already adored.

He slept and dreamed that he heard Cavanaugh saying: "It is the cottage of delight, my boy, and it is for you and her—for you and her. Don't forget, for you and her!"

CHAPTER VII

The foundation for the court-house was soon laid. The county officials had announced to Cavanaugh that a day had been appointed for a ceremonious laying of a corner-stone, to which all the countryside had been invited. A block of marble properly marked and dated was ordered and came. The occasion was to be a great one. A brass band was expected from a near-by town. There was to be a barbecue, with speeches and singing from a hastily improvised platform.

John himself supervised the construction of the platform and the long tables upon which the food was to be served.

The day arrived. The weather was most favorable, there being cool breezes from the mountains and sufficient clouds to shut off the heat of the sun. The speakers' stand was hung with flags and decorated with flowers and evergreens. Long trenches had been dug in the earth. Fires had been going in them all day. The dry hickory wood was reduced to live coals and the pork, beef, and lamb were suspended over them. Negro men, expert in the work, were busy turning and basting the meat, the aroma of which floated on the air. A little organ from a near-by church had been placed amid some chairs for choir-singers, and then John discovered that Tilly was expected to play the instrument.

"The regular organist is away," Cavanaugh explained to John, "but I'll bet our little girl will do it all right."

John said nothing, for he had caught sight of Tilly seated with her mother in the front row of benches. She was dressed in white muslin from head to foot. She wore a cheap sailor straw hat he had never seen her wear before, and some flowers were pinned on her breast. The whiteness of her attire seemed to accentuate the rare pinkness of her face, which deepened as she caught his stealthy glance. She was the last of the choir to take her place, the others being seated when she finally went forward, seated herself on the organ-stool, and began to look over the music. How calm and unruffled she seemed to John! On the platform sat a candidate for the Governorship of the state, several ministers, the Ordinary of the county, the Sheriff, an ex-judge, and several other men of prominence, and yet in the eyes of the younger spectators John Trott, who was to place and seal the stone, and stood with a new trowel in his hand, was the most envied person there. He was well dressed, good-looking, possessed with a forceful demeanor, and it was rumored that he was a mason who could demand any wages he liked. It was little wonder that poor young farmers who lived from hand to mouth to eke out an existence should deem him most fortunate, and that the girls should regard him with favor.

John was young; he was human, and he was experiencing a sort of new birth. Aside from Cavanaugh, no one present knew of his mother's reputation or of the social wall between him and the citizens of Ridgeville, and here to-day he was being treated as he had never been treated before. He felt strangely, buoyantly, at his ease. He was too happy to analyze his wonderful transition. He wanted to do his part well, not chiefly on account of Cavanaugh and the contract, or the dignitaries about him, but it must be admitted that above all he was considering Tilly. It pleased the poor boy to think of her as conducting the music, and of himself as having charge of the other details. There was a vague, new, and even confident dignity about his erect figure, face, and tone of voice as he directed the laborers to bring the corner-stone forward. There was a square cavity in the stone into which souvenirs were to be placed, and it devolved upon John to collect them from the audience. He did it well. He was a man drawn out of an old environment by the dazzling experience of being in love. A copy of a fresh issue of the county weekly was handed to him by the paper's editor; the Ordinary contributed a photograph of the old court-house, some one else put in a sheet containing the autographs of leading citizens, and there were coins and various trinkets of more or less historic significance. John placed them in the cavity, and under the eyes of all began to close the opening. His new trowel tinkled softly as he worked in the dead silence on all sides. When it was finished the band played. There was much applause, and then the choir sang. During this part of the program John had a chance to look at Tilly without being seen by her. She sat very erectly at the organ, unabashed, unperturbed. John, even from where he stood at one side, saw the red welt on her hand. He told himself, sentimentally, that those were the same little hands which churned daily, washed dishes, made fires in the range, washed, hung out, and ironed clothes, and he marveled. Once as she turned a page of the music-book she looked at him, seemed in a flash to sense his admiration, and dropped her eyes. Something came into her face which he could not have described, but it played there for an instant like a beam of rose-colored light, and he throbbed and thrilled in his whole being.

The speeches passed off. The band played again and John was asked by the Ordinary to announce that the barbecue was ready to be served at the tables.

John had never spoken in public, and yet to-day a new daring possessed him. Quite unperturbed, he rang his trowel on the corner-stone till quiet was restored, and then, with a half-jest, appropriately worded, he made the announcement. Immediately the audience was on its feet and surging toward the aromatic trenches and tables. The platform was soon vacated, and John saw Tilly alone at the organ, putting up the music-books. He longed to go to her, but a vast and

sudden embarrassment checked him. He started, but stopped and pretended to be inspecting the corner-stone. She was behind him now, but she was the light and breath of his new existence and he half saw, half felt her presence. He told himself that she must think him an awkward fool, and yet he could not approach her.

Suddenly he saw something for which he was not prepared. A tall, thin young man with a scant brown mustache and rather long hair, who was tanned like a farmer, and who had large, coarse hands and wore a frock-coat which was thick enough for winter, was stepping upon the platform and approaching Tilly.

"You must come get some of the barbecue," he said. "You are doing most of the work and must be fed. I saw your ma and pa over at the first table."

"I'm not very hungry, Joel," John heard Tilly say, and from the corner of his eyes he saw that she was shaking hands with the young man. A moment later they were passing close behind John. He knew that to pretend still to be inspecting the corner-stone would be absurd and so he turned and faced the couple. Tilly smiled, nodded, and glanced at the stone.

"It is very pretty," she said, pausing and looking at the work he had done. "This is my friend, Mr. Joel Eperson—Mr. Trott," she added.

The hands of two laboring-men met and swung up and down before the little maid. "Pleased to meet you," both men said, and they stared at each other, dumb, concealed thoughts in the depths of their eyes.

"You ran that singing all right." John dug the words from his perturbed self-consciousness. "It went off fine."

"Yes, you certainly did that," the young farmer agreed. "You all must have met and practised."

"Only once, last night," Tilly said. "We met at the church."

"We are going to get some of that barbecue," Eperson said, rather stiffly, to John. "Won't you come along with us? I've got two places reserved and can easily make room for another."

"Two places reserved!" The words had an unpleasant sound to John. Evidently the fellow had been counting on eating with Tilly even before he invited her. John hesitated. He noticed that Tilly had nothing to say, and that irritated him.

"Oh, I'm not a bit hungry," he answered, now in his old, rough, Ridgeville way, and he frowned.

"Well, you might come and see the rest of the animals fed," Eperson jested. "I'd like to talk to you. Tilly wrote me about you coming. I certainly would like to have a job like yours. Farming has gone to pieces in this section."

Tilly had written him. Again John was conscious of irritation and a strange, deep-seated uneasiness. Were the two on such terms of familiarity that they exchanged letters while living so near together? John was still hesitating when Cavanaugh suddenly elbowed his way through the surging throng to his side.

"They expect you and me to set at the Ordinary's table along with the speakers," he announced, momentously. "I've been looking for you all about."

"We just asked him to go with us, Mr. Cavanaugh," Tilly said, "but of course, if the Ordinary wants him we'll have to excuse him." She introduced Eperson, and Cavanaugh smiled.

"I've heard about Mr. Eperson already," he said. "And I'll tell 'im to his face that he has fine taste and knows a good thing in the female line when he sees it."

The young farmer flushed red and smiled, but Tilly's face was unchanged. "I see you are a tease," she said, indifferently. "Well, we'd better be going."

John felt Cavanaugh grasp his arm and begin to lead him through the crowd toward a distant table which was smaller than the others and at which several local dignitaries were seated.

"We might as well give them young turtle-doves a chance to coo on a perch by themselves," the contractor said, with a low chuckle. "I understand the fellow don't get many chances to see his girl. They say he has been in love with her ever since he was a little boy, but old Whaley don't seem to like him. They say the old chap has shut down on Eperson's visits—don't let 'im come around as often as he used to. I reckon to-day is one of the fellow's chances to see her. My! what a nice little trick she is! And take it from me—she deserves a better fate than to marry a slow-going farmer like that one. She'd just change one life of drudgery for another."

As if in a tantalizing dream, John heard these things as he walked along, still tightly clutched by his old friend. He told himself that it was incredible that he should care so much about the affairs of a simple country girl whom he had known

such a short time, but the startling fact remained and haunted him.

They found their places at the table and sat down. The Ordinary, a genial man of middle age, with a full brown beard, had a big jug of fresh cider in front of him and was filling some tin cups with the amber fluid.

"We are going to drink to the health and success of these two gentlemen," he announced, when every one at the table had received his cup of the beverage. "They are both agreeable men and are an honor to our community. Moreover, I am satisfied that they are going to give us the finest public building for the money in the state."

They all drank standing, and, as they resumed their seats, they glanced at Cavanaugh as if expecting a response from him.

"I am much obliged," Cavanaugh stammered. "I can't make a speech or I'd tell you how tickled I am by your compliment, and my young friend on my right is, too. We are combining business and pleasure on this jaunt and are having a fine time."

John was gloomily unconscious of the fact that he, too, was expected to say something. Seeing Cavanaugh sit down, he did likewise. He was watching Eperson and Tilly, who at one of the long tables near by sat facing him. Eperson was bending eagerly toward her, smiling and saying something in her ear. Tilly seemed to be listening, for she was smiling also. Farther down the same table sat her father and mother. Whaley had a plate heaped high with the meat and its accompanying peppery relish, and was eating voraciously. Mrs. Whaley was chatting with a woman at her side and scarcely eating at all. The brass band was playing, there was a great clatter of knives and forks and tin cider-cups. John was in one of his surliest moods. He was really hungry enough to have enjoyed the feast, but his thoughts kept him from doing so. Presently he managed to slip away from the table, and found himself alone. He wandered aimlessly about the foundation of the new building, trying to make himself believe that he was inspecting the work already done. The band had ceased playing. The crowd of white citizens was thinning out, and the negroes were falling into the vacant places at the tables. John saw Cavanaugh and the elder Whaleys trudging homeward. Where was Tilly? he wondered. Then he saw Eperson driving a poor horse drawing a ramshackle buggy around from the public hitching-rack. Tilly stood waiting for him alone on the edge of the sidewalk. Eperson got out, helped her into the seat, and then got in beside her and drove her homeward.

John lingered about the foundations for half an hour. Then he saw Eperson returning in the buggy alone. He had to pass close to where John stood, but John refused to look up as he went by and turned into the country road. There was a vague look of placid content on the earnest face of the man which portended things John dared not think about.

CHAPTER VIII

The work on the new building went on apace. John was always tired when night came, but a new expectation at the end of each day had come into his hitherto uneventful life. It was not often that he saw Tilly alone, but he had come to look forward eagerly even for the mere sight of her in the evening, at the supper-table, on the veranda, or in the yard with the others. Both he and Cavanaugh immediately changed their clothing when the day's work was over, and this formality was a new and pleasant thing for the young mason. The change always made him feel more respectable. It gave him the sense of throwing off the grime and toil of the day. It was the first ordering of his life on any social plane, and it charmed him.

"You are certainly a wonder," the old man remarked to him one afternoon as they were dressing in John's room.

"In what way?" John asked, curiously.

"Why, you are different, that's all"—the contractor laughed—"as different from what you used to be down at home as night from day. You used to have a grouch on you nearly all the time, but now you are as pleasing as a basket of chips. Your mind seems brighter. You often say funny things, and you ain't as rough with the boys that work under you as you used to be. If they are a little slow with brick or mortar you don't fuss so much, and—say—you have mighty nigh quit cursing. I'm glad of that, too, I must say I am, for taking the Lord's name in vain never helped a man get ahead. You see it is a slap in the face to so many well-meaning folks. Gee! ain't we having a fine time? It is about as hard to understand myself as to understand you—I mean this combination picnic and hard labor we are at. There is one point about it that I wouldn't dare tell my wife. By gum! I don't know that I'm ready to admit it even to myself yet, but it is a queer notion."

"What is that?" John asked, only half attentively, for he was listening to the sounds in the kitchen below and picturing Tilly at work.

"Why"—the old man stared gravely as he answered—"it is a fact that I don't miss Mandy at all—hardly at all, and it has set me wondering—wondering. I know I love her, you see; that fact is as solid and plain to me as that brush you've got in your hand, and why I don't miss her more I don't know. I lay in bed awake between four and five this morning, turning it over in my mind, but to no effect. However, it may be this way: a man and a woman may actually be—well, almost too well suited to each other, if such a thing is possible."

"You are getting tangled up." John laughed as he tied afresh a new cravat he had just bought and thrust a cheap, gaudy pin into its folds.

"You may think so, but I hain't," Cavanaugh denied. "I mean this, John. A couple may live together so long and become so near alike that nothing exciting happens to either one of 'em, and along with that may come a sort of strain of marriage responsibility. Down at Ridgeville somehow I was always wondering what Mandy would want done and what not, but up here when my day's work is over I can slap on a clean shirt and my best suit, brush my shoes, light my pipe, and sit around till bedtime and have a good free evening of it. And I sleep—I'll admit it—I even sleep sounder and seem to get more out of it. At home I lie with one eye open, you might say. If Mandy has a bad cold, I can hear her sniffling, and if she has an attack of rheumatism I can smell the liniment she rubs on. I don't mind it, you understand, oh no, not one bit! but the—the very worry about her upsets me. She's the same about me. I know it is a fair deal between us, for she takes it powerful hard even if I come home with a cut or any little injury. I said that it was a fair deal on both sides, but I'll take that back. It is not. The woman gets the worst of married life, and I reckon that's what is bothering my conscience. I sent mine off once for a week at a big camp-meeting over in Canton. She sewed and fixed and packed and cooked for three weeks to get ready, and was gone just two days and a night. She hired a special team to fetch her back, and come acting like she'd been off for a year and had escaped from ten thousand ills and misfortunes. You see, she just couldn't live without her pans and pots and chickens and the cow and calf which she was afraid I wouldn't feed—and, I don't know, maybe—me. And that's what hurts. She keeps writing now about what I'm fed on, how my duds are washed and mended, and how long it will be before I get back home. All that when I'm cracking jokes and arguing with old Whaley over some of his hidebound Bible views about the end of the world. Why, he couldn't predict the outcome of a county election, and yet he knows to the day and hour when him and some more are going to be lifted up on a cloud of glory and all the rest of us stand looking on, wringing our hands like the bunch Noah left without a thing to cling to. But don't you let anything I say about marriage influence you against it, my boy. It is the greatest institution in the world to-day, and while I don't somehow miss my wife, I'd die if I lost her. I know that as well as I know I'm alive. There must be such a thing as loving folks you don't want to be with all the time."

CHAPTER IX

That evening a wonderful thing happened to John. It was a moonlit night and Cavanaugh took the two older Whaleys down to see the progress on the new building. That left John and Tilly on the veranda together. At first the poor boy's tongue was tied, but under the influence of Tilly's calm self-possession he soon found himself conversing with her quite easily. There was a sort of commotion in the chicken-house near the barn and they started down there to see what had caused it. He had seen young men of the better class at Ridgeville walking with young ladies, holding to their arms at night, and in no little perturbation he wondered if he ought to offer Tilly his arm. He did not know, and he wondered what Joel Eperson would do in the circumstances. Finally he plunged into the matter. "Won't you take my arm?" he asked, so naturally that he was surprised at himself.

She did so, although the path was clear and the distance short, and the gentle pressure of her hand on his arm sent an inexplicable thrill through him. She even leaned slightly and confidently against his shoulder, and that, too, was a wonderful experience. He was filled with ecstatic emotion. He slowed down his step and clumsily adapted his long stride to her shorter one. There was a vast, swelling joy in his throat. At the barn-yard gate she released his arm and opened it, and at once he had a fear that he had made a mistake in not forestalling her. He was flooded with shame at the thought that Joel Eperson would have known what was proper and have acted quicker.

"Excuse me," the poor fellow stammered, his eyes on hers. He had never used such words before and they sounded as strange to him as if they had belonged to a foreign tongue.

"Excuse you, why?" she inquired, perplexed.

"Because—because I didn't open the gate for you," he replied. "I wasn't thinking."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," she answered, evidently pleased, and there was something in her eyes that he had never seen there before. Her face seemed to fill with a warm light, and her pretty lips were slightly parted. They walked on. The chicken-house, a shack with a lean-to roof against the barn, was near and he stood by her as she looked in at the open door.

"One of the planks they roost on fell down," she explained. "Too many of them got on it. They will huddle together, warm as it is."

"I can fix it," he proposed, "but I'd have to have a light."

Tilly hesitated, looking again into the shack. There was a low chirping from the perches overhead.

"Never mind to-night," she said. "They have found new places and will soon settle down."

She turned back, facing him, and slowly they started toward the house. This time she took his arm without being asked, and the act gave him additional delight. He allowed the natural weight of his arm to gently press her hand against his side and she did not resent it. In fact, he felt as if her touch was responsive. The moonlight fell on her bare head and played in her wonderful hair, upon which the moisture of the night was settling. Half-way between the barn and the house there was an empty road-wagon. Its massive tongue stood out straight a foot or so above the ground. To his wonderment, Tilly sat down on it, thrusting her little feet out in front of her.

"Let's sit here," she said. "They won't be back for some time yet."

He complied, his wonder and delight growing. They were silent. Finally she spoke again.

"You are the strangest man I ever saw," she said, looking into his face with her calm, probing eyes.

"Am I?" he asked. "Why, how so?"

"I don't know," she made answer, thoughtfully, and she locked her little hands in her lap and looked down. "I can't make you out. You are so—so gentle and tender with me. You are a mystery, a deep mystery. You don't seem to take to women in general, and yet, and yet with me—" She sighed and broke off abruptly.

In his all but dazed delight he could not supply the words she had failed to summon, though he knew what he would have said could he but have untangled his enthralled tongue.

"Oh, I'm no mystery!" He tried to laugh away his awkwardness. "I'm as plain as an old shoe; no frills about me. You ask the boys that work with me."

She was unconvinced. He saw her shake her wise little head and twist her fingers together as she answered:

"A girl I know who saw you on the platform that day said she'd bet you'd had an unfortunate love-affair. She said nothing else would make as—as fine a young man as you are shun all the girls like you do. She even hinted that maybe you were—were married down in Georgia and for some reason or other was not telling it."

"Oh no, I'm not married," he laughed. "Gee! Sam would think that is funny. Me married!"

"Then you *have* had a—a love-affair with some girl, and—"

"Wrong again!" he laughed, deep in the throat of his ebullient joy. "I've just been a sort of stay-at-home, pretty busy, you know. I've had my hands full of night work, figuring, writing, and planning, and through the day I've been hard at it, as a general thing. No, I'm just, I reckon, not a natural ladies' man." How could he explain to her what he had never understood or even tried to fathom, the reason why he was different from other young men of his age whose manner of life he had only superficially observed?

Tilly seemed still unconvinced. "That girl was Sally Teasdale," she went on. "She was here yesterday. You may remember her—the tall, dark-haired girl that sang in the choir that day and turned my music for me once. She is going to have a party at her house down the road Wednesday night. She is—is dead set on having you there. She says all the girls want to get acquainted with you, and she—she wanted me to—to take you to it."

"To take me to it?" he repeated, hardly understanding what was really meant, for how could a young lady be asking him to a party at her house when no home of that sort had ever been open to him? How could that be true, and that another girl of Tilly's social rank should really be inviting him to escort her?

"I see, you don't want to go," Tilly said, with a touch of mild resentment. "Well, that is for you to decide, and I would not have asked you but there was no way out of it. Even mother advised me to mention it."

Never had his confusion been greater. "Why, I want to go!" he blurted out. "I don't see how you could doubt it. And you say that you will let me go along with you?"

"Yes, but it was Sally's idea; not mine," Tilly urged. "Don't think I go about inviting boys to take me places. You see, you are stopping at our house, and that is why Sally mentioned it to me, but the fact that you pay us board doesn't give me the right to pull you into things you don't care for. You must be your own judge. No doubt you are frightfully tired at night, and if you have writing and figuring to do after work hours, why, it would be wrong of you to bother with a crowd of silly country girls that you never saw before."

"Me tired? Oh no! Leave that out of the question," he warmly thrust in. "I've set up with the boys when they were sick all night long, and worked the next day without feeling it. What ails you? Why don't you think I'd like to go with you? Well, I would— I do want to go."

"Well then, we'll go," Tilly said. "I know you will like the girls—Sally, especially, for she is crazy, simply crazy about you. Huh! and you don't know it? Why, she goes to town nearly every day just to pass the new court-house. Shucks! she knows every layer of brick that goes in it, and every man by name that works under you."

"I think I remember the girl you mean." John was not absorbing the compliment. "She is a tall, dark girl, as straight as an Indian squaw. She stopped one day and asked me some questions about the rooms on the lower floor. Sam come and showed her around— I was too busy. Sam's on the ladies' entertainment committee— I am not."

"She told me she had never met you." Tilly leaned toward him as she spoke. She clasped her hands over her knee. She was staring steadily, her eyes flashing. "Oh, my! what won't some girls do to get in with a new man? Huh! She has failed to get at you in every other way and is now making a cat's-paw of me."

"I declare I don't know what you mean," John asserted, "but if you are in earnest—about the party, I mean—why, you can count me in. I've never been a party man—I wouldn't know what to do or say—but if you will go with me, I'll be ready long before you are, I'll bet you. I'll hire a horse and buggy at the livery-stable, and—"

"Oh no, I seldom ride," Tilly protested. "It is only about a mile and we can walk that far in pretty weather like this. They all live close about except Joel Eperson. He always drives in and brings his sister, Martha Jane."

"Oh, so *he's* going—*that feller* is going!" John exclaimed in a crestfallen tone. "I see—I see—*he's* going."

"Yes. He is Sally's first cousin."

The uncouth mason sat silent. He folded his ponderous hands and scowled as he did when displeased with the work of a bungling assistant. Tilly was covertly and studiously regarding his profile.

"Why do you say it like that?" she inquired. "Is there anything strange about Joel going to a party?"

"Strange? Not if he knows you are to be there. Does he?"

"I suppose he *does* think I may be there, but what of it—what of it?"

John turned and stared toward the house. It was as if he were trying to keep her from seeing the fierce expression he knew had clutched his face. Tilly leaned closer to him. Her shoulder touched his. She sat waiting for him to turn his head toward her again. Presently he looked at her, his honest eyes holding a famished expression.

"What is there strange about Joel going?" she asked, softly and all but propitiatingly.

"Nothing strange about it—just the reverse," he sighed. "I've heard that he has been loving you ever since he was a little boy, and that he comes to see you every chance he gets. I've heard that your father doesn't like him. I see—his cousin has got this party up so you and he can—"

Tilly sprang to her feet. John kept his seat, unaware that even rural courtesy demanded that he rise when she did. But Tilly was no stickler for conventions. She was a working-girl; he was a laborer, and there was something to be fathomed in the man before her which lurked deep within him. She was angry, or perhaps only impatient, but the mood passed as if melting into the moonlight which laved her dainty form like some supernal fluid.

"What you said is not kind or just," she objected, sweetly. "You intimate that I'd meet Joel somewhere against my father's wishes. I would not do so. I would not disobey my father or do anything on the sly that he would oppose."

In dumb, almost stupid alarm John sat staring up at her. He quaked under the sudden realization that he had offended her, and yet he had never apologized to any one in his life. The fine sense of that sort of restitution belonged to social paths John Trott had never traversed. "Excuse me," he might have said, as he had said at the gate, but somehow under her bent gaze he found himself unable to utter a word. It may have been the sheer blank look in his eyes, or the helpless twitching of his lips, that decided her, for she suddenly sat down by him again and leaned forward till their eyes met.

"You did not mean to say that I'd do anything underhand, I'm sure," she faltered. "I'm sure of it *now*."

"Oh no," he slowly shook his head and seemed to swallow an emotional contraction in his throat. "I didn't mean any harm, but—but he *will* be there, you say? He'll be there?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Tilly responded. "I suppose he will bring Martha Jane. He usually does. But what of that?"

"He'll want to talk to you, I suppose?" John went on, his nether lip hanging limp, his gaze steady.

"Why, yes—that is, maybe he will. Sometimes couples walk about between the games and dances. I don't dance. My father and mother oppose it, and our church does not sanction it; but you dance, don't you?"

"No, I've never even been to a dance. I hardly know what they are like. The young folks at Ridgeville have them often at their club and at the hotels and in their homes, but the boys are a lot of dudes that have nothing else to do, and I hate them. I've always had to work for a living and most of them are well off and look down on poor folks. People here treat a fellow like me different somehow."

"It seems very strange that you don't dance," Tilly mused aloud, "especially when you don't belong to the church. How does it happen that you never joined?"

He shrugged and sniffed with uncurbed contempt, unaware of the fact that what he was saying was an unheard-of thing in Tilly's circle. "I don't believe in them," he jerked out. "They are a bunch of close-fisted, grafting hypocrites. Most of them haven't the brains of a gnat. I've helped build meeting-houses, run against the leaders, and know their private lives. They say they believe there is a God— I don't!"

Tilly sighed unresentfully. "You will see it differently some day," she said. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Will I? Try me," he laughed, and he sat eagerly waiting for her to continue.

In her earnestness she put her hand on his knee as she leaned closer to him. "Then don't tell father how you feel about it—please don't. You don't know him. You can't imagine how furious that would make him. A man stopped at our house once to stay overnight. He was selling harvesting-machines, and after supper he and my father had an argument on the veranda. He said—the man said something like what you've just said to me, and father made him leave the house—made him pack up and leave at once, for father said it would be a sin for us to sleep under the same roof. Mother did not object, either. She was glad to see him go. Our preacher preached a sermon on it and said my father did right. I'm sorry you believe as you do, but won't you promise me not to say anything about it while you are here?"

"I'll promise you anything on earth you ask." John sat up straight. Her little hand was still on his knee. He yearned to

take it into his calloused grasp and fondle into it his assurances of compliance with her desires. "I don't object to any man's religion unless it rubs against my rights as a man," he went on. "These church folks here may be better than any I've run across, but down home the breed doesn't suit me. Why, when I was a little fellow in the public school I've had them—women and men—invite other boys to go to Christmas-tree parties, Sunday-school festivals, or picnics, and leave me out. They would do it right before my face, as if I was the very dirt under their feet. A thing like that would be noticed by a little boy who wonders why he can't go along with the rest."

"I didn't know there were such church members as that anywhere," Tilly said, thoughtfully. "Oh, I see. I wonder if your folks are Catholics?"

"No. My father is dead. My mother doesn't go to any church."

"Oh, that's odd. Not any at all?"

"No. I guess she is like me. She doesn't know any of the members or care a hill of beans about them. Why did you ask if we were Catholics?"

"Because Catholics are looked down on so much around here. If you had said you were one, I was going to ask you not to mention that to my father, either. The greatest trouble my family ever had came through the Catholics. You see, I had a brother. He died five years ago. He was a professing member of our church, and father was awfully proud of him because he was a fine exhorter at revivals. When he wasn't more than sixteen my brother actually preached in public, though he wasn't ordained. They called him 'the boy wonder' and many people were converted under him."

"I've seen his sort," John said, reflectively. "They had one down our way, a sissy of a chap, that women fairly went crazy over, but you say your brother died."

"Yes, but not before he caused us that great trouble," Tilly went on. "It was this way. Father's chief ambition was to have him preach, and when he was about twenty, and after father had saved and stinted to put him through the Methodist seminary, an Irish family moved here. They were Catholics. There was a girl in the family, and in some way or other George got acquainted with her and got to visiting at her house. You know the Catholics have no church here—there are so few of them—but at her house my brother met Catholics who talked to him and gave him books to read. The truth is, he fell in love with the girl and our trouble began. She and her folks somehow convinced him that her religion was the oldest one—that it was really established by our Lord, and that all the other denominations had shot off from it. George had the manhood to come to father and tell him what he believed and that he was going to join the Catholics, so that he and the girl could marry according to Catholic rites. I was too young to know what it was all about, but I was terrified by father's fury. He acted like a crazy man. He couldn't eat or sleep. He disowned my brother and drove him from home. George married the girl and they all moved away. By accident we heard that he had died of consumption away out West, and then a man—a Catholic, some kin of George's wife—came to deliver some message George had sent from his death-bed. We were all sitting in the parlor. Before father would let him say what the message was father asked the man if George died a Catholic, and when the man said he did and that a priest had been called in, my father refused to hear the message and showed him the door. My mother seemed willing to listen to it, but she always obeys my father. They are almost exactly alike, and so she said nothing."

The gate latch clicked. Voices were heard from the house. "They are back. I'll have to go in," Tilly said, and she sighed as from weighty memories awakened by her recital.

John got up and Tilly took his arm again. It seemed to him that her hold upon it was somehow insecure, and he took her hand and drew it higher up. He had never touched her hand till now, and, while it was rough from her accustomed toil, by contrast with his own brick-and-stone rasped palm, it felt as soft as velvet. There was a warm lack of resistance in it and he released it reluctantly. How glorious and bliss-drenching seemed the moonlight as it lay on the landscape! And it was not to end, he told himself. There was the party to look forward to. That would give him another chance to see her alone. He was a strong man, and yet he was all but swooning under emotions which he had never dreamed could exist.

"Oh, there they are!" he heard Mrs. Whaley exclaiming.

Tilly now released John's arm, stepped forward, and casually explained the mishap in the chicken-house.

"The same thing happened some time ago," Mrs. Whaley said, pleasantly, to John. "We've got too many chickens, anyway. I'm going to ship some of them off."

He told her awkwardly that he would send one of the carpenters up to repair the damage, and further showed his crudeness by adding that it should not cost her anything, all of which struck her as being quite gentlemanly of him, and proving his ability to command men who ranked lower than himself in the scale of his trade.

They all separated for the night and John went to his bed stirred by hopes and passions that kept sleep from his brain for hours.

CHAPTER X

The evening of the party came around. John was in his room, dressing for it, and Cavanaugh was with him.

"It certainly is a new wrinkle for you," the old man said, with a broad smile. "And I wouldn't bother about not knowing how to dance, either, if I was you. There will be aplenty that won't take part in that, so you won't feel odd. La me! I wish I could go look on! I love to see young folks together. I spied you two the other night long before the others did, and I noticed how Tilly was leaning against you, and it was by all odds the prettiest sight I ever looked at, and took me back, back, back! I believe there is a future life, and in it we'll be allowed to unreel all the sweet and pretty things we ever wound up in our earthly passage. I want to see the girls and boys I used to know at your age that have gone on. Many of them had awful trouble and disgrace before they went, and some died in pain and poverty, but I don't believe they are suffering now, and they will come to meet me, too, and lend me some of their joy. Old Whaley's eternal-damnation idea for some of God's children don't go down with me. There is punishment—oh, I know that well enough, but it is here in the consciences of folks that go crooked. Wait, wait! You can't tie a cravat. It is the first time you ever wore a white one, isn't it? Let me see if I can do it. I used to know how."

With a happy laugh, John bent downward and the contractor pulled the narrow strip of lawn into place around the stiff collar and managed to tie it fairly well. "You will cut a dash, my boy, for that is a dandy suit, and it fits you like a kid glove. These mountain fellers don't get as stylish a cut as that from these cross-roads stores, and no such material by a long shot. I'm going to say something and I'm afraid you will be hurt, but I hope you will remember that I feel like a father to you."

"Shoot it out!" John laughed. "Fire away."

"Well, you can't accuse me of being foolish about what is style and what ain't, John, but there are a few things that I wish you'd remember not to do any more. You see, I never lived with you down home—never set with you at the table and the like, and so I didn't notice anything out of the way, but—" The contractor was avoiding John's questioning stare and suddenly broke off.

"Why, what do you mean?" John asked. "Have I been doing anything wrong?"

"Oh no, and maybe not a single one has ever noticed what I have, but I must say there are a few things that sometimes I wish you wouldn't do. Oh, I'm going to tell you and be done with it, because if I don't some young lady may and that would hurt worse. John, I don't like the way you act at the table sometimes. I hope you won't get mad, but I don't."

"Well, what's wrong?" John asked, a look of shame crossing his face as he stood mechanically brushing his coat-sleeve with his big, splaying hand.

"There are several little things," Cavanaugh went on, lamely. "For instance, there is always a big spoon on the bean-dish or the cabbage-plate, and we are expected to use it when we are asked to help ourselves, but I've seen you take your knife, fork, or teaspoon and rake it out exactly as if you was scraping mortar from a board."

"Oh, I see, I see." John smiled in a sheepish sort of way. "So that is wrong, eh?"

"Yes, and then you stick your knife in your mouth loaded to the brink with stuff, and I've seen you use your fingers, John. I've seen you pick up a chunk of meat with your fingers and ram it in like you was plugging a hole in a sinking boat. You begin eating before the rest do, too, and that don't look nice, I must say. You are all right—all right, but it is just a few little things like those that you ought to watch out for and try to avoid. These are plain-living folks, but still they seem to have pretty good manners—that is, except the old man. He does a lot o' things that he ought not to do. He drinks coffee out of a saucer, and, although I saw him rubbing the back of a cat just before we sat down yesterday, he broke off a piece of bread with his hands and handed it to me that way, and not on a fork or a plate, as would be proper. If the women hadn't been there and akin to him, I'd have throwed it down."

John had turned to the bureau for a handkerchief. He was angry, but more at himself than his gentle companion.

"It is all poppycock," he said, suddenly. "I'm astonished, Sam, to hear you say such fool things—you, a man of your age and trade. I thought you was a plain, sensible man. Why, you are trying to be a dude."

Nevertheless, as the old man sat silent, John made up his mind that the advice was worth heeding and he forced a smile.

"All right, Sam," he said; "I'll remember next time. I'm new at this game."

"I thought you'd take it sensible," Cavanaugh said, in relief. "Now there is another little thing. It seems to me that, as

you are going to escort Tilly there, you oughtn't to be behind time. You know you always had a bad memory, and it wouldn't look exactly right for you to keep her sitting somewhere waiting on you. A man ought to be first on deck in a jaunt like this."

"I was wondering about that." John stared eagerly. "She didn't say what time we'd leave the house. Do you suppose she'd want to start now?"

"I don't know, but I'll tell you what we'll do to be on the safe side. Let's go down in the yard and set about. I've got two cigars. You take one and I'll take one and we'll smoke till something turns up."

They went down the stairs and out into the yard. They saw no one about the house and they took chairs under the trees near the fence. They had hardly seated themselves when a horse and buggy stopped at the gate. A man and a woman sat in the buggy. Giving the reins to his companion, the man sprang down and came in at the gate. In the light of the rising moon John saw that it was Joel Eperson.

"Good evening," the young farmer said to John. "Is Miss Tilly about?"

John sat immovable. He turned his cigar over in his mouth and looked up fiercely. "What are you asking *me* for?" he snarled. "I'm not keeping the door."

"I beg your pardon;" Joel said, in a startled tone. "I meant no harm. My sister and I came by to see if she'd like to go to a party over at my cousin's house."

John made no reply. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and pulled at his cigar. Cavanaugh saw that he was in a rage and rose to his feet.

"I believe Miss Tilly is getting ready now," he explained, mildly. "She is going with my young friend here, I understand; but, of course, if you and your sister want to see her, why, maybe you'd better knock at the door. Somebody will hear and come out."

"Oh no, no!" Joel was now flooded with embarrassment. "I didn't know she was provided for so nicely, and— No, we'll drive on. I wouldn't want to hurry Miss Tilly. I can explain it to her at the party. She will understand, anyway, for sister and I often come by after her."

Bowing politely and still confused, Eperson backed away a few feet, and then, restoring his hat to his head, he rejoined his sister.

"I'm sorry to see you act that way, John," Cavanaugh deplored, as the buggy disappeared down the road. "I know the reason of it, I reckon, but still you went a bit too far. It is give and take in a game like the one you and this chap are playing, and if you don't want to lose, you'd better be careful."

John stared, still angry. "I've got no use for him," he sniffed. "He looks like a jack-leg preacher or a mountain singing-teacher, bowing and scraping and holding his hat in his hand before two men. He has no backbone. He is as yellow as a pumpkin, and ought to have that long hair of his parted in the middle and tied in a knot behind his head."

"I know, but he looks honest and straight, and he is dead in love. That's one reason he's so timid, even with us. It works that way with some men. You are different. It makes a wild man of you, especially when the fair one is looked at by somebody else. But you've got to hold in. This fellow has got prior rights to you in this deal, and if you are too rough it may go against you. I don't say it will, but it may."

CHAPTER XI

John was about to make some retort when Tilly suddenly came out to them. She was dressed in white, wore no head-covering, and appeared very pretty and somehow changed.

"Oh, you are all ready to go!" she said, smiling on John. "Here is something for you to wear." She held out a few leaves of geranium and a white rosebud and proceeded to pin them on the lapel of his coat. "It is the custom," she explained. "All the girls give them to the young men they go with. Now, now, isn't that nice, Mr. Cavanaugh?"

"Fine! Beautiful! It sets him off just right!" the old man cried.

John looked pleased, but said nothing.

"Why don't he thank the little trick?" Cavanaugh wondered, resentfully. "And why don't the goose stand up?"

"I don't believe you like flowers," Tilly said, pretending to pout.

Still John said nothing, but what astonished Cavanaugh was the fact that Tilly evidently understood his mood, for she gave a little pat to a wrinkle the pin had made in his lapel and smiled.

"I thought I heard wheels just now," she remarked. "They seemed to stop here."

"It was that fellow Eperson with his sister," John blurted out. "They came by to take you to the party. He acted like he owned you."

"Oh, it was Joel and Martha Jane!" Tilly smiled. "Oh no, he doesn't think he owns me, by any means. Martha Jane put him up to it. She and I are great friends and she was afraid I wouldn't get an escort."

John shrugged dubiously and answered: "You may look at it that way if you want to, but I see through him. I know his brand."

To Cavanaugh's wonderment, Tilly seemed pleased rather than offended, for she indulged in a little satisfied laugh.

"I suppose you told him we would be there?" she said, lightly, and it was the old man who answered, seeing that John had nothing to say.

"Yes, he knows that now, Miss Tilly, though he looked sorter set back. In my day and time about the last thing I'd want to do would be to take a sister of mine to a shindig. Going and coming was always the biggest part of the game, and you may bet there was times when I was in for busting a party up as soon as supper was over so as to be on the road again."

Tilly laughed merrily. "I'll make you a buttonhole bouquet if you will wear it," she proposed.

"Well, not to-night—I thank you all the same," Cavanaugh returned, "but you may some other time when I've got my best clothes on. I don't want to part with you two, but don't you think you ought to be on the way?"

"Yes, it is time," Tilly said, and John rose to his feet and stiffly held his arm out to her.

"Please tell mother that we are gone," she said, as she took John's arm and the two turned away.

"What a purty sight!" the old man mused, standing and gazing after them as they walked away in the moonlight. He followed as far as the gate and leaned on it and watched them till they were out of sight.

Presently Mrs. Whaley came out and joined him. He delivered Tilly's message and they sat down and chatted for half an hour; then she went back into the kitchen.

She was making dough for bread to be baked the next day when her husband came and stood beside her. He wore no coat and his coarse suspenders hung loose over his hips; the collar of his shirt was open, showing his hairy chest.

"I saw you out there talking to Cavanaugh," he began. "Did you say anything about that matter?"

"I did—in a roundabout way," she said, taking the great lump of wheat dough in her hands and rolling it into a heap of dry flour at one end of the long wooden bowl. "I didn't want him to take up a notion that we want to marry her off, but I tried to find out what I could. Mr. Trott never has had any love-affairs. He is mighty young—younger than you'd naturally think to have the job he has, and somehow he never has taken to a girl before. Mr. Cavanaugh says this is the first time, and I know he is telling the truth. Oh, he had a lot to say in Mr. Trott's favor. He says he has a wonderful mind

for building and the like, and that the time will come when he will make piles of money. He already gets high wages, and it is always cash, too. He doesn't have to wait till the end of the year like Joel Eperson and other farmers do, and then be up to their eyes in debt, with nothing left over to begin another crop on."

"Does he drink or gamble? That is what I want to know," Whaley put in suddenly.

"No, he doesn't. Mr. Cavanaugh says he hardly thinks of anything but figuring, planning, and calculating. He goes to bed early and gets up early, and can handle a gang of men better even than he can, he's so popular with them."

"Didn't you find out about the feller's religion?"

"No, I didn't. I sorter touched on that—said you wanted to know—but Mr. Cavanaugh made light of it—said all that would come out right in due time. He said he was no hand for hurrying up the young on those lines. He said John Trott at bottom was the right sort, and that he would count on him serving the Lord in the long run as well as the next one."

"I don't know as I'd let that old skunk pick a religion for a son-in-law of mine." Whaley's lip was drawn tight as he spoke. "He don't take enough interest in doctrine, and when you force him to talk about it he says entirely too much about salvation through works alone. I like a man that knows what he believes and can point straight to Biblical authority in page, line, and word. It behooves a Christian to watch out what sort of a mate his daughter picks. Infidelity will breed at a fireside faster than tadpoles under skum in a mud-puddle."

"Well, I'm for keeping that part out of it just now," Mrs. Whaley suggested, timidly. "This is a good chance for the girl, and you know you have made a lot of folks mad by the way you talk to them."

"Well, I haven't said anything to Trott yet," Whaley answered, "and I may not, though he hasn't been out to meeting yet and that seems odd, when the Sabbath is a day of rest and there is nothing else to do."

"I happened to hear him tell Tilly that he was going next Sunday," Mrs. Whaley answered, "so you see that will work out all right."

"Well, we'll wait and see," Whaley returned. "They dance over there at Teasdale's house, don't they?"

"Some do and some don't," was the answer, slowly made. "Tilly don't and Mr. Trott never did in his life."

"There isn't much difference in actually dancing and giving sanction to it by looking on," Whaley said, his heavy brows meeting in a frown, "an' I'm in for calling a halt on Tilly going to such places. Looks like there would be plenty of decent amusements without hot-blooded young folks hugging up tight together and spinning around on the floor till they are wet with sweat from head to foot. Sally Teasdale ought to be churched, and she would be if she was a Methodist. The Presbyterians ain't strict enough. Well, if I believed in foreordained baby damnation as they do I'd let a child of mine dance her way into hell and be done with it. They make me sick. I had an argument with old Bill Tye yesterday and I fairly flayed up the ground with him—didn't leave him a leg to stand on, but he was mad—oh, wasn't he mad? The crowd laughed at him good."

Whaley turned away. He intended to chat with Cavanaugh outside, but he met the contractor coming in at the front door on his way to bed.

"I found that passage from Paul and read the whole chapter," Whaley began, but Cavanaugh stopped him.

"I'll see it to-morrow," he said. "My eyes are not strong enough to read at night, even with my specs, and I'm a little bit tired, too. I walked out to the sawmill—five miles and back—this morning, to see about some timber, and it was quite a stretch for me. Good night."

"No wonder he didn't want to see it," Whaley smiled to himself as he leaned in the doorway. "I had him beat and he knows it. I'll bet the old skunk has already looked it up, or asked somebody about it."

CHAPTER XII

A wide country road stretched out in the moonlight before John and Tilly. They walked slowly. Tilly still held his arm and he was transported with sheer ecstasy by that close contact with her. Once or twice he started to speak, but found himself unable to think of anything appropriate, and this both angered and alarmed him, for, he asked himself, how was it that Eperson was always so ready with his tongue when in Tilly's presence? But Tilly seemed to understand John's way and not to care much whether he talked or was silent. As he dared to glance down on her pretty head just below his left shoulder he remembered the bride and the bridegroom on the train, and the contractor's words came back to him like breeze music from the waving tops of celestial trees: "It is ahead of you, my boy."

Ahead of him? Marriage? A home for Tilly and himself alone? She, his wife?—actually his wife? Absurd! Impossible! The bare thought, checked though it was, set fire to his brain and he was thrilled in all his nerves and members. He caught her upward glance and she smiled almost as if she had glimpsed his vision and was thus responding to it.

"You don't like Joel," she said, knowing full well that that remark would prod his tardy speech.

"Well, what if I don't?" he answered, with querulous sharpness.

"Well, you shouldn't dislike him," the little minx continued, designedly. "He hasn't done you any harm. How could he? You have known each other such a short time."

Had John been other than the crude working-boy that he was, he might have made a more adroit answer, but, even as it was, it was not unpleasing to his sly tormentor.

"What is he hanging around you so much for?" John demanded. "I've heard that your father doesn't like him. What does he mean by coming, at the slightest excuse, like to-night, for instance?"

"Joel and I have been friends ever since we were tiny tots," Tilly answered, as casually as a school-girl chewing gum. "And even if—if he really does love me and—and wants me to be his wife, should he be blamed for that?"

The very suggestion of her marriage to any one, and that man in particular, drove John wild. He bit his lip; he swore under his breath, and his oaths had never been guarded before meeting Tilly; his eyes flashed from the fires behind them. He clenched his fists.

"You are mine, mine, mine!" he said to himself with the grinding teeth of a cave-man, and he was all but unaware that his words were not audible. She was smiling up at him, so sweetly, so placidly. What a nimbus of transcendental charm hovered over the wonderful face in the moonlight. Suddenly he checked his onward stride, caught her, and drew her around facing him. What he might have said or done he never knew, but Tilly gravely started on again, gently extracting her hand from his fierce clasp and restoring it to his arm.

"We must not stop," she said. "I hear a horse behind us. It is somebody going to the party, perhaps."

He said nothing as her fingers left his, and they walked on again. It was a horse and a buggy containing a couple from the village. Tilly spoke merrily to them and they answered back as they dashed on.

"It is Marietta Slocum and Fred Murray," Tilly explained. "They are engaged."

"Engaged?" The word seemed to fill the entire consciousness of the crude social anomaly. He told himself that an engagement must naturally precede marriage, and how was that to come about with that helpless tongue in his mouth? Besides, how did he know but that Tilly might refuse him? How did he know but that there might even now be some understanding between her and Eperson? The sheer thought chilled him like a blast from a cavern of ice. She seemed to feel the limpness of the arm she held or in some way to sense the despair that was on him so quickly following the mood she had interrupted only a moment before.

"You are so strange!" she sighed, taking a better grasp on his arm, and even bearing down on it slightly as she lowered her head thoughtfully. "You are a mystery to me. I can't make you out."

He could not explain. He was not sure that he cared to explain the terrible internal quakings which to him seemed so unmanly, so unlike any feelings that had ever come to him. He wondered if Eperson had actually spoken open words of love to her, and, if so, how had the fellow, with all his suave ability, managed it?

Another buggy passed. Tilly explained who the occupants of it were after she had greeted them. They were George Whitton and Ella Bell Roberts. Then she added, with a touch of seriousness:

"You ought to have lifted your hat just now."

"Lifted my hat? Why, I don't know her— I've never seen her before!" he retorted, with the irritation of a great mind descending to a triviality.

"Because he lifted his to me and you are with me," Tilly persisted in her mild rebuke. "It is the custom here, but it may not be at Ridgeville."

John was chagrined, but determined to hide it. "I have never heard of a man bowing to a man or a woman he never saw before," he fumed. "I don't care what you all do; it is foolishness out and out."

"Well, when you are in Rome," Tilly quoted in quite a grave tone, "you ought to do as the Romans do."

The thing rankled within him. The blood had mounted to his brow and stayed there. Even Tilly was telling him how to deport himself. He adored her, but he was angry enough to have sworn in her gentle, uplifted eyes. She observed his moody mien and playfully shook his arm.

"Don't be mad," she urged, sweetly. "I meant no harm, but I *do* want them all to like you, and I'm afraid they won't if you fail in little things like that just now. They won't understand—they will think you are stuck up, and I know you are not a bit vain. I am sure of that—as sure as I'm alive. If you were I'd not like you."

She had intimated that she liked him, and that ought to have been sufficient to quell the storm within him, but it did not quite. Her rebuke hurt far more than any which had ever come to him. She adroitly changed the subject. She spoke of the work on the court-house and praised his part of it, but what did that matter? He knew what his work was and he was just learning profound and relentless things about the difference between himself and her—between her puzzling environment and his, which was all too distinctly plain for his present comfort. As they neared Teasdale's and saw the lights streaming from the open doors and windows across the lush greensward and noted the considerable collection of horses and vehicles under the shade-trees and along the fences, he became conscious of an overwhelming timidity with which he felt unable to cope. Had Tilly been like himself and feared the entry into the light and easy gaiety of the chattering throng, he would not have felt so isolated. But her very unconsciousness of the thing as any sort of ordeal to be dreaded depressed him as emphasizing the fateful demarcation between her walk of life and his.

They reached the steps of the large, rather rambling one-story farm-house. There was a long veranda in front, both ends of which were filled with merrymakers. There was a wide hallway, and it, too, was filled with jolly, loud-talking couples, as well as the big parlor on the right.

"Oh, here they are!" Sally Teasdale cried, coming forward and taking Tilly into her slim, pretentious arms. "I heard of you two poking along like snails on the big road. As if you couldn't see enough of Mr. Trott at home! I am going to introduce myself to him, to pay you back. I'm Sally Teasdale"—holding out her hand to John—"and I am glad you came to my party."

John did not know what he said, if he said anything audible. It was the damnable glibness of speech of others which he had to contend with and which seemed to be as silly as unattainable.

"Now, dear, run back to my room and take off your wrap," Miss Teasdale said to Tilly. "I'll show Mr. Trott the men's room."

"He has nothing but his hat," Tilly lingered to say, "and he can leave that anywhere."

"Yes, if you like," his hostess said, leading him to a spot on the veranda where many men's hats were hanging on nails driven into the weather-boarding. He hung up his and immediately felt Sally clutch his arm.

"Tilly says you don't dance," she ran on. "What a pity! It is great fun, and a good way to get acquainted. I suppose you are a member of the church. Which one?"

"None at all," he heard himself saying, as if in a dense fog and from a great distance.

"How funny that you don't dance, then?" she went on, leaving an opening for him which he did not enter. He did not like her. She was too tall and angular, too harsh of voice and fluent of talk and irritating suggestion. He had the sense of being managed when he wanted above all to be unmolested. Besides, she had sent Tilly away, and without Tilly he felt lost.

"I must introduce you to my father," Sally said. "He is old-fashioned and wants his way about everything. He would scold me if I didn't introduce you at once. He is inside. Come on. My stepmother is busy in the kitchen fixing refreshments."

CHAPTER XIII

He wormed his way after her through the surging throng to the parlor, where a fat man in dark trousers and a white-linen coat stood vigorously cooling himself with a palm-leaf fan and talking to some middle-aged men and women.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Trotter—I mean Trott," he said, extending a clammy hand. "I've seen you about the court-house several times but you were always busy and I didn't want to climb up those rickety planks to you. How is it moving along?"

"All right," John said, bluntly. He was not awed by the man, for he was used to men of all types. Besides, John could not descend to empty platitudes for the sake of making conversation, and he half resented the unnecessary question about a matter that was obvious to every passer-by.

"Come in here with me." The old man took a large grasp on his arm and began to fan lazy waves of warm air into his face as he drew him into an adjoining room, which was evidently a sleeping-apartment from which the bed had been removed. There was a table against the wall, and on its snow-white cloth stood a great bowl of mint, some goblets, a pitcher of water, a dish of sugar, and a brown jug containing whisky.

"I want you to try one of my juleps," Teasdale chuckled. "That is some of the best old rye that ever slid down a thirsty throat."

"I don't drink," John said. "I won't take anything."

"What, what? You don't? Well, I won't insist—I never do—but stay with me a minute till I take one straight. My old lady says I take too much at every party Sally has, and unless some feller is in here with me she thinks I am tanking up all by myself."

"Go ahead," John answered, and the farmer proceeded to help himself to an ample supply of the amber fluid. While he drank, the sound of tuning fiddles and the twanging of guitars came from the parlor.

"The niggers have come," Teasdale gurgled, as he smacked his lips and screwed the corn-cob stopper back into the neck of the jug. "Sally will start out with dancing, I reckon. I used to be a great hand at it, but I'm too heavy now."

He led the way back to the parlor. Four black men sat in a corner vigorously sawing and picking their instruments. One of them, the leader, called out in stentorian tones, "All hands fer de fust set!" and there was a laughing rush from the hall and the veranda of several couples to secure places. Seeing a chance to get away from his host, John drew back into the hall, where he found himself jostled and ignored by the tempestuous human mass. He edged his way along a wall to the veranda, and there saw something startlingly disagreeable. It was Joel Eperson and Tilly standing side by side, their faces averted toward the gate. Joel was regarding her with the eyes of dumb adoration and listening closely to something she was saying. John saw that the opposite end of the veranda was deserted and he went to it. He tried to keep his eyes from the pair, but it was impossible. His misery increased, seeming to ooze into him from some external reservoir of pain. All around him surged a life bewilderingly new and fatuous. He saw Joel bend down to pick up a flower Tilly dropped and saw him smile as he gave it back to her. What could she be saying, with that sweet, drawn look about her lips? What was Joel asking? He saw her nod, and Joel took her arm and the two went down the steps to the gravel walk that led from the house to the gate. Here back and forth they walked, arm in arm, now in the full light from the door and windows, again in the half-darkness near the fence. Once for fully five minutes they lingered at the gate while the silent spectator of their movements leaned tense and rigid against the balustrade. The promenade was quite in accordance with rural propriety and custom, but John could not understand why that pair in particular should be the only ones in the entire company to engage in it. It did not seem right. How could it be right?

The music, the sonorous calls to the dancers, the tripping of feet, pounded his tortured brain. The whole world in its new aspect seemed to meet him with fangs and claws exposed. He wanted to fight something physically, to express by oaths and blows the resentment packed within his primitive breast. He felt his gnarled and hardened fingers at Joel Eperson's thin neck. He saw the long hair sway back and forth as he shook the love-smitten man. His clutch tightened till Joel's eyes bulged from their sockets, and then, in gloating fancy, John dashed him to the ground, where he lay exposed to Tilly's view. But reality has little to do with the tricks of the imagination, and there stood Eperson at the fence with Tilly by his side.

Two girls were approaching. One was Sally Teasdale, the other Martha Jane Eperson.

"They've told the truth about you," the former greeted John, with a teasing laugh, as she introduced the slight, plain, dark girl whose hand she held. "You are really a woman-hater, or you would not be off here by yourself when all the girls want to know you."

Again he was scarcely conscious of what he was saying or leaving unsaid, and suddenly waked to the fact that his hostess had hurried away, and that the plain girl was in his care. After all, she was Eperson's sister, and he eyed her curiously, wondering if she, too, were his enemy.

"You've met my brother," she began. "He spoke about it the day the corner-stone was laid. There he is out there with Tilly now. I didn't want to come to-night, but he was crazy to be here so that he could see her."

"I thought that was it," John permitted his slow lips to say. "They have been going together a long time. That is, I've heard so."

"Yes, and I thought—we all thought that Tilly would end up by taking him, but it is all off now," Miss Eperson sighed, her eyes on the pair at the fence.

"All off?" John in his sober senses would have wondered at his ability to talk so freely with a girl he had just met. "Why, what do you mean?"

"As if you didn't know—as if *everybody* doesn't know!" Martha Jane laughed half sardonically.

"But I don't know what you mean." Something new and bountiful in its promise of joy filled John and drove the words from his palpitating tongue.

"The idea!" scoffed Martha Jane. "Well, if you don't know it you are blind as a bat in daytime. Brother knows it, I know it—everybody knows it."

"Knows what?" John demanded, his breath checked, his eyes gleaming, his whole being athrob under the dawn of an ecstasy the plain girl seemed to offer.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you, if you don't know," the girl answered, with a little shrug. "But if you want to understand, watch my poor brother. He never had a look like that before. She has been his very life. People that doubt real love ought to know Joel. He would go through fire and water for Tilly. He'd steal, he'd kill, he'd do anything. He is desperate to-night. When we got to her house and found that you and she were going to walk out here, it was the last straw. But he is a gentleman, my brother is, and he will never make a row over it."

Under the sheer blaze of this information, John stood speechless. He, boldly now, gave his arm to his little companion and they started to walk back and forth on the lawn as others were doing. His face was now turned from Tilly, but subconsciously he could fairly feel her proximity. John almost loved the little woman on his arm. How could he help it? She was so kind to him.

They were turning toward the steps when Tilly and Eperson approached. There was a wilted look of resignation on Eperson's face, a sentient animation in Tilly's eyes and about her lips, when she said to John:

"I hope you are having a good time and meeting all the girls. Sally said she would look after you."

He smiled and nodded. Something seemed to bear down on his brain and befog his sight. The lights, the lawn, the people, swirled around him.

"Yes, I'm all right," he said.

They were all on the veranda now and Joel stood facing his rival, a look of wondering respect in his shrinking gaze.

"Oh, Joel!" a voice was heard, and Sally Teasdale approached. "We need you. Mother is going to serve the refreshments and all the men who know the ins and outs of our kitchen are helping wait on the crowd. Will you come? Father is already unable to walk steady."

CHAPTER XIV

Joel blandly and gallantly complied. His sister, now thrown with John and Tilly after the others left, looked slightly embarrassed, and, saying that she, too, would help serve the supper, she moved away. This threw John and Tilly together again. Some couples had seated themselves in chairs against the wall, and, as there were vacancies, they sat down also. The negroes, to the accompaniment of guitars, began singing old plantation melodies. The moon, higher in the heavens now, shed a glorious sheen over the still landscape. John was too full of adoration and joy to utter a word. Tilly seemed to sense his mood to its depths and to blend a mood of like nature with it.

"I love you—I love you!" John's soul seemed to whisper, but his tongue remained an inactive lump in his mouth.

"I know—I understand," Tilly's soul seemed to be saying in the same inaudible way. He smelled the perfume of the geranium leaves on his coat, and his big red fingers raised them to his nostrils. He told himself that it was a silly, womanish act, but what did he care? Tilly's fingers had pinned them there, the little fingers he longed to caress.

Joel served her first. He came past other girls and brought Tilly a plate containing cake and a glass of sillibub and hastened away after she had sweetly thanked him.

Tilly held the plate in her lap, idly toying with the spoon.

"Why don't you eat it?" John asked.

"Because the others haven't theirs yet," she answered.

"Oh, I see," he muttered, chagrined in spite of his happiness. "I'll never get on to your ways. I've been brought up different. I've worked hard since I was a boy—I— I—" But he could not go farther. Why should he allude to his sordid home life when it was a thing which he now so utterly despised? How could he speak of his mother, who was so widely and strangely different from the women Tilly knew? No, he would let those things rest.

Various young men had served all the ladies on the veranda when Joel came out with a plate and looked about as if trying to find some lady who had been overlooked. Finding no one, he brought it to John.

"You take it, Mr. Trott," he said, suavely, and yet with a touch of irrepressible dejection in his tone.

John stared in stupid bewilderment and then jerked out, "Keep it yourself." It was just such a well-meant reply as he might have made to one of his workmen who was offering him a cigar, and yet it quite frustrated Joel, who stood awkwardly waiting, the plate still timidly extended.

"Oh no! I'm going right back," Joel said. "I can't eat now, thank you. We are just beginning to help the men."

"Well, you can't wait on me," John blurted out. The situation was becoming tense and awkward, when Tilly half playfully reached out, took the plate, and gave it to John.

"Take it," she said, firmly. "Joel is in a hurry. The others are waiting."

John obeyed, but failed to thank Eperson. He was vaguely conscious that Tilly was smoothly performing the duty for him and that Joel was bowing himself away. Then they sat in silence. Others near by were boisterously laughing, beating time with their feet and singing with the band, but neither Tilly nor John had aught to say. It was as if the subject which was at once burning and soothing their souls was too vast and sacred to be touched upon in the neighborhood of others less profoundly stirred.

"Give me your plate. I'll take it in," John heard a young farmer saying to the girl he sat with. "You don't want to hold it all night. We'll be dancing again in a minute."

The girl obeyed, and the young man left with two plates in his hands. John noticed that Tilly had finished, and he offered to take her plate. She gave it to him. "Be careful," she warned him. "Sally borrowed most of them from the neighbors and wants to return them in good order."

John chafed under the admonition as he rose with his plate and Tilly's in either hand. He had, however, scarcely reached the door when, in trying quickly to step out of the way of two girls who were approaching, one of the plates and the goblet on it fell to the floor. John stood as if paralyzed. Then he softly swore. Every one on the veranda stopped talking and stared. What he would have done next John never knew, for Tilly suddenly approached.

"Never mind," she said, calmly. "Take the other one to the kitchen."

Furious at himself and all the swirling, clattering, and chattering company, John managed to make his way into the kitchen, where he delivered the plate to a buxom negro woman at a big dish-pan full of hot water. He saw Joel putting down some plates and glasses on a table near at hand. Joel smiled in a friendly way.

"I saw your little accident," he said. "I barely escaped the same thing just now. A fellow has to be a regular bareback rider or a tight-rope walker to get through this crowd with his arms full of glassware and crockery."

"No, I couldn't help it." John was conscious of a hot flow of blood to his face, and a vague sense of gratitude. "I'm no good at this sort of thing. I haven't been brought up to it."

Joel seemed to have no reply ready, and the two willingly parted. John found his chair by Tilly still unoccupied and sat down in it. Why didn't she say something about the accident, he wondered. He decided to bring it up himself, so ignorant was he of the ways of the new world to which she had introduced him.

"I'm sorry about those things I broke," he began, hurriedly. "It wasn't my fault. Those girls came out all of a sudden and faced me. I had to get out of their way, you see, or smash right into them. So I—"

"I know. I saw it," Tilly interposed. "Never mind. Let it pass."

"But I've got to fix it somehow," John blundered on. "Nobody shall lose through me. I am able to pay for any damage I do. Tell me who they belonged to and I'll send the owner a whole set of plates and goblets. I might not match the ones I broke, but—"

"Don't, don't think of that," Tilly urged, her pretty lips twitching with almost maternal sympathy. "If you were to offer to pay it would offend Sally."

"Offend her? Why, in the name of common sense?"

"I don't know, but it would hurt *me*—it would hurt *anybody*. It is of no consequence."

"But you talked differently before it happened," John insisted, his lip hanging and quivering. "You said distinctly that the things were borrowed and that Miss Sally wanted—"

"Yes, but it is done now and the only thing is to forget it. Don't even mention it to Sally."

"Not mention it to her? Why not?" John's tongue was thick with the mystery in which he was warmly floundering.

"Because that would not be right—not according to—to custom."

"Custom be—" John bit off the oath with exasperated teeth. "I don't care a hill of beans what the custom is here in these backwoods. I want to pay my way in this life. I laid a cigar down one day against a fellow's hat, and burned a big hole in it. I bought him another and it tickled him to death. It was the best hat in town, while his was an old one, and—"

"But this is different," Tilly pleaded. "Let it drop, please do. For my sake don't say anything more about it. I'll explain what I mean some other time."

That had to suffice. There was more music and dancing and the game of "Stealing partners" on the lawn. Tilly asked John if he wanted to play the game, but he confessed that he did not know what it was like. Saying that it would not look well for them to sit together so long, she led him down to the grass, and they stood watching the big circle of couples. It was very simple—far too simple to interest John. A partnerless young man would dart across the ring, select the partner of another, and they would merrily trip back to his "home" on the other side.

Seeing Tilly, a young man unknown to John came and "stole" her and drew her into the circle.

"Now let the girls steal!" a voice cried out, and several girls sped across the ring after partners. A lively minx with blue eyes and flowing golden hair danced up to John. "Come get in with me," she laughed. "Tilly Whaley hasn't introduced you to any of us. It is a shame. You may have heard Tilly mention me. I'm Jennie Webster."

"No, I never heard of you before," John said, bluntly, as they settled into their places in the ring.

Jennie laughed in her small handkerchief. She even bent her golden head to give vent to her amusement.

"What is the matter?" John demanded, in slow irritation, his eyes on Tilly, directly opposite with a young farmer whom he had once seen at the Whaleys'.

"Why, you are as funny as they all say you are," Jennie tittered. "I heard you were rough and outspoken, but I didn't think you'd admit that you never heard of *me* before. Why, sir, I'll have you know that I'm somebody, *I am*. You may bet

your boots. I got the first prize for butter at the fair last fall and my father got two blue ribbons on a white pig—one on its neck and the other on its stumpy tail."

John wondered if she was making sport of him, but soon decided that there was no malice in the twinkling blue eyes.

"There goes Joel Eperson," she said, laying her small hand on John's arm. "He is not in the game. Watch Tilly— What did I tell you? I knew she would steal him. My, my! that couple are a wonder!"

John saw Tilly leaving her partner and crossing the grass to Eperson. "Come play," he heard her saying. "You've worked long enough for one evening."

John saw Tilly and Joel find a place opposite him. How his new hopes drooped at the sheer sight of them!

"You are living in her house; I guess you know about them," ran on John's companion.

"Know about them—know *what* about them?" he demanded, all but fiercely.

"Huh!" ejaculated the girl. "Have you been so busy with your bricks and mortar that you haven't heard that they have been sweethearts since they were tiny tots? Why, even my mother and father always inquire, when I get home from a party, whether Joel and Tilly got together? You see, few folks sympathize with her hard-shell old daddy, and everybody loves Joel—everybody, man, woman, and child. And I know why. It is because he is so fine, noble, and constant. Some think—some few—that Tilly will give in to her father and drop Joel, but take it from me—and I'm a girl—she won't. She loves him—down deep she loves him, for no girl could help it. She wouldn't be a true woman if she went back on adoration like that. He is not handsome, but there is something in him too sweet and good to talk about. Once we all were arguing at Sunday-school whether anybody could actually forgive an enemy, and nearly all of us agreed that we couldn't but that Joel Eperson could. Wasn't that funny? When I talk to him I feel restful. If I was about to do a bad thing and he spoke to me, I'd throw it up. He did once, but never mind about that. It is too long to tell you now. But I'll always—always love him for what he did and said right while I was wavering."

John now saw that Joel had given Tilly his arm and was leading her across the grass to a rustic seat under an oak-tree. The circle of forms and faces became blurred to John's sight. There was much laughter, much darting to and fro across the ring, but John heard only the voice of the little analyst at his elbow.

"There they go for the second dose of soothing-syrup," she twittered. "Old man Whaley doesn't know which side his bread is buttered on. By trying to keep them apart he is only driving them together. 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder,' and so does opposition. That pair is lapping up stolen sweets to-night."

CHAPTER XV

The game was breaking up. The couples were moving toward the house. John was desperate enough to have shaken the unconscious tantalizer now on his arm. He could think of nothing to say and didn't care what his companion thought about his inattention. He was wondering why Martha Jane Eperson had said what she had said, and why he had been so foolish as to believe it. Perhaps she had a motive. Perhaps it was sarcasm born in the knowledge of his presumption. For aught he knew, she might now be laughing over his credulity.

John was only a boy, and a crude one. Without excusing himself from his companion, he left her at the steps and abruptly stalked away. He had his choice of entering the crowded farm-house or sauntering about the grounds. Taking a cigar from his pocket, he struck a match on the door-step, lighted the cigar, and then turned toward the stables at one side of the house. Here among the horses and vehicles he stood reflecting gloomily, rebelliously. Across the lighted lawn he saw Joel and Tilly still on the bench. How close they seemed to sit, one against the other! The hot weight of rage again bore down on John's brain. He forgot to smoke. His cigar died in his inert fingers. Again he wanted to throttle his meek and placid rival. The man's sheer gentleness enraged him, for it was a quality he himself did not possess, and till now had denied. In the half-darkness he saw two young men come to a buggy not far from him, take from under the seat a flask, and heard them joking as they drank.

"I knew you had your arm around her, you sly dog!" one said, "and I held my horse in to give you a chance."

"She is a little beauty, eh?" another voice said with a laugh. "She nestled up against me like a sick kitten to a hot brick."

The flask was emptied. It whistled as it was hurled against the barn, and the two men went back to the house. What could Tilly and Joel be saying? She had said to John that he and she should not be seen too long together, and yet for the second time that evening she and Eperson had sequestered themselves like that. John told himself that he had been a fool to hope as he had done, and his rage and despair joined forces within him.

Presently he noticed that some of the young men were coming for their buggies and driving them up to the veranda. Then he saw some couples getting in and driving away. Still Joel and Tilly sat on the rustic bench. Still John lurked and watched in the darkness.

"Oh, brother, we must go now!" It was Martha Jane calling from the steps. "I don't want to hurry you, but we really must be going."

"Yes, yes, dear— I'm coming!" and Joel and Tilly rose and arm in arm slowly went to the house. A moment later Joel was coming for his buggy, and John, fearing to be seen alone in the dark, quickly advanced by another way to the veranda without meeting his rival.

He found Tilly ready to go and looking for him. "I wondered where you were," she said, softly. "We must be on the way."

He went on the veranda for his hat, leaving her at the foot of the steps. He joined her, the dead cigar in his mouth. He held out his arm. She took it, started on, then paused suddenly.

"Have you said good night to the Teasdales?" she asked.

"No," he retorted, impatiently, even angrily, for Eperson stood near by, hat in hand, extending a handkerchief to Tilly.

"You dropped it on the grass," he said. "I found it just now."

"Thank you," Tilly said, taking it and smiling sweetly. "Good night. Remember what I told you." Then she turned back to John. "You must say good night to them. They are rather particular, and will think it strange if you don't. There they are in the hall, all three of them."

He obeyed. How he got through it he never knew. He bore away with him a blurred impression of the farmer's red face, too affectionate handclasp; Mrs. Teasdale's fat and squatting movement as she silently and timidly bowed; and Sally's gushing appreciation of his coming, and her regrets at not having seen more of him through the evening.

Joel and Martha Jane were getting into the buggy. The latter leaned over a wheel to kiss Tilly. Joel raised his hat, and John found himself imitating the salutation, and despising it. He gave his arm to Tilly and they started home. The road ahead of them was dusty, and Joel's horse stirred the powdered clay into a cloud as he trotted ahead of them. This fact in itself angered John. He coughed and sniffed, but said nothing.

"I hope you liked the party," Tilly began. Her hand rested on John's arm in the same confiding way as formerly, but it

stirred him no longer.

"I thought it was awful, silly, stupid!" he declared. "I never knew that grown-up people could act that way."

"I'm sorry," Tilly sighed. "I was afraid you would not enjoy so many strangers. It would not be natural for you to feel as much at home as the rest. You see, they have been going together for years, and, moreover, you said you had not been accustomed to such things."

"No, and I have not missed anything," he threw back.

She made no denial. Her hold on his arm had a caressing quality that would be hard to define. She seemed to understand him better than he understood himself. "Yes, I was afraid you wouldn't like it," she rejoined, "for you are different from most persons. You are the strangest man I ever knew—the very, very strangest. Your face is as smooth as a boy's, and yet somehow you seem old in—in experience—sad experience, too, I should think. You are rough on the outside, but I know you are pure gold on the inside."

"Pure gold, rubbish!" he sneered, inwardly. Had he not just heard a girl say that Joel Eperson was the best man alive? What did a woman's opinion amount to, anyway? And how could Tilly expect him to be such a fool as to believe her when she had acted as she had that evening with another man? The memory of this fired him afresh and he suddenly shook her hand from his arm and with bowed head strode along. He was breathing now like a beast of burden hard driven by pain.

"What is the matter?" Tilly asked, blandly, although she knew full well that she was responsible for his present mood, and, reaching out, she took his arm again. He did not lift it into place, and her hand slid down his wrist till his fingers were clasped by her pleading ones.

"Don't be mad at me," she said, soothingly. "If you understood everything you would not be."

Understood everything? Did she mean now that her engagement to Eperson would explain, justify all that had taken place?

"I do understand," he said, aloud, his cheeks twitching, his lips tight, his eyes gleaming. He had stopped short and now stood fairly panting, facing her.

"Oh, you don't—you don't!" she insisted. "Nobody knows, but myself and Joel, how he feels. I have tried to do right by him, and once I thought that in time I might feel otherwise, but it is impossible. I love him dearly in a certain way, but it is not as a woman ought to feel toward the one man in all the world for her—the one given by God Himself. Joel loves me in that way, and I am very, very unhappy about it. I see—I see—you thought to-night that he and I— But never mind. I was only trying to get him to take a brighter view, for he is very, very dejected."

"You mean to tell me, looking straight in my eyes," John cried—"you a truthful girl—you mean to tell me that you don't love him?"

Tilly, with eyes full to their brink with sincerity, and in a voice that rang true to its maidenly depths, answered: "No, I do not love him as—as a wife ought to love her husband. I've tried, but I can't."

The moonlight seemed filled with darting arrows of bliss made as visible as rockets against a black sky. John felt as if the vast earth were rocking his fears to sleep. He took her hand and drew it into its place on his arm. The ground seemed to fall away from each step he took as they moved forward.

"I see, I see," he heard himself saying; "then it doesn't make any difference. Poor devil! *That's* what ailed him, eh? No wonder! No wonder!"

Tilly's gentle pressure was on his arm and he was afraid she would feel the wild throbs of his being, for, strong man that he was, he was as much ashamed of them as of a secret sin. How could he open those joy-tied lips of his and tell her how he felt—how he had felt since his first sight of her? He tried to summon words that would be adequate, and failed utterly. But Tilly knew. She seemed to gather a knowledge of his emotions from the very moonlit silence that pervaded the fields and the woods around them.

Suddenly she began to quicken her step. "We must walk faster," she said, sighing, as one in joyous slumber about to wake. "Mother and father may hear the buggies passing and think we ought to be home earlier. You see, it is Saturday night, and if I'm out after midnight father says it is breaking the Sabbath and is angry."

The house was still, save for a lamp burning in the hall, when they arrived home. He helped her lock the front door, insisted on giving her the lamp, and with a lighted match made his way up to his room. He had not said good night to

her. He remembered that with twinges of self-contempt as he stood undressing in his room and heard Cavanaugh snoring across the hall. Why had he overlooked it, he wondered. Why did he have to be instructed on such matters like a little child learning to walk, when they came so naturally to Tilly, to Joel Eperson and others?

He frowned as he jerked his necktie and gave up the problem. He would tell her when he saw her that he was sorry for the oversight. How could he tell her that it was partly due to his dazed happiness over what she had said about not loving Eperson?

He tumbled into bed, but could not sleep for a long time. Cavanaugh snored like the roar of a distant sawmill, but that didn't matter. The events of the evening were unreeling in a series of mind-pictures filled with lights and shadows and culminating in the blinding revelation of a single fact—the fact that Joel Eperson had cause for his present gloom. John knew that he himself was unlike the people he was meeting for the first time in his life, and he was sure that he could never be as they were, but he had come upon the marvelous belief that he and Tilly were meant for each other. Somehow, by some intent of Fate, they were destined to breast the world side by side, arm in arm, as they had walked the dusty road that night. He was conscious of many stupid shortcomings on his part, but she would overlook them. Indeed, she was overlooking them already. Finally he slept, and, of all absurdities, he dreamed of carrying bricks and mortar as a small, ragged boy for Cavanaugh, who had just hired him for a few cents a day to see what there was in him. Later he seemed to be telling his powdered and painted mother of his success and displaying to her indifferent gaze the first few cents Cavanaugh had ever paid him.

CHAPTER XVI

The next day being Sunday, the family rose an hour later than usual. Cavanaugh came into John's room after the sun was well up in the sky and found his young friend awake.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he jested. "Here you are flat on your lazy back while that little last night's partner of yours is out milking the cow and feeding the chickens. I saw her from my window just now looking as fresh as a pink morning-glory wet with dew. Old Whaley and his wife are hard masters even of their own child. I reckon Tilly would love to lie and snooze after that late tilt of yours and hers, but her folks don't allow it when there is work to be done. I don't want to meddle, my boy, but take it from me for what it is worth, Tilly is the kind of a girl to make a working-man a fine wife. Why? Well, because she hasn't been raised with a gold spoon in her mouth, and a lot of fool ideas about style, rank, and what not. She'd be industrious, saving, and grateful for what her husband could give her. And you—well, I'm not giving you taffy to tickle your vanity, but you'd lavish your last cent on a wife of your choice. How do I know? Well, how do I know that mighty nigh all you ever made—now, I'm going to speak plain—mighty nigh every cent you ever made was lapped up by your ma and Jane Holder and that poor little girl at your house? Huh! Don't I know that a big, strapping fellow that will do all that for folks of—of that stripe will do even more for the sweet little maid that leaves all her own kin to cleave unto him?"

"You don't know what you are talking about," John said from the pillow which half hid his flushed face.

"Well, maybe I don't," the contractor smiled benignly, "but you get up and put on your best suit. We are all going to meeting to-day. You've dodged that too often to help you along with old Whaley. He is wondering where you stand, anyway, on these vital questions of man's duty to God and His written law as Whaley reads it. Don't you forget about the way he treated that son of his that tied up with a follower of the Pope. In spite of his harsh ways Tilly loves her old daddy, and—and well, there is no use of your rubbing the old hog's bristles the wrong way. They might stick in your hand in the long run. You've talked too much to our men on your line of free thought, I am thinking. I heard one say yesterday that you claimed to be an out and out atheist. They all like you, but they are members of some church or other and they were scandalized to hear it. We are in a narrow, hidebound community up here and we've got to watch where we step. Fellers like those will talk, and what they say will be added to by others."

"I won't keep my mouth shut for anybody," John said, firmly, as he got up and began to dress. "I don't want to go to-day, but I will if you say so."

"Well, I *do* say so," Cavanaugh answered. "And we will set out as soon as the family does. I'm going to set, as usual, in the old man's Bible class that comes before the regular discourse, though I can't say that I get much profit out of it. I disagree with his interpretation of many passages, but he'd crawl over the benches and have a fist fight with me if I disputed his points. They say he is a regular devil when he is mad. Church member though he is, he actually shot a man once, and it was a wonder the chap didn't die. He carries a revolver. What do you think of that for an active disciple of the great Prince of Peace?"

"They are all that way," John said, warmly. "They are crooks and haven't brains enough to see how crooked their reasoning is."

Shortly after breakfast the three Whaleys started to church. Tilly walked between her father and mother, and John and Cavanaugh followed close behind. They found, on their arrival, a group of villagers, mountaineers, and farmers loitering on the grass-plot in front of the little building, but the Whaleys went straight in, and John and the contractor did likewise. Cavanaugh went forward to the benches at the front which were reserved for Whaley's Bible class. Eight or ten men and women were already seated there, and they nodded appreciatively to him and the Whaley family. John found himself quite alone on a bench near the door. He saw Tilly and her mother chatting with some other women, and Cavanaugh making himself quite at home as he shook hands with various smiling members of the class. Only half an hour was to be given to the class work and nearly all the students had arrived. John saw Whaley open his worn and interlined Bible and then step back to a bell-rope which hung down by the little white pulpit. He gave the rope a single forceful jerk and the cast-iron bell on the roof creaked and tapped lazily. That was a signal that the Bible class had begun its session.

Just now, to John's great discomfiture, Whaley, with his Bible in his stubby hands, came down the aisle to him.

"You can't hear back this far," Whaley said. "Move on up and join us."

"I'd rather not," John stammered, trying to steady his eyes and voice in his bewilderment.

"Well, I can't see why. It certainly can't hurt you to hear us go through the lesson, and you might learn a lot. Bible

reading and study is fairly sweeping broadcast over the country. Over in Dadeville they have hired that woman blackboard teacher to come several hundred miles and are paying five dollars a head for the course. I've read some of her points in our Leaflet, and I'm here to tell you if she ever comes this way I'll refute her, if they oust me for disorder. It would be my duty, considering the light I have. Come on up."

There was nothing else to do, for the entire class, with the exception perhaps of Tilly, was looking toward him. John rose and followed the old man up the aisle, and found Cavanaugh gravely and sympathetically making space for him at his side. Tilly and her mother were just in front of him. John could have bent forward and whispered in the girl's ear, had he dared. The exercises began by a chapter being read, first a verse by Whaley and then a verse in turn by each of the class. John was fairly chilled by the horror of his predicament. It was plain that Whaley would expect him to read aloud, and he determined that he would refuse. He told himself that he would refuse if the whole silly bunch of fanatics were infuriated by it. He had been forced into the class and he would be forced no farther. As luck would have it, the book was handed to Cavanaugh before it reached John, and the old man read in a clear, confident tone the verse which had fallen to him. Then he started to hand the Bible to John, but John shook his head firmly.

"Pass it on to some one else," he said, almost aloud and with guttural sullenness. "I won't do it."

Then Cavanaugh displayed friendly diplomacy. "I'll read for my young friend, if it is all right," he said. "Me and him have a lot of talks on these same lines, but usually I do the reading."

Whaley frowned and glared, but, being impatient with any delay, he said, gruffly: "Well, well, go ahead. I don't know where Mr. Trott stands, anyway. He is bound to see the light sooner or later, and then he won't have to be begged to read the grandest Book the world ever saw, or be slow about joining a class like this, either. As many of you know, with pride, it is the best and biggest in the county, if not in the state."

Cavanaugh proceeded to read the verse, and the book went over to Mrs. Whaley and then to her daughter. And as Tilly read in her clear, unruffled voice John was conscious of a certain twinge of shame for his avoidance of a thing so simple as she made the act seem.

The reading was concluded, and Whaley set in to analyze the text, line by line. He would read a verse, and then ask the class what particular significance it held to their understanding. Answers came rapidly from all the class, and sometimes John noticed that, when all the others had failed to grasp Whaley's particular version, he would call on Tilly to reply and what she said always met with her father's approval, the reason being that the girl had already gone over the chapter with her parents at home. The lesson was concluded by a long-winded lecture from Whaley, and then the bell was rung for the regular service.

John failed to hear what the aged minister was saying, but he did note that Whaley now and then called out, "Amen!" in deep, self-satisfying tones. John could not keep his eyes from the back part of Tilly's head. He worshiped her hair, the very ribbons of her simple straw hat, the curve of her brave little shoulders. What a marvel she was in human form! It was almost impossible to realize that only a few hours before she had been alone with him, telling that dazzling story of her inability to love another man. He wondered if he might walk home with her. He was afraid not, and yet could not tell whence his fears came, unless they were due to his vague sense of having opposed her father's religion.

When the service was over, however, the opportunity came. It might have been brought about by deliberate design on the part of the contractor, for Cavanaugh drew the husband and wife into conversation about the sermon, and that threw Tilly and John together. The Whaleys seemed to forget Tilly's existence, and John and she fell in behind the three.

"I wondered what you were going to do when father went back after you," Tilly said, with a smile. "I was afraid to look around."

"What did you think when I refused to read in the class?" John inquired, forcing a lifeless smile.

"I hardly know," Tilly said, as she studied his face with bland sincerity. "It almost frightened me. I was afraid father would forget himself and storm out at you. But—but as for your reading out loud, of course, if you really do not believe in the Bible and love it, you ought not to read it in public. That would be sacrilege."

"And do you believe in it?" he demanded, almost rebukingly. "Do you believe that that Book is the actual word of some far-off God that no living man ever saw with his eyes or heard speak with his ears?"

"Yes," Tilly answered. "If I didn't believe it I'd be miserable. I can't see how you can doubt the existence of God—how you can keep from actually feeling His presence, especially when you are in trouble and seriously need His help."

John sneered. He loved Tilly with his whole being, but he despised her belief. "I can tell you why I don't believe," he

said, a billow of feeling behind his words. "I believe if there were a God, that God would have to be a God of love, power, and pity, and with my own eyes I've seen— I have told you about that little orphan girl at home, Dora Boyles. She is a little, helpless, overworked rat without father or mother, in the care of an aunt who is no earthly good—and is crazy about men—crazy about clothes, cards, liquor, and dancing. That little dirty scrap of a girl is a child of God, the same as those polite, well-fed, well-dressed girls and boys we met last night, eh? Well, tell me what is God doing for her? As for me, myself, as I look back on what I went through among those haughty, hidebound people at Ridgeville, before Sam Cavanaugh held out a helping hand— Well, never mind about that, but I know I've been my own God, and I never run across any other except in the dreams of persons who get the best things of life and don't care whether anybody else gets them or not."

"You will think otherwise some day—you will *have* to," was Tilly's regretful ultimatum. "Someday you will need God so badly that you will turn to Him. I did once, and was answered, too."

"You don't mean it," John disputed, warmly. "No prayer was ever answered by any God, on the earth or off of it."

"Mine was," Tilly asseverated. "It was one night, and I was at home all alone. Father had lost his temper at an election and—and wounded a man in a dispute. Father was put in jail and mother hurried to him. The man was bleeding to death—the doctors couldn't stop the flow of blood. You can't imagine how I felt. I fell on my knees and prayed with all my soul to God to save my father and the man he had shot. At two o'clock—oh, I don't know how to express it!—at two o'clock I seemed to be lifted up into something like light, but it wasn't that. It was something finer and holier, but I knew, I knew that all was well. My mother came at sunup. She said they had stopped the flowing blood at two o'clock—exactly at two o'clock. My father was released the next day and the man finally recovered."

"Things like that happen once in a thousand times," John said, with an indulgent smile, "and people say it is in answer to prayer."

"But I know, for I *felt* it," Tilly responded, simply, and she said no more, for the three older persons had turned and were waiting for them on the street corner.

CHAPTER XVII

One morning a week later Cavanaugh mounted the scaffold on which John was working. He held some letters in his hand.

"That car of brick has been delayed," he announced. "It will be three days before it can be delivered. The men won't like it, but we'll have to shut down for that long, anyway."

John frowned and swore, as he stood scraping his trowel on the edge of a brick which he had just tapped into line.

"Never mind; we needn't be idle—you and me, anyway," Cavanaugh said, gently. "You heard about Mason & Trubel's storehouse being burned down last week, didn't you? Well, the agents for the insurance company have written me to come home and help adjust the loss. Some of the walls may be usable in rebuilding, and they want me to be one of the arbitrators. Now, there will be a lot of close figuring to do, and I want you to be there. How about both of us going? There will be a fee for us that will more than cover expenses, and the trip will do us good."

"I'll go with you," John said. "When will you start?"

"First train in the morning," was the reply, and the contractor went about among the men, explaining the situation.

The two friends arrived at Ridgeville the following morning at ten o'clock and at once started for their homes. To John's surprise, at the end of the first street Cavanaugh did not turn toward his home, as would have been natural, but kept on in the direction John was to go.

"You are out of your beat, aren't you?" John asked.

"I am and I ain't," Cavanaugh smiled. "I want to show you something—a little house and lot that I hold a mortgage on. You know the cottage I built for Pete Carrol, this side of your mother's house? Well, he couldn't pay for it and it is on my hands. He went West, you know, and left all his furniture in it. I've had a rent-sign on it for two months, but haven't had a single applicant for it. I'd like to take a peep at it."

The cottage was in quite an isolated spot, near the end of the street railway, in full view of the lots containing shanties in which negroes and the very poorest whites lived. Above the tree-tops, not far away, could be seen the patched roof of John's ramshackle home.

"I hid the key under the door-step," Cavanaugh said, as they entered the small front gate, and, bending down, he secured it. Then he crossed the tiny, newly painted front porch and unlocked and opened the door.

There was a little hallway with rooms on each side of it, a tiny parlor on the right which, on entering, they found neatly equipped with plain oak furniture, and a rug or two on the floor, which was covered with straw matting. They next entered the dining-room, which was furnished in similar style. There was a small sideboard holding a modest supply of table-linen, dishes, and glassware.

"Pete's wife was awfully particular, and she left things in apple-pie order," Cavanaugh said, as they went into the kitchen adjoining. This room, too, was supplied with all necessary utensils, a neat stove and a sink with running water. Next they saw the bedroom. It held a table with a lamp on it, and an oak bedstead in neat order with unsoiled pillows and white coverlet. There was a bureau with a wide plate-glass mirror, also a wash-stand with a white ewer and basin. The floor was covered with new matting.

"A snug little nest, eh?" Cavanaugh asked, with a slow and rather automatic smile. "Looks like somebody ought to rent it, cheap as I hold it and ready furnished—only fifteen a month."

"It is all right," John answered, indifferently. "You ought to rent it in the fall, anyway, when business picks up."

"I want to rent it by the time we finish the court-house, anyway"—Cavanaugh continued to smile—"and I'd like to rent it to somebody that would take care of it— I mean somebody that I know about. Gee! wouldn't this be a snug little nest for a pair of new-married turtle-doves? Think of a fellow coming back from his day's work at night to a cottage like this, with a little wife to meet him in a white bib and tucker and a kiss and a glad smile?"

John had a sudden flash of comprehension, and he flushed from head to foot. His great mouth made a failure of a smile, and that he was pleased Cavanaugh did not doubt. "You think you have a joke on me," John said. "Well, well, go it, Sam! I'm game for a little thing like that."

"You may call it a joke, but I don't," the contractor said, quite seriously. "You see, I've got an ax to grind—two, in fact,

for in the first place I want to rent this house for enough to pay the taxes and insurance, and in the next I want to tie you down to Ridgeville. I am too old to move now, and I need you mighty bad. Say, you and I can become partners before long."

"Well, what has that got to do with your—your other damn foolishness?" John's face was averted as he spoke. They were back in the bedroom now, and he made a pretense of examining the new sash-cords of the window. He drew one of the weights up in its hidden groove and lowered it again. He had never before examined a detail of a building so minutely. He looked closely at the paint on the mullions and searched for flaws in the glass.

"It has got this to do with it," Cavanaugh went on, now steadily and without a vestige of his former smile. "I'm no fool, my boy. I know as well as I stand here that you are not going to leave that sweet little girl up there to do the drudgery for that irritable old hog and his obedient wife. If you did I'd lose respect for you. You are making good pay and you will make even better. In a little nook like this you could make her as happy as the day is long. She could do all the housework and not work a fourth as hard as she does now. Why, I saw her in the corn-field the other day, toiling like an old-time slave with a heavy hoe, while her rotten old daddy was in the house picking out passages in the Bible to pin down some particular argument of his."

"I guess—I guess—" John stammered, "that the—the *girl* would have something to say on the subject."

"How *can* she, in the name of all possessed"—Cavanaugh snorted and laughed—"unless she is *asked*? I'm no fool. I know what two smudges of red about the cheek-bones of a pretty girl mean when they never come in sight till a big, hulking feller in overalls appears on the scene. I know, too, that things have taken place that you haven't heard about. I know that I've turned myself into a contractor of flesh and blood instead of brick and mortar. Them old folks simply agreed one night, in a talk with me, that I might run it. I told them I'd stand for you in every way, and they— Well, haven't you noticed for the last week that they have slid off to bed early and left you and Tilly out under the trees or on the porch, together? Well, that was my doings. The old man was for having you come to him and state your intentions in plain words, but I advised him against it. I told him that you could make a speech on internal revenue, political economy, or any other big subject to an audience a thousand strong, but that you'd fall down in an attempt to tell a girl's daddy that you wanted to provide her grub and clothes. I did have a big tussle, though, to keep one certain thing out of the discussion, and that was your religion, or rather your lack of it. He kept saying that he wanted to know what particular brand of theology you'd impress on his daughter at your fireside. He said he never had failed to see women go with their husbands sooner or later, and he was afraid you hadn't been converted yet. However, I got him quiet on that line. I told him, you see, that while you hadn't yet made an open profession, I knew you well enough to be sure you'd end up all right and make as good a citizen as any man I know."

"You have heard about a certain fellow by the name of Eperson, haven't you?" John asked, as he strove manfully to quench the glad lights in his eyes. "Well, he and Tilly have been sweethearts ever since they were children."

"He has, but she hasn't." Cavanaugh emphasized the "he." "I know all about it. He is as near dead as a man can be from disappointment. She might have thought she cared for him, at one time, but when you came all that was off. Now I'm going home to my old woman. Talking to you on these lines makes me want to see her mighty bad. I feel younger, and I'll bet she will look that way to me, too. But remember this, when we get back to Cranston, sail right in and tell Tilly how you feel. She knows, anyway, but you tell her straight out, like a man with a load of hay to sell, and be done with it. I want to rent this house and I'm going to do it."

They were outside the cottage now. Cavanaugh had closed the door and was on his knees, hiding the key under the step. John stood over him.

"I wish you knew what you are talking about, Sam," he said, and it was the first even indirect confession of the sacred tumult within him. "I'll say that much. I wish—I wish it could be like you say it is. My God! Sam, when I dare to think of it I go all to pieces. It is too good to be true. Nothing has ever come my way that amounted to much in this life. How could as big a thing as that be for me?"

"Well, it just is." Cavanaugh stood up, his fine face working in sympathy. "The Lord has fixed it that way, my boy. You have had a hard time, but your day is dawning. And listen to me. Under your full joy you are going to wake up into a gratitude to the Creator for His great gifts. You've been bitter—so bitter, for one reason or another, that you've denied even God's existence, but with a believing wife like Tilly at your side, and with children to bring up right, you will be different. You are just a boy, anyway—a great, big, awkward, stumbling boy, but you are going to make a man, and a good one."

CHAPTER XVIII

They parted outside the little gate, agreeing to meet at the Square in the afternoon, and John pursued his way homeward. The very ground seemed to fall away from his feet as he put them down. His whole body felt like an imponderable thing over which he had little control. The swelling joy within him fairly choked him.

"My God! My God!" he said several times, aloud. "Sam's a fool. Sam's a fool. It can't be so. My Lord! how could it? And that little house. It is a beauty and most women would like to run it and keep it in order. I wonder if she would with me. I wonder."

He found Dora under an apple-tree in the front yard, playing with some rag dolls she had made from scraps of finery cast off by her aunt and Mrs. Trott. A brick represented a table, and on it were arranged bits of china for plates. Other pieces of make-believe furniture were constructed of cardboard cut and bent into shape. She glanced up as he swung open the gate, smiled a welcome from a soiled face, and wiped her itching nose on the back of her slender hand. She did not rise or make any sort of physical demonstration by way of greeting.

"Where are the folks?" he asked, glancing into the house through the open doorway.

"Asleep, I reckon," she said, busy with the pink sash of one of her legless ladies, the tinseled hat of which was pinned askew over a pair of eyes formed of green beads. "They've only been home about an hour. Aunt Jane is sick. Your ma said she fainted at the party and they all thought she was dead for a while."

"Those are not good dolls," John said, from the depths of his turbulent joy. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy you a real wax one with yellow hair and blue eyes. I saw one in a show-window as I came along just now. It had on shoes and stockings and held a parasol in its little hand."

"All talk—all wind, hot air!" the child said, indifferently, and she had evidently picked up the expressions from her elders. "A drummer—the fellow with the striped shirts that is always whistling and sells cloaks—he told me he was going to get me a doll and a baby-carriage, but he never came back—changed his rowt, so Aunt Jane said. But this doll's all right. Don't you think so, brother John?"

"It will do till I get the other," he answered, and then he felt an impulse that he had never felt before. He bent down and put his hand caressingly on the almost matted hair, and she, not understanding, impatiently shook it off and went on with her work, her mouth now full of pins.

There was a chair near by and he sat down in it, bending toward the child. Seldom had his boyishness been so apparent. He wanted to open his cramped heart to some one—why not to her? He wanted to hear his own voice applauding the things that were leaping, singing, shouting in the penetralia of his being.

"Say, Dora," he began, clasping his warm hands between his knees, "can you keep a secret?"

"A secret?" she repeated, letting her doll lie for an instant in her ragged lap and staring straight at him with growing interest. "Have you got one—a real one?"

He had. His smile and generous nod admitted it. "Can you keep your mouth shut, that is what I want to know?"

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed, eagerly. "You ask Aunt Jane if I ever let your ma know—let her know—but never mind. I can keep one. Try me—that is if you are not kidding. I don't want any foolishness from you or anybody else. Life is too short."

"Well, listen!" he began, and something in the blaze of his eyes, the tremolo of his erstwhile brusk voice, the warm look of his face, caught and held her attention. "Did you ever think the day would come when I'd go with a girl?"

"Who, you?" Dora sniffed. "Now I *know* you are kidding."

"No, I'm not," he went on, riding the tide of his joyous self-emptying. "I have done it often since I went to Cranston. I got acquainted with one up there. Sam and I board with her pa and ma. You ought to see her, Dora. She is all right—as nice and pretty as any stuck-up girl in this town. Folks up there are different—very, very different from these down here who don't know that you and I are alive. They are polite and decent and civilized. Lord! somehow it makes me sick to think of living on here, but I reckon I will. Say, did you ever notice the stunning little cottage that Sam put up for Pete Carrol on the right-hand side of the street as you go down? But never mind that. What would you think if I was to tell you that before very long I might—" John was stalled. How could he express by mere lip and tongue the transcendental thing which so completely filled him?

"What are you trying to get through yourself?" It was another of the child's picked-up expressions, and she leaned toward him with a slow leer of wonder. "What is your great secret?"

"I was coming to it," he said, his words falling steadily now. "But you mustn't tell it to a living soul. Kid, I'm thinking about getting married."

"Married—you? Huh!" Dora laughed incredulously as she plucked a pin from her lips. "Why, you are too young! I heard your ma say it would be ten years before you ever thought of it, even if you did then, you old goody-goody poke of a boy."

"I'm not too young." John flared up resentfully. "Sam says I'm not, and he ought to know. It isn't settled yet, but it will be when I get back up there. Sam says it is as good as settled now, and Sam is in a position to know. Oh, she is all right, kid—believe me, she is a wonder! I wish you could see her. She wouldn't turn up her nose at you like some folks do around here. She is sweet and kind and gentle. They are working her to death up there—her folks are, but all that will be off when I bring her down here?"

"Are you in earnest—really dead in earnest?" Dora asked, her face still blank.

"I am, and I don't want a word said about it. It is none of my mother's business, you understand. She might try to pry into it and I want her to keep out of it. This is my affair—mine and nobody's else. Sam knows it, and you, but that's all."

"I won't tell it," Dora, now convinced, declared earnestly. "I'll never tell it till you let me. Have you got a picture of her?"

"No, she's got some, but she never gave me one— I never asked for it. They are not good enough, nohow. They make her look too glum and pinched about the eyes. To know what she is like, you have to see her and hear her talk, or read the Bible out loud at prayer-time. She isn't big; her hands and feet are nearly as little as yours are; but above all else in the world, kid, she is good. The neighbors all love her. She waits on them when they are sick. Away late at night not long ago a farmer come to get her to go stay with his sick wife, and Tilly—that's her name—was away till sunup, and then came home and milked the cows and worked around the kitchen. She needs a long rest and she shall have it. I'll see that she gets it, and plenty of clothes and pretty things, besides. She is having an awfully hard time and that is one reason I don't feel so bad about asking her to—to come with just me. I am going into partnership with Sam later, and he and I will both make more money and I'll buy things for her. She plays an organ. I'll get her one. She shall tote the pocket-book, too. She has been skimped all her life. I know. I've had my eyes open up there. She never buys a thing, even a bit of ribbon, without her old daddy fingering it and calling her down for spending money for show, and it was her money, too, bless your life! She sells butter and eggs, takes them to the store herself. She has a little garden-patch all her own, and I've seen her out in it even in the rain, picking beans and peas to sell."

"If she is like that"—Dora was precociously and pessimistically wise for one so young, the fact being due, no doubt, to the tutelage of the two worldly women who were her sole companions—"if she is like that, it looks like some lazy feller would have got her before this. Aunt Jane says it takes money and clothes and lots of things to keep any man coming regular."

"There is—there *was* another fellow," John put in, unctuously, "but she turned him down. Lord! Lord! it broke him all to pieces! She just somehow couldn't tie to him. She told me so out of her own mouth."

"What is she like?" Dora then demanded. "What does she look like?"

"Don't ask me," John smiled. "I can't tell you. When we walk together she strikes me about here," his hand on his left shoulder. "She has blue eyes, brown wavy hair, a pretty mouth, and a nose with a cute little tilt to it. There are bits of brown freckles on her wrists and cheeks, but they don't matter. If anything, I like them. I wouldn't rub them off. Folks don't say she is pretty—even Sam don't; but why I can't see, for she is simply stunning, and you'll say so, kid, when you see her."

"Well, I won't tell— I won't tell," Dora promised, returning with lowered interest to her rag things after the flight with him into his empyrean.

Here a voice sounded from the window of Mrs. Trott's room up-stairs.

"Dora, is that John down there?"

"Yes'm. He's just got back."

"Well, tell him to come up here right away."

The order did not need repeating. John stood up, the old practical frown settling on his face. "I wonder what the ——

she wants?" he growled, with fierce emphasis on the omitted word. "I thought she was asleep."

"Come on up, John; I want to see you," Mrs. Trott's querulous voice rang out again, and without replying he turned away. He wore his best suit of clothes, had recently shaved the fuzz from his face, and looked rather more manly than formerly as he strode through the doorway and up the rickety old stairs. Reaching the upper floor, he turned into his mother's room, unceremoniously pushing the door open and standing on the threshold, just as Mrs. Trott, in a soiled wrapper, was getting back into bed after having been to the window. Her hair was in curl-papers, and the little bristling tufts gave to her face an uncouth, bleak look and left her penciled brows to a barren waste of forehead. Her cheeks were still rouged from the night before. A brazen necklace, recently doffed, had left dark streaks on her powdered bust.

"Why didn't you come on in?" Mrs. Trott demanded, irritably. "What did you sit down there and talk with that brat for?"

"Oh, I don't know. What do you want?" He frowned in his turn, and all but growled.

Mrs. Trott kicked the light covering down over her feet and wadded the pillow so that her head was raised higher. "I've been short of money ever since you went off," she explained, pettishly. "When you were here you always had some on Saturday nights, but after you went off you didn't send as much and Jane and I both got in a hole."

"Well, what do you want now?" he asked. "How much?"

"I'll have to think," Mrs. Trott said. "I borrowed five from Jane yesterday. We were playing a little game and I lost. I was about to drop out when Jane backed me. I lost again. My luck was against me, and her, too. Jane needs the five. She is sick and will have to have a doctor. You know they insist on cash—they won't come here, the silly fools, unless you shake the money in their faces, though they run the accounts of other people for years on a stretch."

"I haven't got that much with me," he gave in, wearily, "but I'm going to the bank after dinner and will get it."

"How much have you got there?" Mrs. Trott inquired.

"That's *my* business, not yours," he said, with an oath, for under that roof it had always seemed natural for him to swear. "And don't you be nosing into my business, either. You went there once and tried to get money on my name, but don't you do it again. I've turned over a new leaf. I have to. You throw money away like water, on cards, whisky, beer, and what not. I can't keep that up, and I won't. I have to draw the line somewhere."

She raised her head a little higher and fixed her eyes, in their puffy sockets, on him in a sort of groping wonder.

"Why, what has got into you?" she asked, stupidly, and all at once he seemed older to her, older and more dignified, more business-like, more like his dead father, to whom she had been flagrantly untrue.

"Common sense, I reckon," he jerked out. "If I've been a fool I don't always have to stay one. I'm going to need money —for myself, for my *own* self, do you understand? I—I don't intend to live on here always, either. I'll be of age before long. I've thought it all over. I'm willing to set aside a reasonable amount to help you along, but I'm done with these big drafts on me."

"John, what ails you?" There was a touch of shrinking fear in the almost childish appeal. "You have never talked like this before."

"Well, I might as well begin," he sniffed. "You have to be told. I've seen how other folks live away from here, and I want a change. I'm sick of it all—you and Jane and the gang you hang out with."

"John Trott," his mother gasped, "you sha'n't talk to me this way. I won't stand it."

"Well, then, think it all over," he answered. "I know my business. You can look out for yours. I know when I've had enough, and I *have* had enough."

He turned and left her. She heard him in his room, the sordid cubbyhole he had occupied since he was a child, and somehow now she pictured its narrow confines and condition as being unsuited to the new and unaccountable dignity into which he had grown in his short absence. What could it mean? What?

She got up, slid her silk-dressed feet into a dainty pair of black-satin slippers, drew her wrapper about her, and went into Jane Holder's darkened room.

"Are you asleep, Jane?" she inquired, half timidly.

"How could I be, with you yelling out of your window to John at the top of your lungs?" Jane turned on her side as she answered. "Then it was wow-wow-wow! in your room after he came up. Oh, I'm sick, sick, sick! You let that

sneaking Kelly mix those last drinks on me. I heard you snickering when he did it."

"Never mind; it will go off," Mrs. Trott said, and she sat down on the edge of the bed. "It always does. Listen to me, Jane. Something has happened to John."

"Happened? What do you mean?" Jane softly moaned and gagged, her hand at her thin throat.

"Why, I don't know! That's what I want to see you about. Somebody must have been meddling—talking to him. He has a queer look in the eyes. He fairly glared at me and spoke to me— Well, he never did the like before. I was—was actually afraid of him. It looked to me once as if he was going to pounce on me. Do you remember how Judge Manis talked to us the day he remitted our fine, dismissed the court, and talked to us in private?"

"My God! woman," Jane groaned, desperately, "what are you—"

"John looked and talked like the judge did," Mrs. Trott ran on, with a little impatient wave of her hand. "I was glad he went to his room. There is no telling what he would have said about us both. Somebody has been meddling, I tell you, putting notions in the boy's head. Oh, he has changed—changed!"

"Spoiled, by that new job, I reckon," Jane Holder whined. "The new outfit Sam Cavanaugh gave him has stuck him up. Boys turn like that all of a sudden when they reach the gosling stage. He has been dreamy all his life, and he is getting his eyes open and thinks he is the whole show. You will have to put up with it, that's all."

"I don't know what to make of it— I don't, I don't!" Mrs. Trott stood up, sighed heavily, yawned, and left the room. Outside she met Dora coming from John's room.

"I asked him what he wanted for dinner," the child remarked, "but he said he wasn't going to eat here. He's going down to the restaurant—said he didn't want me to cook and drudge for him. He is funny, Mrs. Trott. He is not one bit like he used to be."

"I don't care where he eats," Mrs. Trott answered, wearily. "We haven't much in the safe, anyway. Is the flour all gone?"

"Yes'm, and the coffee and bacon. I used the last sprinkling of flour for the batter-cakes yesterday."

"Well, stop the grocery-wagon the next time it goes by," Mrs. Trott concluded. "Tell the boy I'll have that money for him to-day. You left a great litter out in the yard. Go clean it up. If you have to play, play in the back yard. People passing will talk about the way you look."

CHAPTER XIX

That night at the supper-table Cavanaugh took his wife into his confidence and told her of the love-affair which was culminating in such a satisfactory way to him as well as to John. "You see," he said, "when it first flared up between them, I was dead afraid that the boy might settle up there, or move away, and I'd lose him as a future partner, and a good one at that, but I clinched all that to-day." Cavanaugh laughed slyly as he told of the Carrol cottage and how pleased John had been with it. The old man talked at considerable length, but suddenly noticed that his wife, seated in the lamplight across the table, had not uttered a word, which struck him as being truly remarkable. Of all things in the dull routine of her life, engagements and weddings of young persons hitherto had interested her most.

"Well, well," the contractor said, suddenly. "What do you think of it? You don't, somehow, look glad. I always thought you liked John, and all this time I've been thinking how tickled you'd be to hear about him and his girl."

Mrs. Cavanaugh blinked. Her face was very grave, her fat chin set firm in accordance with her resolute jaws.

"Why didn't you write me about it, along with all the rest of the stuff you had to say?" she asked, in a tone of actual accusation. "This is the first intimation to me of it."

"Well, for one thing I didn't feel at liberty to do it." Cavanaugh floundered in his slow surprise. "The two were just sorter getting under headway, as you might say, and nothing had been decided on positively. I don't think the final word has been said yet, either, and—"

"Oh, then there is still time— I mean—" But Mrs. Cavanaugh, avoiding her husband's blank stare, suddenly broke off what she was saying and sat gazing fixedly into her coffee-cup.

"Oh, there will be no slip between the lip and the dipper in this case, if that's what is bothering you," the contractor said. "They will get married now, for they are both simply crazy about each other."

"Listen to me, Sam Cavanaugh," Mrs. Cavanaugh threw out quickly. "I want to get down to the rock bottom of this thing without any ifs and ands. I want to know one thing. It may make you mad, because you said once that I was meddling in John's business, but I want to know if—if them folks up there—the girl's daddy and mammy, and the girl herself—I want to know if they know about—about John's mother and Jane Holder, and—and—"

"Make me mad?" Cavanaugh actually got up, drew his chair out, and grasped the back of it angrily. "You knew it would make me mad. You have always made me mad by fetching that poor, unsuspecting boy into the dirty ways of them two women. He's never had his eyes open about that, nohow. He is too pure-minded, too busy with his work, too dreamy to stop and compare his folks, bad as they are, with others. But if you think that I am going to take up a bucketful of slime —and other folks' slime at that—and dash it into the blooming faces of that happy, innocent pair of sweethearts, you don't know me. A catty old maid would go a thousand miles to get a chance to do it, but no man with sound blood in his veins and a heart in his chest would do it for high pay. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for thinking of it—even for letting it dirty your mind for a minute."

Mrs. Cavanaugh, unconvinced and with a ponderous shrug, began to pile the dishes together. "You are a man and can't understand," she said. "Any woman would know what I mean."

"And she'd know *more* than you mean, too, if she was a woman," Samuel sneered, testily.

His wife received this in dead silence. She pushed her gold-rimmed spectacles up into her flowsy gray hair and let them rest there, and, as if regretful of his heat, Cavanaugh added, more gently, "It is a pity for you and me to fly up like this when I've just got home."

"You and *me*?" she answered, mildly and with a tantalizing smile. "Huh! how high do you think *I* flew, Sam Cavanaugh? I've certainly been on a dead level, but you went over the church steeples like a hot-air balloon in a wind-storm. I'm on the ground, flat-footed, and I'm going to stay on it. I look beyond the end of my nose, and you don't, that's all. You can build houses, but you can't start families out right in a town like this one. Now listen to me. What do you think that poor girl will do in Pete Carrol's house all by herself? Who will go to see her? What church will she attend? What will she do—in the name of all possessed, what will she do with her mother-in-law?"

Cavanaugh, as he sat down again, slid lower into defeat than he had been for many a day. "Listen to me," he began, resting his folded hands on the table and clearing his throat, for his voice was husky. "Now you have hit on something, and I'm going to be plain about it. I don't often speak about my terrible struggles over spiritual matters and the things I sometimes have to settle between me and my Maker, but I'm going to admit that I did let all that business bother me at first. I got so keyed up over it up there at Cranston that I couldn't hardly think of anything else for quite a while. I had

private talks with this Bible student and that in a roundabout way to see if I couldn't arrive at a decision, but couldn't seem to get anywhere. They all said the clean must be kept away from the unclean—that you couldn't handle manure without smelling of it, and that goats stink and cows don't. But one night, while I was lying in my hot bed, unable to doze off, and thinking—thinking whether I ought to tell that hard-faced old hypocrite, Whaley, the thing that I was sure would kill poor John's chances to get his first happiness in his own little cottage—I was lying there, I say, when the thought come to me, as sudden as a streak of lightning, that an all-wise God created Liz Trott and Jane Holder and permitted temptation to meet them. The same God made John's daddy and let him go to his grave with a lowered head. The same Power fetched John into the world in that joint of hell over there and put one of the soundest heads on his shoulders that I ever run across. The same Power caused me to see the boy loafing about town and shooting craps with the negroes, and induced me to hire him. I never regretted it. I love to see him climb as much as if he was my own flesh and blood, and—and I simply love the little hard-working girl he has picked out. All that flashed on me, and I got up and prayed. Right there I laid the whole thing before God, and something seemed to tell me that Jesus was right when he said we must first get the beam out of our eyes before using a spy-glass on the eyes of others. That was enough for me. The subject hasn't bothered me since. Them folks up there at Cranston will never hear about Liz Trott and her doings from me."

Mrs. Cavanaugh shrugged again. She went for her dish-pan and began to put the dishes into the hot water it contained.

"Well, what have you got to say?" her husband demanded.

"You and me," she replied, gingerly testing the heat of the water with her finger-tips, "never could agree on one thing. You contend that God uses wrong for a purpose, but I say He has nothing to do with it. Say, Sam, look away back to our own wedding. When you fetched me here, your ma and pa gave us a big infare, and all the kin from everywhere was invited, and come, too, with presents and good things to eat, and no end of nice folks called to see me. I was proud. I wrote back home all about it and mentioned the names of all of them. I told them about the big, rich river-bottom farm your uncle Ted owned and begged us to visit. I told them about the deputy sheriff that was your cousin and was such a brave man in the White-cap raids. I told them to hurry on my church letter, that the Methodists was begging me to join them. I told them a lot more, but I want you to stop and think what that poor child up there in Tennessee will have to write back home, and stop and think how she herself is going to feel when she learns the full truth. Sam Cavanaugh, outside of me—and I'm too old to count—I don't believe a single woman will go to see her—not one. They are all like sheep and have to have a leader. Even the fellows that work with John won't send their wives; even if they did ask them, the women wouldn't go."

Cavanaugh's shaggy head sank lower over his inert hands. His lower lip hung as if torn by pain from its fellow. A deep shadow lay in the kindly eyes beneath the heavy brows now lowering in grim perplexity.

"I never thought of all that." He all but winced as he spoke. "That sort o' puts the shoe on the other foot, doesn't it? Poor little Tilly! It will be rough on her, won't it?"

The conversation rested there. Cavanaugh bore the new phase of his dilemma out to the front porch, where he sat down by himself and pondered deeply. Now he would utter an ejaculation as if some thought had stabbed him to the quick; again he would fervently mutter snatches of prayers for light, for mercy. Were his prayers answered? He wondered, and reasonably, too, for, else, why the sudden and soothing appearance of his wife with that calm, far-reaching ultimatum, as she seated herself by his side and put her hand gently on his knee?

"I've thought it over, Sam," she said, as smoothly as the flowing of deep water. "There is nothing else to be done and you are not to blame. We will let the young folks come and we'll leave them in the hands of God. As I see it, that is our duty."

Cavanaugh choked down his glad emotion, reached out, took her crinkled hand in his, and pressed it. "Yes, yes, we'll do that," he agreed, "and we'll hope for the best—we'll pray for the best. God bless them—they shall have their little home, and I'll do all I can to help them."

CHAPTER XX

Shortly after the return of Cavanaugh and John to their work on the court-house, John's fate was permanently decided. His chats with Tilly took place every evening, either on the veranda, in the yard, or in strolls along the mountain roads. One warm evening they had seated themselves on a log on a lonely road on a hillside. Below them in the twilight loomed up the hamlet with its lights and slow, blue smoke from the chimney-tops. In the distance a dog was barking and a farmer calling to his hogs. A church-bell was clanging for prayer-meeting. They sat close together. She had a fan, and, as the mosquitoes were troublesome, he had taken the fan and, novice that he was, he was awkwardly beating them away.

"Don't bother," she said. "You are tired after your day's work," and with a pretty air of male management she took the fan and fanned his flushed face. He was perspiring from the walk up the hill, and with her own dainty handkerchief she wiped his broad, tanned brow. He had never kissed her. He had hardly dared even to think of it, but he kissed her now. He was afraid she would rise resentfully and start for home, but she took it as a matter of course and allowed him to draw her head to his shoulder. For half an hour, in sheer bliss, he was unable to speak, and Tilly seemed to understand. When he recovered his voice it occurred to him that he must now ask her to be his wife, but he found himself unable to formulate the prodigious thing in words. However, he accomplished it indirectly, for he began telling her about the cottage Pete Carrol had left so neatly furnished, and which Cavanaugh wanted him to rent. Tilly listened as eagerly as a petted child who knows its privileges. She frankly asked about the furniture, the curtains, the rugs, the dishes, and, as he held his cheek against hers, he told her everything he could think of in regard to the place. Suddenly she laughed out happily, teasingly.

"You haven't even asked me to marry you," she said, voluntarily kissing him and then playfully stroking his lips with her soft, pliant fingers. "You are very strange, John. I always know what you feel—what you think—but you don't say them right out."

"I was afraid," he suddenly confessed. "I've been afraid all along—afraid of something, I don't know what, but afraid you'd refuse me—as—as you did Joel Eperson."

"Refuse you!" kissing him again, and nestling back into his arms. "How could you have thought that?"

"I don't know—but *will* you—*will* you?" he asked. "Will you say it to-night in plain words, Tilly? Will you be my wife, and go to Ridgeville with me and live in that little house?"

"How could you doubt it?" she asked, raising her head and looking at him trustfully and admiringly.

"I don't know, but I was afraid," he returned. "Somehow I can't feel that such a big thing could come my way. I want you—God knows I want you, but somehow you seem miles and miles above me. You know so much that I don't know. Every day it seems to me you teach me something I never knew before but—but if you will come with me I'll do everything in my power to make you happy. Will you?"

"Of course I will!" And Tilly kissed him again, and held him at arm's-length for an instant and looked at him proudly. "I am the one that ought to have been afraid," she smiled. "Men pass along and make love to country girls and never see them again. In fact, Sally Teasdale said the other day to me—she is mad on account of me and Joel—she said that you were just a flirt, amusing yourself while you are here. Those are the things a girl has to put up with, John. Sally had her eyes on you at first. She is dying to get married. She thought you were handsome and wonderful in every way till you got to going with me, and now she sniffs and turns up her nose and tries to make me doubt you."

"I never liked her, and she knew it," John said. "But let's not talk about her or any one else. There is no one I care a pin about except you and Sam and his wife."

"Nobody else—nobody?" Tilly asked, slowly. "Why, you told me once that your mother is living, that she is a widow and that you help take care of her!"

Here John's stiff fingers relaxed in their clasp on Tilly's small hand, and with averted face he sat still, silent, and gloomily reminiscent.

Tilly edged herself around till her eyes met his again. "Yes, I knew your mother was living, John," she went on, "and I'm going to confess something. I'm going to confess that I've been worrying more since you got back from your home than I did before. John, I thought if you really intended to ask me to marry you, that you would tell your mother about it, and that you would naturally tell me what she said—that is, if she was willing for you to marry me. But as you have never mentioned her since you got back, I thought—well, I thought she might have other plans for you and that you didn't want to hurt my feelings by telling me what she said."

John stared helplessly for an instant; then he shrugged his great shoulders. "She has got nothing to do with me or what I do," he blurted out. "She goes her way and I go mine."

"But surely," Tilly said, groping for his meaning, "she knows about me—you have told her—"

"No," John broke in, in a mood like that of his old impatience over work that was badly done by his assistants, "I haven't told her, and what is more, I shall not tell her. It is no business of hers. I did tell her that from now on I'd not supply her with as much money as I have been doing, but I didn't tell her why. She throws money away—she burns it in solid wads. She is—is foolish. She is not like your mother or any of these plain, sensible folks up here. She is on the go all the time, to parties, dances, and what not."

"I see," Tilly said, in a mystified tone. "Then she must be young. How old is she, John?"

"I don't know; I haven't the least idea," was John's prompt reply. "Let me think. Seems to me I heard Jane Holder say she was very young when I was born. That would put her at, well, near forty. But what does that matter? I don't care anything about her or her age."

"John, you speak so strangely," Tilly intoned, reproachfully. "You pretend that you don't love her. Why, I'll love her always and with all my heart if for nothing else than that she is your mother."

"Rubbish!" John sniffed. "You won't love her; you won't even like her. I tell you she is—is different from what you think. She is—is giddy, silly, complaining, quarrelsome—up all hours of the night and asleep all day or moping about with bloated eyes."

"I see. She is fond of society," Tilly returned, with a little self-deprecating sigh. "Ridgeville is a rather big town and there must be plenty of women like her there. I won't blame her for that. I shall love her, and I shall make her love me, too, if I possibly can. She will be old some day and she will need us both."

For some reason inexplicable to him, John was impatient with the trend of the talk. He was vaguely angry, and yet was trying to curb the impulse. For the first time he was finding Tilly unreasonable. Since the very inception of the plan to marry Tilly and reside in the little cottage he had pictured himself and her as being completely cut off from his old life. Since his visit to his home the sheer thought of the sordid old house and its inmates had jarred on him to the point of repulsiveness. He had learned to like the orderly simplicity of the circle in which Tilly had her being, and to wish that his might have been like unto it.

It was now time to return home, and they started back. Tilly hung lovingly on his arm. "We sha'n't quarrel about your mother," she said, soothingly. "I shall win her love if I can, and if I can't it won't be my fault. I am a plain, home-loving person, though, and she may not take to me at all. I'd like to help that little girl Dora, too. You say she can't read or write. I could teach her."

Here John's interest was roused. He bent toward Tilly's upturned face. "That would be nice," he said. "The poor little rat needs something of the sort. Yes, we must, between us, do something for that kid. She has the making of a fine woman in her."

CHAPTER XXI

The court-house was finished, even to the last touches of putting on the brass locks and window-fastenings. The commissioners formerly accepted the building as meeting with all the contracted requirements, and a large check was handed to Cavanaugh by the Ordinary of the county.

Cavanaugh was in high feather for several reasons, the main one being that the whole affair was to be capped by a wedding at the farm-house. Cavanaugh had been expecting his wife to come up, but had a letter saying that she was actually in bed with rheumatism and unable to make the journey.

Only the most intimate friends and relatives of the family were invited, and on the evening of the wedding they began to arrive shortly after sunset in buggies, wagons, and on horseback. Cavanaugh, who had dubbed himself as "the best man," was the busiest person about the house. He met all the guests, showed them where to put their horses and where to sit in the parlor, which was filled with a motley collection of borrowed chairs from cherry-colored rockers of the latest tawdry design to straight-backed, unpainted relics of Cherokee days with concave, split-oak or rawhide bottoms.

With his usual stinginess and contempt of show, Whaley had allowed his daughter little for her trousseau, and her apparel was most simple, and so scant that her small trunk was scarcely filled. As they were to take a train immediately after the wedding supper, she wore a plain traveling-dress of dark gray which made her look as demure as a young Quakeress. As for John, he had considered his new suit as good enough and under Cavanaugh's advice had not bought another.

"I'll tell you one thing you've got to do," Cavanaugh said to him as he was tying John's cravat in John's room before the ceremony, "you've just got to stand up straighter. Here lately, when you are with Tilly, you hump yourself over, or sag down with one leg crooked like you was ashamed of being tall. If there is a time in a fellow's life when he ought to stand straight and look folks square in the eyes it is when he's having the cheek to take to himself a sweet young bride. Stand up, throw your shoulders back, and let them all know that you've got a job before you and that you are going to do your level best to put it through."

"Give me a danger-sign if you see me making any breaks," John smiled. "I do feel shaky and weak-kneed and I might have folded up like a pocket-rule if you hadn't cautioned me."

John went down and mingled with the guests before Tilly joined them. He was near the door when Martha Jane Eperson came in, accompanied by her mother, who went at once to a seat proffered by Cavanaugh, leaving her daughter with John, to whom she had barely nodded.

"You must excuse my mother," Martha Jane said, plaintively, as she shook hands with John. "She is very unhappy over the way Joel is taking it. He simply could not come to-night."

"I understand, and I am awfully sorry," John contrived to say.

"Oh, but you can't understand, Mr. Trott," the girl protested. "You don't know my poor, dear brother as we do. This thing is actually killing him. He is a mere shadow of his old self. You see, he and Tilly were very dear to each other until you came. I don't blame Tilly; my mother doesn't, either. She has the right to decide for herself; but poor Joel! He simply allowed himself to love Tilly all along till this thing came like death itself, or worse. He is very manly about it, though. Don't understand me otherwise. I think he intended to come to-night till almost the last minute, and then decided not to do it. I watched him through the window as he hitched the horse to the buggy for us, and I broke down and cried."

Some others were entering, and Martha Jane, with a little parting nod, moved on to a place by her mother's side. As for John, he could not give much thought to his defeated rival, for a commotion in the room indicated that the bride was descending the steps. She did not, however, come into the parlor just then, but turned into the sitting-room opposite.

"Come"—Cavanaugh came and touched John on the arm—"the preacher is in there with Tilly. He may want to give you both a few lessons on what to do and say."

It was the old minister whom John had heard preach, and he stood stroking Tilly's hand in a paternal way. He paused and greeted John with rather cold formality. "I hope you realize the great prize you have won, my young brother," he said. "I've known this sweet child a long time and love her as if she were my own."

John was chagrined beyond measure, for he found his tongue an unusable appendage. He felt the blood rush in a flood to his face. He stammered out something, he knew not what, and stood fumbling his hands. He disliked the man and his profession, and could have told him so easier than to have uttered some trivial insincerity even on that occasion.

John's attitude of sheer helplessness touched Tilly. She put her hand on his arm and smiled up in his face. It was as if she were saying, "I understand, and it is all right."

"Where is your father?" the minister asked of Tilly. "He must give the bride away."

"He refuses to do it," Tilly informed him. "He says it is a silly, new style, and he doesn't believe in it."

"Well, Mr. Trott," the old man said, still distantly, "you will have to bring her in on your arm after I get to my place at the end of the room. I never marry with a ring. That belongs to the Episcopalian service. Now"—looking at his watch —"it is about time."

He walked from the room, leaving John and Tilly alone now, standing ready, arm in arm. John had not seen her in her new hat and dress before, and somehow now she seemed the same and yet not exactly the same Tilly who had worn such plain frocks in her work about the house. A chill of suspended delight was on him. It seemed a dream of some transcendental event, worked through the alchemy of love. He could not have uttered a word had he tried. How could she look so placid, so fearless, while the very earth seemed unstable under his feet, the skies ready to drop further glories about him and her?

Cavanaugh suddenly thrust his head in at the door. "The parson is ready," he called out, with a laugh swelling with expectancy. "He says send you in. That bunch in there is crazy to see the bride. I tried to get somebody to play a march on the organ, but nobody is able. Now move along. Stand up straight, John. My Lord! you are not a jack-knife! Lift your feet! Quit sliding them along! Look how Tilly walks—as light and dainty as a pigeon on a clean barn floor."

Tilly laughed almost merrily, but John felt the far-reaching gravity of the moment too deeply even to smile. He wondered how he could meet the curious faces packed together in the adjoining room. His whole frame was in a tremor, but he was sure that Tilly's hand and wrist on his arm were as steady as they had ever been. He was seeing her from a new angle, and admired her more than ever.

"Come on," she said, simply, and she it was who led into the parlor.

It was soon over. The minister kept them standing before him only a few minutes. The women pressed forward to kiss the bride, and John found himself quite ignored. His place was by her side at that moment, surely, but, blind to custom, as usual, he extricated himself from the throng and joined Cavanaugh in the hall.

"What are you doing here?" the contractor demanded, as he shook hands warmly and congratulated him. "They will expect you in there with the bride. I know that is where I stayed when I went through it."

"I am all right here," John replied, doggedly. "I don't want to talk to all that mob."

At this juncture Whaley appeared—Whaley, of all others. He was chewing tobacco and nonchalantly wiped his lips on a clean, folded handkerchief. John felt more than he had ever felt before the man's intuitive dislike for him, and it was significant now that Whaley should address Cavanaugh rather than him.

"I'm sorry you are going off," he said. "I've had some pretty fair talks with you off and on, though we are still wide apart on doctrine. Do you know a man like me can learn to handle his own theories by arguing even with a fellow that lies down at every point, as you'll have to admit you've done time after time."

"That's so, but this is a wedding," Cavanaugh smiled, "and I'm here to tell you, old horse, that this young man is going to make you proud some day."

"We'll hope so—we'll hope so." Whaley frowned till his heavy brows clashed. "I'm relying on your opinion. You've known him longer than I have."

Hearing this and being infuriated by it, John shrugged his shoulders, sniffed audibly, and went out on the veranda, fully aware that by his act he had shown contempt for his father-in-law. Outside the yard, a heap of pine-knots was being burned to furnish light for the unhitching and hitching of horses, and the red, smoke-broken rays fell over the street and house. Through the window John saw the throng within the parlor. Tilly and her mother stood side by side, surrounded by friends. Never had he felt more alien from his surroundings than on this most successful night. What was wrong with him? he asked himself. Why was he unlike all other men? Why was he forced to feel like an unwilling interloper among people he could not understand and who did not understand him? But what did it matter? Tilly was his, all his, and in a short while he would be bearing her away. In a short while he and she would be left unmolested in their cozy home. He and she alone, away from all that gaping, meddling throng. What happiness! But how could it be?

Cavanaugh came to him out of breath. "Good gracious! Where have you been?" the old man cried. "I'll be hanged if I wasn't afraid you'd got scared, turned tail, and run off and hid. You oughtn't to have treated the old man like that right

on the start. You and him will have to sort of pull together in future. He is thick-skinned, but he looked sort of flabbergasted when you whisked off just now with that snort of yours. Come on. They are going out to supper, and there will be no end of talk if you don't take part. They've got a lot of lemonade in there, and somebody may want to drink your health. If they do, for the Lord's sake stand up like a man and say, 'Thank you,' if nothing more. Remember how well you done when the corner-stone was laid."

John smiled faintly, and the two went back into the parlor as the guests were filing out into the dining-room. Tilly was waiting for him at the door.

"I'm hungry. Aren't you?" she asked. "I want some of that chicken salad. I know it is good, for I made it."

The dining-room was furnished with two long impromptu tables made of rough boards covered with white cloths and flanked by rows of chairs, stools, benches, and inverted boxes. Whaley stood at the head of one of the tables, his wife at the head of the other. Near the center of one two bows of white ribbons marked the seats reserved for the bride and bridegroom. Tilly called John's attention to them and somehow he managed to lead her to them, but he failed to do what he ought to have done. He did not draw Tilly's chair back and place it for her use, but stood staring helplessly while she did it herself. Then he sat down beside her. All were seated now and Whaley rapped on the edge of his plate, producing a tinkling sound that invoked silence.

"Now," he said, solemnly, "it is our duty to ask the blessing of our Creator on what we are about to receive, and as the parson had to leave, I'll call on Brother Cavanaugh to perform this rite for us."

Cavanaugh, who sat opposite John and Tilly, actually paled, and then he flushed. He was silent for a moment, glancing appealingly first at Whaley, then his wife, and finally at Tilly, as if for succor from overwhelming disaster.

"Why, I—I'm not a good hand at it," he stammered. "I don't believe in doing things half-way, especially on what you might call a gala occasion like this. Brother Whaley, in my opinion—and I'm sure all the rest feel the same—you are the man who is best qualified for the job. I know I'd enjoy hearing you do it to-night more than I would to sit and listen to my own voice."

"Why not let Tilly do it?" a young wag farther down the table asked, merrily. "Any bride these days ought to be thankful to get a square meal on the first day of her married life, if never afterward."

"You will all excuse me, I know," Tilly said, simply, and with a sweet, half-forced smile.

Thereupon her father, who was getting the opportunity he wanted, cleared his throat, tapped on his plate for silence, and with lowered head prayed long and unctuously. He touched on the duties of the newly married to God and the Church, that they might be examples for the generations who were to follow them. He hinted—and John knew what was meant—that there were young men of the present age who were indifferent to the full meaning of a Christian life and its forms, and upon all such delinquents he implored the mercy of a long-suffering and patient God.

John's eyes were on his plate. He imagined that every one present was taking note of the veiled rebuke to him. How odd that he should hate Tilly's father so profoundly and feel like striking the cold face between the spiritless eyes. How strange that he should feel almost the same toward that silent, didactic copy of her husband, his mother-in-law, who now seemed to be weighing so judiciously the subtle charges against him, the new member of the family!

The prayer was over; a great clatter swept from end to end of the tables. Everybody was eating, proffering food, laughing, and jesting in munching, mouthful tones. Suddenly, and before she had turned up her plate, John felt Tilly's little hand steal into his.

"Never mind what he said." She smiled as she pressed his fingers. "That was in him. It has rankled a long time and he had to get it out."

"It doesn't matter," John responded, defiantly. "He has the upper hand and he uses it like all men of his brand."

The supper went off merrily, and when it was ended the guests began to depart. All said good-by to Tilly. Some shook hands with John and congratulated him, but that there was a certain restraint between him and all those present he as well as they did not doubt. A few thought that he was "stuck up," but the more penetrating attributed his attitude to his youth and the belief that men of his trade were really not so refined as farmers, who were more or less like the slaveholding planters of the past, from whom the countryside had inherited its manners.

Cavanaugh had provided a livery-stable trap to convey the bride, the bridegroom, and himself to the station, and as the time was up he hurried John and Tilly away. Mrs. Whaley kissed her daughter coldly on the cheek, as if unaccustomed to open affection, and Whaley simply shook hands with her and his son-in-law. The trap contained only two seats, and Cavanaugh sat with the negro driver on the front one, giving the rear seat to John and Tilly.

"Now don't mind me and this chap here," he said, his eyes fixed on the back of the horse as they started on. "We are not going to look, and you can hold hands and hug and kiss all you want to."

Tilly laughed cheerily. "You backed out to-night; you know you did," she bantered him. "You said you were going to kiss the bride, but failed to do it."

"I wanted to, mighty bad, but I was afraid they would all think I was powerful cheeky." Then the contractor fell into talk with the negro, and John heard Tilly sigh.

"What is the matter?" he inquired.

"Oh, I'm sorry for mother," she explained. "I was just thinking that the poor old thing will get up as usual in the morning before daylight and start in to do my work as well as hers. Father won't hire any one to help her and she will have a hard time from now on."

John found himself unable to properly respond, for he didn't care how hard his mother-in-law worked. He would see to it, however, that Tilly should have a rest from the slave-toil which had been her lot since childhood.

It was nine o'clock when the station was reached, and they got down to await the train. Only the station-master and a switchman with a lantern swinging in his hand were in sight. Cavanaugh paid the negro, and with a low bow and scraping of the feet he got into his trap and drove away.

They had not long to wait. From the distance of a mile they heard the whistle of the approaching locomotive, and in a few minutes it was slowing up at the long, unroofed platform.

"You two go sit in the chair-car," Cavanaugh directed. "I've got a cigar, and I'll try the smoker. I'll come back and see you before we get to Chattanooga."

John led Tilly to the luxurious car in question and helped her in. How strange it was! But now for the first time, as he saw her seated in the big revolving-chair in the almost empty car, she seemed all at once to be in reality his wife. He put his bag and hers into the brass rack overhead and adjusted the footstool so that she might rest her feet on it. No living psychologist could have fathomed his emotions. That had become his which seemed to belong to some outside, ethereal existence.

The train started. John took a chair facing Tilly. When he was not at work his hands seemed extraneous members, and they now hung down between his knees as limply as if they had lost all animation.

"You are already homesick," he said, banteringly, though the placid expression of Tilly's face belied his words.

"No, I am not," she said, a thoughtful smile capturing her mouth and eyes. "How could I be? John, I'm simply crazy to see that little house. I've always wanted a home of my own, all my own."

He locked his twisting fingers in sheer delight, and the blood of his joy warmed his eager face to tenderness. "There is a surprise ahead of us," he said, chuckling. "I say surprise, for Sam thinks I don't know it. He has stocked the pantry full of supplies as our wedding-present. I got on to it by accident. I happened to see one of the bills. Old Sam doesn't do things by halves. Do you know, he is the best man I ever knew?"

A newsboy passed through the car, selling magazines and candies. John bought two flashy periodicals and a box of fresh caramels and put them into Tilly's lap. With a smile she began to look at the pictures. Some of the leaves were uncut and he took out his big workman's knife and clumsily slit them apart. She opened the box of candy, daintily pressed back the lacelike paper covering, and proffered some to him. He shook his head. "I never eat it," he said, and then in brooding confusion he remembered that he had not thanked her.

"I'll never do that kind of thing—never!" he said to himself, in reckless disgust. "All that tomfoolery is for Joel Eperson and his sort. I am of a different breed of dogs."

However, his discomfiture was soon dispelled. The rapid rush of the train through the mountain woodland seemed to brush it away as a thing unworthy of his vast surging happiness. He adored the lashes of Tilly's eyes, which seemed to thwart his efforts to probe the eyes themselves; the sweet curve of her lips; the hair which fell so gracefully over her smooth white brow; the tiny brown freckles on her cheeks; the little feet in the somewhat plain new shoes that shyly peeped out from beneath the new gray skirt. A colored porter brought in some soft pillows, and John secured one and placed it behind Tilly's head.

"There," he said, gently enough, "lean back on it. I'll bet you are fagged out, after all you've done since you got up this morning."

"You mustn't make a baby of me," she mildly protested. "Remember I'm a farmer's daughter who never has been petted."

"It is time you were coddled up a little, then," he answered, fervently. "Somehow you look like a child to me, and a lonely one, too, going off like this with a big no-account hulk of a man whom you have known only a little while."

Tilly beamed at this. It was the quality she loved most in her husband. She had a new purse and card-case combined in her lap, and he opened it, finding only a few dimes and quarters in its immaculate interior.

"That will never do." He laughed, took from his own purse two five-dollar bills and put them into hers as he added: "I never want you to have to run to me for change. I despise that in any man, no matter how long he's been married. A fellow's wife should be as free with the money that comes in as he is. I've felt like knocking a man down many a time for that very thing. I don't believe a delicate woman feels like asking for every cent she spends. I'll watch this pocket-book, and if I don't keep that much or more in it all the time it will be because I'm dead broke, too sick to work, or unable to borrow it."

Tilly's face shed a smile that was tender and full of thought. "You are the best man in the world," she said. "I don't believe many men, even the ones that pretend to be polished and educated, would have thought of that."

CHAPTER XXII

The train, which was slightly delayed, reached Ridgeville at two o'clock the following morning. With his usual thoughtfulness Cavanaugh had ordered a street-cab to be on hand to take the couple to their home, and it was found waiting in the care of a half-asleep negro.

"Here is the key to the house," Cavanaugh said, as he handed it in to them after they were seated in the ramshackle little vehicle. "I'd go on with you and help you light up, but I'm anxious to see how my old lady is. She's sick abed, you know, and will be worrying about the train being late."

The negro driver on the seat outside started his horse, and the cab trundled through the darkness of the unlighted streets. They were now wholly alone for the first time since their marriage, and it seemed quite natural to him to put his arm around her and draw her head to his shoulder. Another moment and he had kissed her.

"I wonder," he asked, almost beneath his breath, that the driver might not hear—"I wonder if you are happy?"

She started to speak, but decided not to do so. Her reply consisted of a voluntary lifting of her hand to his neck, the raising of her lips to his, after which she nestled back on his shoulder and was silent.

He also started to speak, but there was nothing to say, and with her hand in one of his they sat still and silent till the cab stopped at the gate of the cottage. The driver opened the door and John helped Tilly out. He tipped the man, and he drove away as they entered the gate. John opened the door and lighted the gas in the diminutive hall. Tilly had never seen a gas-jet before, and he explained its use, and the danger of leaving it open when unlighted. From the little hall they went into the parlor, then into the dining-room and kitchen, and thence to the bedroom.

"Sam's wife has swept and cleaned the whole house," John said, appreciatively. "It is as clean as a new pin."

"I knew some good housekeeper had been over it," Tilly said, giving free vent to her delight over everything. "I didn't dream, from what you said, that it would be as nice as this," she declared. "Why, it is simply wonderful! But you say you think Mrs. Cavanaugh looked after it. Then—then you don't think that your mother—" She hesitated, and with a faint shadow in her face she broke off and stood looking at the floor.

"No." There was a companion shadow on his face as he answered, rather lamely, she thought. "She'd never think of it—even if—if she was expecting us."

"Not expecting us?" Tilly said, gropingly. "Then she doesn't know. You didn't write to her that we were to be married?"

"No"—John's glance wavered as he slowly released the word—"I didn't write her. I didn't care whether she knew it or not."

"I think I understand now," Tilly said to herself. "They have had some sort of family disagreement and are not on speaking terms."

"Never mind," she said, aloud, seeing a cloud on his face. "All that will come out right. In time I'll win her love—you see if I don't."

His frown deepened, but he said nothing. Their bags had been left in the little hall, and he went to get them. When he returned she was standing before the wide mirror of the new-fashioned bureau. She had taken off her hat and the elevated gas-jet on the wall threw a blaze of light into her beautiful hair. He put down the bags and stood gazing at her with eyes full of timid reverence and worship.

"Poor, dear little Tilly!" he said, almost huskily. "You look so lonely, here just with me like this, away from your home and friends. I am not worthy of you, little girl—no man is. I feel that. I know it down deep inside of me. Until I met you I never knew what a good, pure girl was like. Oh, you are so different from all the women I've ever known. Somehow you seem to have dropped down from the skies."

She didn't fully understand him. How could she? And yet his look and tone went straight to her heart. She stood staring at him for a moment and then she advanced to him. She put her hands on his shoulders and looked up into his eyes.

"You say I'm different from other girls, John. Well, you are different from all other men. Oh, it is so very sweet of you—your silly fear that you can't make me happy—your continual reference to that absurdity. Why, John, I am so happy that I can't express it. No one else could have made me so. I am the luckiest girl in the world."

Her throbbing lips invited it, and he bent down and kissed them. He drew her into his arms. She felt his great breast quiver and heard him sigh. Not yet was she comprehending him—not yet was he quite able to comprehend himself.

CHAPTER XXIII

Among the men of John's trade it was deemed an effeminate thing for a laboring-man to allow his marriage to cut into his duties to his daily work. And as Cavanaugh already had a job waiting, which was the erection of a fine brick residence on a near-by plantation, John joined him, ready for work, on the day following the one of his arrival home. This left Tilly all alone in the cottage. At first she was so absorbed by the changes she was making about the house—the moving of this article or that and the rehanging of the cheap pictures and curtains, that she had little time for self-analysis or a study of her environment.

However, after the first three days had passed and there was now nothing in the cottage to be done except to prepare her husband's supper, breakfast, and lunch for his dinner-pail, the time began to drag on her hands. She sat on the little porch nearly all the time, for the outside view was more soothing than the cramped interior of the rather dark little house. Across the vacant lots, and above the dim roofs of the neighboring negro shanties, she saw the smoke from the town's cotton-factories, woolen-mills and iron-foundries, the steam-whistles of which were John's signals for early rising and her own best guide to the approach of nightfall and her husband's longed-for return. Above the trees, an eighth of a mile away, could be seen the roof of Mrs. Trott's house. John had reluctantly pointed it out one evening as they stood at the gate, and every day now she looked at it as the physical symbol of a mystery which was growing more and more inexplicable. She had come to feel that there was something about John's mother which he himself did not fully understand and from which he shrank in morbid and manly sensitiveness.

Cavanaugh had called one evening, and as the three friends sat on the porch, the weather being warm, he had explained that his wife was still confined to her bed and was deeply regretting her inability to come over and see Tilly. But neither did the contractor help Tilly to solve the brooding enigma. On the contrary, his very reticence seemed to deepen it, for he had the disturbed air of a man avoiding some disagreeable fact. How could it be, Tilly began to ask herself, that a man so genial as John should have absolutely no women friends in the town of his birth, and why was it that even his men friends should so persistently shun his residence and show so little interest in his bride? There was Joe Tilsbury, she recalled. What a contrast, what an inexplicable contrast! Joe's friends had given the wife he had brought home a far-reaching welcome, afternoon receptions, quilting-bees, dances, straw-rides, surprise-parties, and even the jovial jokers of the village, in grotesque costumes, had serenaded the couple with tin pans and cow-horns. Tilly herself had taken part in the courtesies to the wife of a man far beneath John in point of position and attainments. What could it mean? What?

Four days after the departure of her daughter, Mrs. Whaley received the third letter from Tilly, and Whaley found her one morning at her churn with that letter on her knee, the dasher inactive in a steadily extended hand.

"Who's that from?" he inquired. "Oh, I see! She writes powerful often, don't she? Well, how does she like it?"

Mrs. Whaley was silent, her eyes on the milk-coated hole in the churn-lid through which the worn dasher was wont to glide up and down. Noting her mood, Whaley gruffly took up the letter and, adjusting his black-rimmed nose-glasses, he read it.

"What do you think of it?" she asked, when he put it down.

"I don't know as I think anything much about it," was his response. "House, house, house! That is all there is in it—tables here and chairs there, a new organ, cook-stove that runs by gas, and water on tap within arm's-length—to say nothing of milk left on the front-door step, as well as a block of ice in summer-time every morning. All that, I say, but not one word about the big union-tabernacle-tent revival that Cavanaugh said was to open there this week? I'd walk ten miles through the broiling sun to meet that preacher and hear him rip the hide off of the ungodly down there. That town is just big enough to be full of hell, 'blind-tiger' joints, and houses full of shamefaced strumpets that are fined in city court and allowed to keep on even by the law in their devilish occupation."

Mrs. Whaley was never known to sigh. Sighs are born of elements which she had suppressed till they had died a natural death, but there was something in her very uncommunicating manner that provoked her husband's lingering at her side.

"You don't say what you think," he said, restoring his glasses to their tin case and snapping its lid down.

She raised her eyes and fixed them on his. "It is not what she says, but what it seems to me she ought to say and don't that seems strange to me," was her reply. "Why, there is no mention at all about any of John's kin—not one single word about his mother—not one single word about any woman stepping in even for a minute. I don't care anything about your tabernacles or your whisky-joints—what seems strange to me is that Tilly don't seem to have made a single acquaintance since she got there. She writes, you see, about Cavanaugh coming over and why his wife didn't, as if that

was something to tell. She writes about John being away in the country all day, and, as far as I can gather, she is at home all by herself from dawn till nightfall. There is something powerfully odd about all that. I don't know what it is, but it is there."

"I know one thing about John Trott that I didn't know when he was here," Whaley pursued, tapping his thumb with the case of his glasses, "and I tell you if I had known it he would have had to change before he took a daughter of mine to live under a roof with him. I got it straight that he's been heard to say that he didn't believe in a God or the Bible, and that folks were silly fools that did. I heard it this morning and I made it my business to trace it down. He said it, and I'm here to say that I don't want to be the granddaddy of the children of an atheist. The wrath of an offended God would fall on them and on me. Tilly was put in my care. The Catholics damned the soul of my son when he went over to those idol-worshipers through the wiles of a present-day Eve, and here I stood stock-still and let an avowed atheist take away my daughter. Do you think I'm going to stand it? Man-killing is said to be wrong, but killing human snakes is not, and a man that will lead an innocent Christian girl away from the smiles of God deserves death, let the law of the land be what it may. I've got a good pistol. I've got a steady finger and a firm arm. I tell you to look out. I don't know what may happen. Our Lord said Himself that He came not to bring peace, but a sword, and I'll be at war with atheism against my own flesh and blood till I die."

"You wouldn't be as foolish as that," Mrs. Whaley faltered, for once daring to oppose her spouse. "Even if he is an infidel he may get over it under—under Tilly's influence."

"Get over it, a dog's hind foot!" Whaley sniffed, his great nostrils fluttering, his harsh face rigid. "No wife ever does. They go with their husbands and so do the children, and children's children, all the way down, if the flow of hell's poison is not stopped, and I'll stop it."

On the day that dialogue was taking place Sam Cavanaugh was seated by the bedside of his wife. "Yes, I went by there," he was saying. "John had bought some fine peaches from a mountain wagon and wanted Tilly to have them to put up in jars. She was out in the little yard. I saw her clean across the old circus-grounds. She was walking back and forth, and I'll admit she looked lonely. You were right about what you said that time. I begin to see my mistake. As awkward as it would have been, maybe I ought to have had a straight talk with John, if nobody else. It looks to me like he is slowly opening his eyes now, but doesn't know how to fetch up the subject when we are together. He comes a little later in the morning and starts for home on the dot. I've seen him on the scaffold, looking off over the fields in the very saddest sort of way. He is becoming different. He never curses the men now when they make a bobble or are slow with mortar or brick, and he has lost interest in plans and figures. They have all noticed it. Some seem to understand, while others don't. They all respect him too much to tattle among themselves about his private matters. They love him. They all love John Trott—rough as he is, they all love him; and as for me—as for me—my God! my heart aches! I feel like I've made a mistake, but I can't feel that I am much to blame, for I was going by my best lights. They love each other, those two do, with all their souls. How could I burst it up with a nasty revelation like I'd 'a' had to make?"

CHAPTER XXIV

Two days after the arrival of the bride and bridegroom the report of the marriage reached the residence of Mrs. Trott. Jane Holder had been to town to make some purchases, and in a dry-goods store heard a delivery-man mention it. She made further inquiries and established the fact of the truth of the report. And when she left the street-car at the end of the line she walked past John's cottage and looked in at the open door. Tilly was sweeping out the little hall and Jane got a fair view of her as she hurried by.

"What a sweet little thing she seems!" Jane mused. "I wonder what Liz will do. It may make her mad. I'm sure she will be mad to find out that he has been here two days and not been over home. She is expecting some money from John, too, but how can he give it to her now that he has set up for himself? Why, he is just a boy! It seems funny to think of him having a wife and a snug little home like that."

She found Mrs. Trott in the dining-room, where Dora was arranging the table for the midday meal, and as she sat removing her hat and veil, her gaudy green sunshade in her lap, she made her revelation.

"What are you saying?" Lizzie Trott cried, incredulously, and with her carmined lips parted she stood staring at her friend.

Jane repeated what she had said, and then both of them were astonished by a comment from Dora as she leaned against the table and smiled.

"I'm glad it is out," the child said. "I was dying to tell it. I knew it was coming off long ago, but he made me promise not to give it away."

"You knew?" Mrs. Trott cried, her eyes flashing behind their waxed lashes.

"Yes, and all about the house being rented. Huh! I guess I did! I saw Sam Cavanaugh hide the key under the door-step one day, and after he left I unlocked the door and went in and looked it over. Oh, it is mighty pretty! I saw Mrs. Cavanaugh come in and clean it up one day, too, and I knew that things was getting ripe. Huh! I've already seen Tilly, too, for I've passed her several times while she was out in the yard. I'd have spoke to her, but my best dress was out on the line and I know John would want me to look neat and clean."

With steady eyes and a motionless breast Lizzie Trott turned toward the stairs. "I want to talk to you in private, Jane," she said, under her breath. "Come up to your room."

"I was going up, anyway, to get these hot things off," Jane said, complainingly. "Something is wrong with me, Liz. I can't lace as tight as I did without suffocating. I've got to take off my corset and lie down. I almost fainted in Lowe & Beaman's this morning while I was waiting for Doctor Renfrow to mix my tonic. He laughed and said that I drink too much adulterated whisky for a woman of my build. He felt my pulse and looked at my tongue and eyes and talked sorter serious about my condition. He asked how old my mother was when she died, and when I told him 'thirty-six' he shook his head and said I must come into his office some day and let him examine me thoroughly."

Jane was out of breath by this time, for she had been talking while ascending the stairs, and she turned into her room and sank down on the bed. Mrs. Trott followed and stood over her, her hands on her hips.

"You say they have been here two days?" she said.

"Yes; came in the night," Jane panted forth as she began to unhook her silk dress. "Oh, my! I have that gone feeling again—sort of swimming-like, and when I try to see all of your face at once I get only part of it—like a black spot was coming between—and if I look at the wall there in the shade or at the floor I can see wriggling lights. The doctor said my liver was awful."

Lizzie Trott took a chair and sat in it. She bent downward, her bare, shapely elbows on her knees, her ringed fingers holding her chin.

"For the love of Heaven," she said, impatiently, "let up on your whining for a minute and let's talk about John. What do you think about it?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think!" and with a low groan Jane threw herself back on the bed. "What do I care? They are full of health and can take care of themselves, while here I lie with hardly strength enough to unlace myself."

"Why didn't he tell us, do you suppose?" Lizzie continued. "Why hasn't he been over? Two days and nights, and nothing said or done! Why, it is outrageous—simply outrageous!"

"Oh, I see what you are driving at!" Jane sat up and began to unlace her corsets, her yellowish wrists and bony finger working behind her back. "Now the spots are gone and my head is steady. It is peculiar how they come and go that way. Yes, I think I see what bothers you. Well, old pal, I'll tell you. I'll bet my life she is a good girl, and a worker, too. Country stock, maybe. She looks it. No style to her dress or the way she does her hair. Yes, yes, I think I understand what is bothering you. You are wondering—well, you know what I mean. You are wondering if anybody has told her—well, told her about us—*all* about us, I mean."

Mrs. Trott showed a tendency to flare up, which her blank bewilderment seemed to quench. "You can say the most catty things when you try," she began, but finished with a low groan and sat with her eyes fixed on a pattern in the worn rug by the bed.

"Well, I am including myself," Jane said. "You may call that catty, but I don't. What is the use to plaster facts over? Between you and me, I simply don't believe John would take to a fast girl. If there ever was a boy that gave fast girls the cold shoulder, John Trott did. I always thought he was blind, anyway—going about with his figuring and blue papers with white lines on them. The way he hauled his money out and threw it at us proved he never stopped to think what he was doing. Yes, that little wife is the right sort, and I myself don't see how—well, how he could have brought her right here, you understand. You think so, too, and that is what is bothering you. You won't admit it, but that is the nigger in your woodpile, Liz! My! how easy I feel when I'm unstrapped! The doctor laid the law down on that when I was sick the last time, you know, but how can I walk through Main Street looking—?"

"For God's sake, dry up!" Lizzie suddenly shot out. "What am I going to do? How can I get along without his help, and he can't help me and keep up a separate house. Must—must I go over there? Do you think I—I ought to call? Doesn't it look like—like he means something by—by keeping it a secret? It wasn't sudden, for Dora says he told her some time back."

"Go over there? Huh! You make me smile, Liz. You didn't even get an invitation to the wedding, or a chance to make a present, and yet you are bothered about whether you ought to call or not. As for me, I'll not put foot across his door-sill—not even if he asked me. No, not even if he come begging me on bended knee. Huh! I guess not!"

"And why not?" Lizzie Trott asked, after a momentous pause.

"Because"—and as she answered Jane's eyes held a steely gleam as from some inner light of self-accusation that refused to be quenched even by fear of giving offense—"because if he did ask me I'd know the poor boy was still blind to what everybody else knows and what he would have known long ago if he had been as coarse as other men, or if folks had not liked him too much to talk plain to him. No, I'll not go there. I wouldn't know what to say, nohow. Huh! You wouldn't, either, I'll bet."

"You are not helping me much." Lizzie Trott readjusted the imitation tortoise-shell comb in her rather lifeless hair and gave a sigh, which was followed by a moan, half of anger, half of despair.

"I think I can take a nap now," Jane said. "I feel drowsy-like. If—if you have finished, I wish you would pull the shades down. Tell Dora I don't want anything to eat and not to bring it up. She will wake me if she does."

Mrs. Trott rose sullenly and drew the shades down. She cast a parting look at Jane, and was on the threshold when from the bed came these words:

"Liz, do me a favor, please do, like a good girl. If Jim Stacy comes again, don't let him know I'm up here. Tell him some lie—tell him I am in Atlanta. He is dead broke and always drinking and jealous. I'm too sick to talk to him, and, sick or not, he'd come right up. I've got to get rid of him, that is certain."

Making some sort of promise, Lizzie went into her own room and sat down in a rocking-chair. Nervously she swung back and forth for a few minutes, and then sat still, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

CHAPTER XXV

One morning shortly after this, while Tilly was busy cleaning up the house, she noticed a little girl at the front fence near the gate. The child was oddly dressed, wearing a skirt that was too long for her, stockings so large that they hung in folds about her thin ankles, a shirt-waist which had been cut down from a woman's size and clumsily remade, and a cheap sailor hat with flowing blue ribbons. The little girl was acting, Tilly thought, in a very queer way, for when Tilly approached the door the child lowered her head and with shy, furtive glances moved on, but as soon as Tilly disappeared she would return to the gate and stand peering over it in timid curiosity.

"Strange," the young wife mused, and when the little girl made no show of leaving, Tilly decided to speak to her. So, going suddenly to the porch, she called out: "Wait, little girl. Do you want anything?"

The head of the child hung down till the brim of her hat hid her eyes, and if she made any reply it was spoken so low that Tilly did not hear it. Tilly now went to her and leaned on the gate.

"Did you want anything with me?" she asked, most kindly, as she scanned the incongruous attire in half-amused wonder. The answer was delayed, but it finally came from lips rendered stubborn by embarrassment:

"I—I wanted to see you, but—but I thought maybe I'd better ask John first. He hasn't been over home yet, and I don't know whether he'd want me to come or not. He told me about you, Tilly. He told me, and nobody else, and I didn't let a soul know, either—my aunt, or Liz, or any one."

"Oh, I see! I know now. You are Dora, aren't you?"

"Yes'm," in great relief and with a lifted face. "I see. Then you know about me?"

"Oh yes, and you must come in and see me." Tilly opened the gate. The little pinched face appealed to her, as well as the child's crude timidity. Dora stepped gingerly inside, her coarse, ill-fitting shoes grating on the graveled walk. One of her little hands was loosely buried in a woman's black kid glove, the mate of which was damply clutched in bare fingers, the nails of which were jagged and black. By Tilly's side she clumsily moved along till they had reached the porch steps, where she paused hesitatingly.

"I almost feel like I know you," Tilly went on to reassure her. "Somehow I almost feel that you are John's sister. I don't know why, but I do. Would you care if I kissed you?"

"Kissed me?" Dora started and stared blankly. "You mean— Huh! you don't want—"

"This is what I mean, you poor dear little thing!" and Tilly bent down and kissed the wan cheek. "There, now, you must come in and see our new house. John will not be home till nearly dark."

"I don't know whether John will fuss or not," Dora said. "Maybe he wanted me to wait till—till he told me. I don't know. From the way my aunt and Liz talks, a body would think he intended to cut us clean off his list."

"Liz?" Tilly asked. "I've heard John mention your aunt, but who is Liz?"

"Liz? Why, Liz— You know she is— Why, Liz is his mother!"

"But—but why do you call her Liz?" Tilly asked, in wonder.

"Because that's her name. Everybody calls her Liz. I don't know— I can't remember that I ever heard John call her anything. He was always cursing her—that is, when he spoke to her. I don't blame him. She is no good and is always after him for money."

They had reached the little parlor now, and Dora sank into one of the new chairs and swung her thin legs to and fro. She was now more at ease, and was inspecting the room with the wide eyes of a curious child.

"Curse her?" Tilly gasped. "You don't mean that my husband would actually curse his own mother?"

"Huh!" Dora sniffed, half absently, for she was looking admiringly at the cheap dress Tilly had on. "Huh! you would, too, if you had to live with her and drudge for her like me and him do. She is peevish and fretful. If things go wrong with her when she is out at night she is a very hell-cat in the morning. I've heard her say she was going to kill herself, and when her and my aunt have a scrap, things fly about, I tell you. She is mad now. Oh, my! ain't she mad at John for not telling her about you? She drove out to his work yesterday, and, from what she told my aunt, her and John must have had a big row, right before the men, too. Aunt Jane told her John could have her arrested—that the judge would be on his side. But I reckon John tried to quiet her. He always does when she flies plumb to pieces."

Tilly's face was grave and pale. "I think I understand now," she said, in a sinking voice. "Mrs. Trott is out of her mind; John is sensitive about it, and—"

"Who's out of her mind—Liz?" The child laughed derisively. "Don't you believe it! Aunt Jane says she has a clear head on her when it comes to getting the best of any deal. They swapped dresses once and Liz hid some big grease spots that didn't show till Aunt Jane was dancing on a platform in the sun at a picnic. That was a whopping, big row, for the laugh was on Aunt Jane and she had no chance to change till she got home."

Tilly was bewildered. She told herself, as she sat peering into the guileless eyes before her, that she must know more than she did know and this was an opportunity.

"I made some fresh cake yesterday," she said. "Wait; I'll get you some. It has icing on it, and jelly between the layers."

But Dora refused to be treated as a formal visitor. She followed Tilly into the kitchen, now clutching her ribbons and swinging her broad hat in her hand. "John said you was a good cook," she remarked. "He said you was too hard-worked up there, and that he was going to give you a long, sweet rest. Lord! that boy thinks the sun rises and sets in you! He said you was pretty, but I don't think you are extra. Do you?"

"No, I'm anything else." Tilly was now cutting the big, white cake. The situation was too grave for personal trivialities. She put a slice on a plate and handed it to the child. Dora took the cake, declined the plate, and began eating eagerly, smearing her lips with the jelly and licking them with an encircling tongue. She had put her hat and gloves on a table and was becoming even more communicative.

"I love cake like this with wine," she said. "Have you any about?"

"No. My parents are opposed to wine," Tilly said. "Surely you, as young as you are, don't drink it?"

"Don't I, though!" The child all but leered, and laughed aloud. "What do you take me for—a silly ninny? When they have it at home I get my share, you bet, and I don't always wait for them to get too drunk to see, either. I hide a bottle when there is a big lot. You see, Bill Raines—the biggest, fattest old roly-poly you ever laid eyes on—sends it over by the case. He is full of fun, drunk or sober, with up-to-date songs and jokes—he is a whisky drummer from Louisville, and the rest of the boys say it don't cost him anything—'samples,' I think Liz said, to treat with and make folks buy. Well, as I set in to say, when he gets to town he generally has a big lot delivered to us. He used to like Aunt Jane, but they had a fuss, and he goes with Liz now. He is always flush, plays for high stakes, and cleans the board nearly every time. His luck is always with him. He won't cheat, and they say he shot a fellow in the hip that tried it on him one night at the races. I don't know. I'm just telling you what they all say. I like him— I like the old devil, for he always has a good word for me. He told Aunt Jane, and between us two I think that's what the fuss was about. Give me another piece, will you? It is a million times better than baker's cake. Bakers use spoiled eggs in their dough. I can smell 'em in spite of the flavoring. My! this *is* good! Wine or no wine, it goes right to the spot!"

In munching the cake the child forgot that she had not finished what she had started to say, and with bated breath and lips grimly tense Tilly reminded her of her omission.

"Oh yes, about that fuss!" Dora swallowed as she resumed. "Bill ripped her up for scolding about me. He said that it was a shame the way I was treated, and that if something wasn't done right off—me sent to school and fed and clothed better—he was going to court about it. Lord! Lord! how mad Aunt Jane was, and Liz, too! They said he was trying to make trouble. That was a month ago. Huh! I think they are right! What business is it to that old pot-bellied duck what I do or don't do? He is no kin of mine and I don't want to go to school, either. I tried it once, and that was enough for me. Sat on a bench all day, with a prissy old maid making me hold a book before my face."

Dora declined a third piece of cake without thanks other than a gesture of repletion as she placed her hand on her stomach, smiled, and shook her unkempt head.

"No. I'd make myself sick," she said. "I'll take a drink of water, though. I seem to feel lumps of it lodged in my chest. I reckon I put in too much at once. If I had wine, now— But of course that is out of the game."

Tilly supplied the water. Her heart was as heavy as lead. She was afraid to admit that she believed the terrible thing which, like the bile of some all-inclosing disease, was oozing into her consciousness. She led the child into the sitting-room and listlessly invited inspection of this or that article—the few photographs on the table, a china vase holding flowers, a new Bible which was the inscribed wedding-present of the minister's wife, and some other things which to Tilly now seemed to weep in sheer sympathy for her under the horror which brooded over her. But she fought off the suspicion. It couldn't be—it mustn't be.

"My mother-in-law—Mrs. Trott—John's mother," she stammered in the effort to speak unconcernedly. "Being a widow,

she will need money, help from me and John, won't she? Don't you think so, Dora?"

"No, Aunt Jane says no," answered the child, making a wry face as she looked at a picture of Tilly's father. "Gee! what an old pie-faced hayseed this is! For the Lord's sake, who is it?"

"But why won't she need it?" Tilly had heard the question, but did not want to spare the time for a reply which might or might not embarrass her iconoclastic guest. "John has been giving her part of his wages, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but he has to call a halt somewhere, my aunt says. She says Liz can get all the money she needs if she won't throw it away as fast as she gets it and play her cards so she won't be fined so often."

"Fined?" The word fell from Tilly's irresolute lips in sheer dread of further revelations. "Fined! What do you mean?"

"'Soaked' by the judge, that is all I know," Dora quoted, indifferently. "About once a month they both have to go in and pay up or be jugged. Old Roly-poly said once that he paid the running expenses of this town himself. What are 'running expenses'? Hanged if I know."

"I don't know." Tilly made an all but somnambulistic reply. Had some one—even John—died suddenly, she could not have been more shocked. Even John's support in her terrible strait seemed somehow likely to be withheld, for how could she go to him with such a matter, seeing that he had not fully confided in her?

"I must be going now," the weird child remarked. "You see, I sneaked over and must get home before they wake up. I'll go in by the back way and change my dress, and they will never know about this lark. At least that's what I'm counting on. You may tell brother John I was over if you want to. He won't give me away. I want you to see the doll he sent me, and her bed and carriage. Gosh! they are scrumptious!"

When Dora had left, Tilly stood at the gate and watched her crossing the vacant lots till she was out of sight. Then the young wife went back to her work, but it had lost its charm. She could think of nothing but the discoveries she had made. She was enabled now to account for hundreds of discrepancies and omissions in her husband's words and acts in the past. Now all things were clear—too clear by far for her peace of mind. The terrible scandal would reach Cranston. It was sure to, eventually, and all her friends and acquaintances would pity her. And as for Joel Eperson—why, knowing him as she knew him, it would crush him. Her marriage already had dealt him a blow, and this would add to his suffering. As for her parents, she fancied her mother's taking it stolidly and inexpressively; but her father, ah, that would be a different matter! She dared not contemplate the effect on his monumental pride and uncontrollable temper. He would interpret it in terms of heaven, hell, and eternity. He would be as relentless as a patriarch ordered by the voice of God to slay his young in the cause of righteousness. Something must be done, and quickly, but what?

CHAPTER XXVI

In terrible loneliness the day dragged by. The blood of her being seemed sluggish in her veins. She could not eat her luncheon. She thought of going to see Mrs. Cavanaugh, but she did not know where the contractor lived, and, as Mrs. Cavanaugh was still in bed with illness, a call would be out of place. Besides, she was sure, even if she went, that she would not be able to broach a matter of such undoubted delicacy, and, unless she mentioned it, how could Mrs. Cavanaugh allude to it? Tilly felt, too, that when John came she would not be able to mention it to him, for had he not kept from her even the fact of his mother's visit to him at his work the day before?

It was growing dark when he came. She had not lighted the gas, because she feared that he might too plainly see her face and read its new lines, shadows, and shrinkings, and he came into the hall, his dinner-pail in hand, as she stood waiting for him in the parlor. She essayed a cheerful greeting, but the words stuck in her tight throat and she went into his arms without uttering them.

"So, so, little mouse," he said, in a forced tone of cheerfulness, "here you are in your dark little hole. Let me light up. I'm dead tired. We all had to put our shoulders to it to-day and lift some big stones and place them right. Our derrick broke twice."

He went to the kitchen. She heard him fumbling about for some matches. Then he came back, striking the matches and lighting the jets in dining-room, sitting-room, and hall.

"You are hungry," she said. "Supper is ready, all but taking it up."

"Well, yes, I guess I am," he said. "Gee! little girl, it is fine to have a place to come to like this." He caught her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. "In a snug place like this a man can throw off his troubles easier than anywhere else. Sam calls it 'a cottage of delight,' and that's what it is."

"Troubles?" she repeated, stealing a look into his face. "Have you troubles, my darling?"

She thought that he avoided her direct gaze, and she was sure that she felt him start slightly, and that his immediate kiss was somewhat more mechanical than usual.

"Oh, every fellow in my business has more or less worries," he parried, awkwardly. "You see, a good deal depends on my judgment, and now and then Sam and I disagree on little details of construction, and we have to argue it out to a finish."

"Have you had any disagreement to-day?" Tilly was probing him desperately, knowing well that the subject had naught to do with the weight on her breast and his.

"Oh no, not to-day," he said, lightly. "Don't be alarmed. Sam and I work all right together. He's always talking about me and him going into partnership. He wants to tie me here, you see; but I don't know. The world is wide, and I could make a living anywhere."

They finished their supper and went to sit on the porch, where the air circulated better than in the house. "I had a caller to-day," she suddenly announced.

"What, a—a— You say you had a—" He broke off, and then finished in a breath of seeming relief. "Oh, Mrs. Cavanaugh! Sam said she would soon be up; but from what he said I thought she'd be in bed for another week at least."

"It wasn't Mrs. Cavanaugh." Tilly's hand was in his and she felt his calloused fingers twitch and remain tense while he waited for her to finish. "It was the little girl from your house."

His fingers shook. He stared at her through the twilight. She saw his lips move as if for utterance, but no sound came forth. It was an awkward moment for them both.

"Oh, so she came!" John finally got out. "I thought she was too backward to—to go anywhere."

"She was timid at first," Tilly said, choking down the despair that seemed to rise in her throat like a fluid; "but I gave her some cake and made her feel at home the best I could."

There was another turgid pause. John managed to break it, inexpert though he was in the verbal finesse he was evidently trying to use.

"She is a queer little imp," he said. "Don't you think so?"

"Yes, very, very strange, for a child of her age. I think she liked me pretty well, and—and I did her. She ought to be taught. Can she read or write? I didn't think to ask her."

"She doesn't know B from a bull's track." John tried to smile, as he forced a laugh. "Yes, she ought to be taught, I guess." He was silent for a moment, and then he resumed: "What did she have to say? She can talk a regular blue streak at times, and I am wondering—wondering—"

"She told me all about the doll and doll-things you sent her," Tilly answered, resorting to subterfuge with no little skill. "Let a child like that start to talk about her playthings and she will run on all day. She didn't stay very long. She said she had work to do at home."

From the sudden change of his face, Tilly comprehended the relief that must have swept through him at that moment. He glanced toward the center of the town where a cluster of lights threw a glow on the sky. "There is a show under a tent on Main Street to-night," he said. "It may not be much good, but it is something to go to. Suppose we walk over? It isn't very far. When it is out we can stop at Tilman's ice-cream and soda-water parlor and take something cool."

"No"—Tilly shook her head—"let's stay at home."

"But why? Listen! That's them now!" There was a sound of a brass band playing in the direction of the lights, the blare of horns, and the beating of drums. "They always play outside the tent to draw a crowd. Why don't you want to go, little girl?"

"You said you were tired."

"Who, me? Good gracious! Now that I've had my supper I feel like a fighting-cock. We'd better go. You are staying in too close, anyway."

CHAPTER XXVII

There seemed no way to avoid accepting the invitation, and she went into the cottage for a light shawl. Then they locked up their little house and started away. Tilly held his arm. She tried to fancy that they were taking one of the unforgettable strolls along the mountain roads at Cranston which had led to their union, but the illusion refused to abide with her, for at Cranston he had been care-free, full of hope and joy, and now his every word seemed to exude from a heart surcharged with pain. How she loved him, now that she better understood the Sinister fate that was scourging him so relentlessly!

Ahead of them they saw a tent. It was lighted. "That is not the one," John explained. "That is a tabernacle revival meeting. Sam goes every night. He doesn't believe in it any more than I do, down inside of himself, I mean; but he goes and tries to get the boys to go. That would suit your father. That preacher throws off his coat and dares the barkeepers to meet him in a fist-to-fist, knock-down, drag-out match on his platform. We must go, too. How about to-morrow night?"

"But—but you don't believe in such meetings," Tilly answered.

"It doesn't make any odds what I believe," John returned, in a thoughtful tone. "You got a lot, one way or another, out of your meeting and Sunday-school up at home, and—and this is a dull town. It is full of sets and a lot of silly pride, drawing the line at this and that. Take my trade, for instance. Do you know a brick mason is sort o' looked down on by the fool gangs that go in for style and show? Up your way everything is more on a level. One man is as good as another. That is one thing I like about religion. In the backwoods, at least, it does away with a lot of stuck-up ideas. You mustn't think I want you to quit going to church. No, I want you to go. I can't take part, but you can go on the same as you used to."

They were now in front of the tent's opening. And as Tilly was peering in at the brilliantly lighted platform on which sat some singers behind an organ, and a young, square-jawed, long-haired minister in a frock-coat, John thought she might be interested in the service.

"Maybe you'd rather go in to-night," he advanced. "It is with you to decide. Is it preaching or show?"

"But you don't like preaching," she said.

"I don't count in this shuffle," he jested. "They are both shows to me. The only difference is that the burnt-cork and dancing people admit they want your money, and these people lie about it."

Tilly frowned. "You get worse and worse," she said. "Let's go to the show. It will be good for you after working so hard to-day."

"Well, we'll come here to-morrow night," he said. "We've got to have some amusements. You are by yourself too much. I've been thinking a lot about the way you are fixed down here in this measly, hypocritical town. You see, up there where you were raised you know every man, woman, and child, but here you are a stranger. I mean— I mean—" He was beyond his depth and realized it, quite to his chagrin. Tilly came to his rescue.

"Never mind about me," she broke in, quickly and with tact, as she drew him on in the direction of the lights and music farther up the street. "I am thoroughly happy here. I don't want anything but you and our little home. I love you more and more. Some day you will know why, but I do. I'm going to make you happy, John, happier than you've ever been."

He sighed, and it was as if he were conscious that the sigh which had surged up within him, in a way, was a denial of the hope her words extended.

He paid their fare at the opening in the tent and went in and sat on one of the crude, unbacked benches. The place was filling fast. Laughing parties of young men and young ladies entered. John told Tilly who some of them were. The "chipper, fluffy-headed blonde" was a banker's daughter, with the son of the president of the largest iron-works in Ridgeville. Another girl was the only child of a rich money-lender and the young dude with her was an ex-Governor's son, a silly fool that everybody said would have been in jail long ago for some of his scrapes but for his father's influence. John didn't really know who all of them were, though they lived in the town. They had grown up so fast and he had been so busy that he hadn't kept track of them. He did know, however, that they all belonged to a select dancing-club up the street, and they would go there after the show, no doubt. They felt that they were better than the working-class, and John said he despised them for it. Their people belonged to the leading churches and that accounted for their lack of sympathy for the poor.

There were some improvised boxes or tiers of seats inclosed in scarlet ribbons on the right, which were marked,

"Reserved Seats, 25 cents extra." The young society people had not taken them, for some reason or other, but, on the contrary, had found places in the body of the little amphitheater where they sat merrily eating roasted peanuts which were bought from a loud-shouting vender with a basket on his arm.

It was all new to the young country wife, and she would have enjoyed it but for the grim tragedy unfolding in her experience. The music stopped, and the curtains were drawn. Two amusing Irishmen held the stage for fifteen minutes in a heated colloquy interspersed with songs and "horse play." Then when they had withdrawn, and Tilly and John were looking over the audience, a man and a woman entered, came down the wide saw-dust aisle, and turned into the reserved section. The man was very fat, short, and flashily dressed; the woman was also showily attired, powdered, painted, penciled, and perfumed.

"Oh, my! Old Liz is on a splurge to-night, ain't she?" a man behind John and Tilly said, with a giggle. "Who's the fellow with her?"

"'Sh!" his companion hissed, warningly, and from the corner of her eye Tilly saw him pointing at John. She looked at her husband and saw a wincing look of chagrin settling on his face. He had given but a single glance at the new-comers and now gazed fixedly at the crude drop-curtain. Tilly saw his neck and the side of his face growing red.

Could it be her mother-in-law? she asked. Undoubtedly, and her escort was "Roly-poly," for Dora's description had fitted him perfectly.

Another act was on the stage. Acrobatic performers in silken tights began vaulting, climbing, balancing one upon the other. Tilly saw that John was valiantly pretending to be absorbed in their maneuvers. He was still flushed, and his eyes all but stood out from their sockets in their grim fixity. How she pitied him! How she longed to take the strong red hand which half clutched his knee and assure him that it didn't matter to her at all.

In the middle of the act something seemed to actually draw her eyes to his mother's face. Lizzie Trott, with an expression half bewildered, half abashed, was gazing past her son straight at her. The eyes of the two met in a steady stare of infinite curiosity. The eyes of the woman of the world seemed to cling to the eyes of youth and purity. The former sank first. Lizzie Trott's wavered and fell to the dainty handkerchief in her lap.

"She is like John about the mouth and eyes," Tilly thought. "Poor woman! I could love her. For John's sake I could love her. Yes, I could love her. In spite of what she is, I could love her. Poor woman! Poor woman! And she is John's mother —actually his mother! She is not wholly bad. I see that in her face. Something is wrong. She looks tired, sad, disgusted."

Tilly now saw John with a flurried look in his eyes glance toward the entrance. She read his thoughts. He was wondering if they might not get away. He was dreading something, but what she knew not. Perhaps he was afraid that his mother might at the end of the performance come across boldly and introduce herself to her daughter-in-law, and perhaps make a scene as she had done the day before. Again Tilly looked at her mother-in-law. Their eyes met once more and clung together with almost mystic comprehension.

"Don't be afraid," Lizzie Trott's whole aspect seemed to say. "We'll go away. I understand, and I'll not make it hard for you."

And a moment later she was whispering something into the ear of her companion, and the two rose and went out. John saw their backs as they left, and Tilly noticed the expression of vast relief in his face.

"Poor woman!" Tilly said to herself. "We could be friends. She is a real woman, after all. She'd have to be to be John's mother."

An hour later they were leaving the tent. Tilly declined John's invitation to go to the soda-water and ice-cream parlor across the street where a gay crowd under revolving fans were taking seats at numerous small white tables.

"I don't care for anything," she assured him. "Let's walk on. The night is lovely and it looks like it is close in there."

On his strong arm she hung tenderly as they strolled slowly back to the cottage. John was changed. A sort of blight seemed to have swept over him. She understood the cause of it and loved him all the more. That he would never open his lips on the subject she was sure, but she could read many of his thoughts which burrowed through some of his roundabout utterances, as, for instance, what he said as they stood at their little gate.

"We must have some good long talks about my business," he said. "About what's far ahead, you know, as well as right now. Sam wants me here. In fact, he pretends to think he can't do without me to help out in several big contracts, but between me and you— I was wondering yesterday what you'd think if I was to tell you that I'm just fool enough to think that I could go to some big Western city and light on my feet right at the start. A fellow that sells cement and lime

to us told me not long ago that I could hit it big out in Seattle. He was looking over some of my figures that Sam showed him. I was wondering— You see, I am a little afraid that you might not like to go away so far from your kin, with a big hulk of a scamp like me, and—and—" John swung the gate open and seemed unable further to direct his anxious outpourings.

Tilly understood—too well she understood what he meant, what he feared—and she made up her mind that a dubious move for her sake only should not be taken. John had not thought of such a thing before marriage. Why should it happen now?

"I don't think you really ought to make a change just yet," she said, firmly. "Mr. Cavanaugh is determined to push you ahead as fast as possible. He told me so the other day. He said he needed your brain for expert estimates and calculations, and that there were big things ahead of you both as a firm."

John was now unlocking the door, and the dark interior of the house seemed to add more gloom to his troubled bearing. "Oh, Sam's all right," he said. "Sam means well and would do right by me, but—but I can't say exactly that I like this town. There is nothing to it. They tell me that the West is a different proposition. Folks don't—don't meddle in one another's business out there. It is more free and easy, not so hidebound and overrun with hypocrisy. A man is judged by what he is—by the amount of gray matter he has in his skull, by his character, and not by—not by—well any little thing that he can't help, you know. I mean, well, like what you saw there to-night—that gang of stuck-up boys and girls, living on their family backing. The world's wide, and, God or no God, there must be better things dealt out than this. I mean than this is to *some*. I never thought much about it when I first began to think you might come here with me, but I do now, and there is no use denying it. Of course, I don't want Sam to know yet. He would do all he could to help me, but Sam is—is just Sam, as helpless against some difficulties as I am."

"Don't light the gas yet." Tilly caught his hand entreatingly. A deep sob of sympathy filled her throat, and she drew him to the little wicker seat on the porch. "Let's sit awhile here where it is cool. It is warm in the house."

They sat side beside each other.

"I see. You don't want any Western experiments," he said, plaintively, his great fingers toying with her hair and now and then touching her brow. "That is the way of a woman."

"I think," Tilly said, leaning her head against his breast and holding his hand in hers, "that we ought to let well enough alone." Her thoughts sank into inexpression and ran on. Should she tell him that she knew all—knew what he was trying to run from on her account—and assure him that she wanted to face the whole situation? But how could she tell him, knowing how sensitive his sudden awakening had made him to the awful matter? If he had wanted her to know it he would have brought it up himself. No, that must wait, for to let him know that she knew all would only add to his pain. He was finding a sort of respite in her supposed ignorance of the situation; she would let it be so for a while, anyway.

CHAPTER XXVIII

On that day a thing of no little importance was happening at Cranston. Various members of Whaley's church were holding a meeting at the farm-house of a certain Simon Suggs. They numbered seven in all, including Mrs. Suggs, who was supposed to take no part beyond supplying the group with fresh cider, which had been kept cool in a spring-house and was now served with warm gingerbread. But she was alert, open-eyed, and open-eared to all that was done and said.

The meeting was called to order by Suggs himself. "As I understand it," he began, rising and clearing his throat, "the object of this meeting is to take a vote on what we ought to do in the matter under discussion. Do I hear any motion in that respect?"

"I move," said a wizen-faced little man in a high, piping voice, "that we all go in a body to Brother Whaley and lay the matter before him. Grave charges have been preferred against him as a consistent church member, and a proposition has been made to turn him out. I hold that he deserves at least a chance to make a statement—show his side, if he has got one, even before it goes to the official board. Most of you contend that he was aware of what he was doing from the start."

"Of course he knowed!" cried out another man, who was a shoemaker and bore the marks of his trade on his hands. "Wasn't that contractor hand-in-glove with him, and didn't Cavanaugh know the whole thing as plain as the nose on his face? I know a man that went straight to Brother Whaley and told him this Trott was an atheist, and my informant offered to bring sworn evidence of all that Trott had said on that line, the most damnable talk, by the way, that hell ever had spouted in our midst."

"Oh, I'm admitting that part," the wizen-faced little man piped in. "I admit all that, Brother Tumlin. Brother Whaley had heard of that, but it seems that Cavanaugh persuaded him to gloss it over and leave the fellow in Tilly's hands for gradual conversion to the truth; but as to the other matter—the thing that is too dirty to talk about even here to you men while Sister Suggs is out of the room—"

"He knew that, too," broke in the shoemaker, angrily. "How could he keep from it? We got it, didn't we? Isn't Trott's mother notorious?"

"I'm not disputing that," the little man went on. "All I want to set forth is that, even though Brother Whaley thinks he is the only man in seven states that can interpret Scripture right and does know considerable on that line, he is entitled to a fair show from us."

"I wonder, brethren"—it was Mrs. Suggs who now appeared, wiping her fat hands on her blue-and-white checked apron—"I wonder if I might be allowed to put in a bare word right here?"

Silence prevailed. A look of vague dissent passed over the solemn faces. Suggs pulled at his stubby chin whiskers and knitted his bushy brows. "If I'm chairman," he said, dryly, "I may or may not, according to my discretion, permit Sister Suggs to speak; but as her husband, brethren, I think if I don't give her a chance she will make it hot for me, so if she will promise to fetch in some more cold cider right off I'll let her speak."

"Oh yes, let her," a voice said in a drowsy tone from the horsehair sofa in a corner. "In my time I've known women to hit a nail on the head when twenty men had either missed it or bent it double and spoiled the woodwork. What is it, sister? Shoot it out! Saint Paul was against women talking in public, but I like to listen to 'em—I do."

"I was just thinking of one thing, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen"—Mrs. Suggs bowed her frowsy head formally. She had presided at a church meeting of her sex once or twice, and there was something more than imitation of her husband's manner in her tone and bearing—"I was thinking of one particular thing that men are apt to overlook in a scramble like this seems to be, and that is this. I may as well tell you that I've had talks with the wife of the man under investigation, and, as I know how to handle a woman as well as the next one, I dropped on to a few things that I'll bet you all will overlook."

There was a sudden commotion in the yard, and, springing up, Suggs went to a window, parted the curtains, and looked out. Turning, he rapped on the back of his chair with his big pocket-knife and stared at his wife.

"That cow has pushed the rails down and got to the calf again," he said. "Either you or me will have to go out and part 'em. Of course I'm willing to do it, but if I am to conduct this meeting properly, why—"

"I move we take a recess," spoke up the wizen-faced man, "just long enough to dispose of the cow-and-calf matter, and then come back and finish up in here."

"No, I'll go attend to it," Mrs. Suggs sighed. "I know how to handle her, but you fellows have got to hold my place open. I'll be right back. It is just a baby calf, and I can tote it about in my arms. I'll drop it over in the old hog-pen till later."

She had scarcely left the room when a lank man past middle age, with long beard that was quite gray in spots and black as to the remainder, stood up. "Would it be in order, Mr. Chairman," he began, "while the lady whom you have recognized as having the floor is absent, for me to say a word or two, being as this matter is *pro bono publico* and vital to us all—in fact, is the *primum mobile* of our faith in the Almighty and His plans?"

"You have the floor, Professor Cardell. Hold on to it," Suggs said, formally. "If you don't get through before my wife parts the cow and calf she will just have to wait, that's all. That's one reason I never thought women had a right to dabble in matters like this. They would get interested in it and burn a pan of bread to cinders, or let a helpless baby crawl out of its swaddlings into the fire. Go ahead, but I'd hurry up a little. When there is a debate of any sort on my wife can do her housework ten times as quick as ordinarily, if the work is holding her back from the talk."

Professor Cardell pulled at his beard till his lips smacked and his white teeth showed. "I'm of the opinion, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen," he began, "that Whaley was tempted by the big wages young Trott was drawing, and all that Cavanaugh had to say about what Trott was apt to amount to in the future. As we all know, *facilis descensus Averno est*, and any man with natural greed in his veins is subject to temptation. Therefore I wish to state quite plainly—"

"Well, plain or not plain," Mrs. Suggs was heard saying, as she bustled into the room, brushing short brown hairs from her dress and frowning on the speaker, "I don't intend to have my place gobbled up behind my back. Huh! I reckon not! You stout, able-bodied men let me do the dirty work, and make that a reason for depriving me of my liberty of opinion and the use of free speech."

"As I see it," rapped Suggs with his knife, "Professor Cardell has just got to a point that if he wasn't allowed to go on he'd have to go back to the beginning and start over. I've noticed that he is that kind of a speaker, and as time is—"

"Professor Cardell nor no other creature in pants can take my place," Mrs. Suggs fumed. "What is he saying, anyway? You men ought to be ashamed of yourselves, setting here like stranded catfish, swallowing all them foreign words and pretending you understand 'em. He whirls off a lot of jumbled talk and the last one of you look as wise as a sleepy ape in the corner of a cage in a circus."

"I see I ought to apologize." Professor Cardell wore a flush which looked as if it had its rise in scholastic pride rather than in rebuked humility. "I am well aware that my phraseology is interspersed with Latin, but that is due to my constant reading of the ancient classics and a habit I have when I am alone of holding converse in that beautiful tongue."

"Beautiful, a dog's hind foot!" cried Mrs. Suggs. "Listen to me, Professor Cardell. I can give you valuable advice, and I'm going to do it here and now. You'd make much more headway, and clothe and feed your wife and children a sight better, if you would throw all that gibberish overboard and talk stuff that folks understand. Now nobody else hasn't had the face to tell you the truth about this, but I will. You know when you put in application as principal of the new school, and was turned down so flat? Now I got it straight from the wife of one of the committee who was to select the teacher, that when you got up before that body of plain farm folks to show what you could do, and begun all that Latin chatter, you cooked your goose for good and all. And, while I hold nothing against you otherwise, I agree with them. I've always heard that Latin is a dead language, and if that is so, it ought to be used on dead folks and not on live ones. No living person can understand half you say, and therefore I claim that your talk on this matter ought not to go before what I've got to say in words so plain that a fool can understand."

"I yield the floor to the lady," the Professor said in confusion. "*Prior tempore, prior jure.* She has it by rights, and I beg the pardon of the chair: and the assembly."

"Thank you, Professor," Mrs. Suggs said, as she picked at a few stray calf hairs on her sleeve. "I wouldn't insist if I wasn't sure that I've got something to say in plain English that you all will overlook. It is this, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen. I've had friendly talks with Sister Whaley and she has sort of let me in on her troubles and fears. Now there is just one thing that will happen if you botch this matter. Dick Whaley is the biggest fool and the wildest man when he is mad that ever lived, and, while you haven't thought of it, this thing may bring about bloodshed. He has already brought one man to death's door, and this will be the worst thing for Brother Whaley to stand of anything that ever crossed his path. He might have stood the talk about his son-in-law being an atheist, but he'll never put up with what is being said about selling his own child to a life of infamy, and the likelihood of his being the grandfather of stock of that sort. If you fellers go on with this, the innocent blood of more than one person may be on your heads. Now I'm giving you fair warning, and I'm doing it in time to set you all to thinking. Serving God is our duty, but if you fellows go over to Dick Whaley's with this cock-and-bull yarn that you just heard from a man peddling through the country, you will be

led there by the devil himself. That is all I've got to say."

She sat down. There was a lengthy silence. The men glanced from one to another in helpless inquiry of rapidly shifting eyes. Then a composite stare became fixed upon Suggs's troubled lineaments. He arose, shrugged, knitted his brows, and coughed.

"There is something in what my wife has said," he began, "and, on the whole, it may be that we ought to wait a little while before we take this thing up. The whole country is rife with it, and Brother Whaley is bound to hear it. He may act rash—in fact, now that I think of it, he will be sure to do it, and I'm going to be frank and say here and now that I'd rather not handle matches around as big a powder-can as this one is. So if you will bring in the cider and cakes, Sister Suggs, I'll adjourn this meeting *sine die*. By the way, that's Latin, isn't it, Professor?"

"Yes," the Professor answered, warmly grateful for being applied to, "but I'd prefer the less common and more erudite term of *re infecta*."

"Which means," replied Suggs, without intending to joke, "that we may be infected again?"

"Oh no, not that, by any means!" the Professor responded. "You quite miss the point. You see, my worthy brother, in the Latin language—"

But the cider and cake was being brought in; the men were rising to receive the glasses which were tinkling on a tray, and good humor and smug rectitude prevailed.

CHAPTER XXIX

One morning Tilly was occupied in the little front yard of her home. Some rose-bushes needed attention, and with a pair of large scissors she was pruning the branches and cutting the weeds away with a garden trowel. Suddenly, happening to glance toward the town, she noticed one of the street-hacks approaching. There was no doubt that it was headed for the cottage, and a sudden qualm of alarm passed over her. Indeed, she feared that some accident might have happened to John, for he had told her that he was at work on a scaffold to which large stones were being hoisted. The negro cabman seemed to be in a hurry, for he was lashing his horse vigorously.

The cab stopped at the gate. The door was opened and Richard Whaley stepped out. He wore his best suit of clothes, but it was badly wrinkled and covered with dust. His black-felt hat was crushed, and its broad brim had been pulled down over his eyes. Tilly heard him order the man to wait, and the tone of his voice sent a shock of terror through her. She had never heard him speak like that before, nor had she beheld such a look in his haggard face. His whole form drooped and quivered as with palsy as he came toward the gate.

"Father!" Tilly gasped, but she said no more, for the wild stare of the bloodshot eyes cowed her into silence. He swung open the gate and lunged into the yard.

"Where is that—where is John Trott?" he asked, panting, saliva like that of an idiot dripping from his shaking lip. "Where is he, I say?"

Tilly saw the negro staring curiously. She knew he was listening. Almost deprived of her wits, yet she was thoughtful, and she said:

"Come in, father; come in?"

"Oh, he is inside, is he?"

"Come in," Tilly answered, evasively. "Let's not talk out here."

She led the way into the sitting-room and tremblingly placed a chair for him, noting as she did so that his coarse shoes were untied, his hat without a band, his cravat awry, his shirt unclean. He refused the chair, and stood holding to the back of it with a besmudged hand. Then her alert eyes took in the bulge of the right-hand pocket of his short coat. A weighty article drew it sharply downward. She knew that it was a revolver, and her blood ran cold in her veins.

"Where is John Trott?" Whaley demanded, raspingly, and he looked toward the door leading into the dining-room. That room was darkened and he bent and peered toward it like a beast about to spring on its prey.

"He is not here, father," Tilly said, in almost a gentle whisper.

"Not here? Where has he gone?"

She hesitated and then answered, "Out in the country, father."

"I don't believe it." He turned, automatically laid his hand on his revolver, and left the room. She stood still. She heard him stalking from room to room, now striking against a chair or a table or tripping on a rug. Through the window she saw the cabman, his gaze on the cottage door. Whaley passed the window; he was walking around the house; his hand was in his right pocket; he stumbled over a tuft of grass, almost fell, and uttered a snort of fury. She raised a window at the side of the house, and saw him looking into the little woodshed in the rear of the lot. He turned and strode back to the cottage, entering at the kitchen door and clamping over the resounding floor back to her.

"Where is he? I say," he snarled.

"I told you, father," she said. "Why—what is the matter? What do you want? Why are you so excited?"

"You know well enough!" he cried. "Don't stand there and tell me that you don't know all or more than I do. Show him to me. I want to meet the white-livered atheistic agent of hell. And when I do meet him he'll never sneak into another respectable home like he did in mine. Do you know what is being said? Do you know what is spreading from county to county up home?"

"I can imagine," Tilly sighed. She felt faint. The objects in the room, the glaring fanatic, the sunny windows were swinging around her. She pulled herself together. She told herself she must be strong. Unless she conquered her weakness and held taut her wits her husband would be killed. What was to be done? Suddenly an idea came. She told herself that it might work. There was nothing else to do, and at any cost she must prevent the meeting of the two men.

Another moment and the madman might be driving away in search for his victim.

"Father," she began, and she advanced to him and started to lay her hand on his arm, but he drew back and snarled like an infuriated beast.

"Did you know about that strumpet, Liz Trott, before you married her son?" he asked.

"No, father, I did not; but you don't understand John's position—"

"Understand the devil and all his imps! He'll understand me when I meet him; that will be enough."

"Father, sit down, please. John is away out in the country and won't be home for a long time. Please, please don't raise a row here and stir up this whole town. John is suffering enough without that. Now listen to me. You know I have some rights. I am a married woman now, and I've got a heart and soul in me. I've got the right as an innocent woman not to be dragged into a scandal like this. If you shot John in your present fury I'd have to be held as a witness, and you'd be put in jail. You are a religious man. Surely you ought to know that God would not forgive you for treating your own child as you are about to treat me. I am willing to go home with you right away—this minute! The cab is waiting, and we could catch the twelve-o'clock train. Surely you regretted that other shooting affair you had, and are grateful to God for sparing you from the worst. I'll pack up and go. It won't take me long."

Slowly and limply he sank into a chair. His soot-streaked hands clutched his knees and he groaned. She saw him shake his frowsy head and a tremor went through him. He was being twisted between the hands of two forces. He was silent for several minutes, save for his loud breathing. Glancing through the window, Tilly saw that the negro had approached the gate. She went to the window and leaned out.

"Can you tell me," she asked him, as he saw her and lifted his hat, "what time the Tennessee north-bound train leaves?"

"Twelve ten, miss," he answered, trying to read the suppressed mystery of her features. "Do you need me in dar? Dat man look' dangerous ter me, miss."

"Oh no." She shook her head and forced a smile. "But I want to ask—can you take us to the station, and a small trunk also?"

"Yes'm."

"Hold on!" It was Whaley's voice, and he had risen. "Tell that nigger to— Let me speak to him. Do you think I came down here to—"

Tilly thrust her small person between him and the window. She laid two opposing hands on his breast and checked him.

"I'm going to save you from murder— I will, I will!" she said, desperation filling her voice with power and causing his fierce stare to flicker. "If you meet my husband you will shoot him and the blood of a helpless, suffering, noble man will be on your head. You know what the brand on Cain was. You will bear it till you meet God with it on your brow. Do you think He'd forgive you? No, you'd have to burn for it in eternal torment, and you know it. You know you thanked God for sparing you before. Are you going to do even a worse thing now?"

He sank, half pushed down by her, into his chair. She saw the revolver, now exposed by his gaping pocket, and had an impulse to take it, but realized that the act would infuriate him anew. So she left it alone and stood squarely in front of him.

"You are not going to damn your soul," she went on, firmly. "Jesus, your Saviour and mine, forgave the guilty and you are refusing to pardon *even the innocent*. You are going to take me home. You are going to sit quietly there till I pack my trunk, and then we'll take the cab to the train."

He groaned under a vast inrolling wave of indecision, and stared at her like a helpless, thwarted child, and yet she knew that the flames smoldering within him were apt to burst at any moment.

"I want to go home," she said. "I'm giving you this chance to take me in a decent way. If you refuse, I don't know what I'll do, but you'd better take me. For your sake and mine, you'd better do it. Now, I am being driven to the wall, father, and down inside of me is your stubborn nature when it is roused. You harm my husband, and see what I'll do. I'll swear against you at the court of man. I'll appear against you on the Day of Judgment."

He stared at her helplessly. His great mouth fell open and he groaned. "I understand, and—and you may be right," he faltered. "But you'd better hurry. I know myself, and I know that if I met him I'd put him out of the way if all hell stood between me and him. He has dragged my name down into the mire and made me a laughing-stock before all men. I'm

pointed at, sneered at—called a senile fool."

"I'll hurry," she promised. "It won't take long."

In the little bedroom she threw open her trunk and began hastily to pack. New fears were now assailing her. What if John should suddenly come home for something he had left, as he had done once or twice? Indeed, there on the bureau lay the blue-and-white drawing which only the night before he had been studying. He might come for that, using Cavanaugh's horse and buggy, as he frequently did. The thought chilled her to the marrow of her bones. In her haste she all but tore her simple dresses from their hooks in the closet and stuffed them, unfolded, into the trunk. Now and then a little stifled sob escaped her. Her father sat still and soundless in the other room. She wanted to brush his clothes, tie his shoes, and fix his hatband before starting away, but time was too valuable.

There was a pad of writing-paper and a pencil on the bureau, and she told herself that she must write John a note and leave it. She closed and locked her trunk. Then she turned to the pad. She took up the pencil and started to write, but was interrupted. Her father crossed the hall and stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing?" he asked, a suspicious gleam in the eyes which took in the pad and pencil.

"Nothing. I am ready," she replied, dropping the pencil and turning to a window. "Come in and get the trunk," she ordered the cabman.

Nothing was said by Whaley or herself now, for the negro, hat in hand, was entering. And when he had left with the trunk, Tilly said:

"Come on, father, let's go."

Sullenly and still with a haunting air of indecision on him, he trudged ahead of her out into the yard. She closed the door but did not lock it.

"How can I get a message to John?" she asked herself. "There is no way that I can see, and yet I must—oh, I must!"

Her father had gone to the cab, opened the door himself, and stood waiting for her. In the open sunshine, his unshaven face had a grisly, ashen look; his bloodshot eyes held flitting gleams of insanity. His lips moved. He was talking to himself. She saw him clench his fist and hammer the glass door of the cab.

The negro was immediately behind Tilly. She turned while her father's eyes were momentarily averted. "Listen," she said, in a low tone. "See my husband when he returns home to-night; tell him that my father came for me and that I had to leave. Tell him not to come up home."

The negro's bare pate nodded beside the trunk on his shoulder. He seemed to understand, but made no other response, for Whaley's suspicious eyes were now on him and his daughter.

"Get in! Get in!" Whaley gulped, and stood holding the cab door.

She obeyed, and he followed and crowded into the narrow seat beside her. Through the glass of the opposite door she saw the white tombstones of the town's burial-place, the roof of Lizzie Trott's house above the trees, and the jagged, boulder-strewn hills beyond. The next moment the cab had turned toward the station and was trundling along the rutted, seldom-used street. Whaley's gaping pocket was within an inch of her hand, and Tilly could have taken out the revolver, but she did not dare do so, for that might fire him anew, and she had determined to run no risks whatever. The smoke of factory chimneys streaked the horizon above the town. She heard the bell of a switch-engine in the distant railway-yard. They met a grocer's delivery-wagon. It was taking some ordered things to the cottage, but Tilly dared not stop to explain, and, as the grocer's boy did not recognize her, the two conveyances passed each other. In an open lot some boys were playing ball. How could they play so unconcernedly when to the young wife the whole universe seemed to be whirling to its doom?

A little street-car was rumbling down an incline not far away. It seemed to have a few passengers. What if one of them should be John? And what if, on finding her gone, he should hasten to town and meet her father before the train left?

"What time is it?" she asked her father, with forced nonchalance. He made no answer, and she reached over and drew his open-faced silver watch from the pocket of his waistcoat; but he had forgotten to wind it, and it had stopped at three o'clock. She put the timepiece back with difficulty, for he was leaning forward and made no effort to aid her.

They were soon within sight of the station. Groups of men and boys stood about. She shuddered at the thought of meeting their gaze. Cavanaugh might be among them, and she feared the consequences of her father's ire on seeing him. And when the cab had stopped and they had alighted Tilly noticed that the men were exchanging remarks and

staring at her and her father. Surely they suspected something, and why? she wondered. Some of them came closer and eyed her attentively while pretending not to do so.

Tilly had her purse, and she sent the cabman for the tickets and ordered him to check her trunk. There was a little waiting-room, and, desiring more seclusion, she led her father into it. But they were not thus to escape the stare of the bystanders, for many of them walked past the door and looked in curiously. One of them wore the uniform of a policeman, and it seemed as if he were about to address some inquiry to her, but decided not to do so when he saw the cabman delivering the tickets and trunk-check to her. The clock on the wall indicated twelve. Ten minutes to wait. She was beginning to hope that all would be well when the ticket-seller came from his office and with a piece of chalk wrote on a blackboard bulletin:

"36 North-bound 15 minutes late."

The time dragged. More curious persons came to the door, stared, and even paused. The cabman came for his fare. She paid him for the use of his cab all the morning. "Don't forget," she whispered.

"I won't, miss," he said, comprehendingly, and thereupon she put some more money into his hand.

"Please, please, don't forget!" she repeated.

She watched him as he walked away, and then she saw the policeman join him, and the two turned to one side and began to talk earnestly together.

At last the train came. Through a gaping throng, ever increasing, she led her father to a seat in one of the coaches. There was only a short stop, and the train was soon moving again. The relief was great, and a vast sense of weakness came over her. She felt like crying, but she knew that would never do. She yearned for the opportunity to confide in some one. It could not be her mother, for she had never been understood by her mother. There was one friend who would understand, who had always understood, and that was Joel Eperson. Joel would be grieved. She was the wife of another, but that would make no difference to Joel Eperson, for that he was still faithful to her she did not doubt. She told herself that she must see Joel at once and get his advice. She could think of no one else upon whom she could so confidently rely, and she must go to some one, for all the initiative she had ever possessed seemed to have been ruthlessly destroyed along with every girlish dream, hope, and ideal.

CHAPTER XXX

It was dark that evening when John arrived home. As he opened the gate he was surprised to see that the cottage was not lighted. That was indeed strange, for Tilly was usually in the kitchen or the dining-room at that hour. The next remarkable thing was the fact that the key was in the lock. He felt it and heard it rattle as he caught the door-knob. The hall was dark and silent. He went in hurriedly. What could have happened? Where could she be? He called out: "Tilly! Tilly!" but there was no response. A gray cat that belonged to the Carrols came and rubbed against his ankles as he stood in the kitchen. He lighted the gas. How odd! for there lay the unwashed breakfast-dishes, the uncleaned coffee-pot, and in the dining-room the breakfast table-cloth had not been removed. He put down his dinner-pail, and, with a great fear clutching his breast, a fear he could not have defined, he went into the sitting-room. Nothing here was out of place, and he turned into the bedroom. It was dark, and with unsteady hands he struck a match. It broke. A blazing globule fell to the mat. He swore impatiently and extinguished it with his foot. He struck another and lighted the gas. The open door of the closet, now empty, met his eyes. A crushed hat-box lay on the floor, the bureau drawers were wide open and contained but a few things. He looked for Tilly's trunk. It was gone. Then he began to look everywhere for some written communication, lighting all the gas-jets to facilitate his search. Then he gave it up. He went about extinguishing the gas as aimlessly and mechanically as a sleepwalker, unaware of the things he was touching.

He went out on the porch. He stepped down into the yard. Verbal expression of no sort was formed in his consciousness, for the pall of comprehension had not yet quite enveloped him. Something yet of hope might blaze forth out of his gloom. Ah, perhaps she had received a telegram from home that some one was ill and had not had time to inform him. Yes, it might be that—that and not the other—not the damnable, sinister conceit that somehow seemed to emerge from the home of his mother and come crawling like a designing monster across the intervening spaces toward him. He went to the gate and clutched it with the strong hand which all that day had lifted mortar and bricks till his muscles were sore. Then he heard the sound of wheels. A horse and cab were approaching from the direction of the town.

"Ah, a message is coming!" he cried, a vast rising relief driving the words from him.

"Is dat you, Mr. Trott?" The cabman was reining his horse in at the gate.

"Yes. What is it?" John went out to the cab and stood breathlessly waiting for the negro to speak.

"Why, yo' wife tol' me ter tell you, sir, dat—but, bless me if I wasn't so rattled dat I hardly remember what it was she said."

"My wife, my wife, what about her?"

"Why, I done fetch 'er father here, sir, dis morning," the man went on in stammering tones. "He was rampagin' up 'n' down de Square, askin' whar you was. He had a gun an' was out er his head. Dar wasn't no policeman about, en' nobody else knowed how ter handle him. He sure was dangerous! Seems like he done hear about—well, you know—about yo' ma, an' Miss Jane Holder, an'—an' de high jinks over dar night after night, an' fines, drinks, poker an' all dat. He didn't talk to me, sir, but some of de white folks dat he saw in de stores said he claimed dat you abdicated his young daughter 'fo' she was old enough ter decide fer herself. I didn't want ter fetch 'im here, for blood was in his eyes, but I was afraid not to, wid him settin' behind me wid dat gun in his pocket, so I driv' him over, knowin' you was out in der country at work an' safe fer a while, anyway."

"But my wife—my wife?" John all but pleaded. "What about her?"

"I don't know 'cept she tuck 'im inside an' sorter quieted 'im down and tol' 'im she wanted to go home ter her ma. Some a de white folks up-town say she didn't know what she was gettin' her foot into down here nohow, an', now she found out, she was glad enough to get away. One an' all say she is plumb decent herself, just er plain country girl wid good up-bringin'. Some of 'em is b'ilin' mad at you an' yo' boss."

John stifled a rising groan. "Damn you," he said, "cut all that out and tell me if my wife left any message for me."

"Yes, sir, she did—now I remember, but she had ter give it ter me on de sly, an' I didn't git all of it. She said tell you she had ter go—dat she had stood it as long as she could, an'—oh yes, she said fer you not ter dare ter show yo'se'f up dar at 'er ol' home."

"And have they left town?" John asked, with strange calmness.

"Oh yes, sir! Dey tuck de twelve-ten train."

"That will do." John motioned for him to go. "I understand."

The negro turned his horse around and started back to town. John stood stock-still, his eyes on the cab disappearing in the gloom. He had stood that way for several minutes when a small hand was slipped into his from behind, and, looking around, he saw the soiled face and matted hair of Dora Boyles.

"Brother John," she faltered, "has Tilly left you—really—really left you?"

He dropped her hand and shoved her from him. "Go home!" he cried. "Go home, and don't bother me!"

She fell back a yard or so and stood staring at him. "I won't go till you tell me," she said, stubbornly. "I started over here this morning to show Tilly my doll and get her to help me dress it. I saw that crazy-looking old man come in a cab and take her and her trunk away. She was white—oh, she was as white as a sheet, and so pitiful-looking!"

"Go home, I tell you! Go home!" John gulped and snarled like a man goaded at once by grief and physical pain. "Go home, I tell you! Leave me alone!"

"I suppose that means she *has* left," the child reasoned aloud. "Well, brother John, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, because I liked her awfully well. But I'm not surprised. Aunt Jane told your ma yesterday—and it made her mad. My! didn't the old girl rip and snort? Aunt Jane told her this thing would happen sooner or later. She said no woman alive could stay cooped up in a little box like this very long and not have a single soul go near her, and you off all day."

John laid his hand roughly on the child's shoulder and smothered an oath of fury. "You go home!" he panted. "If you don't, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing!" The child smiled fearlessly. "Your bark is worse than your bite, brother John. But I'm going. I'll come back, though. I'll be over to clean up and cook something for you. You won't come back to our old shack, I know."

When she had left he went into the cottage, but he did not light the gas again. The darkness seemed more suitable to his mood. He sat down on the edge of his and Tilly's bed. His massive hand sank into her pillow. It was past his supper hour, but he had no desire to eat. The sheer thought of the kitchen where his young wife had worked, somehow suggested her death. A little round metal clock on the mantel was ticking sharply. He got up and wound it, as usual, at that hour. He went into the sitting-room. Here he sat down, lurched forward in unconscious weakness, and then, swearing impatiently, he steadied himself. He remained there only a minute. Rising, he went into the dining-room, felt about, as a blind man might, for a chair, and sank into it. Crossing his arms on the table, he rested his head on them. Had he been a weaker man he might have pitied himself. He had always contended that a man who could not bear pain and adversity had a "yellow streak" in him. He had once had a painful operation performed without an anesthetic, and he now told himself that he simply must master the things within and without him which had combined to overthrow him. He ground his teeth together. He clenched his fingers till the nails of some of them broke.

He closed his eyes. He tried to imagine that he was becoming drowsy and that he would soon sleep, but a thousand pictures floated through his brain and dug themselves in like burrowing animals. Chief among them was a view of Whaley striding about the Square, uttering slobbering anathemas against him. Another scene was that of Tilly's receiving the revelation he himself had shrunk from making. He saw the blight fall on her bonny face and her calm and inevitable consent to abandon him forever. And yet how could he bear *that*—exactly *that*? He groaned against the smooth surface of the table. He was ashamed of his frailty, for the mastery of himself seemed farther off, almost an impossibility.

The iron latch of the gate clicked. A heavy step grated on the gravel walk. He sat up straight and listened. The cast-iron door-bell rang. There was a pause, then a step sounded in the hall. Some one was entering unbidden and stalking into the house.

"Oh, John—Johnny, my boy! Where are you?" It was Cavanaugh's voice filled with fluttering grief, tenderness, dismay.

"Here I am!" John did not rise. "Here, in the dining-room."

"But the light—the light. Why don't you—"

Cavanaugh broke off as he stood in the doorway. He paused there for a moment, as if wondering what state a light would reveal the crouched form of his friend to be in.

"I don't want a light, Sam," John muttered. "You can have one if you want it. Here are some matches—but, no, I'll light up. When I came in I was so tired that I sat down here a minute, and—well, I must have—have dropped asleep. But what the hell's the use to lie to *you*?" He struck a match and held it to the gas-jet over the table beneath the gaudy porcelain shade. His writhing face, in the sudden flare of light, was white, holding a tint even of green. He sank back

into his chair. "No, I won't lie, Sam. Besides, if you haven't already heard you will soon enough."

"I *have* heard," Cavanaugh admitted. "I heard it at home from a neighbor. Then I went to the Square to make sure, and —"

"I know. It's town talk, a delicious tidbit for women and loafers," John sneered. "Well, well, it is done, Sam. It has happened, and that is all there is to it."

"I hurried over to see you and talk with you," Cavanaugh went on. "I don't know what step you want to take."

"I'll take none," John answered, grimly. "You don't think I want to kill anybody, do you? She is his daughter, and he had her before I got her. I tell you there is no fight in me, Sam. I can fight, as you know, when it has to be done, but there is no call for it in this case. Knowing Tilly as I know her, and now knowing my own plight as it has been made plain to me since I brought her here, I would think any man a damned idiot that would allow his daughter to marry me. God! God! No, never! Sam, Sam, I never found fault with you before, but you ought to have told me. By God! you ought to have opened my damned sightless eyes!"

"Don't! don't! my boy!" Cavanaugh cried, huskily. "You are breaking my heart. I wanted you with me. I saw how you two loved one another, and I thought I was acting right. I—I couldn't pull the bad conduct of others between you and that sweet little girl. I am not satisfied to let it rest as it is, either. You may not want to take any steps, but it is my duty to try to do something."

"Something? What the hell could you or any one do?"

"Well, I'll tell you what struck me, my dear boy. I'm going up to Cranston to-night and see how the land lies. I don't intend to rest idle and know no more than I've picked up in the wild talk of men on the streets up-town and a stupid negro cab-driver. This is a serious matter, and I have a big duty to perform."

"It won't do any good," John groaned, softly, and he shook his head. "I've been thinking it all over. I began to get my eyes open as soon as we got here. I've been a fool—a boy, a blind boy, at that, and what has happened to-day is not such a great surprise. You needn't go up there and beg for me, Sam. Say what you will, I am not worthy of her—that's the whole damned truth in a nutshell."

"Not worthy of her?" Cavanaugh protested. "How ridiculous, my boy!"

"No, I'm not. I don't know a man that is, but I'm sure that *I* never can be. Do you know that in meeting me and marrying me as she did that sweet child never had a fair deal? Other girls not as good as she is have married men with plenty of means, not a—a stain on them, with respectable friends and honorable blood-kin. But what have I done—my God! what have I done? Sam, I've committed a crime. No matter how I felt—how much I wanted her—I had no sort of right to her. No man has a right to lay a filthy load like mine on unsuspecting, frail shoulders. It is done, but if I could undo it and make her as free as she was when—when I first saw her up there, I'd do it if it plunged me into the eternal hell of flames her daddy believes in."

Cavanaugh's sympathies were wrung dry. He sat blinking as if every word from his protégé were a blow well aimed at him. Once he started to speak, but his voice broke and he desisted, sitting with his arms grimly folded, his legs awkwardly crossed, a broad, dust-coated shoe poised in mid-air.

"Maybe I ought to have had a talk with you—*maybe*," he finally said. "I—I prayed over it, John, but no light seemed to come to justify me in judging anybody in the matter—not your poor, misguided mother even, for our Lord and Saviour told us not to judge her sort. As I interpret Him, He said them that judged was the ones that needed judgment most of all. So on that I acted. My wife saw it a little bit different at first, but she finally said I was right, and sanctioned it. It seems to me that your ma is—is what she is just on the outside, anyway. The other day out at the work, after she had said all that in hot passion, it seemed to me that I noticed a look of shame and regret in her face, like she realized she had gone too far. You may remember that me and her stepped to one side just before she left, and—well, she started to cry. She did that, John, and it meant a lot. I was seeing her with her veil off—as you might say—I was looking beneath the paint, powder, and coming wrinkles. You know I knew her when she was a girl. I must speak plain. She was a beauty then, and that was her ruin, for all the hellish designs of the sharpest of men was centered on her. Your pa was clean, straight as a die, and loved her, but he was helpless. She loved attention and would have it. She fell. It had to come. It meant your pa's ruin, and it meant this blight that is on you and Tilly now; but, my boy, I stand here as a confident witness before God Almighty and state that nothing but good can come out of it in the long run. Peace out of the turmoil; joy out of the shame and grief; the fragrance of Elysian fields out of the moral stench under your mother's roof."

"Good?" John sniffed. "Sam, don't talk to me of a God—yours or any other man's. When you have been where I am

now, you'll know more about God than you do. God? God? God? You say he is everywhere. He's here to-night, isn't he? Here in this room? There in the kitchen where she left the dishes unwashed? Here where she left the door unlocked and ran away, disgusted with me for leading her into such a mess."

"Hush, hush, my boy!" entreated Cavanaugh, a dry sob rasping his throat. "Don't say any more! It is almost time for my train. I'm going up there to-night and see what can be done. Tilly will talk to me. What could she say here to these strangers? Now, don't go to work to-morrow. Things will move along all right for one day without us, and you won't feel like working, anyhow. I'll get back to-morrow night at ten o'clock. Wait for me here."

The grim silence which now brooded over John gave consent, and Cavanaugh rose and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't give up," he said. "I'm sure I'll bring back good news. God will see to that."

"I'll wait for you, Sam," John consented, "but it won't be as you hope. There is no God to see to anything. God didn't help my father, did he? Neither will he help me. The whole thing is blind chance. 'Lead us not into temptation'! What a pitiful prayer! My mother, you say, was led in when she was not more than a girl. Were the designing men on her track God's agents, and is my fate, and my young wife's, a part of some plan laid in heaven?"

"Wait, wait!" Cavanaugh reached down and took John's inert hand and pressed it. "I'll see you to-morrow night."

CHAPTER XXXI

John slept but little that night. There must have been a deep undercurrent of sentiment in his make-up, despite his practical type of mind, for the sight of everything Tilly had touched gave him infinite pain. He waked frequently through the night, and even while sleeping was tossed and torn by innumerable tantalizing dreams. He was awake at sunup, and again the lonely mental spectator of the clouded panorama of the day before.

There was a sound of pans and pots being handled in the kitchen, and he got up and went to the kitchen door. It was Dora making a fire in the range. She glanced up, saw him, smiled sheepishly, and lowered her head.

"There is nobody over home," she explained, apologetically. "They went off last night to be gone two days—another trip to Atlanta with old Roly-poly and some more. Aunt Jane was sick, but she dressed and went, all the same. I came over to cook your breakfast, wash the dishes, and do up the house. Why shouldn't I? There is nothing to do at home."

He said nothing, but as he turned away a faint sense of gratitude seemed to enter the aching void within him. A little later she called him to the dining-room. He had eaten no supper the night before, and his physical being demanded nourishment. He sat down and the child waited on him. The coffee was good and bracing, the eggs and steak were prepared to his taste, the toast brown and crisp.

Somehow he now regarded Dora with pity. How frail, wan, and anemic she looked! How thin and bloodless her hands and cheeks! She had the making of a good woman in her, but she, too, was losing her chance. How sad! How pitiful!

"You work too hard," he suddenly said, and he wondered if that touch of refined consideration for another had come from his contact with his wife. "You are too little and young. Sit down yourself and eat."

She shrugged her peaked shoulders and laughed. "I'm not hungry. I'm not a bit hungry here lately. The only thing I care for is syrup and bread, and they say too much of that as a regular diet will get you down in the long run."

He stared, his impulse toward her betterment oozing out of him. The whistles of the factories reminded him that he was not to work that day—that he was not to return at dark to Tilly, as had been his wont, and he rose and went back to the bedroom. What was to take place? Why, the day would drag by and Cavanaugh would return with some verdict or other—some report that would settle his fate forever.

Leaving Dora at work in the kitchen, he went outside. Desiring not to meet any one, he made his way to the nearest wooded hillside beyond his mother's house and the bleak, white-capped cemetery. From that coign of vantage he saw the town stretched out beneath him. He found a great moss-grown boulder and half lay, half sat on it. The sun climbed higher and higher; the din of the town and its industries beat in his ears, the buzz of a planing-mill, the clang of hammered iron. He ought not to have attempted to pass that particular day in absolute solitude and inactivity, but he knew naught of his own psychology. He watched for the coming and going of trains, telling himself again and again that Cavanaugh's return would decide his fate forever. What would he be informed? How could he face the thing that he had told Cavanaugh actually was to happen—that Tilly and he were to be parted forever?

At noon he crept down the hill, keeping himself hidden till the way was clear, then he hastened across the open to the cottage. The child, still there, had given it a semblance of order, and his lunch was on the table. She refused to sit with him, though he asked her in a tone that was full of consideration and that odd, abashed tenderness for her which seemed to be rooting in the loam of pained humility which filled him.

"I want to know, brother John," she said, her deep-sunken eyes staring earnestly—"I want to know if you think she is coming back?"

He gulped down his hot coffee, and as he replaced his cup in his saucer he said, with a touch of his old fatalistic recklessness: "I don't know. I think not. Sam is up there to-day to—to see about it. He will be back to-night. I don't know. I'm leaving it all to him, and—and to—her."

Later, as he sat and smoked in the parlor he tried to read the daily newspaper that had been left at his door, but even the boldest head-lines foiled to catch and rivet his attention. Taking a hammer and nails, he went into the back yard to repair a fence; but he had scarcely started to lift the first plank into place when the incongruity of the thing clutched him as in a vise. What was he doing? Why was he thinking of a thing so inconsequential as that? And for whom was he putting the fence to rights? With an oath born of sheer bleak agony, he threw the hammer from him and dropped the nails and plank to the ground. He had loved the place; he and Tilly had called it their "Cottage of Delight"; he had thought he would keep it in order, and even improve it, but all that was gone. He went back to the hillside. He watched the afternoon melt away, saw the sun go down into a bed of crimson and pink and the filmy cloud-curtains being drawn about the molten sleeper.

It was growing dark when he went back to the cottage. Dora was in the kitchen, preparing his supper. He was vaguely angered by her attention to him. He appreciated her doglike fidelity, but it made him impatient, for she was too small, young, and weak to do all that she was doing.

"You must go home," he blurted out, standing in the doorway and surveying her. "I'm able to look out for myself. I'm not hungry, anyway, now, for you have filled me up to the neck."

She smiled wistfully. There was a smudge of soot on her nose which gave her face a grotesque look. Her bare legs and feet were dust-coated and scrawny.

"I want to be here when Mr. Cavanaugh comes back," she contended, almost defiantly, a shadow of rigid doggedness in her eyes.

"But you can't," he retorted with irritation. "It will be late at night and you should be in bed."

"I want to know what he has to say," Dora persisted, putting more wood into the range. "Tilly was nice and good to me, and I want to know if she is coming back. Besides—besides, *you* want her."

"You can't sit up around here," he said, firmly. "You've got to go home."

She said nothing. He thought he had offended her and was sorry for it, but when supper was over he prevailed upon her to go. "Poor little rat!" he mused, as he stood at the gate and watched her vanish in the night. "She's never had a chance, and she'll never have one. Huh! Sam's God and old Whaley's is busy counting the hairs of her head and no harm will ever come to her—oh no, none at all!"

John paced back and forth in the little front yard. Eight o'clock came; nine; ten, and a little later he heard the whistle of the south-bound train as it drew near the town. The last street-car for the night would be leaving the Square in a few minutes. Cavanaugh would take it. He seldom rode in a cab, and time was too valuable for him to walk to-night.

The minutes passed. Presently he heard the rumble of the little car as it crossed an elevated trestle a half-mile away, then he saw its lighted windows flitting through the pines and oaks which bordered its tracks. It paused at the terminus. John heard the driver ordering his horse around to the other end, and he retreated into the house. Sam should not catch him there watching as if life or death hung on his report. It was one thing to feel a thing, and another to show it like weak women who weep openly for the dead, or men who cry out in pain like spoiled children. He went into the parlor and sat down. The outer night was very still, so still that he heard Cavanaugh's heavy tread when he was yet some distance away. Thump, thump, thump! John found himself counting the steps.

"Why am I like this?" he questioned himself. "If it is to be, it *is* to be, and that is the end of it. I can bear it. Why not? Why shouldn't a man bear anything that comes his way—anything, anything, even—even *this*?"

Cavanaugh was at the gate now. He was noiselessly opening and closing it as if fearful of waking some one asleep in the house.

"Is that you, Sam?" John called out from the parlor.

"Yes, yes, my boy, it is me. I—I thought you might be in bed," and the contractor now tiptoed into the hall and stood in the parlor doorway.

"Oh no, I thought I'd wait up," John replied. "Like a fool, I didn't work to-day, and you see I'm not so tired as I usually am. Come in. Got a match? I'll light the gas. I didn't light it because it is warm to-night and I was smoking. Did you bring any cigars with you? I've hung on to my pipe all day and wouldn't mind a change."

"No, I plumb forgot," Cavanaugh answered. "I had to hurry to get my train. I didn't go about any of the stores, either—too many idle gossipmongers hanging about. Don't light up for me. I—I— We can talk just as well without that. I really ought to be at home. I just thought I'd stop by and—and—"

He went no farther. John heard him feeling about for a chair and saw his dim bulk sink into it. There was no doubting the man's agitation, and why was he agitated? John thought he knew, and bared his mental breast to the hot iron of revelation.

"You say you didn't go out to the work to-day?" Cavanaugh said, irrelevantly enough to explain his mien and mood.

"No, I ought to have gone, but I didn't. I was a fool to hang around here like this, eating my head off and making a smoke-house of my lungs. It is the first day off I've had for a long time."

This remark was followed by silence. Cavanaugh broke it with a slowly released sigh. "I may as well tell you what I

did," he faltered.

"You can't tell me anything I don't know already," John quickly interposed. "Remember, Sam, that I told you last night —"

"I know, but I wasn't satisfied to let it rest there. I'm not satisfied yet to—to let it rest even where it is now. I'm not done with it by a long shot. I—I'm going back up there in—in a few days. I've got to look deeper into the law dealing with such extraordinary cases as—"

"The law?" John leaned back in his chair in a swift gesture of contempt. "What the hell has the law got to do with it, Sam? Law, I say, law! Did you ever hear of any justice dealt out by the law? Don't talk law to me. Tell me, man to man, what you did up there."

"What I did? Why, my boy"—Cavanaugh was floundering about in search for a word, a phrase with which to meet the blunt attack on his resources—"I did all I could think to do."

"Well, out with it, Sam. I know it went against me. There is no use beating about the bush. You saw Tilly, and she said —"

"Oh no, I didn't see her, my boy!" The contractor leaned eagerly upon the denial, small as it was. "I tried to, but it was impossible. She is housed up at home like a prisoner. John, Whaley is in a dangerous mood. I was advised not to go near the house. I started there anyway, but the sheriff stopped me—gave me orders to stay away. I don't know how to —to make it all plain to you, John. You see, I love Tilly and you so much that—that this thing cuts deep. It has almost knocked out my faith in a just Providence."

John leaned forward; his hands hung between his knees and he clasped them near the floor. He uttered a ghastly laugh meant to show indifference, but which missed its mark. "You are beating about the bush," he said, huskily, and another rasping laugh issued. "Out with it. I'm able to have a tooth pulled. Go ahead. Get it off your chest, old man."

"As I said just now," Cavanaugh began again, "I'm going back to Cranston after—after I get some legal advice down here where there is no public excitement."

"Excitement?" John said. "What do you mean by public excitement?"

Cavanaugh hesitated again, and John rose and stood towering above him in the gloom. He repeated his question, and this time there was no pretense in his tone or mien.

"Well, you know how a narrow-minded, backwoods community like that can get when it is wrought up high," the contractor said, gingerly. "You know how they are inclined to make a mountain out of a molehill. I can't say that I met one cool-headed person up there. Men and women were so crazy that they were frothing at the mouth. I hate to say it, John, but they actually threatened me with bodily harm. They asked me if what had been reported against your poor ma was true, and when I said that most of it was they wanted to tear me limb from limb. I'll tell you the truth and be done with it. There is no other way as I see it between friends such as we are. My boy, a mob was forming to tar-and-feather me. The sheriff came and warned me. He took me to the junction five miles this side of town in his buggy and put me on the train. I saw I would harm your interests if I stayed longer and so I took his advice. He is a smart man, well versed in the law, and as we drove along he told me what old Whaley is up to."

"I can guess," John said, grimly, "and, Sam, if I was in his place I'd do the selfsame thing. He is going to undo this marriage. I know— I see. Tilly is just a girl and I didn't tell her or him what to expect down here. Am I right, Sam?"

Cavanaugh hung fire, then he nodded his head. John could see the tangled shock of hair moving up and down.

"I knew that would be it," John said, returning to his chair. He sat down, crossed his legs, and tugged at the strap of one of his shoes. It broke off and he sat twisting it between his fingers.

"Yes, the sheriff called it 'annulment,'" Cavanaugh resumed, more calmly. "He said that Whaley would have no trouble putting it through the court which is in session, now, as it happens. Even the judge is prejudiced—seems that he had heard of your ma. They ought not to fetch in religion, but Whaley is going to prove that you are an atheist, so they say. So you see, my boy, that what is to be done by us must be done in a big hurry. I am going to see Fisher and Black the first thing in the morning. They are the best lawyers in the South. I'll be there when they open the office. I've got money enough to plank down a good retaining fee. You helped me make it on that court-house. Just think of it, we are going to win our case in that very building."

"You will not go to those lawyers, Sam."

"You say I won't?"

"No. I'm the one to decide that, and I've already done it."

"What do you mean, my boy? Surely you don't intend to sit quiet and let a lot of mountain roughnecks—"

"You are hot-headed like the mob up at Cranston," John broke in, and then made an apparent effort to proceed calmly. He took out his pipe and began to knock its bowl against the heel of his shoe to prepare it for a refilling. His nonchalant shrug was that of a thwarted school-boy. His smile was little more than a grimace which the darkness further distorted. "You are 'kicking against the pricks.' What is to be has to be, and if you oppose it you get the worst of it. Besides, you are an old fogy, Sam—you are out of date, moth-eaten. You have got some sort of a Romeo love idea in your head. You are trying to make yourself believe that—that Tilly will be unhappy the rest of her life if—if the old man wins. Shucks! I know women. How long does a young widow wear black these days? Old Whaley is right. That Cranston judge is right, the sheriff, and all the damned mob, too. If death will free a woman from a long life with a drunkard, the Cranston court can free one from—well, from what I pulled Tilly into. No, sir, Sam. I am not the man for her. I can't give her enough of what she ought to have. She deserves respectability, recognition as a lady in this or any other town. It is a good thing that it happened so soon. It will blow over all the quicker. She will—she will feel bad for a while, maybe, but time heals all wounds. Now go home to your wife, Sam. She is not well, and—"

Cavanaugh stood up. "Yes, I'll go," he faltered, "but I'm going to talk to Fisher and Black in the morning."

"Don't do it, Sam." John was smoking now. "I refuse to fight this case before the public. It is bad enough as it is without forcing my poor little—without forcing Tilly to hear more of it. She is too young and sensitive to go through it, and I won't let her. If I don't appear it will go through quietly. I know— I heard of a case like that. The judge picked a time when just a few people were present, and it was over right away."

"John, are you in earnest?" Cavanaugh asked, at the end of his resources, and he shambled out to the porch.

John followed and stood at his side. "I am, Sam; in fact, I insist on it. I know Tilly's rights and she shall have them. I owe her a million apologies. I'm doing all I can do. I wish I could do more. The time will come, Sam, when she will—will not want to think of me. She will do her best to forget me and all the rest of the awful mess."

"Hush, hush! I'll see you in the morning, after I've slept on it," Cavanaugh said, from the gate. "I don't see how I can give in to you, my boy. You and Tilly were too happy for it to end like this."

CHAPTER XXXII

When the contractor was out of sight John sank limply into a chair on the porch. The part he had played against his emotions had told on him. Not the hardest day of physical toil could have so wrought upon his nerves. Cavanaugh's steady tread was dying out in the distance. Afar off a dog was baying. Suddenly, across the street against a scraggy growth of sassafras-bushes, he saw something white moving. He thought that it might be a dog, a sheep, or a calf. It moved again. It was coming toward him. It approached the gate. It was Dora, and she timidly raised the latch and crept into the yard.

"Don't get mad, brother John," she pleaded. "I saw him come. I was hidden over there in the bushes. I couldn't go to sleep to save my life. I tried."

He was too much undone to protest. Moreover, there was a dumb, shrinking, animal-like worship in her tone and mien that watered the feverish waste within him. For the first time in his life he wanted to take the barefooted child into his lap and fondle her. He longed for a closer contact with her pitying warmth. To see her weep in his behalf would help; her childish tears would balm his wounds.

"Come in, kid," he said, gently. "I didn't mean to be rough to-night. You must overlook it. I was out of sorts—a fool to be so, but I was."

She sat down on the door-step, her eyes glued on him.

"What did he say?" she inquired. "I want to know. Is she coming back to you?"

"No, she's gone for good, kid," he answered. "But don't you bother; it is all right."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Stay on here in this house? I'll cook and clean for you, if you do. You can get another wife. If she wouldn't stay I'd let her go. There are plenty of others. Was she after some other fellow, brother John?"

"Oh no, no!" he jerked out. "It is not that. Don't you understand? But I see you don't. How could you?"

"You didn't say whether you are going to stay on here in this house or not," the child pursued. "That is the main thing."

Suddenly he leaned forward and stared straight at her. "Listen, kid," he began. "I tried you once and you kept my secret, so I know I can trust you. If I now tell you something I don't want a soul to know, will you promise to keep it?"

"Yes, yes," she agreed. "I won't tell, brother John. I'd cut out my tongue first."

"You see, I don't want Sam to know," John went on. "I don't want my mother or Jane to know—or Tilly, or any one alive. It is important. Sam will be as much surprised as any of them. Kid, I've made up my mind to pack my grip and catch the four-o'clock north-bound train. I'm going to cut this thing out forever. I'll cover my tracks. Not a living soul shall know where I am. I've thought it all out, and it is the only thing to do."

Dora was silent. He saw her fixed gaze shift itself from his eyes to the gate. Then he noted that her little hands were raised to her face. She was softly crying. He heard a low sob, and it cut through him like a gapped and rusty blade. He was surprised. He had never seen her like that before. "What is the matter?" he inquired. But she did not answer, and he saw that she was making a strong effort to control her emotion, as if she realized that it was distinctly out of place there and then. But he had determined to understand her better, and he went and sat beside her on the step. He took her hand and tried to fondle it, but, as if ashamed of her weakness, she drew it away and continued to sob, swallow, and quiver.

"I see, you don't want your brother John to go away. Is that it, kid?"

"Yes," she muttered, nodded, and then remained silent, her face tightly covered by her hands.

He stood up. He went to the fence and took some steps along it irresolutely. Suddenly he stood facing her, his arms folded as Cavanaugh had seen him stand studying the masonry he was building, an arch, a pillar, or cornice.

"Why haven't I thought of it before?" he reflected. "It would be a crime to leave the poor little mouse over there. She doesn't know what is in store for her, but her eyes will be opened some day, as mine are, and—and what has come to me may come to her. And who knows? It might hurt the poor little mite every bit as bad. I wonder if she— I wonder—" He went back and sat by her side.

"Listen, Dora," he began. "I've got to go—there is no way out of it—but I don't want to leave you like this. I didn't know till to-day how much I care for you. You seem, somehow, like a real sister. Say, I'll tell you—how about this? Come, go with me. I don't know where yet, but away off somewhere where we can start out right. I want to send you to school and give you a chance."

"Oh, you don't mean it—you *can't* mean *that*!" and she uncovered her face and sat staring, her quivering lips parted. Impulsively she put one of her hands against his breast, and with the other slowly wiped her wet eyes.

"Yes, I mean it, and there is no time to lose," he went on, gravely. "I want it settled, and when we are once on that train all this will be cut out forever. It will be better for me, and for you, and for Tilly."

"But Aunt Jane—" Dora faltered, letting her hand slide slowly down his shirt-front till it lay in her lap. "She needs me and—"

"You will have to leave her for good and all," he said. "You must decide between her and me. At any rate, she is doing nothing for you, and I am willing to work for you. It is odd, kid, but, now I come to think of it, I want you with me. It seems like leaving would be easier along with you."

"I don't know what to do," the world-old child said, undecidedly, but her eyes were dry, the sobs had left her voice.

"Then do as I say," he threw out firmly. "Go home and get your best dress on and your shoes and stockings, and some hat or other. Don't bother about a valise. I have two, and we'll stop on the road somewhere and I'll buy you some clothes. We are to be brother and sister, you know. From this on you are Dora Trott."

The child was still undecided, though her face was lighted with growing expectation. "Oh, it would be nice—scrumptious!" she half laughed, "but your ma and Aunt Jane—"

"Forget them!" he ordered, sharply. "They are not thinking of you to-night, are they? Huh! I guess not! Hurry! Get your things and come back. I'll be ready. We'll have to walk to the station, and I don't want to meet anybody on the way, either. We may have to take the back and side streets, and cut through an alley or two."

"May I bring my doll?" she asked. "I don't want to leave her."

"I'll get you a new one—never mind it," he answered, impatiently, stifling one of his old oaths.

"But I want her. I love her and she'd miss me. They would kick her about over there."

"Then bring her. I'll pack her away somewhere. Get a move on you. See how quick you can be."

"I'll hurry," Dora said, now completely resigned to his will. "I'll be ready in time."

When she had passed out at the gate he went into the bedroom, lighted the gas, and began to pack his clothes into two valises, leaving room for Dora's use.

"It is the thing to do," he argued. "I can't leave the poor little rat over there with those women. She needs attention. She is not strong and they are working her to death. Great God! she might grow up and be like them! Who knows? How could she keep from it? Who would be there to warn her? I was ignorant till it was too late. So would she be. No, this is the right thing to do. I'll adopt a sister. Huh! what a joke when they say I'm just a boy! But I'll do it. As for Tilly, she will now be doubly free. The old man can claim desertion. He can add that charge to his complaints in court. If I had some way to make everybody think I was dead, that would be even better. The main thing is for her to forget—wipe out and start in fresh, and she would do it quicker if she thought I was under the sod. Any woman would. Then she would marry again. I know who she will marry—" He winced, shuddered, and pressed down on the things he was packing. "She will end up by marrying Joel Eperson. I'd lay heavy stakes on that. My God! I can't find fault with him—not now, anyway! He is white to the bottom, that fellow. I have to admit it. He bore up like a man, though I was robbing him. I slid in between him and her after she had become the poor devil's very life. Then, then—I have to admit that, too—he never would have got her into this awful mess. He has too much sense for that—sense or honor, which? Well, well, they say turn about is fair play, and old, patient Joel will get his innings. He'll—he'll come home to her after his day's work. He'll take her in his— O my God!" John stood motionless. The old primitive fires were kindling in his blood. Had the room been dark his eyes might have gleamed like those of a tiger. He sat down on the bed. He was quivering and his heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. Presently he mastered himself and resumed his packing. "Don't be a fool, John Trott," he said, sharply. "You are up against it. Be a man, if it is in you."

Here the open closet caught his attention. One of Tilly's dresses hung in view, and he took it into his hands reverently. A pair of worn shoes lay on the floor. He picked up one of them. It was so small that he could have hidden it in his pocket. He turned it over in his great hand. His throbbing fingers caressed the soft leather. She would never need it.

Why not put it in with his things? He started to do so. He made space for it in one corner of a valise, and then, all at once exclaiming, "What t'ell!" he threw it back into the closet and continued to swear at himself in low, vexed tones.

Dora was entering at the front. She seldom wore her shoes, and, as she now had them on, she used her feet clumsily and made a great clatter in the hall.

"'Sh! for God's sake!" he cried, angrily, and then he turned his impatience off with an apologetic laugh. "Never mind, kid. Make all the noise you want. It won't do any harm. Are you ready? Give me that doll."

She handed it to him roughly wrapped in a newspaper. "Don't mash her!" she pleaded. "Her face is soft as putty in warm weather."

"There, there!" he laughed, "she will be all right. As snug as a bug in a rug. Now, let's go."

CHAPTER XXXIII

He locked the front door after them, put the key into its old place under the door-step, where Cavanaugh could find it, and then they passed out at the gate and trudged toward the station. They had ample time, and so he took the best way to avoid meeting any one who might comment on their odd departure.

The station was finally reached. No one was there but a watchman with a lantern in his hand, and he did not know either of them.

"Ticket-office isn't open at this hour," John explained to Dora. "We'll have to pay on the train. We change cars at Bristol. I'll pay that far and we may stop there and rest. This night traveling may go hard with a little thing like you. I've got to attend to you, Sis—eh? Did you catch that? It slipped out as natural as you please, and Sis it is, from now on. Yes, I've got to see that you are fed properly and have a tonic to get your blood right."

When the train came they got aboard. The car was about half full of passengers, nearly all of whom were asleep. John led his wide-eyed charge to a seat, put a valise down for a pillow, and made her take off her hat and lie down. "Close your peepers and take a nap," he jested. "I'm going into the smoker and light my pipe."

A half-hour later he came back. She was asleep. Her hat had fallen to the floor, and he carefully placed it in the rack overhead. Her features in repose appeared almost angelic, despite the fact that the cinders had drifted in at the window and lay on the young cheeks beneath the fallen lashes.

"Poor little rat!" he said to himself. "You are in bad hands, Sis, but maybe no worse off than you were." He recalled Eperson's studied courtesy and attention to Martha Jane and wondered if, after all, Eperson were becoming his absent instructor.

He sat down in the seat across the aisle from Dora and looked out at the window. The coming dawn was lighting the fields through which the train was scurrying like a monster of fire and smoke. The eastern sky was slowly filling with liquid gold. Dora slept till the sun was well up. Then she stirred and waked. He saw her glance around the car in amazement and then she saw him, smiled sheepishly, and flushed a little.

"I was dreaming," she said. "I thought I was flying away up in the air and that I never would light."

"We are going to have some breakfast in a little while," he informed her. "There is a dining-car on this train, and I'll order something brought to us here. A little table fits in here under the window. Come on, I'll show you where to wash your hands and face."

He led her to the ladies' lavatory, taught her how to supply the basin with water. He got a towel from an overhead rack, showed her a brush and comb that were for the use of passengers, and left her to make her toilet.

She came back to him presently, looking brighter and better, and they sat side by side till a negro porter in a white uniform came with the table and their breakfast. It had an inviting look—the fruit, the fried eggs, the thin-sliced bacon, the hot, brown cakes, dainty toast, and aromatic coffee, and the child partook of them with unusual relish.

John watched her with strange, new interest. It was a sudden reversal of a habitual situation. She had waited on him. He was now doing the same for her, and the performance seemed to hold in abeyance a full realization of the tragedy in his life. It may have been autosuggestion, induced by the child's great need of him, but whatever it was was vaguely soothing. He found himself with his young back to a wall of miserable fact, valiantly fighting off constantly increeping and maddening memories which threatened to unman him.

Later that afternoon they reached Bristol, and, as Dora looked weary, John decided to go to a hotel for the night. There was one near the station, and to it they went and secured adjoining rooms. While he was making the arrangements in the office Dora waited for him in the great, barren-looking parlor, the scant furniture of which was upholstered in dark-green plush, and when he came for her she was standing at a window, looking out. The sight of her worried him, for she seemed homesick and drooped like a storm-tossed bird.

"Now for our supper," he said, cheerfully. But she shook her head. She was not a bit hungry, she declared. The motion of the car had sickened her at the stomach.

"Then I'll put you to bed," he said, "and leave you there till I get my supper."

She acquiesced, and he led her to her room up-stairs. "Tumble in," he said, still cheerily, and she began slowly to undress, sitting in a big arm-chair which all but swallowed her diminutive form. She was having trouble with the knots of her shoe-strings, which, in her haste, she had tied too carelessly, and he knelt down and unfastened them. "What a

baby you are, after all!" he said, tenderly, a thrill that was almost parental going through him as he drew off the shoes, observed the thick coating of dust that was on them and the holes in the heels and toes of her stockings. "I'll leave your shoes outside the door, and a porter will clean them before morning and put them back," he said, smiling. He opened a valise, took out a clean though tattered nightgown she had brought, and spread it on the bed. Again he thought of Joel Eperson and wondered if Joel had done all such things for Martha Jane when she was a tiny tot. It was likely, for there were several years between their ages, and Joel seemed to be that sort of man.

When Dora was ready to retire he left her. "Are you afraid?" he asked from the door.

She shook her head. "What is there to be afraid of?" she asked, with a wan smile.

He returned in about an hour. He entered his room and peered cautiously in at the connecting door. The light from his gas-jet fell on her bed. She was awake.

"What is this?" he chided her. "Not asleep yet, and you all fagged out! Ah, I see! No wonder. Your window is shut. It is as close in here as a corked flask." He went in and opened her window. He thought the covering over her was too heavy for such a warm night and drew the white coverlet down below her feet. "There, there, that's better," he said. Her tangled hair lay unbecomingly across her brow, and he wanted to brush it back, but, conscious of a queer timidity, he refrained from doing so.

"I can't sleep for thinking," she suddenly said, with a touch of her old bluntness. "You haven't said where we are going."

"Oh, that is it!" He laughed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Well, the truth is, little sister, I hadn't made up my mind fully. I thought it might be Philadelphia, but I was looking over a newspaper down-stairs and saw some notes about new developments in New York, and I decided to go there."

"Oh, New York!" the child cried. "That is the biggest city in the country. Old Roly-poly says the lid is always off up there, and—"

"Stop!" Not since leaving Ridgeville had John's tone been so sharp and commanding. "Don't mention that man's name ever again, Sis. And another thing! Let's agree between us never to speak of any of it again—not to each other or to anybody else. Do you understand? I want all of it buried forever in a grave as deep as from here to the middle of the earth."

"Not your ma, nor Aunt Jane—?"

"No, no!" he said, fiercely.

"Nor Tilly?"

"No, never—under any circumstances. If people want to know about us, send them to me—or simply say we are orphans, father and mother both dead. John and Dora Trott. You understand now, don't you?"

The little tousled head moved wearily on the big pillow. She did not understand his far-seeing policy, but it didn't matter. He knew best.

There was a rap on the door. Opening it, he admitted a waiter with a tray containing some steaming milk-toast. "I forgot ordering it," John said to Dora, as the man moved a small table up to her bedside and rested the tray on it. "You must not go to bed on an empty stomach, and this is just light enough to make you sleep soundly."

The sight of the food, which was attractively served, appealed to the child, and when the man had left the room, John propped her up with the pillow and put the tray into her lap. She ate heartily, and when she had finished he set the tray aside.

"Now go to sleep," he enjoined her. "We leave at eight thirty in the morning and scoot straight through Virginia to New York."

CHAPTER XXXIV

One morning, two days after this, Tilly, half ill from worry, was in her room. She heard the sound of wheels below, and, looking from her window, she descried Joel Eperson in his buggy under the spreading branches of a big beech in front of the gate. Her mother and father were at a lawyer's office in the village, where they had gone to conclude the arrangements for the immediate annulment of her marriage. She hastened down the stairs, and went out to the grim, sentinel-like visitor, noting, as she approached him, the tense, wasted expression of his sallow face and the dark splotches about his honest eyes.

"Oh, Joel," she all but sobbed, "I'm so glad you came! Did Martha Jane tell you I wanted to see you?"

"Yes, and I hurried over at once." He had bared his brow, held his broad-brimmed hat in his hand, and had descended to the ground. He took her hand and pressed it reverently and with a sort of shrinking timidity. "I want you to know, Tilly, that if there is anything on earth that I can do I'll willingly do it, if it costs my life. God only knows how I long to help you."

"Oh, Joel, it is awful—awful!" she began, and stopped abruptly.

"Oh, I know— I've heard everything!" he responded, "and it is a beastly outrage. I feel like killing some one. Your father must be insane, and the whole hot-headed mass of hoodlums who are making such a row over nothing at all. I knew about your husband's unfortunate mother and about his religious views, but those were things he could not help, and I could not hold them against him."

"You knew about his mother?" Tilly cried, surprised. "You knew before our marriage?"

Eperson shrugged his gaunt shoulders and transferred his resigned gaze from her face to the still fields. "Yes," he said. "A man who thinks he is a friend of mine, and—and knew of my attentions to you, he had heard it down at Ridgeville and came to me with it shortly after your husband came to Cranston to work. I asked him to drop it, and he did so. I was convinced that your husband was an honorable man and in himself worthy of the love I saw that you were giving him. I am ready to be his friend as well as yours."

"Oh, Joel, you are so—so sweet and kind and noble! You are my only friend—you and Martha Jane. Your support and friendship make me stronger and braver."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Eperson said: "But you sent for me, Tilly. There must be something that—"

"Yes," she interrupted, "there is something I want you to do for me. In fact, there is no one else to go to. Oh, Joel, I want to get word to John in some way. I was compelled to run away without seeing him, and I have been unable to get a letter to him. My father has stopped my letters both here and at the post-office. John will not know what to think, and it struck me that if *you* would write him that I haven't turned against him, and that I will be true to him always in spite of anything my people may do, it would help him to understand the situation, and encourage him to wait till I can go back to Ridgeville."

"Of course, of course I would gladly do that, but would not this be better?" Joel looked at his watch. "You see, it is too late to get a letter off on this morning's train, but I could go in person. I could, by driving fast, leave my horse and buggy at the livery-stable and catch the train myself. In that case I could see him to-night, you know, while if I wrote a letter it would not reach him till late to-morrow, if even then."

"Oh, but could you—*would you*—really go?" Tilly asked, eagerly. "It would be so much better, for then you could explain everything thoroughly."

"Yes, but I must hurry," Eperson said, glancing at his horse. "I have only a few minutes."

"Then hurry," Tilly urged him. "You will know exactly what to say. Tell him that, no matter what is done in court, I shall still be true to him, and that I love him now more than ever."

Eperson bowed gravely. "I'll do my best," he promised. "And I'll hurry back and bring you his message. Shall I come straight here?"

"Yes, straight here," Tilly cried. "I'll find some way to talk with you in private. Oh, you are so good, so good; but hurry, Joel! Don't miss the train. Find Mr. Cavanaugh and he will show you how to reach John."

"I'll do my best, you may be sure," Eperson said, springing into his buggy and taking up his reins and whip. "Good-by."

She watched him from the gate as he dashed away in the cloud of dust raised by the hoofs of his trotting horse. She estimated the time it would take him to reach the station, and dreaded hearing too soon the whistle of the coming train's locomotive. Fully ten minutes passed before she heard the whistle. Then she was sure that Joel would get aboard in time. She was sure, because she knew the man who was serving her.

That afternoon, rather late, her parents came home. They delivered the news to her that the court had acted most promptly and she was now no longer the legal wife of John Trott. She received the information as stolidly as if it were a foregone verdict and quietly turned from her harsh-faced parents and went up to her room.

"Not his wife?" She laughed to herself as she sat on her bed and locked her limp hands in her lap. "As if a lawyer, a judge, and a few jurymen could take my husband from me as easily as that! Huh! I'd live with him without marriage if that is all there is to marriage. Joel will see him to-night. Joel will tell him how I feel, and John will wait till I can go to him. I know he loves me. I know that, and nothing else counts—nothing!"

Later she descended the stairs and went into the kitchen where her mother was at work. "Let me help you, mother," she said, taking the broom from Mrs. Whaley's hands and beginning to sweep the floor. "You must have had a lot to do while I was away."

Mrs. Whaley stood surprised for a moment, started to speak, hesitated, and then went out to where her husband sat in the slanting rays of the sun under an apple-tree.

"Where is she now?" he asked, glancing up from the open Bible and manuscript on his knee.

"She's sweeping in the kitchen."

"You don't say!" he said, laconically. "Well, when she is through in there send her here to me. I've got a straight talk for her. Things can't rest exactly on the same basis as they used to, as far as she is concerned. She has got to be on probation-like if she stays on under my roof. A great deal will depend on her conduct from now on. Folks will be inclined to slough away from us for a while. Already they blame you and me, and say we were too eager to marry her off. Nothing like this ever happened to any member of my church. It is bad in every way, and may be worse. I'm going to pray that no—no living stigma may follow it. You know what I mean. You know that I don't want to be the grandfather of Liz Trott's grandchild, and I won't—I won't if there is a just God in heaven. When Tilly is through that work send her to me."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," the woman said. "She is my child, as well as yours, and you'd better let well enough alone."

"What do you mean?" he growled, his grisly brows meeting, the old fanatical gleams in his eyes.

"I mean what I say," was the retort, deliberately delivered. "She was a child when she left us—she is a full-grown woman now. A woman don't live with a man even three or four days and remain the same as she was before. If you take my advice you won't nag her over this. I don't like her looks. She took the news of the divorce too quiet-like to suit me."

"Oh, that's it!" Whaley said, seriously, the flare in his eyes dying out. "That's what you are afraid of. You think she might give us the slip and get back to that scoundrel, divorce or no divorce. Well"—and he continued to frown—"that would be bad—that would be making a bad matter worse. I see your point, and you may be right. At any rate, I'll hold up for a while. Yes, yes, I'll hold up."

"I think you'd better," was the answer, as the speaker turned back into the house.

CHAPTER XXXV

The next day, in the afternoon, when Eperson had alighted from the train, he met his sister waiting for him in the buggy. "I got your message," she said, as he hurriedly approached her, brushing the dust of travel from his hat, "and here I am. What can I do to help poor Tilly?"

"Come with me to her," he said, sadly. "It may give me an opportunity to see her alone. I have already heard what was done at court, but I have even worse news for her."

He hurriedly explained as they drove along. He had met Cavanaugh and the astounded contractor had told him of John and Dora's secret departure. The old man had wept as he said that John had taken himself away as an obstacle to his wife's happiness, and that he evidently intended to disappear completely and forever. As Cavanaugh saw it, John had taken Dora with him to rescue the child from a fate similar to his own, which was a grand and noble thing to do, "especially," the contractor had added with a gulp, "when the poor boy was already loaded down with troubles of his own."

"It will break Tilly's heart—it may kill her!" Martha Jane declared, with strong emotion. "Poor thing!"

Just before reaching Whaley's Joel said: "I may not get a good chance to see Tilly alone, and in that case we'd better not keep her in suspense. Perhaps, after all, you could tell her even better than I."

Martha Jane nodded. "Poor Joel!" she murmured. "I see. You haven't the heart to tell her. Well, I will do it for you."

The elder Whaleys sat on the veranda. Tilly was not in sight. "I'll stay here in the buggy. You go in," Joel said. "They will let you talk to her alone. They always do."

Martha Jane got down to the ground between the parted wheels of the buggy and went into the yard.

"Where is Tilly, Mrs. Whaley?" she asked.

"Up in her room," Mrs. Whaley said. "Will you go up, or wait down here?"

"I'll run up, I guess," the visitor answered, with assumed lightness. "Joel, wait for me. I'll be down soon."

"Won't you come in, Joel?" Mrs. Whaley asked.

"No, I thank you, Mrs. Whaley," he said. "I'll watch my horse out here."

He remained seated in the buggy, slightly bending forward. A horse-fly was teasing the shuddering back of his horse, and he deftly flicked at it with his whip till he had knocked it away. A man in a field across the road was gathering yellow pumpkins and loading them into a cart. Joel himself had several acres of pumpkins ready for harvesting, and ordinarily he would have been interested in the quantity and quality of this farmer's product, but there were graver things on his mind now. Surely Martha Jane was staying a long time up-stairs. Had she put it delicately enough? Had she omitted to mention the fact of Trott's taking the child away with him? Joel had intended emphasizing that, for it was a thing any wife would be proud to hear of the man she had married. The time dragged even more slowly now. Old Whaley left his seat, walked around to the well, drew up a bucket of water, and drank from the bucket itself, tilting it forward with both his hands. Then Mrs. Whaley went into the house. Presently Martha Jane came down the stairs and out into the yard.

"Good-by, Mrs. Whaley," she called out. "I must be going now."

"Good-by, Martha Jane!" from within the house. "Come again when you find the time."

"I will, thank you, Mrs. Whaley. You must come out to see mother. She never gets into town, and you mustn't count visits with her."

There was a response to this which Joel did not hear, for he was studying his sister's face as he stood ready to help her into the buggy.

"Well?" he said, as they started to drive on. "What did you do?"

"Oh, don't ask me—don't ask me!" Martha Jane's eyes were filling, her lips twitching. "Oh, Joel, it was awful—simply awful! I'm glad you did not try to tell her. She stood tottering pitifully and looking as white as a dead person. I thought she was going to faint, and would have called her mother if she hadn't stopped me. It seemed to take away all the hope she had left. She sees it exactly as Mr. Cavanaugh does—that her husband intends to disappear for good and all. She

thinks it was for her sake, too. She said so. She declared she did not blame him at all, and when I told her about that child she said she understood that, too, and knew he did it for the little girl's good—that the child was facing a terrible future."

"Well, well, is that all?" Joel inquired, huskily.

"I left her seated at a window," Martha Jane continued. "I tried to get her to promise to be calm and hopeful, but all the old strength and energy seemed to have left her. I'm afraid, very much afraid, that she will never get over it. She has borne a lot already and this shock is the last straw."

A strap which held the breeching around the buttocks of the horse and fastened it to the shafts had broken, and Joel got down to fix it. The buckle-hole had torn out of the rotten leather, and he had to punch another with his pocket-knife.

"Poor Joel!" Martha Jane thought, as she sat and watched him. "People needn't tell me that men can't be constant. He'd love Tilly if she were to wipe her feet on him. He'd love her if she refused him a dozen times for other men. He'd go any length right now to give her back her husband. I wonder what there is about her that men care so much for. I'm sure I don't know, unless it is because she is so patient and gentle and plucky."

The harness was fixed. Joel got back into the buggy and drove on to the Square. "I was going to stop and get some things," Martha Jane said, "but I won't. I'm coming in to see Tilly to-morrow. I'm about the only one that goes to see her now. You knew, didn't you, that some of these narrow-minded women and girls are pretending to believe simply awful things about her?"

"What sort of things?" Eperson asked, waxing indignant.

"Why, you know—they say that Mr. Trott took her to his mother's house and introduced her to the worst sort of folks. There isn't a word of truth in it. Tilly has not yet even met the woman. Tilly and he had a cottage all to themselves. She told me that herself."

Joel groaned angrily. "I'm not surprised at anything the people around here would say and believe," he said, his lips drawn tight, his eyes holding fierce fires that were bursting into flames.

"Joel," Martha Jane said, as they were nearing their home, "you must take yourself in hand. This is showing on you. Tilly's marriage was bad enough, but this is hurting you even more."

"Oh, don't bother about me!" he cried, testily. "I'm a man and can stand anything. But you must look after her. Do you understand? You must come in to-morrow early and stay all day. She will need somebody besides that sour-faced, crabbed old pair that is with her. They will kill her or drive her insane."

"I'll do it—you may depend on me, brother," Martha Jane promised, as he helped her from the buggy at the gate.

CHAPTER XXXVI

On the morning following their arrival at Bristol, John and Dora took the train for New York. "We'll sit in the chair-car," he proposed. "It has revolving fans and is more roomy. They say this train is usually crowded."

Dora smiled expectantly as she followed him into the luxurious coach. She had slept well, had eaten a good breakfast, and seemed brighter than she had the day before. She was still a grotesque-looking creature in the dress which was too long for a child of her age, and the hat that was too large, being one Jane Holder, in one of her rare moments of mild self-reproach, had discarded and hastily retrimmed for her niece. But John Trott was not critical of outward appearances. There was something beneath the surface in Dora—an unspoken reliance on him, a gentle betrayal of pride and confidence in him, not to mention her abject helplessness, which atoned for all external shortcomings. The whole world looked dark to him, but he had determined that Dora should not dwell in the shadow, if he could prevent it.

They were soon well into the state of Virginia. The train was quite crowded and John congratulated himself on securing seats in the parlor-car. From the window Dora listlessly viewed the back-drifting fields and forests, the tobacco which she had never seen growing before, and the old-fashioned houses on the farms as well as in the towns and villages.

It was near night. Washington was only a few hours away.

"We are going to cross a high trestle over a ravine," John explained to his charge. "I heard a man talking about it. There! that is the whistle. I guess they will slow down until we get over it."

But the train was late and the locomotive's speed was not greatly diminished. From the window John saw the line of trees marking the ravine's sinuous course through the fields and told Dora that they would soon be on the trestle. A moment later there was a shriek from the locomotive, a violent jerking of the cars, a distant crashing and grinding of timbers, and a thunderous sound of heavy bodies falling. The coupling was broken and the chair-car lurched forward, left the track, shot its front end against an embankment about twenty feet high and remained poised there. Dora was thrown against a window, the thick glass of which fortunately did not break, and John fell between the chairs to the floor. Everywhere in the car the passengers lay over one another, squirming and screaming in pain and terror.

"Are you hurt?" John asked Dora, as he struggled to his feet and bent over her.

"No." She shook her head, her face blanched, her whole frame quivering.

"Come, let's get out!" he said. He offered to lift her in his arms, for the floor of the car was sharply slanting to one side, but she refused to permit it.

"Oh no. I can get out better by myself," she said, stepping from one seat to another to accelerate their egress.

Some of the passengers around them were injured slightly, some had fainted, and lay prone in the aisle, and these people blocked their progress for a few moments. But when they had finally reached the open a frightful sight met their view. At the bottom of the ravine which the trestle had spanned lay an indiscriminate heap of splintered and telescoped coaches which quite hid from view the locomotive lying beneath. A violent hissing of steam came from the mass which all but drowned out the cries of pain and terror from the imprisoned victims. Now and then men or boys could be seen breaking through the car windows and climbing down to the ground. But hundreds were out of sight. They were doubtless stunned or killed outright.

Fifty or sixty people from the chair-car and the two connected sleeping-coaches, which were the only parts of the train saved from the ruin, gathered on the brink of the ravine and stood spellbound by the sights they beheld in the smoking inferno beneath.

Suddenly a trainman near John raised a cry: "The cars are catching on fire! They are dry as powder and will burn like oil! My God! there are women and children down there!"

"Stay here!" John said to Dora. "I must get down there and try to help."

She nodded mutely, and he darted away. Other men followed him through the weeds and bushes down the rugged declivity. Dora watched him till he had vanished among the trees and boulders. The sound of escaping steam had ceased. Human cries were now audible, groans, prayers, and the pounding of feet and hands against parched car-walls. Faint blows they were and futile—hoarse prayers and unanswered. The highest car in the heap was toppling over and settled down more snugly into the mass. Between the upper coaches blue smoke was issuing, and from the under ones fierce flames were bursting. Dora suddenly descried John. He was on the slanting side of one of the cars, kicking in a wired window. The heart of the child was in her mouth, for he was in the gravest peril. Within twenty feet of him the

flames were lapping the paint from the thin woodwork on which he stood.

"That man that was with you is a fool!" a stylishly dressed woman said to Dora. "He will be burned to death."

"He is a workman—a brick-mason," Dora said, "and able to—"

"I don't care what he is—he is crazy, simply crazy!"

What had become of John, Dora did not know, for in a cloud of swirling smoke and flames she suddenly lost sight of him. Also the men who had descended with him could not be seen, and the whole mass of cars were now aflame. The blaze and heat drove the awed spectators back farther from the edge of the fiery gorge. Some were moving away to look after their belongings in the undestroyed cars. Dora wondered what she ought to do. She began to fear the worst in regard to John. She wanted to cry, but the tear-founts seemed to have dried up. The sun was down. The thickening darkness made the flames in the ravine all the brighter.

Presently she felt some one grasp her arm. It was John. He was covered with black as to his hands, face, and neck. His clothing was torn and scorched; there was a bleeding scratch across his right cheek and chin which had been made by a piece of flying glass. He was now mopping it with a soiled handkerchief.

"It is hell!" she heard him say, more to himself than her. "It is hell!"

Dora clung to him joyously.

"Think of it," he panted. "I got one woman out at a window and was reaching down for a little boy. I could see him holding up his hands from the burning seats, but he could not reach me. God! I'll never forget that kid's eyes and his last scream as he fell back into the fire!"

A locomotive drawing flat-cars loaded with people from a near-by town had stopped just beyond the sleeping-cars, and the crowd sprang down and gathered on the brink of the ravine up the side of which remains of the trestle hung, slowly burning.

"Come," John said to Dora. "I'll get our things out of the car, and then we'll get a place to spend the night. I'm sure we'll not get away till morning. I saw a hotel down the track as we came along."

He left her and returned in a moment with the valises. Then they went back along the railway to a crossing where stood a hotel of the very crudest rural type. Going into the office, he secured a room for Dora; but could get none for himself. Returning to her, he said:

"We'll have supper pretty soon. Go to your room and wash the dust off your face and hands. You are a sight to behold."

She followed an attendant up the single flight of stairs, though it looked as if she were averse to being separated from John even for so short a while. Indeed, she was wondering if he did not intend to undertake something else in which danger was involved. However, he did not keep her waiting long. He came up to her room. He had washed his face and hands in the barber shop, and had had his clothing and shoes brushed. He led her down to the dining-room. It was packed with passengers from the remaining coaches of the train who were bent on getting something to eat, and as for the adjoining office, it was literally jammed by an ever-growing throng of curious and horrified spectators, who were arriving by train, by private conveyance, and on foot from all directions.

They had secured seats at a table and given their order when an excited man of middle age, without hat or coat on, rushed up to John, holding out his hand.

"They tell me you are the man who saved my wife!" he cried. "My God! sir, I want—"

"Not me." John smiled blandly. "Must have been some other chap."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," the man said, slightly taken aback. "I see I am mistaken."

He disappeared in the office and Dora looked up at John inquiringly. "Didn't you say back there that you got a woman out of—"

"'Sh!" John said, glancing furtively at the adjoining table and lowering his voice to a whisper. "Yes, I said so, but we have to be careful. That man would have wanted my name and address and I don't know what else. You see, kid, you and I are trying to cover our tracks. If we got our names in a paper the people in Ridgeville would know as much about our business as we do ourselves. There are several reporters here jotting down names and telegraphing them. I made a point of not registering just now—paid in advance to get around it."

Young as she was, Dora understood what he meant. The supper came, was eaten, and they gave their places to other applicants for seats at the table. Dora looked tired and he sent her to her room. He had decided to sit up all night, but he did not tell her so. He saw a stream of sight-seers going toward the flaring gorge, and he joined them. More than a thousand persons were now massed along the brink of the ravine, in the depths of which lay a vast heap of coals, red-hot iron, twisted steel rails, and the burly outlines of the unconsumed locomotive, over which the ashes and coals had settled like a pall of scarlet.

In the light of a lantern held by a trainman a reporter on the steps of the chair-car sat rapidly making notes on a pad with a pencil. Suddenly he saw a man passing and called out to him:

"Hey, Timmons!" he cried. "Any more names?"

"Oh yes! I was looking for you," the man addressed answered, and he drew a slip of paper from his pocket. "Here you are. Take 'em down quick. I have to wire my own list in right away. T. B. Wrenshall, wife and child, St. Louis. Got that? Begins with a W, not an R. They say he was a traveling-man, but that doesn't matter. It is the list my people want. Here is another: Mrs. Marie Dugan, Nashville, also Miss Satterlee, Atlanta—a school-teacher, they say, but I'm not sure, so leave that out."

"All right. Thank you, Timmons," and the two reporters parted.

John paused, leaned against the car near the man with the pad, and idly watched his rapidly moving pencil. Something, he knew not what, seemed to hold him there as for some occult purpose. A conductor of one of the sleeping-cars approached. "Press?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, here I am," muttered the reporter.

"Here is a complete list of all my passengers," the conductor said, "all alive and checked up."

"All right, but it is the dead ones I'm after," the reporter said, taking the paper and pinning it to his notes.

John moved a few feet away. Again he viewed the red ruins, peering over the brink as into the heart of an active volcano. A thought had come to him, but he was irresolute. He looked back at the reporter. The man was still on the steps at work.

"It would be easy," John mused. "The simplest thing in the world, and I ought to do it. That would settle it for good and all. It would free Tilly completely, and give Dora her chance, too. Yes, I ought to do it— I really ought."

He walked about on the edge of the throng for several moments undecidedly. "What the hell is the matter with me?" he muttered. "Why can't I decide on a thing as simple as that and be done with it? It is for Tilly's lasting good. It would wipe the whole rotten thing out at once, and stop the damned wagging tongues sooner than anything else. It would sting sharply, like a doctor's knife, but it would cure the trouble. If I don't do something it will hang over her as long as she lives. I spoiled her chances by dropping into her life—here is a chance to drop out of it. I'm leaving her for good and all, anyway, so why not make a clean job of it?"

He felt that he had decided at last, and he went back to the reporter.

"Are you taking names?" he asked, in a voice the matter-of-fact tone of which surprised himself.

"Yes. Got any?" The writer did not look up from his rapidly moving pencil.

"Two friends of mine."

"All right, wait a minute."

The pencil was now rapidly producing shorthand dots, curves, and dashes. The red sky above the gorge held John's eyes. As in a picture of radiating flame he saw his little wife as he had seen her the morning he had unknowingly kissed her farewell forever on the door-step of the cottage as he stood, dinner-pail in hand, the sun just rising above the hills. In spite of his self-control and a belief in his stolidness, a lump swelled in his throat.

"She deserves a better deal out of the deck than to be tied to the memory of a man like me," he thought. "When she reads my name in the papers I'll be dead to her, dead and cremated. After all, it can't be worse than the other."

"Well, well," the reporter said, looking up, "you say you have lost some friends?"

"Yes, two—a man and a little girl, in the coach just ahead of this one."

"Their names and addresses, please. I'm in a devil of a rush—using railroad telegraph, and it is packed with official

business. Got an opening now, but may lose it any moment. Mention ages and business, if you know them."

"John Trott, twenty years old, Ridgeville, Georgia, brick-mason."

"All right—two t's in Trott, eh? Well, and the other one?"

"Dora Boyles—B-o-y-l-e-s," slowly spelled John; "age about nine, orphan, same town—Ridgeville, Georgia."

"Thanks. Is that all?" asked the reporter.

"That is all," and, afraid of being further questioned, John turned and stalked away.

CHAPTER XXXVII

He and Dora took a train for New York early the next morning. The air seemed to be growing more crisp. Dora's color was better, her skin clearer, her eyes brighter. She seemed more and more interested in the scenery along the way. They had to stop over in Washington for about three hours, and, leaving their valises in a check-room, they strolled about the city. John did not realize it, but the care and entertainment of the child had much to do with keeping his mind from dwelling on his troubles. Once he caught himself actually laughing over a droll mistake Dora made. She was so much interested in the sights that she walked nearly half a block at the side of a stranger, thinking that the man was John, who had paused to buy a cigar, and when she discovered her mistake she fairly screamed and hastened to John, whose hand she wanted to hold thereafter.

"He wouldn't bite you," John said. "In fact, he thought it was a good joke."

At four o'clock that afternoon they reached Jersey City, and at once took the ferry for New York, sitting on the upper deck and viewing the harbor and sky-line.

"It is a big town," John said, "a powerful big town. We'll be lost here like needles in a haystack. Well, that is what we are after, Sis," he added, a serious cast to his features.

They went ashore at Twenty-third Street. They were so ignorant of the life they were entering that they were fairly dazed by the crush and din of human beings and traffic which met them at the long pier and in the congested thoroughfare upon which it fronted. They were all but as helpless as incoming foreigners who could not speak the language of the country. However, with a bag in each hand, and Dora closely following, John managed to reach a street that was less crowded, and they walked on now more calmly. He was looking for a boarding-house, John informed his companion. "I understand there are plenty of them all about," he added.

They had reached West Fourteenth Street, and there in the windows of many of the old-fashioned brownstone former residences of the well-to-do John saw cards advertising rooms and board.

"There are three in a row," he smiled at Dora. "Which one shall we pick?"

"The one this way," she decided. "It looks cleaner, and there are some flowers on the window-sills."

"Good! Let's try it—ask the rates, anyway."

They crossed the street and went to the house in question. Here, however, they were puzzled, for there were two entrances, one on the brownstone stoop and the other beneath it. They decided on the lower, it being more accessible. There was a bell-pull and John, who had once put one into a wall, understood what it was for and used it promptly.

A white woman, who looked like she was Irish, opened the door.

"I see you have rooms and board," John ventured. "We want to see about them."

The woman smiled agreeably. "The madam is up-stairs. You can go up the steps and I'll let you in at the upper door, or you can come through here."

"This way is all right," John said. And the woman led them into a little hallway adjoining a long dining-room, the white-clothed tables of which could be seen through the open door. On the same floor, just beyond, was the kitchen. They knew this, for they caught a glimpse of a big range above which hung a row of polished pots and pans.

The stairway to the upper floor was quite narrow, and John had some difficulty in ascending it with his valises and the mute Dora, who was nervously attempting to hold his arm. However, the ascent was made, and they were shown into a big parlor with windows looking out on the street. The floor was covered by a well-worn but clean carpet, the walls held pictures of various sorts—crayon portraits, steel engravings, machine-made oil landscapes and a few water-colors in every style of frame imaginable.

"Oh, Mrs. McGwire!" the servant called up the flight of stairs which reached the next floor above. "Are you there?"

"Yes, Mrs. Clark. What is it?"

"Rooms and board," was the answer.

"Very well. I'm coming right down."

The landlady proved to be a cheery, bustling little body about thirty-five years of age. Her eyes were blue, her hair

chestnut. She bestowed a smile on the applicants that at once put them at ease.

"Yes, I happen to have two rooms at the top," she said, eying Dora's attire with a woman's natural curiosity. "They are three flights up; I have no others right now. My house is usually full at all seasons. You see, I have many stand-by's; people who have been here for years call it home. If you want to see the rooms you can leave your things here for a while."

Leaving Dora below, John accompanied the landlady to the rooms above. On seeing them he was satisfied that they would do. They were in the rear. One was quite large, and, in the crude estimation of the brick-mason, rather well furnished, for it held a massive walnut bureau with a marble top and wide mirror lighted on both sides by globed gas-jets, one of which was pink, the other frosted white. There was a big rosewood sofa against a wall, also a rocking-chair, a center-table, a wide walnut bedstead, and an ample alcove containing running water, and a basin and towels. The other was the typical hall room with a narrow iron bed, a chair, a wash-stand, a rug, a row of hooks on the wall for clothing over which hung a calico dust-curtain, and a single window.

"I suppose this might do for the little girl," suggested Mrs. McGwire, affably. "Children don't need much room. She is a relative, I presume?"

"My sister. We are orphans," John said, casually enough, considering the unlooked-for demand on his resources. "My sister Dora. But I would want her to have the other room. I can bunk anywhere. I want to put her into the public school here, and she ought to have a cheerful place to study in at night and sit in through the day. I shall be away at work."

"Fine, fine! I like that in you." Mrs. McGwire smiled affably. "I'm a widow with three children to bring up (that is why I am running this house) and I certainly appreciate such consideration for a child as you show. I have a boy of thirteen, a girl of eleven, and another of eight. If you stay here the older ones, Harold and Betty, might be able to help start your sister out on her studies."

"That would be nice," John responded. "She is a country girl and never has been to school at all."

Just here a rather tall, slender boy with the face of a student opened the door of a room at the far end of the passage and came forward.

"This is my big son," Mrs. McGwire said, smiling. "This is Harold. The doctor says he studies too hard, but I simply can't make him stop it."

The lad smiled politely, put his arm about his mother's waist, and said: "Somebody has taken my concordance. I left it with my other books, and it is gone."

"Oh, I forgot," Mrs. McGwire said, indulgently. "Mr. King (he is our minister)"—this last to John. "He was looking over your books this morning and he took it down to the parlor with him. It is there."

"Thank you, mother," the boy said, and went down the stairs.

"I'm very proud of my son," Mrs. McGwire said, looking after the boy with beaming eyes. "He really has a remarkable mind. Young as he is, he has already decided to be a preacher. He has read the Bible through twice, and can quote any passage you mention. He is the leader of Mr. King's big Bible class. His father was a minister, and it has been my daily prayer that Harold would go into the same work."

Ten dollars a week for the rooms and board for two was the price agreed on, and John went down with Mrs McGwire to inform Dora of the arrangement.

"I needn't ask your name," Mrs. McGwire said, smiling, as he picked up the valises, "for I see it on your bag. John Trott is short and plain enough."

John blinked. He had really thought seriously of changing his name, but it was too late now; besides, what did it matter? He nodded. "Yes," he said, looking at the letters on the valise. "A friend of mine, a sign-painter, made me a present of this last Christmas, and he lettered it himself."

Dora liked the spacious room very much, and it did not occur to her just then to compare it to John's, as she hastily removed her few belongings from his bags, and hung or laid them about the room.

After supper John went out to buy some tobacco, and when he returned he found Dora in her room, most timidly entertaining Betty and Minnie McGwire. Dora did not introduce her guests, and Betty rather gracefully did it herself. She was an affable talker, a rather slim, gawky blonde, while Minnie was a stocky brunette with heavy, dark brows and black hair that was too coarse and wiry to be easily controlled.

"Betty's going to dress my doll," Dora informed him. "She has got lots and lots of doll-things packed away, and Minnie has the cutest doll-house you ever saw. It is full of tables and chairs and dishes and even closets to hang things in. Could you show it to him, Minnie?"

"Sure," answered the child addressed. "I'll go get it."

"No, not to-night," John interposed. "Some other time."

Leaving the children, he turned into his cheerless room and lighted the gas. He unpacked the valises and hung up some of his apparel under the dust-curtain. There were his working-shirts, his overalls, his coarse cap and stoggy shoes. He had bought an evening paper and he opened it out to read it, but could not fix his attention even on the boldest of the head-lines. Ridgeville, the cottage, Tilly, floated through his mind, and a pain that was both physical and mental clutched his whole being. He winced, ground his teeth together, and stifled a groan.

"It is my damned yellow streak!" he muttered. "I must get over it—kill it, pull it out by the roots. Why shouldn't I have my share of bad luck? Others have plenty of it—even women and children. Poof! Be a man, John Trott. Don't be a dirty shirker!"

A merry ripple of laughter came from the adjoining room, and he heard Dora telling of the mistake she had made on the street in Washington, and somehow he felt relieved. Surely good would come out of the plunge he had made into those unknown waters, dark and deep as they seemed. Wasn't Dora already better off? And what more could he desire than to benefit a child like that materially and lastingly?

But the pain still clung and permeated. He heard the two visitors bidding good night to Dora, and when they had gone down-stairs he went into the other room, finding the child with her doll in her arms, rocking it as a mother might a living babe.

"Now get to bed, Sis," he said, more tenderly than he had ever spoken to her before. "Do you like it here?"

"Oh, very, very much!" she cried, enthusiastically. "Betty and Minnie are the sweetest and best children I ever saw, and Harold is nice, too—nice and polite, and awfully smart. He uses big words that I never heard before. The girls want me to go with them to their school and church. May I?"

"Yes," he returned. "Now get to bed. Sleep as late as you want to in the morning. You don't have to get up before day to cook breakfast for me now, eh?"

She smiled happily, but said nothing.

He yearned to kiss her, for through her companionship in his loneliness she had become very dear to him, but that strode him as being a weak thing for a man to do, and he left her without yielding to the impulse.

The air in his cell-like room was rather close, and he did not go to sleep readily. There were so many things to think about—the work he had to find as soon as possible, the clothes that must be bought for Dora, for he wanted her to dress as well as her new friends. He decided to ask Mrs. McGwire to help him make those purchases. As for the work, he was sure he could find a job at good wages, for he had already looked over the "Help wanted" advertisements in a morning paper and written down the addresses of several firms of contractors and builders who were in need of skilled labor.

After a long while he fell asleep, and when he waked in the morning he heard Dora moving about in her room.

"Kid!" he called out, "come here!"

"All right, brother John," she answered, and he was sure that he heard her tittering in a suppressed way. Wondering what could be the cause of her merriment so early in the day, he called out again. This time she answered with a rippling laugh: "Wait a minute, can't you?"

Ten minutes passed, and then she appeared in the doorway. She had on a really attractive blue-serge suit that fitted her quite well. Indeed, with her hair arranged as Betty McGwire wore hers, she looked like some strange, new little girl who bore but a slight resemblance to the unkempt Dora he had known from her babyhood.

"I was going to surprise you," she said, laughing freely over his stare of astonishment. "It is a dress that was too small for Betty and too big for Minnie. Mrs. McGwire gave it to me last night while you were out. She has two or three others which she says will be out of style before Minnie comes on, and will go to the ragman if I don't take them."

"It looks all right," John said, admiringly. "It will do till we can get some new ones."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

His mind greatly relieved by having such good custodians for Dora, John fared forth immediately after breakfast in search of work. No one could possibly have been more ignorant of the intricate ways of the great city than he, and yet he managed to find the office of the first advertiser on his list without overmuch delay or difficulty.

"Pilcher & Reed, Contractors and Builders," as their sign read, had their offices over a carpenter's shop in East Thirty-third Street near the river. The house was a red-brick structure which in former days had been a residence. The contractors occupied all of the second floor, the two floors above being used by certain Jewish makers of shirt-waists and skirts, and an Italian establishment for the dry-cleaning of clothing.

Mr. Reed, the junior member of the firm, was in the main office, a large square room with two windows, the walls of which were hung with framed photographs of buildings the firm had constructed and maps of the city's streets. He was standing at a flat-top desk which was covered with blue-prints, drawings, and sheets of paper filled with figures and diagrams, and as John entered he turned and shook hands with him. He had a broad face, was of middle age, and decidedly bald. He had a cordial manner, and when he detected, from John's pronunciation, that he was Southern, he smiled agreeably.

"I went down into North Carolina with a lumber concern ten years ago," he said. "We roughed it in the mountains getting out timber, and had a splendid time. I often wish I had kept at it. This indoor grind is taking the life out of me. I seldom see the sun. Brick-mason, eh? Well, the manager of our brick-and-stone work is in the rear office now, talking to some applicants. Member of the union?"

"No, not yet," John answered. "But I'm going to join."

"Well, that is unfortunate, for I think Mr. Kline will fill his openings right away, and we have to take union men in our work, to keep out of all sorts of labor complications."

Mr. Reed seemed interested. He laid aside his work, and he and John talked for nearly an hour, and when it finally came out that John had assisted in some contracting work in the South and had an ambition to go farther in the same line, Mr. Reed lowered his brows thoughtfully. In an adjoining office Mr. Pilcher was at work dictating letters to a stenographer and Reed suddenly excused himself and went in to him. John noticed that he shut the door of the tiny office. He was gone ten minutes or more and then he came back.

"The truth is, Mr. Trott," he said, a touch of business-like reserve showing itself in his manner for the first time, "we are really in need of office help. I mean the kind of a man that could do both inside and outside work. Mr. Richer is getting old and is not able to do much. He says he would like to talk to you. Would you mind going in?"

Pilcher was a brusk, dyspeptic individual who seemed to be overworked, but John liked him and was convinced of his fairness and honesty. They had only chatted a few minutes when the old man called out to his partner and asked him to come in.

Reed made his appearance at once. "We might give Mr. Trott a trial in the office," he said. "What do you think?"

"I haven't yet spoken to Mr. Trott of the salary," Reed said. "Have you mentioned it, Mr. Pilcher?"

"No, but I thought you had."

"At the start it could not be more than twenty a week," the junior member said, "but there would be a chance, if you caught on readily to the work, for an increase later on.

"I had hoped to do better than that," John answered, frankly. "I want to make a start at contracting, but I am a good brick-mason, and I can, by working overtime, occasionally earn more at that, I think."

"Yes, perhaps," Pilcher admitted, and he threw a glance at his partner which seemed to sanction John's level-headed view. "We might raise it to twenty-two, and give Mr. Trott time to think it over till—say, to-morrow morning. How would that suit you, Mr. Trott?"

"Very well, thank you," said John, and he rose to go.

Reed followed him into the other office. The fact that John had not at once accepted the position had impressed him favorably. "I really think we could get along well together," he said. "From what you have told me about your past work I think you would fall into our line easily enough. Well, think it over, and let us know in the morning."

John spent the remainder of the day answering in person various advertisements. At some places he was kept waiting in a long line of applicants for hours, only to find that the work to be done was out of town, and that membership in the union was absolutely obligatory.

When the houses of business were beginning to close for the day he took the Elevated train for home. Mrs. McGwire met him at the front door. She was smiling agreeably.

"Your sister is not at home just now," she announced. "Minnie and Betty were going to an ice-cream festival at our church, around in the next block, and they took her with them. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he returned. "I'm glad she got to go, and it was kind of them to take her."

He was at dinner when the children returned and they all came to the table where he sat alone. Dora's face was slightly flushed and she looked very attractive in the blue-serge suit. His heart throbbed with a vague, new pride in her. It was strange, but she had already acquired a sort of self-possession that rested well on such young shoulders. He noticed that she conducted herself almost as well as her two companions. She unfolded her napkin and put it into her lap, and handled her knife and fork as they did.

"Oh, it was glorious, brother John!" she exclaimed. "I wish you had been there. Girls and boys acted and sang on a little stage. Harold helped Mr. King run it all. The ice-cream and cake was the best I ever tasted. Harold made a speech, and it was very funny. Everybody laughed and clapped their hands."

"Harold only introduced some of the performers in a funny sort of way," Betty said, with quiet dignity. "He wrote it down beforehand."

When dinner was over they all went to the parlor above. Betty sat at the piano, opened a book of "Gospel Songs," and she and Minnie and some of the boarders began to sing. Harold came in with his mother and they stood side by side, listening. John sat at a window and he noticed that Dora, who was near the piano, had a look half of envy, half of chagrin in her eyes.

"Poor kid!" John mused, reading her aright, "she is sorry she can't sing. Young as she is, she has backbone and doesn't want others to be ahead of her."

That night before going to bed he looked in on her in her room. She sat in a big rocking-chair with a book in her lap. He went in and looked at it. It was an English primer. She glanced up at him. There was something like the moisture of diffused tears in her eyes and he heard her sigh.

"What is the matter?" he asked, gently.

She sighed again. "I can't make head nor tail of this darned thing," she said, her lips twitching. "Oh, I'm mad, brother John! Betty and Minnie can both read and write, and Betty keeps telling me (not in a mean way, though) not to say this and not to say that. Why, I'm a fool— I'm really a blockhead!"

John was deeply touched. He drew up a chair close beside hers and rested his hand on her head. "Listen, kid," he began. "It will come out all right. You are going to start to school Monday and you will learn fast. You are anxious to do it, you see, and that is the main thing. Some children have to be forced to learn, but it will come easy to you, for you have a good mind."

"Do you believe it? Do you *really*?" she faltered, searching his face eagerly.

"I know it," he answered, "and, take it from me, when you once get started you will go ahead of stacks and stacks of them. Don't be ashamed to start at the bottom. Great men and women began that way, and you are not to blame for the poor chance you've had."

He saw that he had comforted her, and recounted his various adventures in seeking work. When he spoke of the offer Pilcher & Reed had made him she suddenly said, "Take them up, brother John."

"Why do you say that?" he inquired.

"Because"—she began, and hesitated—"because I don't want you always to be a brick-mason. It is dirty work. You can do better. Look at Harold. He is just a boy, and yet he is determined to be a minister like Mr. King. Ministers talk nice and look nice."

And as John lay in his bed afterward, trying to decide what to do, he suddenly said: "It is a go! I'll take the kid's advice. It is a toss-up, anyway. They may not keep me the week out, but the thing is worth trying for. Sam always said it was my line and others have said the same thing. Yes, I'll close with Pilcher & Reed in the morning. I'll hang up my hat in

that office and try my hand at a new game for one week, anyway."

When he waked the next morning, however, he felt oppressed by a weighty sense of the things he had renounced forever. The new work he was about to undertake no longer charmed him. His entire outlook now seemed chaotic, futile. How could he go ahead—with any sort of heart—in this drab life among strangers, and leave forever behind him the memory of his ecstatic honeymoon with the sweet, pulsing mate of his choice? It simply could not be done. It was beyond mortal strength. He told himself that he had kept himself keyed up to the present point by continual change and rapid movement since leaving Tilly, but the ultimate test was on him. With a groan from a tight throat, and smothering another in his pillow, he told himself over and over that his career was ended. Tilly was free—there was comfort in that. With the news of his death in the wreck, she would bury him as widows have always buried their mates, and life for her would roll on, but she would remain alive to him as long as the breath came and went from his cheerless frame.

"Brother John!" It was Dora calling to him. "Are you awake?"

He started to answer, but his voice was clogged and he was afraid to trust it to utterance. She called again and then appeared fully dressed in the doorway, the primer in her hands. She approached his bedside. "Will you please tell me what this darned letter is? I can say them all, I think, down to it. What comes after O?"

"P," he answered. "Who taught you the others?"

"Betty. And Q comes next," she went on, holding the book closed. "Then R, S, T— What comes after T, brother John?" He told her, and she sat down on the edge of his bed, and for ten minutes he helped her learn the part of the alphabet she did not know.

The first bell for breakfast rang, and she left him. He stood up and stretched himself. "Be ashamed of yourself, John Trott," he muttered. "There is that poor kid trying to rise, and yet you are complaining. It is your damned yellow streak, or your liver is out of order. Throw it off, you whelp! Be a man! Women suffer in childbirth—children suffer under operations, crushed bones, and blindness. Your own father had his hell on earth. Stop whining over spilled milk. Think what you may be able to do for the dirty-faced brat you brought with you. Plunge in. Look those men in the eye to-day, and tell them you don't want their money unless you can give value received. What is New York more than Ridgeville, anyway?"

When he had dressed, he stood in the doorway of the other room. Dora was now copying the letters from her book on a piece of paper with a pencil.

"That's the idea," he said, smiling. "Come on, let's go to breakfast." He had never done it before, but he slid his arm about the waist of his foster-sister and playfully drew her toward the stairs. She appreciated it. It was as if she started to kiss him, but was too timid, daring only to incline her head against his arm.

"Harold says I am a heathen," she said. "What is that, brother John?"

He frowned thoughtfully and then smiled indulgently. "The church folks say it is a person that doesn't believe in a God. They pretend to believe in one because they make a living out of it. Let them think what they like. It doesn't concern us."

"Yes, it does," Dora answered, firmly. "Harold, Betty, and her mother all say that I must believe in God, that I must study about Him, listen to sermons, and—and even pray to Him every night and morning. They say I must go to Sunday-school and learn all about the Bible and Adam, and—and somebody else."

"Well, it is all right; go with them," John said in slow perplexity. "Most people do such things, and maybe you'd better. I don't want to stand in your way. Yes, you'd better go along with them and be like the rest. When you are grown you can think it all out for yourself, as I have."

Betty was coming from her mother's room, one flight below, and she turned and greeted them with a smile.

"She is a nice girl," John thought, as she and Dora linked arms and went ahead of him down the stairs. "She will make a fine woman, but she will never be equal to—"

He checked his thought. A storm of pain swept through him, almost depriving him of strength. He followed the children into the dining-room, which was well filled with boarders, some eating, some waiting to be served, and all chatting volubly. There was a great clatter of knives, forks, and dishes. Mrs. McGwire was helping in the kitchen, and Betty

joined her and became a waitress herself.

"I must fight it off—kill it, or it will down me!" John said to himself, as he and Dora sat waiting to be served. "I will never do the work before me if I keep this up, and it must be done—it must!"

When he had breakfasted and was outside in the cool, crisp air he felt better. He walked briskly, swinging his arms to and fro to start the circulation of his blood. He knew the car he was to take and he boarded it, first buying a morning paper, which he could not read for thinking of the delicious and agonizing things he had forsworn forever.

"It will never come through trying to forget," he finally said, with a stoic shrug. "It will simply have to wear itself out. Maybe, after a few months, a year, or two, I will be something like I was before Sam and I went up to—" He checked himself again. "Oh, what's the use?" His very mind seemed to sob and choke. A man seated near him asked him what time it was, and John took out his watch and informed him in the casual tone that any passenger might use to another.

"Thanks. Fine day," the man said, and John nodded and smiled.

CHAPTER XXXIX

One of Jane Holder's masculine admirers brought her home in a buggy from the Square one afternoon, and when he had parted with her at the gate he drove away. She went up to Mrs. Trott's room, finding that lady dressing at her bureau.

"I felt dizzy on the street, and Tobe Overby brought me home," Jane said, sinking into a chair and leaning on her sunshade. "I don't know what is wrong with me, Liz. Tobe says the doctors won't be plain with me and tell me the truth about my condition, and Tobe's all right. He gave me a straight V just now, for the sake of old times. Huh! the doctors needn't be mealy-mouthed with me. I've had enough of this game, Liz. I've had my share of fun all through, and what more could I ask? You don't think I want to get old, bent over, and snaggle-toothed, do you? Not on your life! I'm a sport, old girl, and I'll be one to the dizzy end. Huh! I guess!"

"Hush! Don't be silly!" her companion said, giving her an uneasy look, as she turned, holding in her ringed fingers a wisp of her long hair which she was pinning into a coil on the back part of her head. "I don't like to hear you talk that way."

"I don't care whether you do or not, Liz, old girl." Jane forced a laugh that was harsh to the point of rasping. "Sometimes it looks to me like you are afraid to croak. Let the least thing get the matter with you and you are scared out of your wits; but *me*? La me! I've had my day, Liz. I don't want to be a she-hog—a sow. Enough is enough for Jane Holder. Huh! It used to be 'Jennie' when I was young and thinking about getting married. Later on it was 'Jen,' and now it is 'Jane'—just 'Jane.' 'Old Jane' next! Huh! if I had long to live you don't think I'd keep on here in this rotten, tattling town, do you? I've had my fill of it. You know what they all say about you and me, don't you? They say you ruined John's life, and that I was heading Dora for the dives when John stepped in out of pity and kidnapped her—took her 'way off somewhere to get her away from me and you, and—"

"Hush!" Lizzie Trott, white with fury, cried, brandishing a heavy silver-plated hair-brush in her hand and towering over Jane.

But, leaning on her sunshade, Jane only laughed recklessly and satirically. "Pull in your horns, Liz, old girl," she said. "I'm not giving you any worse medicine than I'm taking myself. Huh! I guess not! Huh! I'm only telling you what's being said in this darned town. They all say, judging from her looks, that John's wife was as decent a country girl as ever lived, and that if her father had met you the day he came loaded for bear he would have put daylight through you. As for me, they say John did my duty for me. Huh! it is a hell of a mix-up, isn't it? But I don't care. I believe I'm all in. I feel it in my bones, and I don't give a damn when I keel over. I hope I won't suffer, though. Whew! I don't like to think of that! Look how Mag Sebastian faced the music in Atlanta. When that fool shoe-drummer got married last week it was piff! bang! and Mag gave a coroner's jury a job. Huh! They all say who saw Mag in her fine casket that she looked like she was asleep. You see, they combed her red bangs down so as to hide the bullet-hole, and dressed her up nice. And flowers! Gosh! every girl on the town piled 'em in and heaped 'em over her. But Mag couldn't smell 'em. Huh! I guess not!"

"What ails you?" Lizzie asked, her lips trembling, her eyes wide with grim inquiry, her tone one of anxious appeal, rather than that of her earlier resentment.

"Huh! Nothing, Liz, old girl!" Jane replied, doggedly. "I guess I am having different thoughts from you, that's all. I think certain things all day long, no matter who I'm with—laughing, dancing, drinking, shuffling a deck, or giving taffy to a man. Huh! Maybe it is because I know something—huh! something that you don't know."

"What do you mean now?" Lizzie demanded, suspiciously.

"Never mind what I mean," was the stubborn retort, as Jane stabbed at the straw matting with the ferrule of her sunshade. "Let well enough alone, Liz Trott. If what I know makes me see sights and hear sounds in the dead of night, what good would it do to bring it onto you?"

Lizzie laid down the powder-puff she was using and bent lower over the rambling speaker.

"You *do* know something," she said, under her breath. "You knew it yesterday. What do you mean by deviling me this way? You had it on your mind last night while the crowd was here and after they left. They knew it, too. I remember now how they looked at one another."

"I don't know anything," Jane said, doggedly, with a cloud across her wan face, and she got up, sighing. "I know I'll go stark, staring crazy if this keeps up. Stop your tongue! Let me alone! Huh! I know what's good for you."

Therewith Jane left the room and all but staggered to her own.

"She does know something," Lizzie Trott mused, as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. She completed her toilet and went down to the kitchen. A negro woman was at work there preparing supper.

"Don't burn the bread again, Mandy," she said, carelessly, her mind still occupied by the conversation just ended.

"Lawsy me! you needn't bother," the portly woman sniffed. "You may res' shore dat I won't burn it atter supper to-night, fer I'm gwine ter quit yer."

"Quit us? Why?"

The woman shrugged her fat shoulders. "Beca'se Jake done say fer me to, dat's why," she muttered. "I done promised ter love en' obey at de weddin', same es him, en' he say he done laid de law down. Dis is my las' day wid you en' t'other woman. We-all's preacher been talkin' ter Jake, en' he say you is unloadin' yo' dirt on de black race, 'case no white woman will work in dis house en' clean up atter you."

"So that is it," Lizzie Trott said, unrebelliously. "Well, well, I sha'n't plead with you." And with a haughty step she turned from the room.

There was nowhere to go that evening, and it happened that no visitors came, so Lizzie felt quite lonely. Even Jane's companionship was denied her, for Jane remained in her room with the door shut. She hadn't come down to supper, having answered to the call with the remark that she was not hungry and was feeling no better.

Ten o'clock came, eleven, twelve. Lizzie stepped out into the front yard and looked up at Jane's window to see if there was a light. The room was dark, and even the blinds were drawn down.

"Something really must be wrong," Lizzie speculated, dejectedly. "She is not at herself. She is imagining things. All that chatter about knowing something that I don't know may be just a crazy notion."

At one o'clock Lizzie reluctantly undressed for bed, for she felt that she was not in the mood for sleep, and she was sure she would have one of her headaches in the morning. She was about to turn out her light when she decided that she would ask Jane how she felt. So she tiptoed to the door of Jane's room and rapped.

"Who—who—who— What is it?" came in a low, halting voice from within.

"Me, Jane," and Lizzie tried the latch, only to find, to her surprise, that the door was locked. She waited a moment and then, full of dire fancies, she shook the knob and rapped more vigorously. "Let me in, Jane," she cried. "I want to see you. I must see you!"

But the appalling thing now was that Jane still made no effort to speak or move, and Lizzie was thoroughly frightened. She beat the door with both hands and kicked it.

"Open up or I'll break in!" she cried.

There was a pause, followed by a crash on the floor within the room. Jane had stumbled over a chair and upset it. There was another unaccountable pause, then Lizzie heard Jane's hands sliding on the door, feeling their way to the lock. The key was fumbled, then slowly turned, and Lizzie pushed the door open. There in the dark, robed in her new pink-silk gown, as Lizzie afterward discovered, stood Jane. She muttered something inarticulately and stepped or reeled back toward her bed. Lizzie groped forward, wondering, fearing she knew not what. She laid hold of Jane's arm and for a moment the two stood face to face in silence. Then Jane began to mutter in slow, vacuous tones:

"You bet I had a good time. I've lived on the best. I rolled 'em high and had friends that could pay their way. I'm a sport. I was born a sport, and been a sport from the day I ran away from school till now."

"What is the matter? Why are you dressed up like this?" Lizzie had felt the silk sleeve of the gown Jane was wearing.

"Huh! You can't guess, can you?" Jane said, with a low, insinuating laugh. Lizzie said nothing. She knew where Jane's matches were and she got one and started to strike it.

"Stop! None of that!" Jane cried. "I don't want no light. Huh! I prefer darkness to light! You know where that comes from, don't you? It is from the Bible. 'Those whose deeds are evil,' you remember? Well, size me up as you like, old girl. I've had my good time. I don't want the earth. I'm no she-hog—a sow. I know what's ahead, and I take off my hat to it, that's all!"

"Sit down," Lizzie said, in the deepest dread of something, she knew not what, and she drew Jane down to the edge of the bed. Unable to formulate any further questions, she stood staring at her companion till presently she saw Jane's body drowsily inclining to one side.

"That's right, lie down," Lizzie said, and she lifted Jane's feet to the bed and put a pillow under her head. Then, unmolested, she lit the lamp on the bureau. A strange sight met her eyes and chilled her blood. In her best pink-silk gown, beaded satin slippers, and embroidered silken hose, her hair crimped and fluffy, her cheeks deeply roughed, her eyebrows blackened as for a ball, Jane lay as if asleep.

"What am I to do?" Lizzie asked herself. "She is sick and must be undressed. She is delirious. She must have fever. She ought to have a doctor, but who could I send at this time of night?"

She took Jane's wrist to test the pulse, but Jane snatched it away.

"Oh, it's you, Liz!" she said, opening her eyes in a sort of inane, widening stare. "You caught me, didn't you? Well, I want it this way. When they look at me, if any of them comes, I want them to say old Jane was a sport from start to finish. The last dance is on. Mix the drinks, boys. Eat, drink, and shake the dice, for to-morrow you may not know where you are at, and nobody to pay the bill. But keep the other thing to yourselves. I don't want to hear about it. You say it was in the papers. I didn't see it. Liz didn't see it, either, and you say she and I are in the same box. Murder? Who says it was the same as murder? I didn't intend it. I'd never have let it happen if I could have prevented it. Yes, the baby was left with me, and—and I might have raised her different, but I was a sport, full of hell and out for a good time! But, O God! I wonder what the little thing thought when the crash came. Gosh! She must have screamed! She must have choked in that awful fire! Burned to a cinder! No flowers, no sod, no nothing! Well, what's the odds? Yes, I'll let Liz find out for herself. Somebody will tell her soon enough. Lord! how a thing like that flies and spins through the air! It is everybody's business."

"I want to undress you, Jane," Lizzie said, bewildered by the ambiguous torrent of words. "Let me unhook your frock."

"No, fool, idiot, spitfire, cat!" Jane cried, angrily. "I want to be like this—*just like this*. Get away! Leave me alone! How long will it take?—the Lord only knows. I couldn't ask the drug-clerk."

"Well, I'll leave you, then," Lizzie said, slightly offended.

Jane made no response, and Lizzie started to leave the room. She noticed the lamp and paused. "She might get up and knock it over," she thought, and, blowing her breath down the chimney, she extinguished the flame.

She was in her room, still undressed, when she heard the gate being opened. She went to the head of the stairs and listened. There was a vigorous rap. Lizzie went down the stairs and opened the door.

A man she knew to be Doctor Brackett stood on the porch, a satchel in his hand. His horse was at the gate.

"I'm just in from Atlanta," he explained, hurriedly. "I have a new clerk at my store, and in looking over his prescriptions I saw that he had sold Miss Holder quite a quantity of morphine tablets. You see, from the talk that is going on in town I was afraid she might have taken an—an overdose—you know what I mean?"

"I think something *is* wrong with her," Lizzie cried, aghast. "Hurry! Come! I'll light her lamp!"

Lizzie fairly ran up the steps and into Jane's room. She struck a match and lighted the lamp. The doctor followed her and bent over the sleeping woman. He opened her dress, quickly cut her corset-laces, and made an examination. Then, standing up, he turned to the bureau and began to search the littered top of it.

"Oh, here we are!" he exclaimed, in relief, as he picked up a vial containing morphine tablets and shook them between him and the light. "She's had a close shave. She thought she was taking enough."

"You mean that she—"

"Oh yes." The doctor put the vial into his pocket. "It is a plain case. Her mind is out of order. She actually—so my clerk heard to-night—went to the undertaker's and asked him the prices of various costly caskets. The undertaker thought she was referring to her recent bad news. She will come out of this sleep all right. But the truth is she can't recover. It is only a question of a week or two now. In fact, she won't get up from this. She hasn't the vitality. She has literally burned herself out and been living on her energies and nerves. She couldn't stand the shock of that sad calamity. I am sorry for you, too, Mrs. Trott. John was a fine boy. Now leave her just as she is. She will be easier handled in the morning. She is in no immediate danger."

The doctor took up his satchel and started away. In the darkened corridor Lizzie overtook him just as he had reached the head of the stairs.

"You said Jane had bad news, doctor," she began, falteringly, dreading revelations to come. "Do you mean about—about John taking her niece away?"

"Yes, Mrs. Trott, and the other—the deaths of the two in that awful wreck."

"Death? Wreck?" Lizzie leaned breathlessly against the wall. "What wreck—whose death?"

"Oh, oh, is it possible that you haven't heard?" And, standing in the slender shaft of light from Jane's partly closed door, the doctor awkwardly explained. Lizzie listened, as he thought, calmly enough. He couldn't read her face, for she kept it averted in the shadow.

"I understand it all now," she said, after a little pause. "Oh, oh, so that's it! That's what Jane meant."

She went with the doctor to the door, said good night, and locked the door after him. She stood in the dismal silence of the dark hall and heard his horse trotting down the street. She started to her room, sliding her hand on the smooth balustrade. Her room gained, she stood in the center of it as purposeless and dazed as a sleeper waking in strange surroundings. She felt for a chair and sank into it.

"John dead!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Why, why, it can't be—and yet why not, if they all say so? John dead, Dora dead, Jane dying, and I—and I left here all alone by myself!"

She undressed in the dark, vaguely dreading the light as if it might somehow stab her anew. She reclined on the bed. For hours she lay awake. She tried to cry, but could not summon tears to her eyes. She would have been afraid of Jane's staggering insanely about the house had the doctor not assured her that she would not stir till morning. Jane was not a ghost, but she was a would-be suicide, and that was quite as gruesome to think about.

CHAPTER XL

Finally she fell asleep, and the sun was well up when she was waked by Mandy, the negro servant.

"Yo' breakfast done raidy on de table, Mis' Trott," she said, a touch of condescension in her voice.

"Why, I thought," Lizzie humbly faltered, "that you were not coming back."

"I did say dat," Mandy answered, "en' I did intend ter keep my word, but Jake say 'twas my bounden duty ter he'p you out en' not quit yer in de lurch, now dat you los' yo' son en' de li'l girl dat way. Jake say he knowed Mr. John Trott en' dat he was er nice-appearin' young man, en' good ter work under. Yo' coffee gittin' col', en' if I heat it ag'in it never tast' de same—de secon' b'ilin' make it bitter."

"I'll come down—I'll come down," Lizzie said. "Let it be cold. It doesn't matter. I'm not hungry. Don't wake Jane. She is asleep. She was sick last night and had the doctor."

After breakfast there was nothing to do, and Lizzie sat first in the parlor, then in the dining-room, and again on the porch. She went in to see Jane and found her still asleep. In the yellow light of day there was something weirdly uncouth in the pink-robed form, the patchwork of paint, powder, and death-tints of the face which had once been attractive and care-free. The doctor was coming again and Lizzie told herself that Jane must be undressed and put to bed properly, and yet she shrank from going about it, for she dreaded Jane's temper. But it had to be done, so, getting out a nightgown from a bureau drawer, she proceeded to wake the sleeper. It was difficult, but Jane finally opened her eyes, and, only half conscious, she submitted, falling asleep again as soon as Lizzie stopped handling her. Mandy came up the stairs and looked in at the door. She approached the bed and stared down disapprovingly at the frail, limp form.

"Dat's er dyin' 'ooman," she said, superstitiously. "She got de mark of it all over 'er."

Lizzie, in a chair at the foot of the bed, nodded, but said nothing.

The doctor came, made an examination, and motioned Lizzie and the servant to follow him from the chamber. "She is sinking pretty fast," he said. "She may come to her senses before the end, and she may not. I'm doing no good and shall not call again."

The white woman and the black, standing side by side in the corridor, watched him descend the stairs.

"Well, well, what could she expect?" Mandy muttered, as she started for the kitchen. "She made 'er bed, Jake say, en' now she's on it. Well, well, I don't judge nobody—dat's de Lawd's job, not mine—but I'm sorry for 'er—so I am. I'm sorry fer 'er, en'—en' fer you, *too*, Mis' Trott."

There were no male visitors that day. The news of John's and Dora's deaths somehow kept men away. However, the report that Jane had attempted to kill herself and was about to die reached some of her female associates, and in their perfumed finery and with mincing, high-heeled steps they rustled in. With faces as vapid as faces of wax they perched around Jane's bed like birds in tinsel plumage, ready for instant flight. They knew that the end of one of their coterie was near, and yet they chatted in low tones of things pertaining to their walk of life and this and that off-color gossip. Now and then a smile slipped its frail fetters and died of its own rebuke.

Under various and startled excuses they declined Lizzie's hint that they come back after dark and sit the night through at the dying woman's bedside. So that night, when Mandy left for her home, saying that she could not possibly stay away from Jake and the children, Lizzie found herself quite marooned with Jane and certain memories which she could not combat.

Why she did it she could not have explained, but she took her lamp and went to John's old room at the end of the house, and stood looking about. Tacked to the wall were some diagrams he had drawn; and on the dusty table lay a coverless arithmetic, a dog-eared algebra, an English grammar, and pen, ink, paper, stubs of pencils, a worn tape-line, and on the wall hung a soiled shirt, a discarded gray vest, a pair of old trousers, and a dented derby hat. Lizzie lowered the lamp to the table and sat down in the only chair in the room. A pair of John's old shoes peeped out at her from beneath the narrow bed. Lizzie sat there for an hour or more. She was tearless, but a vast reservoir of tears seemed backed up within her, and certain inward dams threatened to burst. John no longer seemed the gawky workman of his later days, but the neglected though attractive child who used to romp noisily through the house and stare at her and her friends with such innocent and prattling blandness. And he was dead, actually dead! Lizzie mused thus for a while, and then began to grow angry. People were saying that she had caused his death by separating his wife from him and driving him away. They were saying, too, those meddlesome fools! that he had tried to rescue a child from sheer contamination by her, and had lost his life in the attempt. John's father, if he were alive—but she mustn't think of him.

No, she had given that over long ago. But to-night John's father, as a discarnate entity of some sort, seemed to haunt the dead silence of the house to which he had brought her so hopefully. The all-pervading gloom seemed to palpitate with his demand for the restoration to life and happiness of his son. Was she losing her mind? Lizzie wondered. She never could have imagined that such an hour as this could arrive for her, an hour so fraught with twinges, pangs, and thrusts the like of which had been alien to her experience. She could bear it no longer, and she took her lamp and went back to her own room. She listened attentively to detect any sound that might come from Jane's chamber. Was it a voice, a low, querulous voice? Yes, it must be; and laggingly she went to respond to it.

Jane lay with her eyes wide open in almost infantile inquiry.

"I see it didn't work," she smiled, wanly. "I didn't take enough, eh? Well, well, it doesn't matter, Liz. I'd rather go the regular, old-fashioned way, after all. I seem to have slept off that other feeling. I'm not afraid now—no, no, not a bit! I've had my day, old pal, and the richest women of the land haven't had a better time. I dreamt that all the girls were here—Ide, and Lou, High-fling Em, and—"

"They were here this afternoon," Lizzie fished from her turgid consciousness, "but they left. They were sorry."

"Oh, I know, but not one of the bunch thought for one minute that it would come to them, too, and that's the joke of it! Selfish fools—nasty, sly, and catty even over a corpse. They sent Mag Sebastian flowers, but it was after Mag was out of the game. Huh! I guess I know 'em, Liz, and so do you. Shucks! you won't cry when I'm carted off—not on your life! But there is *one* thing, yes, one thing, Liz, and it lies just between you and me. I don't know why it hangs on to me so tight. Huh!" Jane forced a rasping, throaty laugh that fairly snarled with insincerity. "I mean—I mean—oh, hell! you know what I mean!"

"I—I don't think I do," Lizzie faltered, trying to meet Jane's unwavering stare.

"Oh, come off, come off!" Jane sniffed. "'Jurors, look on the prisoner—prisoner, look on the jurors'! You know what I'm talking about. I heard the doctor telling you last night about John and Dora. Listen. I've had my fun and the good things of life, but did *my fun*—you know what I mean—did *my fun* come between me and—well—my duty to the kid's mother? And more than that—more than that—did my fun and yours, Liz, drive a young wife from a happy home with a hanging head, cause a fine boy and a helpless little girl to run from us as from smallpox into roasting flames—"

"Hush, hush!" Lizzie gasped, and she rose to her feet, quivering and pallid.

"Oh, well, never mind, Liz!" Jane sighed wearily. "You can't face that point any better than I can, but you hold a better hand than I do—for you see, Liz, you are still alive. Oh, but I don't know that I'd swap with you, for I'll soon know nothing about it, and I guess you'll tote it about with you awhile, anyway. I know I would if I lived, and that is why I tried the dope-route last night. Those thoughts have been in my mind some time. By the way, I want my pink on and the other things, and my hair fixed the same way. Don't forget. There won't be any preacher needed. I don't want any long-faced chap to whitewash my giddy record or to make an example of me. We are close to the graveyard, thank the powers that be, and I won't have to ride through town feet foremost. I wish the girls would stay away. I don't know why, but I do."

Jane's eyelids were drooping, and, thinking that she might sleep, Lizzie crept from the room. It was a long, sleepless night for Mrs. Trott. About every hour she would go to Jane, bend over her, and listen to her soft breathing. She was too inexperienced to know whether a decided change was taking place. She joyfully greeted the first gray streaks of daylight in the sky and began to watch for the coming of Mandy. Presently the servant came, accompanied by her husband, a lusty, middle-aged laborer, who simply tipped his hat and sat down on the sawhorse in the wood-yard.

"Jake say he 'low you may need er man about," Mandy explained. "How she comin' on?"

"Just the same, when I last saw her," Lizzie said. "Will you go in and see her?"

Mandy was in Jane's room several minutes. Then she came back, a serious and resigned look on her swarthy face.

"I was jes' in time," she said, stoically. "She opened 'er eyes, Mis' Trott, en' look' straight at me, en' smiled en' laughed, low-like. 'I done hat my share er fun,' she say. En' wid dat she fetched er big breath en' died. I didn't tetch 'er—no, ma'am, I didn't lay han's on 'er. Jake tol' me not ter. Jake say his maw tol' 'im dat 'twon't do ter tetch de corpse of any but dem dat's 'ceptable ter old St. Peter. Jake say dat de evil sperit is still housed up in de corruption, en' dat it will go inter any livin' flesh dat give it er chance. But somebody got ter dress 'er, Mis' Trott. It is a 'ooman's place. Dar is a black mid-wife 'cross town dat does all sorts er odd jobs. Jake say he think she would come. She got witch en' hoodoo charms, en' say ol' Nick en' all his imps cayn't faze 'er. Jake will go fer 'er ef you say so."

"Very well, very well," Lizzie consented. "And have him see the undertaker, too, please."

CHAPTER XLI

Martha Jane Eperson alighted from her brother's buggy before the gate at the Whaley farm-house. Mrs. Whaley came out and met her.

"I got your message," the visitor said, "and came in as quickly as I could. I had heard of John's death, and, as it is all over the country, I knew that Tilly had already heard it or had to be told."

"Yes, she knows," Mrs. Whaley sighed, resignedly. "Her father came in and let it out awfully rough-like. I hold that against him, so I do. He showed her the paper that it was in and told her that, although the court had dissolved the marriage tie, God had made the separation doubly sure. Tilly sat sorter dead-like for a long time. That was yesterday evening about sundown. I tried to comfort her, but she shudders and screams when me or her pa comes near her. This morning the doctor came to see her. I sent for him. He said she had to have a change. He was mad at her pa, and they had sharp words at the gate. The doctor said she simply must not stay here with us for a while—that it would drive her out of her senses or kill her."

"So you sent for me?" Martha Jane faltered.

"Yes, because you are the only one she talks about wanting to see. She loves you, and intimated that she would like to go out to your house for a few days. I am sure it will do her good, and I thought maybe you wouldn't mind—"

"Oh, I should love it above all things!" The girl grasped Mrs. Whaley's hands and wrung them eagerly. "I have the buggy. I could take her right back with me."

"Then you ought to do it while her pa is away," Mrs. Whaley said, her beetling brows lowered. "He is in the country to-day. If he was here he might raise a row, but he won't be apt to object when it is already done. I think she ought to go. I hate to say it, but this is no place for her right now. I'm afraid sometimes that her pa's got some trouble of the brain. 'Softening,' some call it. He is not like he was. He wakes up in the dead of night and comes stumbling over things to my bed to talk all this over, and he would go to Tilly's bed, too, if I'd let him. He is even suspicious of me—says I dispute his Bible views behind his back, or when he is expounding them to somebody before me. But I don't. I'm sick and tired of it all. I am coming to see that he is wrong, because religion is intended to help, not ruin folks, and between you and me, Martha Jane, every bit of trouble me and him ever had came out of his peculiar way of looking at Scripture. La me! wouldn't it have been better to have left Tilly down there with the man she picked out than to—to— Well, you know what I mean? You see how it ended."

With moist eyes, Martha Jane nodded. "May I see her now?" she asked, her lips twitching.

"Yes, go right up. She will be glad to see you."

Two days later Joel Eperson and Tilly sat on the veranda of Joel's farm-house. "Martha Jane said you had something to say to me," he said, gravely. "I hope it is something that I can do to help you, Tilly. God knows I want to do so."

"Yes, I want you to help me," Tilly said, lifting her sad eyes to his face, "but first I must make a confession. Joel, I deliberately planned this visit to Martha Jane for a purpose. There was something to be done that would have been impossible at home, owing to my father's close watching over me."

"I see— I see, and I am ready for anything," Joel declared, fervently.

Tilly was silent for several minutes, her glance on the lap of her black dress, and the black-bordered handkerchief which she held balled in her little hand.

"Of course," Joel began, considerately, "if you don't feel like saying any more at present, why, I—"

"It is not that," Tilly broke in; "but, oh, Joel, I am afraid that you may not agree with me, and this is a thing that lies very heavily on my sense of duty. There is something that I must do right away. Joel, I must go to Ridgeville for a day or so."

"To Ridgeville!" He stared blankly, after his astounded ejaculation.

"Yes, Joel. I want to visit our little house again and get some things I left— No, that isn't it. Why am I not telling the truth? I want to get anything—anything that John may have left. You see"—filling up and sobbing now—"I haven't a

single thing with me that was actually his."

"I understand." Joel raised his tortured eyes from her sweet, grief-swept face and let them rove unguided over his fields of cotton and ripening corn which lay along the red-clay road sloping mountainward. "I see, and you think that I—"

"It is like this, Joel." Tilly was controlling her sobs now and bending anxiously toward him. "So many people know me at Cranston that if I took the train there it would cause talk of an unpleasant sort. Father would know I was going and he would not allow it. But Bellewood, two miles from here, you know, is a station, and if you would put me on there at eight o'clock in the morning no one at home would know anything about it."

Joel's honest and worshipful eyes crept back to her face. "I see," he said, slowly, "and your people would think that you were here under the protection of my sister, my mother, and myself."

"Yes, Joel, but I have mentioned it to your mother and sister and they see it as I do. They are women and understand. They were afraid, however, that you would not want to do it, and so I came to you. You must help me, Joel. As I see it, a deception of this sort is not wrong, for it springs from a right motive."

Joel was deeply perturbed. His whole mental and spiritual being rose and fell on the billows of indecision. Finally he asked: "Is it just to visit the house and get some things? Is that all, Tilly?"

He saw her glance waver and sink to her lap. She took a deep, resolute breath. "What is the use?" she said, tremulously. "I cannot lie to you, Joel. You will either help me, knowing fully what I'm going for, or not at all. Joel, I want to see John's mother."

"His mother?" The plain man started and recoiled. "But why, oh, why, Tilly?"

She put her handkerchief to her writhing lips; she gulped and, with lowered eyes, half sobbed: "Because she is John's mother—that's all, Joel. I want to see, close at hand, the woman who gave my husband birth and nursed him when he was a baby. I saw her once when she sat behind me at a show. She looked at me and I looked at her. Somehow I think I'd know her better than any one else. Joel, she has lost her child and I have lost my husband. They have gone from us forever and ever. No power on earth ought to keep us two apart. No one else can tell how I feel or how she feels. I don't think she is as bad as people say, not deep down in her heart, anyway. She's done wrong, but so have all of us. Joel, you can help me or not, as you think best, but if you don't take me to that train I shall walk to it alone. I know my duty before God, and I shall do it. Joel, Joel, Joel"—she was speaking slowly, as if to formulate into words thoughts which lay deep beneath the surface of her torn being—"Joel, God is holding me accountable, in a way. Joel, if I had not deserted John he would have been alive to-day. Something would have arisen to have prevented my father from shooting him. I thought I was acting for the best, but I was excited and terrified. Do you think, feeling as I do, that I care what a few people here or at Ridgeville think about me?"

Joel rose to his feet. He was wearing his working-clothes. His coarse shoes and the hat in his gaunt hand were covered with dust from the barn which he had been cleaning in preparation for the winter's storage of grain. His rough shirt was open at the neck, the muscles of which were drawn taut. His brow and hands were beaded with sweat. He stood staring mountainward for a moment, rocked between two impulses. Presently he turned to her.

"It would be a question between old-fashioned men of honor," he said, "whether a gentleman could act as you ask me to act while you are intrusted to his protection, but you are now speaking of things, Tilly, which men have no right to decide upon. No bishop, no cardinal should refuse to go to a woman in distress, and neither should I!—neither should you. And so, if you feel that it is your duty to the memory of your husband to do this thing, I shall help you."

"Thank you, Joel." Tilly sobbed aloud. "I knew you would not desert me."

"And when do you want to go?" he inquired.

"In the morning, Joel."

"Then I shall be ready to take you," he said, turning away.

He had to clean and oil the wheels of his road-wagon, and he went to the barn-yard and set to work.

CHAPTER XLII

There was but scant attendance at the burial of Jane Holder. The men she had known, and with whom she had laughed, danced, jested, and sung, under the veil of night, for obvious reasons could not attend in open daylight such rites, simple and unobtrusive though they were. In like manner, Jane's female associates were chary about being in evidence. Moreover, such irresponsible human butterflies are said to have morbid fears of death, and this particular case was surely nature's grimmest reminder.

Lizzie Trott went, of course, and Mandy and Jake walked behind her, solemnly and sedately self-righteous. The spot set aside for Jane's remains to repose in was in an unused, weed-overgrown corner of the public cemetery—the spot decided on by the town clerk, who granted the permit at the price required alike for respected or unrespected interment. The undertaker's men, in a perfunctory way, did the work of lowering the flower-covered casket into the damp red clay which was intermixed with round, prehistoric pebbles. The white sexton of the cemetery, an old man, bowed and gray, took charge of the filling of the grave with earth and shaping a mound on the surface.

The hearse, the black-plumed horses, and the undertaker's men went away. Jake and Mandy again fell in behind Lizzie and they walked down the hill to the deserted house.

"I cooked enough fer yo' supper, Mis' Trott," Mandy said at the gate. "Jake say dat I mustn't come back ter you any mo'."

"Very well, Mandy," Lizzie said, wearily. "Good-by."

"Good-by, Mis' Trott. Me 'n' Jake bofe sorry fer you."

"Yas'm, we is," Jake intoned, doffing his hat and sliding his flat feet backward.

The interior of the house was still and shadowy. Lizzie sat down in that best dark dress of hers in the parlor. She was beginning to pity herself, for it was all so very, very terrible. How could she go on living there? And yet, whither was she to go? She rose. She started up the stairs with the strange intention of again visiting John's old room, but in the hall she stopped. "How silly!" she thought. "What am I going up there for?" The slanting rays of the lowering sun fell through the narrow side-lights of the door and lay on the floor at her feet. She shuddered. It would soon be night again and how could she pass the dark hours?—for something told her that she would not sleep soundly. She had never felt less like sleeping, though she had not lost consciousness for two days and two nights. Then a self-protective idea entered her confused reflections, and she acted on it. She found among her belongings a piece of broad black ribbon, and, forming a bow and streamers of it, she hung it on the front door-knob, together with a card on which she had written, "Not at home." That would keep people away—her friends and Jane's—and she was in no mood to entertain any one. The ribbon and card would speak of John, of Dora, of Jane, and the boldest would respect their significance.

In her own room Lizzie changed her dress. She felt like it, and she put on her oldest and plainest gown. She drew off her rings and bracelets and dropped them into a drawer. Something psychological was happening to her which she could not have analyzed had she had far more occult knowledge than she possessed. She remembered that her mother had dressed plainly in those far-off days which now seemed so sweet and restful, and somehow she wanted to be like her mother.

It was sundown. It would soon be dark, she told herself, with a cool shudder and a little groan of despair. Suddenly she heard a sound as of the gate being closed. Then there was a light step on the porch, followed by a low rap on the door. Lizzie crept down the stairs, not knowing whether she should open the door or not. There was another rap, a timid one, it seemed to Lizzie, who now stood hesitating in the hall close to the door. There was a brief silence, then a low, awed voice was heard calling:

"Mrs. Trott! Oh, Mrs. Trott! May I see you for a moment?"

Lizzie fired up with a touch of her old irascibility, and, putting her lips to the keyhole, she cried out, sharply:

"There is no one at home! Can't you read the card on the door?"

"Yes, Mrs. Trott," came back after a pause, "but I've come a long way to see you. Don't you know me? I'm Tilly, John's wife."

"John's wife!" Lizzie gasped under her breath. "John's wife!" Then with fumbling fingers she unlocked and opened the door and stood staring at the quaint little visitor whose black costume was covered with the dust of travel and who seemed quite frightened under the ordeal upon her.

"Oh, Mrs. Trott," Tilly went on, in a pleading tone, "do forgive me! I know I have no right to intrude on you like this, but I simply couldn't stay away any longer. Oh, Mrs. Trott, you are alone and in trouble and I want to help you!"

"Want to help me—you want to help me?" Lizzie stammered, taking Tilly's outstretched hand and leading her into the parlor. "Of course, of course you are welcome, but you mustn't stand there. Some one passing might see you. You say—you say that you want to see me?"

"Yes, you are his mother— I'm his wife, and we have lost him. Oh, Mrs. Trott, what are we to do—how can we bear it?"

Tilly's voice quivered and hung in her throat and broke into sobs. The woman within the woman of the world took the weeping child to her breast and held her there. She, too, was weeping now and afraid to trust her abashed voice to utterance. Locked in a mutual embrace, they stood for several minutes. Then Lizzie, the weaker vessel of the two, found her voice.

"Why did you come *here*?" she cried. "Oh, why did you come *here*?"

"I had to see you," Tilly made husky reply. "I know how you feel because I know how I feel. Oh, Mrs. Trott, you are his mother—actually his mother. I see the look of him in your face, in your eyes, in your hair and hands, and hear his voice in yours. Do you know that I killed him? If I had not left him as I did he would have been alive to-day. I was a coward—but, oh, it was for John, for John's sake that I did it!"

"I understand," Lizzie half groaned, "but you were not to blame, my child. I am the one. It's just me, child—just me and no one else. I spoiled his life and yours. I know it—I know it. You ought to hate me, as all the rest do, and not come here like this. Don't you know that if people knew you were here they would—would—"

"Hush!" Tilly said, pressing Lizzie's hands to her breast and holding them there. "I love you—I love you even more—yes, more than I do my own mother. You are my mother. Death has parted John and me, but nothing should part me from you. Some day you must let me stay with you—live with you, care for you, work for you. Oh, Mrs. Trott, I want to be to you what John would have been had he lived to see you so lonely and unhappy as you are now."

As she stared Lizzie Trott seemed fairly to wilt in the rays of the new sun that was blazing over her. "Why, child, darling child," she sobbingly cried out, "you could never live with me. It is out of all reason. Even this visit is imprudent. You must go home—you must go back to your mother. Surely you know that this very roof—"

"I don't care for that," Tilly broke in. "I can't live with my people— I don't want to live anywhere but with you. You need me—yes, that is the truth; you need me, and I need you. I feel rested and soothed here, as if God Himself were with me. I don't feel so anywhere else."

They sat down on the old sofa, side by side. They wept and clung together. After a while Tilly raised her head. "I've always wanted to see John's room. May I?" she asked. "Would you mind? It is silly, perhaps, but I want to see it. He told me how he used to study and work there at night."

Lizzie nodded and rose. It was dark now and she lighted a lamp. At the foot of the stairs, however, she stopped abruptly.

"Oh, I forgot," she cried. "You ought not to look at it. It is upset, unclean; it was never well attended to even while he was here. It will make you hate me."

"No, no; let me see it, please," Tilly pleaded, taking the lamp into her own hand. "I can go alone—in fact, in fact, I'd like to be alone there for a little while, Mrs. Trott, if you wouldn't mind."

Lizzie hesitated a moment and then gave in. "It is the last door on the left," she said. "I'm sorry it is in such a bad condition."

"Very well, I'll find it," Tilly answered, and, leaving Lizzie below, she went up the stairs.

CHAPTER XLIII

She was absent more than an hour. Lizzie was becoming afraid of something she knew not what—something due, perhaps, to the suggestion laid upon her by Jane Holder's abortive attempt, when Tilly appeared at the head of the stairs, her nunlike face in the disk of the lamp's rays.

"I've swept and dusted, and made the bed," she said. "There are a few of his things that I'd like to have, provided you don't want to keep them—the books, the drawings, and his hat and shoes."

"You may have them," Lizzie answered, as they went back into the parlor and sat down.

"I am going to ask another favor," Tilly went on. "I intended to spend the night at the cottage, but if you wouldn't mind I'd like to stay here with you and sleep in John's old bed. You may think it odd, but I want to do it, Mrs. Trott. I want to do it more than anything in the world."

"Oh!" Lizzie started and protested, "you couldn't stay here, my child. It would never do. You are too young and inexperienced to understand why. I've harmed you and John enough already; surely you see—you see—"

"I know what you mean, but it doesn't matter," Tilly insisted. "I want to stay to-night, for I must go back to-morrow. Don't refuse me—please, please don't! I want to sleep there and I want to get up in the morning and cook your breakfast and make your coffee for you. Please, please let me."

Lizzie lowered her head. Her features were in the shadow. She was very silent. Then Tilly felt some tears falling on her hands, and with her black-bordered handkerchief she wiped Lizzie's wet cheeks and drew her head down to her shoulder. Suddenly, as if ashamed of her emotion, Lizzie rose, went to the front door and stood there in silence, looking out.

"How could I let her do it?" she reflected. "If it got out she would be stamped as I am by the public. No, it won't do—it won't do; and yet, and yet, the dear, sweet child—"

She turned back to Tilly and sat down. "I don't know what to do," she faltered. "You are upset now with grief, and are willing to do things that later on you may be sorry for. Go back to the cottage and stay there. It will be best."

"No, Mrs. Trott—mother, I'm going to call you mother. I shall not desert you to-night. From the cottage I saw the hearse come here this afternoon and a man told me what it meant. This is your first night alone and I must be with you."

In silence Lizzie acquiesced. Remembering that Mandy had left supper prepared, she went to the kitchen, lighted a lamp, and began putting the food on the table. Tilly joined her, helping at this and that with swift, deft hands. Presently they sat down opposite each other. Neither ate much, though both were pretending to relish the food. The meal was almost concluded when there was a step on the porch and a vigorous rap on the door. Lizzie started and almost paled.

"Stay where you are," she said to Tilly. "I'll be back in a moment."

Tilly heard her light step to the door, then the door opened and a man's voice sounded: "Hello, Liz! What's all this? My God! old girl, I just got to town and heard at the hotel about all three, and—"

"Hush!" Tilly heard Lizzie's voice ring out. "Go away, and don't come back ever again. Do you hear me—*never again*?"

"But Liz, Liz! Why, old friend—"

"Go away, I tell you! I don't want you here and I won't have it! Tell all the others to stay away—every one, man and woman. I'm done, I tell you. I'm through. Go, go, I tell you! Go!"

There was a mumbled, bewildered protest which grew fainter and fainter till it ended with the clicking of the gate latch, and Lizzie, white and trembling, returned. She resumed her seat, and with unsteady hands took up her knife and fork, but made no comment on the interruption.

Supper over, they rose and put the things away. After this was done they sat talking in the parlor till nine o'clock. Then Tilly said, "Now you must go to bed, and so must I."

Lizzie got another lamp, and when she had lighted it she suddenly bethought herself of something. "You have no nightgown," she said. "Is it at the cottage?"

Tilly nodded. "Yes; I will run over for it, if you will give me a match to light the gas."

Lizzie averted her eyes, stood silent for a moment, and then said:

"No, no, you mustn't go at this time of night. Some one might see you leaving here or returning. No, no, that would never do, my child. I have a lot of clean nightgowns, but I have—" Lizzie broke off, her face flushing, her eyes falling.

"Then why don't you lend me—" Tilly had read the thought of her embarrassed hostess, delicate as it was, and yet did not know how to relieve the situation of its tension.

"Oh, I remember now!" Lizzie suddenly ejaculated in relief. "I have some that have just been bought and given to me which I've never worn. They are rather too small for me. In fact, they are about your size. Come to my room and I'll get one."

To the simple, country-bred girl Lizzie's room seemed a luxurious one in the glow of the pink-shaded lamp on the center-table. The imitation damask curtains at the windows had a costly look, and the wide bed with its silk-lined lace covering and great puffy pillows seemed a thing of royal comfort. On the air a mixture of several perfumes floated. While Tilly stood in the doorway, holding her lamp, Lizzie went to a wardrobe, pulled down a long cardboard box, and began to take out some folded garments. Suddenly she turned her back to Tilly, and with a gown of fine linen in her hands she hastily proceeded to remove the pink ribbons and bows from the neck and sleeves.

"It is too gaudy for you, with all these gewgaws on it," she awkwardly explained, when she noticed that Tilly was watching her. "It is not what you'd prefer, I'm sure; but maybe you can make it do for once. It has never been worn. It is just from the store. Here, you can see the price-tag on it."

Tilly took it, was deeply touched, and bent and kissed Lizzie on the brow. "Good night, mother," she said, simply. "Try to sleep. I can see that you need rest. We are both in a sad plight, aren't we?"

"'Mother'! she called me 'mother'!" Lizzie said to herself, as Tilly turned away. She heard the door of John's room being closed, and, peering out into the corridor, she saw that it was dark save for a thread of light beneath the shutter. Then Lizzie, with a strange sense of something new and hitherto unexperienced in her drab life, started to prepare for bed. She had removed the pins from her hair and was about to let it fall, when all at once she paused, reflected for a moment, and then wound her hair up again.

"No, no, I mustn't go to bed," she said. "That would never do. The sweet child is in my care, and nothing shall happen to shock her or prevent her from sleeping. Somebody might come—who knows? Some one too drunk to be decent or orderly."

Therewith, Lizzie got a light shawl, threw it over her shoulders, blew out her lamp, and crept down the stairs. Seating herself at an open window of the parlor, whence she could see the gate and a part of the street leading townward, she determined to remain on guard through the night.

Ten o'clock came and passed, eleven, twelve, one, and still she had no desire for sleep. She had decided how she would act if she saw any one approaching the isolated house. She would hurry out, meet the person before he reached the gate, and, if possible, quietly send him away.

At two o'clock she heard footsteps on the opposite side of the street. A man was slowly and cautiously passing, his eyes on the house. Lizzie wondered, and when she saw him pause and retrace his steps, still looking in her direction, she became even alarmed. Her anxiety increased, for when the man was opposite the gate he began slowly to cross the street. From his light, furtive steps Lizzie knew that he was trying to avoid being seen or heard.

Rising, she tiptoed from the parlor into the hall and to the door. Softly she turned the key, that Tilly might not hear, and stepped upon the porch. The sound she made was evidently heard by the man, for he paused in the middle of the street and stood still. Though the moonlight was clear enough, Lizzie failed to recognize in him any acquaintance of hers. She opened the gate and went directly to him.

"What do you want here?" she demanded, facing him sternly.

"Oh!" the man ejaculated. "Are you Mrs. Trott?"

"Yes, but what do you want?"

She thought he sighed as he courteously lifted his hat. "Mrs. Trott, I don't want to intrude," he began. "I am a friend of your son's wife from Cranston. She was in such deep distress that I and my family aided her. I helped her take a train this morning, but later decided to—"

"Oh, you are Joel Eperson, are you not?"

"Yes," was the answer.

Lizzie lowered her voice; her glance fell to the ground. "Tilly told me about you to-night—how kind you have always been to her and what a fine man you are."

Joel waved his hand disparagingly. "I am not a wise friend of hers, at any rate, Mrs. Trott," he sighed. "I ought not to have given in to her coming. But I didn't know that she—she— You see, she told me that she was going to stay at the cottage. If I had thought—"

"She insisted on staying here," Lizzie replied, plaintively apologetic. "She came before it was dark and insisted on staying. That is why I am up. Do you understand?"

Joel gravely inclined his head. "I understand," he said, "and it is fine and good of you, Mrs. Trott."

"And you were standing guard over her, too?" Lizzie went on.

Again he bowed his head. "It is a cruel world, Mrs. Trott," he said. "I hope you will pardon me for saying so, but if it should be known that Tilly stayed—"

"I know. You needn't tell me," Lizzie interrupted, sensitively. "Now listen, Mr. Eperson, you must take her home in the morning. You must take her home and prevent her from coming again. She will want to. She is not herself now. She is out of her head with grief. I love her—I love her, and I don't wonder that John did and made her his wife. I've brought all this on her and I can never undo it. You love her, too, I know it— I see it in your face and hear it in your voice. I gathered it, too, from something she let fall about you and her before she met my son. Now go to a hotel and get some rest. I am going to sit up and I'll see that no harm comes to her. I'll make her go to the cottage before it is light, and you will find her there. I promise it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Trott." Joel bowed his uncovered head and held out his hand. "If I had known that you were—were like this I should not have worried."

Lizzie pressed his hand and clung to it as if for support to her in what she next faltered out. "I am a different woman from what I was only three days ago," she declared. "Certain things have torn me to shreds. I'm bleeding inside and out. I don't know what I shall do, but I shall leave this house and bury myself from everybody I've associated with in the past. You may not think it possible, but I'll die if I don't."

Joel pressed her hand warmly; he bent his head till his eyes met hers squarely, frankly. "Then I shall help you," he said, fervently. "Not only that, but I shall not oppose Tilly in anything she wants to do in your behalf, and she says she believes in you, Mrs. Trott. I am sure that she will want to see you again, and she must be allowed to do so. I'll help her."

He left her standing in the center of the street and she slowly walked to the gate, passed through it, and crept back to her post of vigil at the window.

CHAPTER XLIV

It was two months after John's acceptance of the position with Pilcher & Reed. The two partners were in the office together. John happened to be up-town on business for the firm.

"Well, what do you think of Trott now?" Reed asked, with a significant smile, referring to some estimates and calculations of John's which he had just submitted to his partner.

"I think he is a wonder," Pilcher returned. "I was thinking about his work last night. Do you know that I can see where he has already saved us several thousands of dollars? He prevents much oversupply of materials and doesn't let us make our old blunders, which often caused tearing out and rebuilding. He seems to have an eye for the finished thing before the work is even started. The architects hate him. They don't have a soft snap with him. He made me send back Hinkinson's plans for the Chester Flats—stairways too wide by ten inches, and ten feet too near the front for the stores on the sides."

"I know," Reed chuckled. "Well, what do you think about his pay? You know we've hinted at a raise."

Pilcher smiled. "I think he is worth as much to us as he is to any one else, and, as I like the fellow personally, I want to hold on to him. You can't hire a brain like his very long for nothing, and if we don't come across he may be snapped up by some one else. Carter & Langley's man asked me the other day if we had a contract with him. I lied. I told him yes, and what I want to do now is to sign up with the fellow and know where we stand. He is ambitious, and I never saw such a worker in my life. He often does as much as an ordinary man after the office closes. He works at home. He told me that he did not care for amusements, reading, or politics. He has put his little sister in school, and he warms up when he speaks of the child. Outside of his work, she seems to be the only thing he is interested in. He is always quoting something she says or telling amusing things she does. Then he laughs—he seldom smiles over anything else. He is very deep and serious. If he were not so young I'd think he had had a sad love-affair. I think he must have taken the deaths of his parents and the responsibility of the child very seriously. Well, what do you think?"

"About a contract with him? Yes, I think we ought to come to terms with him. You say he is the man we need. Why not be liberal with him?"

"I've always thought that gradual progress," Pilcher said, "was good for young men. You can spoil them easily by letting them know that you can't do without them. Still, I see your point and agree with you. How about a two years' contract at fifteen hundred a year?"

"Not enough." Reed shook his younger and more progressive head firmly. "Make it eighteen for a year, with a bonus of three per cent. on our entire net profits."

Pilcher winced and pulled his beard, but finally agreed. "You attend to the details and draw up the contract. I catch your idea of pinning down his personal interest in the work with the bonus. If we make as much money next year as this he will do well."

So it was finally arranged, and when John went home on the following Saturday night, after signing the contract, he was in good spirits. Dora was at the table with Betty and Minnie when he arrived, and he sat down with them. They were overflowing with amusement about something that had happened at school, and John sat watching Dora's animated face with deep pride and gratification. He was sure she was genuinely happy in her new environment, and he was beginning to feel that he had made no mistake in taking her from her old one. She showed by her fine color and increased weight that she was in splendid health. The new dress which she now wore and which Mrs. McGwire had selected was most becoming. Her abundant hair under constant care had grown more tractable and was always well arranged. Her little hands, once rough and soiled, had grown white, soft, and pliant. Under Betty McGwire's persistent admonitions she had left off using many incorrect and uncouth forms of speech, and, on the whole, deported herself very properly.

Why should John not be proud of her? Indeed, she was all he had in the world to care for, and he lavished the wealth of his saddened and lonely soul upon her. He loved to work in his little room at night when she and Minnie or Betty studied or read in hers, the door between being always open. Frequently they asked him questions which he could not answer—questions pertaining to history, geography, and science, and he found that he himself was learning from the answers which they finally secured from their books, teachers, and elsewhere. Sometimes he went with them to free lectures given at night by the public schools. The only place he refused to go with them was to the church and Sunday-school, but, as the grave-faced Harold always escorted them to these places, they did not need him. Sometimes the boy would speak earnestly to him of the intricate theology he was mastering, but, as John no longer combated such ideas with young or old, he always smiled indulgently and let the subject pass.

"What does it matter?" he used to ask himself. "Everybody needs a belief of some sort, and Harold's faith in snake- and whale-stories is as good as any other, if it will keep him from stealing and murdering and make him more considerate of his fellow-man. Let the boy preach. If people are willing to pay to listen to him, that is their business and his. As for me, it hit me once and sha'n't get a swipe at me again."

After dinner was over on the night following his promotion, he told the three little girls that he wanted to "celebrate" that evening and would take them to a certain theater where a children's play was being produced.

"To celebrate what?" they noisily asked him, but he kept his joyous secret to himself, and they hurried away to get ready to go out.

While he was waiting for them in the parlor, Harold came down from his room, a book under his arm, and John invited him to go along. But the boy only smiled and held out the book, which was the *Life of Wesley*. "I have to study this to-night," he said. "I am to be examined on the pioneers of our Church. You know we do not believe in theaters, as a rule, but I understand that this child's play has a good moral. I'm sure it won't do any great harm, and the silly things are up-stairs dancing with joy."

The children liked the play, the people, the lights, the music, and John sat feasting on their animated faces. Once, however, a pang of keen pain shot through him at the thought that he was having a pleasure that could not be shared with the little toiling woman who had once been his wife. If all had gone well, he might have brought Tilly to the great city and lavished the results of his work and ability on her. As it was, she would perhaps remain in the backwoods for the rest of her life. She would no doubt marry— Here he shuddered and tried to banish the thought from his mind.

After the play he took his little guests to an attractive café and they had some ice-cream and cakes. While they ate they chattered vivaciously about the plot and characters of the drama. Betty displayed good critical ability, and John saw from Dora's face that she was seeing her new friend in a fresh light and no doubt determining to emulate her in this, as in other things. He told himself that that quality in his foster-sister would help her enormously in acquiring the social culture which he himself had missed in his youth.

Little Minnie was becoming sleepy. Her eyelids were drooping, and John started home with them. For a while he led Minnie by the hand, and then, noting her lagging steps, he took her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way. He felt her soft cheek settle down against his, and from her warm, moist breathing he knew that she was asleep. He liked the sensation caused by the limp form in his embrace. Betty and Dora walked by his side. Young as he was, he felt a sort of paternal interest in all three of them.

Reaching home, he bore the sleeping child up to her little white bed in her mother's room. Mrs. McGwire was there, hemming sheets for the house, and was deeply touched by his act.

"It was awfully kind of you," she said, and then she began to cry. "I'm a fool," she whimpered, wiping her eyes, "but you were carrying her just as her father did only a week before he died."

However, she dried her eyes quickly and hastened to disrobe Minnie, who was still asleep.

"You have been a godsend to us all, Mr. Trott," Mrs. McGwire declared. "The children worship you. Did you know it? Every night they listen for your coming, and they often go into the kitchen to inquire if you are getting exactly what you like to eat. I am telling you this because I like to have children love me, and these love you very deeply."

One day John had to go to the office of a great newspaper directory where files were kept of almost all the papers in the United States, his object being to look over the advertised offers for bids on public buildings in a certain New Jersey town. He was sent into the basement of the establishment, where he found the files arranged in compartments in shelves on both sides of a long room. An attendant handed him a catalogue of the papers with the numbered key to their locations, and he soon secured the information he desired. He was about to leave when a terrible thought took hold of him, and he ran his eye over the catalogue. Yes, there it was. *The Cranston News*. He went to the indicated compartment himself, took down the file it contained, and bore it to the table and seat set aside for patrons. It was a tiny, half-stereotyped weekly, and on that account its compartment held a longer file than otherwise would have been the case. He put the stack of papers on the table before him. Should he look for the thing the mere thought of which seemed to deaden his brain? He knew the time that the item would naturally appear, and with cold, fumbling fingers he drew out the issue under that date. He held it a moment unopened.

"What good would it do?" something seemed to admonish him. "Don't rasp a healing wound."

The attendant noticed his apparent indecision and approached politely. "Is there something else you want to see?" he asked.

"No, thanks; these are all," John answered, and he opened the paper. The clerk left him and he allowed his glance to sweep the columns of local happenings.

It was there. The mere head-line in bold type was sufficient: "Annulment of Young Bride's Marriage and Tragic End of Husband."

John read the crudely considerate item through, folded the sheet, and restored the file to its place. Then he started back to his office. How pitiless seemed the street scene in the garish light of the midday sun! The push-cart men, the newsboys, the hurrying throng, the rattling of the overhead trains, seemed to belong to an earthly hades. And why, he wondered, should he suffer so over a thing that he had already accepted as a fact, and partly conquered? He couldn't have answered, though a psychologist might have classed it under the head of autosuggestion, or called it a mere backward twist of a morbid imagination fed by unsubdued, subconscious longings for things the subject once possessed.

That night strange, dazzling dreams fell to John's portion. If by his hard work he was enabled through the day to keep his old life out of his conscious thought to any extent, it was often otherwise when he slept, and to-night, following the shock he had had that morning, he was living only too vividly over the period in which he had known Tilly. Again he was entranced by her illumined face and thrilled by her mellow treble voice as she read from the Bible that first night of his acquaintance with her. Again he and she were on the lonely, moonlit mountain road together. He felt her loving pressure on his arm, and as by the light of heaven caught her tender, upward glance. Then she became his wife—actually his wife. They were on the train together—in the cab at Ridgeville, and then in that cottage of dreams and delight, shut in from the uncomprehending world without.

Then he awoke and, like the hail of javelins from an omnipotent enemy, the tragic facts of his existence hurtled down upon him. Smothering a cry like that of a wounded beast in a jungle, he found his pillow wet with tears which he had shed against his will or knowledge—tears of joy, or tears of grief, which were they? He sprang from his bed and stood before the window of his boxlike room.

"It is my yellow streak again," he muttered, wiping his eyes and grinding his teeth. "It can't down me awake, and so it coils about me in dreams. Be a man, John Trott! Life was never made for happiness. It was for pain, struggle, and conquest."

He heard a sound in Dora's room. He wondered if anything was wrong, and as an anxious mother might have done, he listened attentively. He heard a low, rippling laugh, followed by prattling tones. The child was talking in her sleep. Her dreams must have been pleasant, for her lilting voice rang out again.

"It is beautiful on you, Betty! Maybe brother John will get me one, too. Then we can wear them to the church sociable, eh, Betty?"

"Brother John!" he echoed, softly. It was sweet and vaguely comforting to know that the little waif relied upon him even in her dreams. He crept into her room on his tiptoes, bent over Dora, and looked at her. What an angelic, spritelike creature she seemed in her white gown and golden hair! How delicate and refined her features and tapering hands! In the half-light he saw that she was smiling. Smiling! She had never smiled like that in the old house at Ridgeville. She had begun to smile and laugh and jest under his love and care, and he told himself that it should always be so.

He went back to his bed, turned his damp pillow over, and laid his head on a dry spot. As he lay trying to sleep, the visions of his dream began to hover over him, and, wincing and writhing with pain, he cried:

"Be a man, John Trott! It is your yellow streak again. Kill it now, or it will down you in the end!"

PART II

CHAPTER I

Ten eventful years of toil and struggle for John Trott went by. True to the prophecy of Cavanaugh and other practical men, he succeeded. Step by step he rose till, on the death of Mr. Pilcher, he became an equal partner with Reed in the business. He and Dora still lived with the McGwires in the old house, which was now kept for roomers only. John could have well afforded to give Dora a more expensive home, but both he and she had become inseparably attached to these first friends of theirs in New York.

Dora, a tall, slender girl of nineteen, while not exactly pretty, was quite attractive. John had sent her to a select school for young ladies, and the polish and education she had received had not spoiled her. She was not ashamed of the fact that she and John had once been what they were. In fact, the McGwires knew all the circumstances connected with their clandestine flight from the South, and guarded well their secret.

Not once, even indirectly, had either John or Dora heard from their former home. Dora had almost entirely forgotten it, and, while John could not possibly do so, it had become like a dream of blended joy and pain which he persistently put aside. But at times a grim certitude fixed itself on him, that, having once loved, he could never love again. He never met a marriageable woman, no matter how attractive or willing she might be to receive his attentions, without feeling the presence of a certain barrier of contrast to an ideal embedded in his tragic past. There was a vast store of love and tenderness in him, and this he poured out on his foster-sister. He was a natural man and yielded to sensual temptations, but always with the after-result of feeling vaguely soiled and lowered, and was in continual strife with his passions. To-day they were conquered, to-morrow they held temporary sway. And there was a rebuke, always a rebuke which no reasoning could set aside—a rebuke rising out of the mystic sanctity of the short union between him and his bride. "Tilly!" The very name crept upon him unawares as from the exquisite mental pictures he was always trying to suppress. "Tilly!" He caught himself applying it to Dora, a slip of the tongue, which, better than anything else, revealed to him the psychic bonds between him and a personality lost to him forever. Once Dora asked him if he thought, by any chance, that Tilly might have died. He started, reflected for a moment, and then answered in a way that was a surprise even to himself. "No, she's living," he said. "If she were dead I'd feel it."

"That is no criterion to go by," answered Dora, who had become quite religious and was now a member of the Methodist Church. "Do you know what Harold would say about that?"

"Harold might say a lot of absurd things about it"—John smiled indulgently—"but he is no criterion, either."

"Well, I'll tell you what he'd say, and it is my opinion, too," the girl went on. "He'd say that the very intuitive feeling you say you have—your firm confidence of her existence, is due to the fact that she has passed from this plane of life, is now on another, and that she is always with you in spirit because she loved you once, still loves you, and wants to protect you. Don't you see how pretty that is, brother John? She has become, as Harold would say, your guardian angel, your very conscience. When you are tempted to do wrong she restrains you; and when you actually do something wrong she has a way of rebuking you through your intuition."

This argument displeased John, as all such theories did. He claimed, with many of his rather materialistic friends, that to believe in a blissful life to come only rendered one less useful in the present, and was a strong proof of innate selfishness in the individual who was seeking it for himself alone.

But he let Dora have her way, and why shouldn't he? Indeed, he was almost sure that she and Harold were falling in love with each other. Harold was preaching now in a small church on the west side of the city, and his mother and sisters and Dora were diligent helpers in many ways.

"I'm becoming sure," Mrs. McGwire said, with a smile, one day to John as they lingered at the breakfast-table after Betty and Dora had left, "that Dora and Harold are very much in love, and I'm glad of it. A minister ought to marry early, and your sister, of all girls, is the one I'd want for him."

"So it is like that, is it?" John said, resignedly. "Well, I have no objections, I'm sure. I want her to be happy."

CHAPTER II

One evening, shortly after that, Harold came into John's room, saying that he wanted to speak to him in private. He was slightly above medium height, quite thin, and attenuated-looking. He wore the black frock-coat, high, stiff collar, and black necktie of his calling. For a man of less than twenty-four years of age he certainly was grave and serious-looking. He was endeavoring to produce a show of whiskers on his cheeks and chin, but the effort was almost in vain, for the hairs grew sparsely and were of a color between yellow and light brown that did not make for density of appearance. However, he was earnest and sincere, and John liked and trusted him.

"I've been wanting to see you for some time, Mr. Trott," he began, taking a chair that was vacant near John's and linking his white hands between his knees. "I don't know what you will think of me, but I've had the audacity to fall in love with your sister, and, as I look upon you as her guardian and protector, I felt honor-bound to come to you."

"I see, I see." John had flushed with embarrassment. "Well, the truth is, Harold, I have been suspecting something of this sort lately, and I can imagine what you want to say."

Harold had never been one to give in to embarrassment. Life was too serious and needed too many corrections to justify him in losing time or emotion in that way, so without change of color, or quickened pulse, he went on. "I have reason to believe, Mr. Trott, that Dora reciprocates my feeling, and you may be sure that it has given me great happiness. She is wrapped up in my work, and I know of no woman who would so readily adapt herself to the routine of a minister's career. The only thing bothering us both has been—"

For the first time Harold hesitated.

"Go ahead," said John, awkwardly, and quite unaware of what was forthcoming.

"You see, I know what she has been to you all these years," Harold resumed, "and we both know, too, what your religious, or lack of religious, views are, and it has pained me to think that perhaps you would prefer as Dora's husband a man of—well, a man whose views were more in accord with your own than mine can ever possibly be."

Not knowing what to say, John hung fire. He had always been outspoken where his views were directly challenged, and, despite the delicacy of the present crisis, he had nothing to take back. All things being equal, he really would have preferred to have his protégée marry, if she married at all, a man whose calling he could be proud of. He had ridiculed parsons as the most parasitical of all men, and yet here he was about to hand over to one of them the only human treasure he possessed.

"I see you understand me," Harold half sighed, "and I am not so full of religious zeal as not to sympathize with you. I don't see how a man can live without more faith than you have, but I admire your firmness of conviction in what you think is right. You may call yourself an atheist, Mr. Trott, but you really are not one. A great man has said that there are no atheists—that every man who does good, defends goodness, and contends against evil of any sort has as good a god as any one. I don't agree with him fully, but I know that what you did for Dora, full of despair as you were at the time, proves that you had divinity in you. That act was godlike and had to have a source outside of mere animal instinct."

John was touched. He held out his hand. "Let all that pass, Harold," he smiled. "I am sure that Dora loves you, and I want to make her happy. You are her choice. You have a right to her."

"I thank you," Harold responded, with his first touch of emotion. There was silence for a moment, then Harold said: "There is yet another matter, Mr. Trott, and both Dora and I are worried over it. It belongs to a little secret of ours. We have not even told my mother yet, and we dread doing so. Mr. Trott, I have just received an appointment to a desirable post among the missionaries in China."

"China!" John repeated, his honest mouth drooping, his eyes taking on a dull fixity of gaze.

Harold shrugged and nodded. "I thought that would pain you, and so did Dora, but there is nothing else to do but to tell you about it frankly. The heads of the work prefer men with wives, and Dora has her heart set on aiding me in the Orient."

The smoldering embers of John's antagonism under its threatened blight flared up. His blood flowed hotly to his brain. He knew that the separation would be for years if not for all time, and how could he be expected to submit calmly to such a heartless course? Could Dora find it in her gentle nature to desert him like that after all they had been to each other?

"I see that you are hurt," Harold sighed, softly, "and I am more than sorry, Mr. Trott."

John's anger was dying down; a cool breath of sheer despair and resignation seemed to blow over him. How could he live on alone? he wondered, and yet the thing proposed was the logical outcome of many natural circumstances and had to be borne.

"I believe," John answered, "that the missionaries, once they leave, do not return to America frequently?"

"No, they are all poor people, Mr. Trott, and the money saved from such costly traveling expenses can be well used in other ways."

"We'll let that pass," John said, "and come to something else. I have put by a little money to be given or left to Dora, and—"

But raising his hand, and flushing freely now, Harold checked him.

"Don't speak of that, Mr. Trott, please!" he urged. "Dora mentioned something of the sort to me. She said you had thrown out some hint of it recently, and she and I talked it over. We both decided that we'd rather not let you do anything of the sort. You are a young man yourself, and have already done a thousand times more than your duty to Dora. Indeed, we'd both feel very unhappy if you carried out such a plan. You laugh at men of my calling and say they are grafters, but it is really not as you think. Most of the missionaries I've met are poor men, and they are willing to remain so. It would be an absurdity for Dora and me to accept help from you, when our organization is pledged to see that superannuated ministers and their wives are cared for as long as they live."

John was about to speak, vaguely pleased by the manliness of Harold's words, when Dora suddenly came in. Her face was flushed, but her eyes were steady. She stood by Harold's side, who had risen, and smiled half fearfully at John.

"Well, have you told him?" she asked Harold.

He nodded, and put his arm around her waist.

"I mean, have you told him about China?" she went on, anxiously.

"Yes"—with a smile—"and that we simply will not let him give us any of his hard-earned money."

"No, indeed, brother John," Dora cried. "Not a penny of your money will I take after all you have done for me. You must get married—you must be sensible and find you a good wife. You will need all the money you have, too. It is bad enough—my leaving you like this—without taking your savings. We simply won't hear to it, will we, Harold?"

"No," the other answered, firmly. "We'd be acting a lie if we teach others that poverty and humility are a blessing while having a nest-egg of our own."

"Now hear from me." Dora tried to speak with amusing lightness. "While you were here, Harold, exploding your bomb, I've been telling your mother. She is down in her room, crying her heart out. She takes it very hard. It has been the pride of her life that you are a minister, but she never dreamed that she'd miss hearing you preach every Sunday of her life, and help you with your work besides. That's the mother of it, and this is really the hardest blow she's ever had."

There was a sound of a dog barking down-stairs. It was John's pet fox-terrier, Binks.

"He is after a rat," Dora said, forcing a smile to her set face and somehow not wanting to meet the eyes of the stricken man.

"Yes"—John rose—"it is time for me to take him out. He stays in too much." John knew that he was expected to say more on the other subject, but all at once his tongue had become tied. An indescribable despair incased him like walls of sinister darkness. The young couple seemed to feel his mood and to be baffled by it, standing in the presence of his disappointment as if conscious of actual guilt in causing it. Neither said anything, and John got his hat and descended to his dog.

They heard him whistling to Binks as if nothing unusual had happened. They heard the yelping animal scampering up the basement steps to meet him. Creeping wordless, and hand in hand, to the stairs, they saw John bend down and take the dog in his arms. Binks was licking the side of his face, and John seemed unconscious of it. The mute watchers heard the front door close after him. Dora turned back into John's room. She was wiping her eyes. Harold took her into his arms.

"Don't, don't, dear!" he said, tenderly. "It can't be helped, you know. He will suffer—another will suffer, but it has to be. We all bear a cross of some sort or other."

"I know it," she continued to sob, "but it is terrible. Harold, I have never seen such a look on his face as was on it when I came in the room just now. He looked as if he had lost every hope in life. I didn't think I'd ever wound him like this. I used to tell him that he and I would be near together always—if he married or if I married. You see, I know he counted on it, for he mentioned it frequently. Wasn't that pitiful—taking Binks up that way? I could almost hear him sob."

"You are too sentimental, dear," Harold answered, trying to disguise his own emotion, which perhaps Dora's melting mood had elicited. "You soft-hearted women are always attributing your own feelings to men. He'll soon get over it. Besides, a man as young as he is ought not to become a confirmed old bachelor, and this very separation may drive him into a happiness as normal as yours and mine is going to be."

"I hope so—oh, I hope so!" Dora whimpered, still wiping her eyes. "If he should remain unhappy here I am afraid I'd not be wholly content away from him."

"He'll marry, don't worry," Harold said, kissing her again. "He's bound to do so. He is too fine a man to pass his life in loneliness."

CHAPTER III

The wedding, one bright morning in June, was a most simple one and took place in the little church that Harold was leaving. The rites were performed by the Rev. Arthur Kirkwood, the young minister who was succeeding him. Harold was popular with his congregation, and the church was fairly well filled with sympathetic friends, none of whom were known to John. Indeed, he was a dreary alien in a weirdly convivial assemblage, the smug elation of which irritated him. Mrs. McGwire, Betty, and Minnie were all so busy shaking hands with people they knew that John was really ignored. He wanted it so, and yet he keenly felt the line of demarcation between the element in which he lived and that which had engulfed Dora and was sweeping her out of his ken forever. He sat alone in the second row of seats, only a few feet from the pulpit and a table laden with flowers. A few young people in the choir overhead were laughing gaily. The faces all over the room were beaming expectantly, and some of the most impatient persons asked when the bride and groom would arrive.

"At ten o'clock, sharp," Mrs. McGwire said, aloud, so that all could hear. "They are coming in a carriage, and expect to be driven straight to the train from here."

The time dragged slowly for John. He saw a few persons eying him with mild interest as the brother of the bride, but most of the others were occupied in exchanging jests or greetings with this or that acquaintance as their heads met over the backs of the seats. To while away the time, and for the sheer love of it, a man who was a sort of leader in church singing suddenly began to sing a well-known revival hymn, and the others joined in lustily. John detested it. He had heard it during his isolated childhood at Ridgeville, later at Cranston, and here it was a strident requiem over the bier of his last hope. He was inclined to self-analysis, and he wondered if any of the audience could imagine the dark and rebellious state of mind that he was in. He was not jealous of Harold, he did not begrudge Dora's happiness or desire to curb the festive mood of the people around him. He was simply in despair and could see no way of escape. He tried to think of going back to the office the next day and plunging into work, but how could he do so without some aim in life? Dora had refused financial aid from him. Of what account were his past earnings or those of the future?

The singing was brought to an abrupt end. Mrs. McGwire, who had stationed herself at the street door, suddenly cried out, "They are coming!" and a fluttering silence brooded on the room.

Dora and Harold, accompanied by Mr. Kirkwood, entered the adjoining Sunday-school room from the street with the playful intent to deceive the audience, who were watching the front, and the McGwires all hastened through a doorway near the pulpit to greet them. Betty, a tall, dignified young lady in a becoming street dress, ran across to John.

"Will you come speak to them now, or afterward?" she asked, smiling.

"Afterward," he answered, flushing under the composite stare of the whole room and irritated by being made so conspicuous.

"But you won't have a very good chance then," she advanced. "You know there will be an awful rush at the carriage. You'd better come now."

He complied. He found Dora and Harold in the arms of Minnie and her mother. Both of the latter were weeping.

"I'd cry, too," Dora said, smiling sadly up at John, "but it would leave streaks of wet powder on my face. I am to be a pale and interesting bride. I'm sorry to leave you, brother John."

"Never mind, Sis," he said, bravely. "Everything goes in this life." She leaned toward him, and he kissed her. He was still a crude man and shrank from caressing even Dora in the presence of others.

"We'll meet again," she said, confidently; "don't let yourself believe otherwise."

"All right, I won't." He forced himself to smile.

"Ten o'clock!" cried out Mr. Kirkwood, who was ready at the door. "You mustn't miss that train. I'm going in to take my place. Come right in, Brother McGwire."

"Then this must be good-by, darling John," Dora whispered. "I know you won't want to push through the crowd to us afterward."

"Good-by—good-by," he said, and then he shook hands with Harold. "Good-by, Harold," he said. "I'm leaving her with you."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Trott," Harold said, feelingly. "She is a treasure and I am robbing you. God knows I wish it could be

without pain to you."

"Nevermind; that is all right," John answered.

Mrs. McGwire and Minnie, a plain, rather gawky girl, went to the first row of seats in the church, sat down, smiled knowingly at some friends in the rear, and John and Betty followed. Some one at the organ played a wedding march, and Harold and Dora came in and stood before the waiting preacher.

It was soon over. The organ groaned mellowly, and Harold led Dora down the aisle to the vestibule. The congregation followed like stampeding cattle. John was left alone, the McGwires having hurried out through the Sunday-school room to get a last sight of the pair as they entered the carriage.

John met Mrs. McGwire outside as the carriage was disappearing down the street. She said she and her daughters were going to stay awhile to attend to the flowers and some other gifts, and he went home alone. The massive door was locked, and, opening it with a pass-key, he entered the hall. He heard Binks barking in the back yard and he went down to him.

"They didn't want you there, did they, Binks?" he said, taking the dog in his arms. "You'd have made a row, wouldn't you? Well, she is gone, old boy—you don't realize it now, but you will later, when you miss the feeds and nice baths she gave you. She used to buy choice morsels for you. I know, for I've seen the bones lying around."

The remainder of that day he spent in sheer torment, strolling about in the parks with Binks, and when he returned home he found Betty and Minnie alone in the parlor. Their eyes were red from weeping.

"It is on account of the way mother is taking it," Betty explained. "She's gone to bed with a headache. The excitement of the wedding kept her up, but she has gone to pieces since they left. Really, Harold was all she had in the world. Min and I didn't count."

John could think of nothing to say, and he went on to his room. There were some blue-prints and calculations awaiting his attention on the big desklike table in his room, and he took them up to look them over, but laid them down again.

"What is the use?" he muttered. "My God! what is the use of *anything*? Money? What do I care for money? What could I do with it if I had millions?"

That night when he was about to go to bed he looked into Dora's room. She had left it in perfect order, but somehow it seemed as barren as a room for transient guests in a hotel.

"Dear, dear Sis," he said, with a lump in his throat. "When you and I used to get up before day in that old ramshackle home—you in your rags, and I in my overalls—we didn't dream that all those things would happen and draw to an end like this. There is nothing for me to look forward to—nothing, absolutely nothing, but you will find peace, contentment, and happiness. Well, that is enough. It was worth it, Sis. I'm out of it, and it is only my yellow streak that is whining."

The room, in its tomblike silence and inanimate reminders, oppressed him sorely, and, closing the door that he might not, even by accident, glance into it again that night, he started to undress for bed, when Binks began loudly barking down-stairs. Then he heard Betty trying to quiet him.

"What is the matter with him?" John called down from the head of the stairs.

"I think he wants you," Betty laughed. "I can't pacify him. He keeps jumping up and down, pawing the floor, and crying like a baby."

"Unfasten him, please, and let him come up," John answered.

Immediately there was a swishing, thumping sound on the stairs and Binks rushed into John's room and began to lick his hands and whine. Although he was ready for bed, John sat down in a big chair, took the dog into his arms, and fondled him like an infant. Binks seemed to understand, for he became restful at once. John was not conscious of it, but he sat with the animal in his lap for nearly an hour. Suddenly he became aware that it was late, and he put on his bath-robe and slippers, with the intention of taking the dog down to his kennel, but Binks, as if reading his mind, ran under the bed and remained out of sight. Stooping down, John saw a pair of small eyes gleaming in the shadow.

"Poor little devil, he's lonely, too!" John muttered. "Say, Binks, come out—let's talk it over. You want to sleep with me to-night, eh? All right, we'll keep each other company."

It was as if the little animal understood, for he came out readily, wagging his stubby tail, and began to stand on his hind feet and lick his master's hands. "All right, all right." John took him up in his arms, bore him to his bed, and placed him on the side next to the wall. And, as if fearful that John might change his mind, Binks snuggled down between the

sheets, his snout on his paws, his eyes blinking almost with pretended drowsiness.

"Sly old boy!" John laughed, softly, and, throwing off his robe and slippers, he closed his door and lay down by the dog. His strong arm touched the sleek coat of his pet and somehow the contact soothed him. With a tightness of the throat, his eyes suffused with restrained tears, he told himself that absolutely all had not been taken from him, for Binks was left.

CHAPTER IV

Another year passed. As he had feared it would be, John's life was all but aimless and becoming even monotonous. What mattered it whether he and Reed had one or two contracts more or less in the year? Neither of them really was in need of the profits earned, and the business continued to come as fast as they cared to attend to it. John liked best the outside work, for then he took Binks along with him, and sometimes in bad weather he even brought the dog to the office, where Binks would lie quietly under his desk till called out by his master for lunch or a short stroll in the quieter streets.

"You are too much attached to him," Reed said to him. "I have a friend who used to have a pet like that. Some devilish person poisoned it one night, and my friend never could get over it. He told me that if it had been his only child it wouldn't have hurt him any more."

John shuddered and frowned darkly. "I know how he felt," he answered, simply, and turned away.

One morning, when John had the office entirely to himself and was going over some intricate plans and estimates, his stenographer came to him.

"There is an old man at the door who wants to see you," she announced. "He refused to give his name or state his business."

"Well, tell him, then, that I won't see him," John ordered, impatiently.

The girl left and came back. "He wouldn't give his name," she said, "but he said to tell you that he was an old friend and was very anxious to see you—that he hasn't seen you for about eleven years."

"Eleven years—an old friend!" John said to himself, aghast. "Who could it be, unless—" The girl was waiting, and he said, "Tell him to come in, please."

The girl went out and ushered in a gray-haired, gray-bearded old man who walked with a cane and was so bent downward that, under a broad-brimmed straw hat, John did not at once see his features. The stenographer retired to her workroom in the rear, and the visitor came to John.

It was Cavanaugh, who now removed his hat and exposed his face to view, a face gashed with deep lines, and fairly shrinking under a sort of awed timidity.

"I'm afraid I'm not welcome, John," he faltered, his wrinkled brow mantled with red, his old, fat hand checked in its impulsive movement forward and falling at his side. "I ought not to have come like this, but I couldn't help it. I was in the city, and wanted to see you for a lot of reasons."

"That's all right, Sam," John answered, extending his hand and trying to divest himself of the visible effects of the shock he had received. "How did you find me? Sit down."

Cavanaugh took the proffered chair. John pitied him, for his hands crossed on the top of his cane quivered with intense excitement, and his eyes swept the room with the slow awe of a beggar in the house of a prince.

"Mostly by accident," he answered, "and putting two and two together, and reasoning it out like a one-horse detective on his first job. John, I know I've done wrong, but—"

"Forget all that, Sam," John said, more at ease. "Don't think I've forgotten you. You are the one friend in the world that I really cared for down there, and it was my intention to get at you sooner or later. I thought, however, that I was considered dead to you and everybody at Ridgeville."

"You are—you *still* are," Cavanaugh said. "It is like this, John, and in a way your secret is still safe, for I won't give it away. You remember Todd Williams. He is in the firm of Williams & Chelton. They set up in dry-goods after you left. Well, last fall he was on here buying goods, and when he came back home one day after meeting—we belong to the same church—he called me off to one side like, and said, said he:

"'Sam, an odd thing happened to me on the Elevated train while I was in New York,' and with that he went on to say that while he sat reading his paper a feller got in and sat in front of him that was the exact image of you. He said the likeness was so great that he came in an inch of speaking to the feller, but, remembering the news of your death, he let it pass.

Then he asked me if I thought there could have been any mistake made about you and Dora being in that wreck. I told him I thought not, and left him, but I'm here to confess, John, that from that minute my mind wasn't fully at rest. Hundreds of times I rolled it over and over in my thoughts—at night in bed, at work, in meeting, at meals with my wife—everywhere. Always, always I was wondering if you might be still alive, fighting your fight and making good away off som'ers. I told my wife how I was worried and she made light of it—said she herself often saw resemblances to folks in new faces. Then I guess I would have dropped it, but for one little, tiny thing that popped into my head one night while I was listening to a long-winded prayer during a revival. Well, sir, like a flash of blasting-powder this thought came to me. You left our town in the dead of night, and it was reasonable to suppose that you did everything you could to keep folks from knowing who you was and where you was bound for. Didn't you?"

"Yes," John nodded, and sat waiting.

"I thought so," Cavanaugh continued. "So you see, when the list of the lost was printed, and your name and Dora's, and your age and hers, and the town you was from, was given, the question come to me, who was it that reported them things so accurate after that awful disaster? You wouldn't have been handing your name and the child's about amongst strangers on the train before the accident, and if your bodies was burned up, all your belongings, papers, and the like would have been destroyed, and— Well, you see what I mean?"

John started and stared steadily. "I see it now, Sam, but I never thought of it before. I suppose everybody else overlooked that point but you."

"Yes, I'm the only one," Cavanaugh answered. "Well, John, after that, instead of being dead to me, somehow you got alive again. I don't want to talk like a sniffling old woman, John, for you are older now, but I loved you like a son, and the hope that you was alive and doing well up here made me powerful happy. You see, until your trouble come like a clap of thunder, I was almost living for you and your interests. I wanted us to establish a business between us that you could carry on after me and my old lady was gone, so, when I began to tote about the idea of you not being dead, I could think of nothing else, till—well, till I come here and found your name in the directory. You were the only John Trott in it, and was a contractor, and I knew I'd run you to your hole."

"I'm glad you did, Sam," John answered. "I've always wanted to see you again, but didn't know how to bring it about with absolute safety to my plans. I'd cut out the whole thing down there, and it seemed best to forget it—best for me and for Dora. She was so young when she was down there that she has almost forgotten the worst features of it—about—about her aunt and other things, I mean."

"I was going to inquire about her," Cavanaugh said. "Is she well and all right?"

John explained briefly, and heard his old friend sighing. "And so you are all alone now, not married—no one with you at all."

John nodded. "Oh, I'm all right. I'm 'neither sugar nor salt,'" he quoted an old saying. "Don't worry about me, Sam. I'll get along some way or other."

There was silence between the two for a few minutes. It was as if the old man were wondering what further information he might be at liberty to give pertaining to the past. Presently he cleared his throat and said:

"Your ma is still alive, John. Jane Holder is dead. Lots and lots of things that you don't know about have happened down home since you left. As soon as Jane Holder died your ma quit living in that old house. She pulled up stakes and drifted about some. She stayed awhile in Atlanta, then in Nashville, and finally came back to our town and moved out in the country. She was—was befriended—a nice woman and her husband sort of—well, I suppose they sort of took pity on her, and—"

"Stop, Sam!" John's face was dark and twisted from inner agony. "Please don't mention her. For Dora's sake I've been trying to think of her as never having actually existed. I don't blame her, you understand. She is living her life and I'm living mine. I don't blame people for their natures or characteristics. Such things come at birth. My father was one thing—she was another. But I've fought down my past, torn it out like an unwholesome dream. I may be mistaken, Sam, but it seems to me that I ought not to talk about all that now. I've fought to acquire a new life, and to some extent I have won it. What lies before me I don't know, and I don't greatly care. I'm still young in years and strong of body and mind, but I feel actually old. I suppose you have some sort of faith still. I have none at all. Dora has it, and it has made her contented, happy, and useful. I am glad she has it. I wouldn't take it from her. Tilly—Tilly used to—"

The name was spoken impulsively, as if some subconscious force or habit had assumed control over a tongue well bridled till now, and with tight lips John suddenly checked himself and sat flushing under the old man's kindly stare.

"I was going to mention her," Cavanaugh put in, his honest eyes falling to the floor, "but didn't know exactly how

you'd feel about it. Oh yes, I still believe in a great Supreme Power that works for eternal good. Shall I tell you about Tilly?"

John was silent. His face had grown rigid and even pale. His lips quivered. "I think I know two things about her," he finally said. "Somehow I feel sure that she is alive and married to Joel Eperson."

Cavanaugh nodded slowly. "Yes, my boy; she finally took him, but it was not till four years after the report of your death. I see her and Joel off and on from time to time. It will do no good to open old wounds now, but I'll say this, John, and that is that your wife's constancy to your memory, and Joel's faithfulness to her through all her trouble—the death of her ma and pa, and—and some other things—has given the lie to every statement ever made that men and women don't actually love each other. If Tilly had had the slightest hope that you were living she'd have remained single till the end of time. She never considered that court edict as right. Oh, I wish I could—could tell you all I know on that line, but it would do no good now."

"No, we'd better drop it," John said, heavily. "It will do no good to go over it. I've regarded it as a dead issue for eleven years."

"That may be," Cavanaugh said to himself, "but he is stunned, actually stunned. I see it in his face and hear it in his voice. Poor boy! Poor boy!"

"Before dropping the subject I will tell you one thing more," the old man said, aloud, "and that is that they have two children, a boy of about six and a little girl of four or five. They are sweet little tots and are a great comfort. They are images of their mother, and I love 'em."

"Tell me this—tell me this, Sam," John said, and it was as if a great anxiety rested on him. "I want to know this. Of course, you'll see that it is no affair of mine, but I'd like to know if Eperson is providing well for Til—for his wife and children. Sam, she has suffered a lot through no fault of her own, and most of that suffering came through happening to meet me up there at Cranston and that silly boy-and-girl fancy of—of hers and mine. She deserves an easier time from now on, and that is why I'd like to know how she and Eperson are financially situated."

Cavanaugh drew his scraggy brows together. His color deepened to red in his cheeks. "I wish I could make a good report on that line," he answered, awkwardly, "but I can't give you the best of news. Joel is not to blame, though. I'll say that. He simply belongs to the class of men that come, as he did, from landholders and slave-holders. Such men are highly honorable, but they simply don't know how to make ends meet."

"Then they are poor, very poor?" John said, grimly.

"Yes, very poor," was the reluctant answer. "I'm not blaming Joel. He has done the best he could. I've never seen a man work harder. If he had been stingy and grasping he'd have made better headway, but he is always doing for others. Old Whaley died insolvent, and Joel took care of the widow and paid out big doctor's bills trying to save her life, through a long sick spell, and when she passed away he paid all the funeral expenses and put up a nice stone over the two graves. He doesn't own any land of his own, but rents a few acres here and there from year to year. He has to buy his supplies on credit at a high rate of profit, and is always up to his eyes in debt. Huh! John, you fellers that can work in a fine office like this, wear clothes like you've got on, and ride home in a comfortable car, reading your paper or smoking—I say, such as you have little notion what an easy berth you have compared to fellers like Joel Eperson. That is the sort of a thing that shakes my faith in the Almighty a little mite sometimes, but I don't let it get hold of me. In any case, Joel is blessed by having the wife he got. She is the most patient little mother that ever lived. I've never heard her complain. I did hear her say once, though, when I happened to pass along where she was at work in the cotton-field and stopped to chat a minute—she told me that she didn't ever worry about what would happen to her and Joel, because they could die and be done with it, but she did trouble about the children. She is so anxious for them to grow up and get an education and be useful in life, and she doesn't see much hope of it."

"You say she actually works in the field?" John exclaimed, with a shudder and a darkening face.

"Not always, but sometimes when Joel is away or sick, or when the crops are suffering for immediate attention. You know labor is high and cash is generally paid, and Joel hasn't the means to hire help at the time he needs it the most. Take cotton-picking, for instance. If the staple isn't taken from the boll in time the weather stains and ruins it. It is at a time like that that Tilly helps. But don't let it fret you. She told me, with that sweet smile of hers that I used to love so much when me and you was boarding with her folks, that outdoor work was good for her. But Joel objects to it. I saw him come out in the corn one day and take the hoe away from her and send her in the house. I never saw a sadder look on a proud man's face.

"'She *will* do it,' he said to me, almost groaning, as he spoke. Joel got confidential that day. He talked free-like, as men

do when they reach the very bottom of ill luck. 'I thought,' said he, 'that I was doing right in marrying Tilly, for she was all alone in the world and unprotected, but you see what I've brought her to. I had hopes then— I have none now. Things never take an upward turn for some men, Cavanaugh. They head downward, and they pull everything they touch with them. They marry wives and make them suffer. They bring children into the world to suffer, and they go on that way till the earth receives their useless remains, and that is the end of their dreams.'

"I tried to cheer him up, but I couldn't. I wish, John, that I could tell you about his unselfishness as to one thing in particular, but I reckon I'd better not. It would do no good. I see from your looks that all this is going hard with you."

"No, nothing is to be gained by it, Sam," John said, shrugging his shoulders. He looked at his watch. "You must go to lunch with me," he said. "I want to see as much of you as possible while you are here."

"I am agreeable," Cavanaugh said, with a touch of his former ease of manner. "It seems like old times once more, my boy."

They lunched together and afterward went to the small hotel where Cavanaugh was staying, got the old man's valise, and went to John's home. Cavanaugh was put into Dora's old room and given to understand that it was his as long as he remained in the city. For a week the two friends were constantly together. John took the time off from business, and, with Binks trotting between them, the physically ill-mated and yet mentally congenial pair took long walks together. And not since Dora's departure had John felt so soothed and comforted. A spiritual force of some sort seemed to radiate from the bent old man that for the time almost regenerated his companion. John had discovered that Cavanaugh loved him as a son and regarded him with an ardent mixture of pride and ecstasy, as a son restored from death to life. Sometimes, in their ascent of an incline in their strolls, the old man would quite unconsciously catch hold of the arm of the younger, and in speaking he often held John's hand in one of his and gently stroked it, as if unconscious of what he was doing. At times, for no particular reason, he would lower his voice into an almost confidential whisper. However, it was on the last night of his stay, before his departure the following morning, that John was permitted to see even more deeply into Cavanaugh's heart. They were in Dora's room. The old man was undressing for bed when suddenly he sat down, locked his toil-hardened fingers between his knees, and lowered his shaggy head, as if buffeting an unexpected wave of despair.

"I want to tell you something, John," he said, in a shaky voice. "And I don't want you to forget it as long as life stays in you. I want you to know that no days in all my existence have been as happy as these with you. Not even my honeymoon, John, and that is saying a lot. I can't tell you about it. When I try my tongue fails, my throat fills, and my eyes stream with tears. You'll never regret being so good to me. God won't give you cause to ever regret it. What is ahead of me seems mighty short. I'll be dead, I guess, too soon for me to ever think about coming to New York again, and I know how you feel about going down there, but I'll take a sweet memory to my grave with me, John, and that is that you, with all your up-to-date success and education, treated me as sweet and gentle as a dutiful son would an old, unpolished, plain father that he loved and respected. You are lonely and unhappy, and I see no way to help you. That hurts. That hurts deep down in me! I hate to go away and leave you like this, never to see you again. What I told you about—about the little woman that was once your wife struck you a deadly blow between the eyes. You thought you had counted on her marrying again, but I reckon, after all, you hadn't really done that. I see—I understand. You have been all these years holding her in your heart, somehow, as yours in spirit if not in body, and now for the first time you are trying to look the facts in the face. I've noticed that you don't sleep sound. I hear you stirring about in the night."

John made no denial, and the fact that he did not do so proved to Cavanaugh that what he had said was true.

John rose and started to his own room. "I'll have you up in time for your train," he said. "Get a good sleep. You will need it before starting on a long journey like yours. Good night."

"Good night, my boy, good night," Cavanaugh said.

From his own room, where John sat smoking in the dark, he saw the light go out in Cavanaugh's room. He listened, expecting to hear the bed creak as it always did when the old man got upon it, but now there was no sound. There was silence for nearly half an hour, and then the telltale creaking came. John understood. Had he had a watch and a light, he could, to a second, have timed one of the saddest and most unselfish of prayers.

"Poor, dear old Sam!" he muttered, and began to undress for bed.

CHAPTER V

After Cavanaugh's departure the time hung heavy over John. He seldom heard from Dora, and, as business happened to be rather quiet, he really was too inactive for one of his introspective temperament. When not at work he spent the time altogether in the company of Binks, who seemed to have become actually human in his fidelity and affection.

One day, having to inspect a finished building on Washington Heights, not far from Dyckman Street, he took the dog along. And when the work was over he and Binks strolled down to the Hudson and walked along the shore. It was a warm day, and men, women, and children were fishing and bathing in the clear water.

Presently a spot was reached that looked inviting, and John decided to eat the lunch there that he had brought along. So, seating himself on a water-worn boulder, he opened his parcel and fed Binks as he himself ate.

Across the river in a bluish haze towered the Palisades, and on either side of him in the distance jutted out from the shore he was on long, slender, gray and yellow boat-houses with their pile-anchored floats. On his right at the water's edge was a group of Italians, picnicking together. There were the four heads of two families, stocky laboring-men, fat housewives, and young girls and boys. They had made a fire of driftwood on the rocks, and John could see a great pot of something stewing, and smelled the aroma of coffee and broiled sausages. The boys and girls had put on foreign-looking bathing-suits and, with tiny water-wings under their arms, were splashing about, trying to learn to swim.

"Binks, old chap," John said, aloud, as had become a habit of his, "there are some deep holes where those silly people are. Those kids may get beyond their depth. I hope the men can swim."

The Italians had a guitar. Some one played it, and native songs were sung. They were very happy. John told himself that it might be some sort of reunion of close friends or relatives. There were so many shouts of merriment in Italian, loud commands to the children from their mothers, and joyous retorts from the bathers, that John failed to hear a shrill cry of alarm from their midst. It was Binks, indeed, who suddenly pricked up his ears, barked, and began to run toward the picnickers. At first, absorbed in reflection, John paid no attention to the dog's antics, but, as Binks continued to bark excitedly, he stood up and looked toward the bathers. The children now ashore were screaming, women were shouting, waving their hands, and with their clothing on the two men were wading out into the water which from the passage of a great steamer was rolling like the surf of an ocean. That the men could not swim John saw at once, and he ran down the shore toward them.

"For God's sake, meester, save her! save my daughter!" a man screamed. "Me no swim! Dere, dere!" and he pointed to a pair of water-wings floating in a circle of bubbles thirty feet from the rocks.

John was a good swimmer, and, throwing off his coat, he plunged in at once, but Binks, who had been taught to spring into water and fetch back such things as sticks or a ball thrown in, and had sighted the water-wings, was several yards ahead of him.

"Dere, dere! My God! she's up de third time!" shrieked the girl's father. "Catch her, meester, catch her! It's de last time—de last time!"

On a curling swell John saw the girl's head and shoulders above the water. She was going down again, and a great rolling wave was close upon her. John saw that he could not reach her in time, and he saw something else that filled him with horror. Binks, with the captured water-wings in his mouth, was within the girl's reach, and she grasped him and dragged him under. There was a gurgling struggle, widening rings filled with bubbles floated on the swaying water, and nothing was seen of the girl or the dog.

A wail of despair rang out from the shore; men, women, and children ran to and fro, screaming. John was soon over the spot where the girl and dog had disappeared, and, exhausting the air from his lungs, he dived down as far as he could. He kept his eyes open, and moving from him in the murky depths he could not quite reach for lack of breath he saw the blue dress of the girl. That Binks was in her dying clutch he well knew. The buoyancy of John's body raised him to the top sooner than he wished, and when he appeared with nothing in his grasp the screams from the shore were louder than ever.

"Again! again! meester!" the father yelled, "farther up. O God! O God!"

Again John dived. This time he went quite to the bottom and crawled along from rock to rock, keeping himself down by the clutch of his hands. But to no avail. He saw nothing and was fairly bursting for lack of breath. The progress upward seemed endless, and when the surface was reached he was almost dead from exhaustion. But he dived again and again. Binks was drowning, he kept thinking, and there was little else in his mind. When he had dived unsuccessfully a dozen times a man arrived in a rowboat from one of the boat-houses with a rope and grappling-irons. Taking John into the

boat, the two began to drag the river over the fatal spot. The man held the oars and John the rope.

"She's been under fifteen minutes," the boatman said. "There is little chance now, even if we get her up. My God! what fools those greasers are! Eating, drinking, and singing while their kid was going down!"

John had time to observe the group on the shore now. The mother of the girl had fainted, and the other woman was fanning her as she lay on the rocks, unsheltered from the sun. The children, in their wet suits, stood crying lustily.

"We can't do anything now," the boatman said when another five minutes had passed. "She is done for, but we'd as well keep on the job to satisfy 'em. The tow has taken her out, most likely."

Ten minutes more. Even the group on the shore seemed to have given up hope. However, the irons caught. It might be a rock, John thought, but the object yielded gently. "Hold! Not so hard!" John ordered. "You might pull it loose. I've caught something!"

Carefully he drew in the rope. He saw the blue dress through several feet of water, and, reaching down, he caught it with his hand. A moment later and the drowned girl, with Binks clutched in her death-grip, was drawn into the boat.

A scream of joy from the reviving mother of the girl rent the air. Having been unconscious of the passage of time, she evidently thought her child might yet be alive. As the boatman gently pulled toward the rocks, John disengaged Binks from the stiff fingers, and held him in his lap.

"Poor mut!" the boatman said. "She choked the life out of him. They are always like that—they will grab at a floating chip. Turn the girl's head down, will you, and let the water run out? There may be a speck of life left, but I think she is as dead as a mackerel."

Putting Binks aside, John obeyed. The girl's face was purple, her lips foaming. The rocks reached, the two Italian men, their yellow faces stamped with agony, were ready up to their waists in water to take the girl ashore.

John knew nothing about what is called "first aid to the drowning," and so, with his dead pet in his arms, he climbed up the rocks. Men were gathering from the two boat-houses. He heard somebody say, "There is a cop and a doctor!" The screaming women, the sobbing children, the awed questions of spectators just arrived, fell on closed ears, as far as John was concerned. Picking up his coat, he wrapped it about Binks and bore him homeward. Looking back, he saw the doctor examining the body on the rocks. John sat down alone in the sun. He told himself that he would let his clothing dry on him as he walked homeward. But what was to be done about the body of his pet? He couldn't take it home with him, and he knew of no burial-ground for dogs. He sat down on the shore to think it out. His mind was in a queer jumble of resentment and resigned despair. How could Binks actually be dead? How could he go home without him? And yet the wet, limp object with the bulging, glazed eyes and distorted muzzle was all that was left of the loving, vivacious animal to which he had been so warmly linked.

The doctor was coming back. He passed John, and then paused. "Is that the dog she drowned?" he asked, bending down sympathetically and stroking the animal's coat.

"Yes. How is the girl?" John asked.

"Dead," was the answer, and the doctor stood erect and walked away.

For several hours John remained on the shore. He saw the Italians bearing the girl's body away, followed by the women and children. Then a thought came to him. There was a dense strip of sloping wooded land between the river and the nearest street, and in the midst of it stood a tall oak. At the foot of this tree he would bury Binks's remains. The oak would be a landmark that he could easily single out again. He found some newspapers, and, wrapping up the body in them, he dug a grave and put his pet into it.

The sun was going down above the New Jersey cliffs when the rite was ended. The great disk was as red as living coals of fire. A tree with shooting branches and stark trunk three miles away was clearly outlined across its face. A big excursion-steamer bound for Albany was passing. The surface of the river was sprinkled with sail-boats and varicolored canoes. From somewhere on the water came the clear, joyous tones of a cornet. Some player was putting his soul into his music. John walked down to one of the boat-houses. Men were fishing from the float. At a crude bar he bought a cigar and lighted it. He asked about the fishing of one of the fishermen and apathetically listened while the man talked of rods, reels, lines, sinkers, and bait. John did not want to go home. The thought of the hot, close, and lonely house, in his present frame of mind, was repellent. He wondered if he was giving way to sickly sentimentality, for he had a desire to pass that night in the wood in solitary vigil over the grave of his loved companion.

Presently he shrugged his shoulders and started homeward. "Be a man, John Trott!" he said, with closed lips. "Why shouldn't Binks die?—everybody has to die sooner or later. What does it matter? The only thing that matters is to bear

your burden like a soldier and a man."

CHAPTER VI

Dear John [so ran the first letter from Cavanaugh after the latter returned to Ridgeville]—I hardly know how to begin this letter. Since I got home I declare everything here seems awfully tame. That was a wonderful visit I had as I look back on it. I wish it could have gone on forever. I am glad I saw you, for a lot of reasons. You were lonely and blue, my boy. Even your partner spoke to me about you. He said since Dora left that you was really in danger of a nervous breakdown. Mrs. McGwire and her oldest girl said the same thing. They were all worried about you, and so am I.

I've got a confession to make, and the sooner it is made the better I'll feel. John, you know how a town like this one is. The folks here love to gossip about anything they can pick up, and I'm going to tell you that when it got circulated among some of your old work friends that I'd gone to New York a few of them began to nose about and make inquiries. They thought it was such a peculiar thing, you see, for a man of my age and habits to do that they kept talking and talking and joking and what not. Then, as might have been expected, Todd Williams, who you remember thought he saw you on the train in New York, put his finger into the pie. He told it about that he was now more sure than ever that it was you he saw on the train and that I had gone up there to see you. That did the job, and I don't know what to do about it. Folks meet me on the street and ask about you as if it was a settled fact that you never died in that wreck, and, with their eyes staring straight into mine, I don't know what to do or say. John, I don't know how to lie with a sober face. The more I shifted about and tried to get out of it the more they believed it, till now, no matter what I say, they only laugh and make fun and say that I'm keeping something back. So please tell me what to do. The truth is that the facts, if they get out, will never harm you in any way. It is now so long since you left that only a very few that used to know you are alive or here. The fever for going West struck most of your old friends and they moved away. I really think that I'd advise you not to keep the truth back any longer. Questions are asked about what came of Dora, and if I say that she is married and gone away it will end all sorts of idle speculations.

If I've got you into a fix in this matter please forgive me, for it all came about through no intention of mine. If I could lie as straight as some contractors can beat down the price of material or wages, I'd have got you out of this, but I'm getting old and I'm like a baby in the hands of these mouthing, tattling folks. Oh, how I wish you could come down here! You'd not feel as bad about all that has happened if you'd come down and visit me and my wife, and throw it off like an old worn-out coat. What a joy it would be to give you a room and see you seated at our humble board! Think it over, my boy. Life is short at best, and we ought to spend part of it with the folks that really love us, and we love you, John—both of us do.

John sat down in his room one night to answer this letter, but, though he tried very hard, he could think of little to say. Cavanaugh's simple phrases had sounded his deepest emotional depths, and yet he could not bring himself to write an appropriate response. He started to mention the death of Binks, but gave that up. That, he argued, would only cause his old friend to be the more deeply concerned over his welfare. So he wrote the most cheerful letter of which he was capable, about his activity in business matters, and his ability to look on the bright side of such things as the absence of Dora and his unmarried state. He ended the letter with this:

Yes, I fully agree with you in regard to a frank and truthful statement about my being alive, etc. I understand the situation and don't blame you at all. Tell every one who cares to inquire that the newspaper report was a mistake and that you saw me while you were here. I want to see you and your wife as badly as you want to see me, but I'm afraid I cannot come down, now, at any rate.

CHAPTER VII

Joel Eperson sat on his small one-horse wagon, which was loaded with fire-wood. He was taking the wood to Cavanaugh's from the small farm he was renting two miles from Ridgeville. Joel had aged remarkably. Young as he was, his thin hair and beard were becoming gray, and his sallow face was seamed with lines of worry and care. His clothing was of the cheapest material and threadbare, and yet faultlessly clean. As he got down at the front gate Cavanaugh and his wife, who were seated under an apple-tree at the side of the house, came around to meet him.

"Here is the wood you wanted," Joel said, removing his hat in quite his old chivalrous way. "You said dry oak, and I found plenty on the hill back of my corn-field."

"And mighty nigh killed yourself cutting it in lengths and splitting it," Cavanaugh said. "Dry oak is a hard proposition for anything but a sawmill. What do you want for this load?"

"A dollar is what I usually get," Joel answered, sensitive as he always was when dealing with friends.

"Humph!" Cavanaugh sniffed, and looked at his wife. "This load is twice as big as any dollar load I ever bought, and will throw out twice as much heat to the square inch. I'll tell you, Joel, I've got a two-dollar bill that is burning a hole in my pocket, and it goes for this load of wood or you have me to whip. We are out of stove-wood, too, and I don't want any dickering from you about it."

Joel flushed under his tattered straw hat. "It isn't worth that much," he declared, tapping the ground with his whip.

"It is worth it to me, Joel," Cavanaugh smiled, "so what can you do about it? I won't take double value from any man, much less you. How is Tilly?"

"She is fairly well, thank you," the farmer replied.

"And the little ones?" Mrs. Cavanaugh asked, with a motherly smile.

"They are both all right, thank you," Joel said, his undecided glance on his wood. Then, to his surprise, the contractor came through the gate, took the reins from his hands, and drove the horse with its load around to the gate at the side of the house. Halting there, Cavanaugh began to throw the wood over the fence.

"Let him have his way, Joel," Mrs. Cavanaugh said, smiling. "He'd be miserable if he got anything too cheap from an old friend like you. Before you start home, come in; I've made two little waists for the children from a pattern Tilly lent me the last time she was in. I hope they will fit."

"You are always doing things like that, and yet want me to take double price for my produce," Joel said, frowning. "Something is wrong somewhere, Mrs. Cavanaugh."

The old woman laughed lightly. "Go help Sam throw off the wood, Joel," she said. "Don't tell me I haven't the right to sew for little children when I have none of my own. I love your two, and what I do for them has nothing to do with you."

With a look of blended pleasure and pain, Joel joined Cavanaugh, and together they unloaded the wagon. When it was empty Joel shook the bits of bark and chips from the plank flooring, and stared at the contractor timidly. "There is a matter I want to ask you about, Mr. Cavanaugh," he began, clearing his throat. "It is a serious thing for me, and my wife, too. I've wanted to mention it for several days—in fact, since I first heard of it. I really don't know whether I have the right to ask you, and if I haven't you must stop me. Mr. Cavanaugh, all sorts of stories have been floating about to the effect that—that my wife's—that John Trott's reported death was a mistake, and that—and that you went up to New York to—"

Joel broke off. He was quite agitated.

"I know what you mean," Cavanaugh put into the break. "How did you hear it?"

"My neighbors are all talking about it," said Eperson, laboriously, his face now grim and fixed. "I went to Todd Williams and asked him about it. All he could tell me was that he saw a man in New York that looked like John Trott, but he said it might have been only a fancy. Of course, I've kept the talk from Tilly as much as possible. I asked our neighbors not to mention it to her and they promised, but—but—"

"You think she has heard it?" Cavanaugh submitted, gravely.

Eperson nodded. A grim expression twisted his lips awry and left them quivering as he spoke. "Yes, I think some part of

it, at least, has reached her. I saw a change in her last night when she came back from a visit to the Creswells. She didn't mention it to me, but I was watching her and I saw a change. She was excited. I think I might call it excitement, Mr. Cavanaugh, and she didn't sleep well last night. She got up several times, and it seemed to me once that she was about to speak to me about it, but still she didn't."

"I see, I see," said Cavanaugh, slowly. "Well, Joel, I hardly know what is right to do in a matter as delicate as this is, but still right is right, and if there is anybody in the world that ought to know the truth about this, why, it is you and Tilly. Joel, the truth is, John Trott and Dora are both still alive."

"Then, then, *it is true*?"

"Yes, Joel; I've just had a letter from John and he wants the facts known. But I don't see that there is any reason for you to be disturbed. You see, the law parted John and Tilly years ago, and even if it hadn't, his long desertion (we'll call it that) would have amounted to the same in any court."

Like an automaton which all but creaked in its joints, Joel took up his reins. Tapping his thin horse with his whip and making a clucking sound between his teeth, he turned his wagon around.

"Wait! You haven't been paid yet," Cavanaugh cried, holding out a bill.

Pausing, a flurried, far-away look in his eyes, Joel took the money.

"Thank you—thank you," he ejaculated. "So there's no doubt about it? Did you actually see him, Mr. Cavanaugh—with your own eyes, I mean? I don't want any hearsay or second-hand report. I want the truth—the facts."

"I spent a week with him, Joel."

Eperson wound the lines around his left hand and brought his desperate eyes back to Cavanaugh's face. "There is one thing more," he gulped, his hand at his throat. "Is he—is John Trott a—a married man?"

"No, Joel; he's single. Marrying didn't seem to be—well, exactly in his line. His time has been taken up with a growing business, his books, a pet dog, and Dora. She was like a loving sister, I understand, till she married a man she loved and moved out of the country. John is a sort of—well, you might say a sort of stay-at-home, soured old bachelor that never took much to women. At least that's the way I size him up. He makes plenty of money, and has laid up some, but I don't think he cares much for it. He's odd—a sort of deep-feeling fellow—different from the general run of men."

In a nervous sort of movement Joel wiped his lips with his hand.

"There is a thing I'd like to know," he said, slowly, impressively, frankly. "You say he is single, and that makes me wonder. Mr. Cavanaugh, truth is truth, and, as you say, right is right; would you mind telling me whether you think he has—has changed—well, in regard to his—his feeling toward Tilly?"

"You are asking me a ticklish question," Cavanaugh said, with a start and a dropping of his honest eyes. "You see, John never came right out and talked plain on that line, and—"

"I was only asking for your *personal* opinion," emphasized Joel; "in talking with him did you gather that—that his sentiments had undergone no change since he left here?"

"I don't see what good it will do," the old man said, "but since you insist on knowing I may as well admit that I didn't see any change. In my opinion, Joel, he loves her even more than he did. He didn't say so, you understand, but that's what I gathered. I was watching him when I told him about you and her getting married, and I must say I pitied him. I don't know why, but I did. He looked so downcast, and, you might say, almost astonished."

With the groping movement of a man in the dark, Eperson started to get into his wagon, but was stopped by Mrs. Cavanaugh.

"Wait, Joel!" she called out. "You are forgetting these things," and she brought them to him wrapped up in paper. "Give Tilly my love and tell her if the waists don't fit I can take them in or let them out."

"Thank you; you are very, very, kind." Joel had lifted his hat, and, with a hand that seemed bloodless, he took the parcel and put it into his wagon, carefully covering it with his coat. He made no effort toward starting on again, and, as there was an opening for it, Cavanaugh said to his wife:

"I've just been telling him about John, and it seems to me that Joel is sorter worried about—about its effect on Tilly."

Eperson nodded as if acquiescing to a statement too delicate to be discussed, and remained silent, a wilted look of despair on him.

"I see, I see," Mrs. Cavanaugh said. "I was wondering how she would take it. She's never been exactly like other women. Few women would have—have, you know what I mean, Joel—would have acted like she has all along in regard to John's mother. I must say, and I know that you will agree with me, that she showed herself to be a wonderfully good Christian woman. Why, sometimes it looked to me like she loved Mrs. Trott more than she did even her own mother. But she's been rewarded—oh, you know she's been gloriously rewarded! Your sweet little wife, Joel, has saved the very soul and body of a lone, lost woman. But you helped—oh yes! if it hadn't been for you she never could have done it. And you deserve your reward, too. In my opinion you have been a man amongst a million in all you have done in that matter."

"I don't deserve your praise, Mrs. Cavanaugh," Eperson sighed. "I did it all for Tilly. She was unhappy till we began to help Mrs. Trott. I saw where the trouble lay, and did a little, that's all."

"And are you worried about how Tilly will take the news about John?" Mrs. Cavanaugh asked, while her husband hung open-mouthed on Eperson's answer.

"I don't know how exactly to make you understand the—the situation," Joel stammered. "But I reckon I may as well say, and be done with it, that—that—" He went no farther, his words piling one upon another on his helpless tongue, his great, tender eyes bulging from their dark-ringed sockets.

"You can't mean that she would be worried about the divorce." Mrs. Cavanaugh feebly came to his assistance. "Sam and I were talking that over. There is no doubt that it was legal in every way. Old Whaley saw to that. Narrow-minded and hard as he was, he acted for the best in that case."

"I see you don't understand." Joel dug the toe of his coarse shoe into a tuft of grass and mechanically pounded it with his heel. "You don't understand, because you don't know Tilly as well as I do. Mrs. Cavanaugh, how can I put it any better than to—to say that—no matter what was done in court, no matter what John Trott did that might be called 'desertion,' Tilly would never have married again if she had thought he was alive. I'd never have dared to ask her to marry me if I hadn't thought he was dead. I believed it—from the bottom of my soul I believed it, and—and, my friends, listen! I got her to believe it. I saw that she doubted it a little, and I worked and worked, and argued and argued, till finally I got her to believe it. But even then I'd have failed if Mrs. Trott hadn't—hadn't helped me. Mrs. Trott believed he was dead, and it was her belief and my talk that finally convinced Tilly. But now what is to be done?"

"Why, nothing that I can see," Mrs. Cavanaugh answered. "All you have to do is to show Tilly that in no sense of the word is she bound by her first marriage. You seem to think she is worried over that."

Joel shrugged his shoulders and took a deep breath. "You don't understand yet," he said, with a low groan. "She is excited—so excited that she can't sleep, but it is not the kind of excitement you think it is. She's heard the report that John Trott is still alive and she is afraid that it may not—by some chance—be true. I don't mean that she'd ever live with him again—now that she is—is a mother, or that she'd hold it against me for marrying her as I did; but to know that no harm came to him will make her happier than she's been for many a day. That is a thing I've got to face. She is the mother of my children, but she has never given me her whole heart and soul. She gave them to John Trott. She has never blamed him for any step he took. She thought that he left here for her sake, *and died for her sake*. Do you think I don't know that when she hears that he himself has never married in all these years—do you think that she will then love him less than she did? She always looked on him as the most wronged man alive. Do you suppose that she herself will turn against him now? In the name of God, what excuse would she have, and him still loving her as Mr. Cavanaugh thinks he does?"

"I never looked at it that way," Mrs. Cavanaugh said. "You are getting me all mixed up. Does Mrs. Trott— Have any of the reports got to her?"

"No, not yet; but Tilly will want to tell her, now that there is no doubt as to the truth. I must tell my wife what I have just learned. It is my duty to tell her. Yes, yes, I must tell her. I'm honor-bound at once to give her all the joy in my power."

It was as if both Cavanaugh and his wife could think of nothing in the way of comfort for Eperson, and, taking his reins into a better grasp and touching his hat politely, he mounted his wagon and drove away.

CHAPTER VIII

The loose planks on Joel's wagon rattled over the rain-washed and little-used road running from the main highway to the farm he was renting. The house was a log cabin of only three rooms, situated on a bleak, treeless hillside. Adjoining it was a diminutive corn-crib made of pine poles with the bark still on them, and a lean-to shed which was roofed with long shingles sawn and split from red oak.

As he drove his clattering wagon up the slope his two children, little Joel and Tilly, ran out to meet him. The boy held his sister's hand to keep her from falling, and was gleefully shouting to his father to stop and take them into the wagon. Eperson checked his horse and got down and made places for them on his coat.

"Where's your mother?" he inquired, his dull eyes on the cabin.

"In the house," answered little Joel. "Supper is nearly ready."

"Hold your sister," Eperson ordered, as he started the horse and walked along by the wagon; "she might fall."

Tilly came to the front door and stood watching them as they drew nearer. The sun was going down, and its last slanting rays made a living picture of her in the crude frame of logs. She looked older than the average woman of her age, and yet there was a rounded mellowness to her features, a suave, spiritual radiance from her skin, eyes, and hair, which always caught and held the attention of an observer. The same quality seemed to pervade her voice. It had always been musical; it was even more so now. Her husband saw that she was all aglow and smiling as she stepped down to the wagon and held out her arms for the little girl.

"Not a long ride, was it, pet?" she said, as the child put its arms around her neck and kissed her cheek.

Taking up the parcel, Joel handed it to his wife. "Mrs. Cavanaugh sent it," he explained. "It is the waists."

"Mrs. Cavanaugh?" Tilly said, in groping surprise. "Where did you see her?"

"I sold Cavanaugh the wood." Joel felt the heat flow into his cheeks. "He ordered it a week ago."

"Was he—was he at home?" Tilly held the child's face to hers, and Joel noted a tense ripple of expectation in her voice.

"Yes, he was there." Joel lowered his head to take up the reins he had dropped, preparatory to driving around to the wagon-shed. From the corner of his eyes he saw that Tilly stood rigid at his side, and he thought he knew why she lingered thus. He was starting his horse, when she said, suddenly:

"Well, come right in. Your supper is ready."

As he put his horse into its stall and fed it with fodder and corn, he almost wished that he could prolong the task, for how was he to pass through the coming ordeal, which was like death to him?

He went into the house, bathed his face in a pan of water, brushed his long thin hair, carefully adjusted his collar, and put on his coat. As a rule, farmers did not wear their coats in the house in warm weather, but Joel had never sat at the table with his wife without having his on. It was an observance of respect to women which had been handed down to Joel from conventional forebears, and from which he could not have departed.

Tilly and the children were at the table. It had grown dark within the almost windowless cabin, and an oil-lamp furnished the light, the yellow rays of which fell over the food, which consisted of boiled vegetables, cornbread, butter, and mush and milk for the children.

Out of respect to Tilly, who always did it in his absence, Joel, when at home, said grace at the table, and the upturned plates to-night mutely reminded him of that duty.

It had always been the same simple formula which, also, had descended to Joel, and over his folded hands to-night he uttered it. Moistening his dry lips as if to render them pliant, Eperson sent his prayer out into the sentient mystery which was so relentlessly wrapping him about.

"Loving Father," he prayed, "we thank Thee, this night, for all the evidence of Thy loving tenderness and care. Bless this food to our needs. Render us kind and merciful to our neighbors, and, when our earthly service to Thee is ended, receive us into the grace and peace of Thy eternal kingdom. Amen."

Eperson forced himself to eat. Under the stress of his emotions his appetite had departed, and yet he pretended to be enjoying his food. Tilly was eating with more relish, it seemed to him, than usual, and he thought he knew the

psychological reason for it. He had never seen her look so buoyantly ethereal as she did to-night. To have described the change upon her would have been beyond the power of man. She was like an older sister to her children. Her love for them seemed to issue from her like some supernal blending of light and music as she bent to adjust the bib of the younger one, or sweetly to admonish the older in regard to his too rapid eating of his mush and milk.

"Don't—don't hurry, Joie darling!" her lilting voice produced. "You don't want to be like a little piggy at his trough, do you, my sweet boy?"

When supper was over, Tilly washed the dishes and Eperson put the children to bed, removing their moist clothing, bathing their bare, dusty feet and legs, and putting on their nightgowns. What a holy service of resignation it was to-night! Why was he so depressed with a sense of his vast paternal unworthiness? Why, unless he was thinking of John Trott's success? He told himself that his whole life had been a failure. Many of his personal debts were unpaid and unpayable. There were men he dreaded meeting because they always asked for the money due them, or showed by their faces that they were thinking of his delinquency. And there were others harder to meet who showed by their faces and the matters they spoke about that they had no thought of ever being paid. Ah! then there were still other men—men from whom he could not bring himself to borrow. They were the few, like Cavanaugh, who wanted to help him, but did not know how to broach so delicate a subject with so sensitive a man.

The children tucked away in the general sleeping-room, Eperson went outside to the chairs that stood by the door-step and sat waiting for Tilly. Would she come to him as promptly as usual? he wondered, his stare on the blinking stars beyond the hilltops. Perhaps not so readily, for an ineffable veil seemed to have been lowered between him and her since her talk with the neighbors in regard to her first husband's survival. He listened for the clatter of dishes and pans in the kitchen. It had ceased. That work was over. Now, nothing would detain her, he told himself, and he tried to brace his courage for the performance before him.

But she did not come at once. He heard her voice, with its indescribable gurgle of maternal sweetness, teaching the children to say their prayers.

"God bless mother," was repeated after her, "God bless father—God bless Grandmother Trott, and all the good people in the world. Amen."

"*Grandmother Trott!*" Joel's whole weary being throbbed with the mental utterance of the words. Then he heard Tilly singing a quaint lullaby sung by the negroes. He wondered if she were purposely delaying her usual after-supper chat with him. After all, what was there to tell her? She had evidently heard the main facts of the matter—that was plain from that irrepressible elation of hers.

She extinguished the light and came out to him, taking the chair he stood holding for her. The starlight gleamed on his bare brow. It was like a well-wrought piece of granite. He brushed his hair back with an unsteady hand as he sat down.

"I was talking with Cavanaugh," he began, and paused to clear the huskiness from his throat.

"I know," Tilly said. "I've heard everything."

"You have?" Joel said, tremulously.

"Yes, the Creswells told me yesterday. You see, Tom Creswell works in the post-office, and the postmaster showed him and the other clerks a letter that Mr. Cavanaugh was sending to John since he got back from New York. Then the postmaster showed him one answering it. The postmaster met Mr. Cavanaugh and asked him about it, and Mr. Cavanaugh told him that it was all a mistake about John and Dora being killed. He says John is doing well and looks well. Oh, I'm so glad—so glad! Ever since the report of that wreck it has been on my mind like a horrible dream. Night and day it would come up to haunt me. Don't you see, I thought— I felt that if—if I had not gone away that day with my father John would have been alive. So now, you see, I haven't *that* to think about. God spared him and Dora, and Mattie Creswell says they are both happily married."

"Both?" Joel exclaimed. "You haven't got it right, Tilly. Dora married and left him all alone. Cavanaugh says John never married."

"Never married?" Tilly's sweet lips hung quivering. "But Mattie Creswell says her brother told her that Cavanaugh said that John was married to a wealthy girl in high society."

"It is my duty to tell you the truth," Eperson said, the look of death deepening on him. "He never married. He has been leading a strange, lonely life. I think I know why. You can guess."

"*I* can guess?" Tilly was pale and trembling as she leaned toward him.

"Well, no, perhaps you can't," Joel corrected, "but I know why."

"You know why?" Tilly's voice broke on the last word, and she stared at him eagerly, her sweet mouth drooping.

"Yes, because no man who was once your husband even for the few days that you were his could ever marry any other woman."

"You—you rate me too highly," Tilly faltered, putting her hands over her face. "Why, why, I've always thought that till his death he hated me for deserting him as I did when all the rest of the world was down on him."

"He is no fool, and he was not even then, boy though he was. He knew why you went away so suddenly. Do you hear me? He simply acted as I would have done in his place. He endeavored to set you free from certain unbearable conditions, and that is what I would have done. In setting you free he rescued another girl from a life of degradation and despair, but that is neither here nor there. John Trott deserves credit, and I shall give it to him. Dead though you thought he was, he has always had your heart. I've seen that in a thousand things you have done and said. Your love for his mother was due to that, and God knows you've had your reward there, for you awakened an immortal soul and have earned its eternal gratitude and love. Don't think I am complaining, Tilly. I knew when you came to me that your heart was not mine. I've never been able to win it and I never shall."

"Why, you don't think—you don't think—" stammered Tilly. "Surely you don't think that I still—still—" She suddenly stopped and stared at her husband in a bewildered way. "You don't suppose, Joel, that I could believe that he—that all these years John—"

Joel slowly swung his head up and down. "I believe that you both love each other still. I was wrong to over-persuade you when you held out so long against me. John Trott acted for your good in leaving, and I should not have saddled on you myself, the greatest failure among men that ever lived. I feel to-night as if the blight of an avenging God is on me for my presumption. I have put two little children on your hands and feel as incapable of protecting you and them as a crawling infant."

"I won't listen to you!" Tilly stood up. "You shall not abuse yourself in this way. You acted exactly as you should. No one could blame you. You are one of the noblest men living. Without you I'd have been lost after my mother and father died. For you to say that—that John and I still—I won't say the word. You have no right to utter it when all is considered—you and me and the children. What right have you to—to think that you could know John's heart, when you have not seen him for eleven years? You may think you know mine. You may do so if you insist on making yourself unhappy, but you have no right to—to pass an opinion on—on the present feelings of my first husband. What are you going by, I'd like to know? You don't suppose that John would tell Mr. Cavanaugh such things, even if they were true? And how could Mr. Cavanaugh come to you, my husband, and—and even *mention* such a thing?"

Joel was on his feet also. The childlike and unconscious eagerness of his wife to make sure of the thing she was secretly craving stabbed him to the core of his being, and yet he told himself that it was his duty to withhold nothing concerning his rival from her.

"Reading him as I'd read myself," Joel answered. "I thought he'd remain constant, but to-day I wormed it out of Mr. Cavanaugh."

"Wormed what out—*what out*?" Tilly sank back into her chair, open-mouthed, her eyes gleaming portals to breathless expectancy. "You can't mean that Mr. Cavanaugh thinks—actually thinks that John still—?"

Joel bowed his head in the relentless starlight, sat down as from sheer frailty, and was silent. The undulating landscape, the fields, the meadows, the woodland, the hills and streams seemed to hold their vast breath with his. Suddenly Tilly rose. It was as if she were about to stand behind his chair, as was her wont at times, put her hands upon his shoulders, and kiss his thorn-crowned brow, but she did not. She went slowly into the cabin. He heard her feet—feet he knew to be winged with sudden, far-reaching joy—treading the boards as she went to the bed of the children. What was she doing? he wondered. Her step ceased. He pictured her as seated by the side of the children's bed. Was she pitying him or rejoicing? Why ask? He knew. And his love was so divine a thing that, but for his throes of death-agony, he could have rejoiced with her.

CHAPTER IX

Cavanaugh had a duty to perform. He had decided to take on himself the act of informing Mrs. Trott of her son's survival. So, the next morning after his colloquy with Eperson he walked out to the cabin the widow occupied near the home of Eperson. As he passed Joel's place he saw from the distance that Joel was at work in his corn-field, and, watching a few minutes, he saw Tilly come out and feed her chickens, so he judged that Mrs. Trott had not yet been told the important news.

Walking on, he soon reached the isolated cabin in the woods that he was seeking. It had but a single room, one window in front, and a crude chimney made from unhewn stones and clay. The door facing the little road was open, and as he drew near, Mrs. Trott, hearing his step, came to the door and looked out.

She was now quite gray, and wore a plain dress of homespun unadorned in any way save for a neat white collar and an old cameo pin which had been a gift of her husband's. A touch of her old beauty still lingered in the contour of her face and good basic features. Her eyes had a placid expression, and her voice had become that of a child who loves to be led and petted. She smiled on recognizing the unexpected visitor, and gave him a seat in the cabin.

"I didn't expect to see you out this way," she said. "Joel told me a couple of weeks ago that you'd gone off somewhere."

He nodded. It was difficult to introduce the topic on his mind, and he chatted with her about the land in the neighborhood, Joel's prospective crop, and the fear some of the farmers had of a harmful drought if rain did not fall within a week or so. He had not been able to come to the matter in hand when a sound outside was heard.

"Grandmother Trott," a small voice piped up, "sister won't come on. She keeps stopping and picking flowers and leaves."

Mrs. Trott laughed, and her face beamed. "It is Joel's children," she explained. "The little darlings come with milk for me every bright day. Tilly sends it."

Rising, she stood in the doorway. "Come on; but, no, Joie, don't pull her hand so hard! You might jerk her little arm out of joint. Come on by yourself. She will come when she feels like it."

The boy soon appeared with the pail of milk and set it in the door. "Mother said tell you she'd have some fresh butter for you in the morning and some eggs. The hens have started again. Tilly and I found six eggs in the hay last night. Grandmother, where are the kittens?"

"Right around behind the cabin, dearie," Mrs. Trott answered, taking the pail. "The mother-cat is nursing them in the sun. Show them to your little sister. You may have them when they are larger."

Cavanaugh heard the children as they went behind the house and bent over the cat and kittens. He heard them uttering endearing words to the animals. "Don't, don't, you little stupid!" Joel cried. "She may scratch you! Don't you see her claws?"

Mrs. Trott laughed softly as she emptied the pail and washed it out.

"They are the sweetest children in the world," she said to Cavanaugh, as she put the pail on the door-step and sat down again. "They stayed with me a week last month when Joel and Tilly went to camp-meeting over the mountain. They were not one bit of trouble, and, oh, I did love to have them about! I never let on to Tilly and Joel, but when they took the darlings away I was awfully blue. Short as the time was, you see, I got accustomed to them."

The children had gone home and still Cavanaugh had not reached the object of his visit. It was the shadow of vague wonderment in the widow's eyes, and her lagging talk, that compelled him to introduce it. He first spoke, and rather adroitly, of Todd Williams's encounter in New York with the man who resembled her son, and, pausing, he heard her sigh.

"Poor boy! poor boy!" she muttered, sadly. "And they said he and Dora were on the way to New York when that awful thing happened. Mr. Cavanaugh, you are a good man. You've always been considered a good man by everybody that knows you. I understand that you never had any children, but you may know the human heart well enough to know that no regret ever heard of can be deeper than that which is brought on by the sort of thing that happened to me. I don't talk this way to Tilly and Joel, because I owe them too much to let them dream that I am not thoroughly happy. But if I could live a thousand years I'd never be able to rid my mind of the positive knowledge that by—by—I *will* say it—I'll say it to you as I'd say it to a priest, if I was a Catholic. I've often wished I was one, so that I could let what I feel

out of me. Maybe saying it like this to you will do a little good. I don't know, but I will say that nothing on earth can rid my mind of the fact that by my thoughtless way of acting when I was young I— I—"

"Stop! I know what you mean, my poor friend," Cavanaugh broke in, "and you are getting all wrought up. Listen to me. Why not look on the hopeful side, the bright side? How do you know but that John and Dora are still alive, and none the worse; in fact—"

He suddenly checked himself, for a sickly, greenish pallor had overspread the listener's face, and she leaned forward as if about to swoon. In a moment, however, she had recovered herself, and, sitting erect, her white, shapely hands pressed to her breast, she smiled feebly.

"Oh, I know what you mean, Mr. Cavanaugh. I did try that. I summed up every hope, everything that held out the slightest promise. I used to lie awake at night and declare over and over that it couldn't be—that the laws of life wouldn't let such an unjust thing happen to them, innocent as they were, and with their right to live, but it didn't do any good. I didn't let anybody know about it, but one after another I got three different papers with John's name in them. I went to Atlanta and visited the editors of all the papers and asked their advice. They were sorry, but they said the list had never been disputed and ought to have been even bigger than it was. Then I gave up."

A shrewd, half-fearful gleam was in the contractor's shifting eyes.

"I know, I know, Mrs. Trott," he gently persisted, "but many and many an account like that has turned out afterward to be incorrect. You don't know it, but maybe all three of those papers got their information from one report. You see, a reporter representing a lot of papers in a sort of combine goes to a spot like that was and his account is telegraphed all about over the country. So you see, even if you had seen it in a hundred papers you wouldn't have to take it as law and gospel."

Mrs. Trott slowly shook her head and moaned softly.

"I wonder if I dare tell her," Cavanaugh debated with himself. "She almost fainted just now. She may have a weak heart. I must be careful. I've heard of sudden joy killing." He was silent for a moment; then he began again: "Mrs. Trott, you are welcome to your opinion, and I reckon you'll let me have mine. But, to tell you the truth, I never have been *fully convinced* that John and Dora was lost in that wreck. I have my reasons, and they are pretty good ones."

He saw her arched brows meet in a little frown of polite wonderment, and she was about to speak when little Joel suddenly reappeared at the door.

"Oh, grandmother," he half lisped, in breathless haste, for he had been running, "I forgot to tell you what mother told me to say. She said for me to be sure not to forget. She said tell you that she is coming over after dinner to tell you the best news you ever heard."

"Ah, tell her I'm glad, darling!" Mrs. Trott said, with a smile. And she went and stooped down before the child and added: "Won't you give old grandmother a sweet little hug? There! there! that's a darling little man!" And Cavanaugh saw her pressing the boy to her breast and kissing his cheeks.

When the child had left she came back to her chair, her face filled with a rare maternal glow. "If you were a younger man, Mr. Cavanaugh, and childless, as you now are, I'd advise you to adopt children. I don't know why or how it is, but I know that persons can love other children than their own and love them deeply, too. I love Tilly's two— I really do. That child there, that little boy with all his cute ways and moods, takes me back to the childhood of my own son. But I neglected him. How I could have done it only God knows, but I did, and you know it better than any one else besides myself. You gave him a fine start, and if he had lived he would have made a great success. But I must stop— I must stop! I think I know what Tilly's good news is. Joel has been trying to rent the Marsden farm. He put in a bid for it. It is a big place, and Mr. Marsden furnishes supplies. Maybe Joel has got it. I hope so, for he is at the end of his rope."

"The good news is not for poor Joel, Mrs. Trott. The truth is that Tilly wants to tell you the same thing I've come to tell you. You know I said that I never was fully convinced about John. Now what if I was to tell you that I went to New York to make sure?"

"Make sure? Make sure that—that John—" she began and stopped.

He nodded, holding her bewildered stare by his fixed eyes. "I found out enough up there to be sure, Mrs. Trott."

"You mean that John— Why, you *can't* mean that—?"

Again he nodded. "I've been afraid to shock you with the good news, but he is alive and prospering. I was with him a week."

She was convinced. She sat white and limp. She put her thin hands to her face as if to hide her joy from him. He saw her breast heaving. He heard her sob in an effort to control her emotion, and then she became quiet.

That night at home Cavanaugh wrote a long letter to John. "Something must be done," he wrote, in one place. "If you had seen that transformed human soul as I saw her there in her lonely log hut and heard her talk of you and your babyhood and the thousands of regrets she has for what she has done and left undone, your kind heart would have melted with pity as mine did. My old mother's passed on, John, but if I could call her back I'd give my last breath to furnish her with a minute's joy. You could give yours years of comfort and happiness. Do you know what I'd do if I was you? I'd come here and get her and take her back to New York with me, and let her have some of the things she used to hunger for and which may have caused her to do as she did. She is poor; she needs you; the two good friends who have been helping her so long really haven't the means to keep it up. You must come—you really must. If you don't it will darken the end of your life. I love you too much to let you neglect this sublime duty. Men of the greatest brains have married repentant women and never regretted it; surely a man as noble as you are, and as able as you are, can afford to pardon the woman who gave him his very life."

Mrs. Cavanaugh read the letter when it was finished. She made no comment on it, but her opinion of her husband had never been so high. Deep pools of his inner being for the first time in his life were exposed to the light of her understanding.

"May I?" she asked, taking the pen into her hand, and laying his letter open on the table.

"Yes," he nodded. "Add anything you like."

"Dear John," she wrote on the margin, in the cramped style of one who writes but seldom, "come to your mother. Do as Sam says. He knows what is best."

CHAPTER X

Among the farmers of that locality it was considered somewhat beneath the dignity of the men to milk the cows, but Joel Eperson had never permitted his little wife to lay her hands to that particularly arduous part of the day's duties. And to-night at dusk he was at this work in the stable-yard, Tilly and the children still being at Mrs. Trott's cabin. He knew why his wife had gone there, and painfully he was comprehending why she was so late in getting back. There would naturally be much to say on a subject like that by the two women in all the world whom such a startling revelation touched so closely. Joel took his pail of milk into the cabin. He put some more wood into the stove that it might be hot and ready for use when Tilly arrived, and then he walked to and fro in the yard, his dull eyes on the dewy fields. On his right, a half-mile distant, the fires of the lime-kilns and brickyards were beginning to glow against the cliffs in the coming darkness, and the songs of the negro stokers and the thwacks of their axes fell on his ears. He emptied the water in the pail and brought up some more from the spring at the foot of the slope. Still his family did not come, and he started out to meet them. He crossed the meadow, skirted his corn, which till only the other day he had looked on with pride, walked between the rows of his cotton-plants to curtail the distance, and finally reached the wood through which ran the path to Mrs. Trott's cabin. As he stood there for a moment he heard voices. Both Tilly and Mrs. Trott were speaking, but he could not see them for the thickened darkness beneath the trees.

"I must hurry now." It was Tilly's voice, and it rang with the lilting tones of triumphant joy. "It is late. Joel will be looking for me."

"Yes, I'll turn back," Mrs. Trott was heard saying. "Let me kiss them once more. Oh, I am so wonderfully happy! Really, dear girl, I'd like to die feeling as I do to-night. You see, I never expected it— I never dreamt that such a thing could be possible. I thought all chance of ever begging his forgiveness was gone, and now maybe, some day or other, I can. I wouldn't ask him to take me back, you understand, but only to say that he wouldn't hold it against me the rest of his life. But I'd want him to know one thing, Tilly, my sweet child, and that is the things you have done for me on account of—on account of—you know what I mean?"

"Hush, grandmother," Tilly answered, in the tremulous tone which indicated emotions firmly checked. "You must not forget who I now am. You must not forget that I'm the mother of those darling children."

"No, my child, nor can I forget their noble father. I wouldn't wound him for the whole world. I love him as—as—yes, I love him as much as I do John, but in a different way, that is all. John was my baby, Joel is my grown-up son. You must never forsake Joel in thought, word, or act. Remember that."

What Tilly answered Joel refused to hear. He was too honorable a man to listen further, and he turned back and with slow, weighty steps reached his home again. He stood in the kitchen doorway, waiting. He heard Tilly and the children coming. They were singing merrily and romping like sprites across the meadow.

"I'm coming! I'm coming! I'll catch you! Boo!" Tilly cried. "Hide from him, darling—hide behind the bushes! Where is she, brother? She must be lost. Oh, there she is!" This was followed by childish screams of delight and the mother's cooing words.

Joel went to meet them, advancing across the yard and taking little Tilly into his arms.

"I know we are late," his wife said, regretfully, "but grandmother came part of the way back, and you know she walks slowly."

"It is all right," Joel said, pressing little Tilly's cheek to his. "It is not very late."

"Well, I'll hurry with the supper," Tilly answered. It was significant, he reflected, that she did not mention then the reception of the startling news by Mrs. Trott. Even while they all sat at the table Tilly failed to bring it up, and a general air of repression brooded over them.

Indeed, the children had been put to bed, the dishes washed, and husband and wife were alone together in the moonlight at the door, and still the subject in the minds of both had been avoided. He wondered if she expected him to mention the matter. Surely she ought to know that it was not exactly the thing that he, a mere outsider, had the right to pry into. An awkward silence fell between them, the sort of silence that surely boded ill for their future harmony of intercourse. Tilly seemed to sense this, and suddenly put her shoulder to the wheel of duty.

"I didn't get to tell grand— I didn't get to tell Mrs. Trott, after all." It was significant that she abruptly discarded a formerly accepted term of endearment. "Mr. Cavanaugh was there this morning for that purpose, so—so the greater part of her excitement was over when I got there."

"But she was happy, of course," Joel got out, well knowing that his remark was an empty one.

"Oh yes, of course." Tilly was silent for several minutes. Then she added: "The poor woman is afraid that John will not forgive her. She doesn't want help from him, she declares, and she thinks it would be unwise for them ever again to meet face to face, but she says she would like for him to know how sorry she is for many things. I think, myself, Joel, that it would be inadvisable for—for them to meet, just at present, anyway. Don't you?"

"I don't know. I can't say. I'm not in a position to decide," Joel floundered. "It would depend on him. It is unfortunate that so many miles separate them. He evidently has some established way of living into which she might not fit so well. The mere fact of his being still alive reached her by accident and through no effort on his part."

"I'm sure she has no idea of making any advancement." Tilly seemed to Joel, as she spoke, quite another woman from the one who had been his wife all those years, and Joel simply sat, bent forward, his every nerve and muscle drawn taut by vast swirling forces within him.

"Then you don't think that he would—would forgive her?" asked Tilly, with obvious anxiety which she was striving to minimize.

Joel's prompt reply surprised her. "I know he would," said Joel, "if he knew all the circumstances. I have never known a nobler man. I don't believe a nobler man ever lived. In trying to help his mother I was only doing what I was sure he would have done for me under the same conditions. If I only knew how to show him what his mother now is I'd do it."

They were silent for a while; then, suddenly, Tilly stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Joel," she said, "you are blue to-night." She toyed with the hair on his brow; she bent almost as low as when in that posture she sometimes kissed him, but she did not kiss him to-night, and he noted the fact as a man dying unattended in a dungeon might test his own pulse. He longed to take the little hand so close to his cheek and press it to his famished lips, but something told him that she would (not openly, but inwardly) now actually shrink from such a caress.

"No, don't think I am blue," he protested, fighting forward on his black billows, and grimly smiling. "You are happy and I shall be for your sake. You mustn't observe my cranky ways too closely. I'm all right."

"Somehow I can't exactly believe it." Tilly twisted a lock of his hair between her slow, reluctant fingers. "You seem changed, a little, anyway, and I think we ought to come to a thorough understanding right now. You have an imagination, Joel. You used to write poetry to me, you remember, and for all I know you may now be fancying all sorts of really absurd things. Now be sensible. John and I *did* love each other away back there, but we were parted and for years I have thought of him as dead. But now he is away off up there, and I am here with you and our darling children. You love them, they love you—and—and you love me, and I—love you. Now be sensible. Can you, even with a crazy flight of your imagination, fancy that John and I ever again will or could be—be like we once were? Throw the idea away if you have it. Of course, I must be happy in discovering that my hasty desertion back there did not cost him his life and Dora's. Oh, that thought worried me! I never let you know how much it worried me! I guess I would have married you much sooner than I did if I had not had that on my mind. But all that is past and gone now. I'm here and John is away off up there. Your idea that he still loves me is ridiculous on the face of it. What was I, even when he was here? Only an ignorant country girl, while he has no doubt grown and learned and altered in a thousand ways. I've seen successful men from big cities. They don't seem to think as we do, or act or speak like us. I'd be a silly dowdy to such a man. I think, of course, if it comes about naturally, that his mother ought to go to him, but I don't think he ever ought to—to come back here, and I am sure that he won't. I am sure of that—I'm sure of it. He has been burnt once, as the saying is, and that will be enough. But I predict that she will go to him. No, I'll take that back. I said that, but I am not sure. Do you know, it is God's truth, Joel, that the sweet old soul loves you and me and the children so much now that she would not leave us even—even for John. She let that out this afternoon while Tilly was sleeping in her lap. The very thought of going started her to crying, and it was some time before I got her quiet."

Tilly's hand actually touched his neck, but Joel still felt that he had no right to clasp it. The wild thought of grasping it and drawing his wife's lips down to his possessed him, but he promptly killed the impulse. Grimly he told himself that he would be fondling a shadow, feasting on a husk.

Suddenly she drew her hand away. "I'm awfully tired to-night," she sighed. "I'll go to bed, but you needn't hurry. Shall I fill your pipe?"

"No, thank you," he said, rising as courteously as of old. "I sha'n't smoke any more to-night."

"Well, good night," she said.

"Good night," he echoed.

The flare from the lime-kilns and the brickyards lit the cliffs, hills, and sky. He beard the town clock striking ten. Little Joel had waked, and his mother was gently telling him to go to sleep. The child wanted water. Tilly went to the kitchen for it, and the father heard her sweetly cooing as she held the cup for his son to drink. What a marvel that—*his son and hers*.

CHAPTER XI

"John is not coming. I see that plain enough from this letter," Cavanaugh announced to his wife at noon one day, as he entered the sitting-room where she sat sewing on a machine.

"Why, what's wrong?" the old woman asked, in a tone of disappointment.

"I can't tell exactly," Cavanaugh answered. "It is all round about, with this reason and that. He seems to have a mistaken idea that it will stir up an awful rumpus in the papers. He wants to help his mother, and says for me to see her and tell her so. He is willing to make a substantial settlement on her, but she wouldn't take it. Do you hear me? She wouldn't have scraps thrown at her like that. If he came here and made it up she might let him help, but she'll never accept it that way. I am disappointed in him. After the way I wrote, he ought to have come and been done with it."

Mrs. Cavanaugh adjusted her glasses, took the letter and read it, moving her wrinkled lips as she slowly intoned the words. Then she handed it back.

"Man that you are," she sniffed, "you don't see what ails him. He doesn't once mention Tilly, but in every line there he is thinking of her and her happiness. He'd love to come back here and see the old place and all of us, but he is afraid it will upset Tilly. You said you thought he still loves her— I *know* he does. I can see it all through that letter, and I'm sorry for him, poor fellow!"

"Oh, I see what you mean," Cavanaugh said, in a mollified tone, "and I believe you are right, too. He was thinking of her happiness when he ran away, and he is doing it now. Yes, yes, he still loves her. I saw it in a hundred ways when me and him was together up there. He never had room for but one woman in his heart, and she fills it still. She is the drawback in the case, I'll bet. He thinks she is happy with Joel and the children and he doesn't want to break in at this late day. But he will come. Mark my words, he will come to help his mother when I write him more fully. I'll explain, too, that I'll keep it from the papers, and when he gets here he can stay out here with us and keep away from old acquaintances as much as he likes. Yes, he will come."

It ended in accordance with this prediction. One evening at dusk John arrived in town and was delivered by a street-hack at Cavanaugh's door. He was received with open arms by the old couple and treated as a much-loved son. And he was glad that he came. For the first time since the departure of Dora and the loss of Binks he felt restful and at home. The delightful old-fashioned room, filled with the very perfume of cleanliness, to which he was assigned, at once charmed and soothed him. Till late that night the three friends sat talking on the porch. Several times Mrs. Trott was mentioned, but Tilly not once. That she and Joel lived near by and had been the widow's stanch friends John was not yet aware, and the Cavanaughs wondered, half fearfully, what effect that knowledge would have on their guest.

John was waked the next morning by the long, resonant blowing of the whistles at the mills. It was scarcely light, and, only partly conscious at first, he fancied that it was his old signal for rising. He thought he was in his dismal room at his mother's house, and that little ragged Dora was clattering about in the kitchen below. Slowly he came to full comprehension and lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. But it was not to sleep. What a tangle of sordid memories wrapped him about! How profoundly wise, by comparison, had he become! He wondered if the tiny cottage in which he and Tilly had passed those few days of blinded bliss were still extant. If so, would he dare visit it? He thought not. Neither would he care to see again his mother's old home.

Later, when the sun was up, he heard Cavanaugh on the porch, and he rose, dressed, and joined him. Presently breakfast was announced. How the cozy table in its snowy expanse appealed to him—the food he used to like, the open door looking out on a flower-garden, a plot of dewy grass, and a row of beehives! He had a sense of wanting to live that way always. He was weary of the life that he had just left, and the ephemeral things he had won. His desire for rest was that of an old man whose years are spent. Somehow he felt that he and the Cavanaughs were on a par as to age and experience. They had suffered mildly through long lives—he had suffered keenly in a shorter one.

It was understood between him and Cavanaugh that the first thing to be done was for him to visit his mother. So, when breakfast was over, they fared forth in the cool, brisk air for that walk in the country. As they neared the cabin Cavanaugh saw Joel's house in the distance. He might have descried either Joel or Tilly about the place by careful looking, but was afraid that even a glance in that direction might attract John's attention. Presently Mrs. Trott's cabin was before them, and, leaving his companion in the edge of the wood, Cavanaugh went ahead to prepare the widow for the surprise before her. Presently he came back.

"I must say she was awfully excited," he began. "I was sorry for her. She turned as white as a sheet and shook powerful; but she wants to see you, and said tell you to come right on. Now you know the way home, John, and so I'll turn back."

"A cabin—a mere log cabin, such as the poorest negroes live in!" John reflected, and yet it was the abode of the woman who used to demand so many luxuries, and that woman, looked at from any angle, was his mother. He was conscious of no tenderness or pity. Those things were reserved for the instant of his first view of her. Great soul that he was, it required but the downcast eyes of the repentant woman to melt him into streams of sympathy when she appeared in the low doorway, a pitiful flush of embarrassment struggling out of the pallor of her cheeks and surrounding her still beautiful eyes.

"Mother!" he cried, huskily, and he advanced to her, his arms outstretched. "I had to come to you. I heard you were in need, but I didn't know it was like this."

She seemed unable to say a word. She hid her shamed face, her childlike face, so full of timid remorse, on his shoulder, and he felt her sobs shaking her breast. He led her to a chair inside the cabin and gently eased her down to it, his fingers, filially hungry for the first time in his life, gently and consolingly playing about her hair and brow.

Presently she found her voice. "I was afraid you'd never come," she faltered, still with that shrinking humility which had so completely won him to her. "But here you are. Oh, I don't know what to say, John— I don't know what to say, except that I am not the same silly woman I used to be. I used to think that the way I lived when you was here was the only way I could live, but now I'd rather die than take back a single day of it. Strange as it may seem, I like this. I like the still woods out there, the rocks, grass, and wild flowers, and being alone. Yes, I like to be all alone. When I'm all alone, even in the dead of night, something seems to come to me and pity me and give me the sweetest rest and peace. There wasn't but one thing that haunted me, and that was thinking you were dead. When I heard that was a mistake I felt very happy, though I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

It seemed to him, as he sat in that crude hut, that nothing stranger had ever happened to him than seeing her in such surroundings.

"Is it possible," he asked, "that you spend the nights here in this place?"

"For six years now, winter and summer." She smiled wistfully. "I've got my little garden behind the cabin, and my chickens and my cats, and they keep me busy. Then I read a lot of books and stories. The Cavanaughs send them to me off and on, and—and"—she started visibly—"some other people do, too."

"Other people?" he repeated to himself. "Then she *has* friends, after all."

Presently a patter of feet sounded outside and a child's voice came in at the open door. "Grandmother Trott! Where are you?"

"Here, here!" Mrs. Trott called out in a flurried tone. She made a start as if to rise, and yet it seemed to John that she had lost the power to move. Then a little boy appeared at the door, two tin pails in his hands. "Here's the milk, grandmother, and some fresh butter. Mother said keep the pie and biscuits warm. She just took them from the stove before I started. Grandmother, sister wants to see the kittens. May she?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Mrs. Trott, still agitated, got up. Little Tilly was now in the doorway, and she took her into her arms. As for Joel, he had espied one of the kittens, and was crossing the room after it, when for the first time he saw John and paused, somewhat abashed.

"Come here." John smiled, holding out his hands, and the boy went to him trustingly. "My, my! what a solid boy you are!" John went on, taking him on his knee. "How old are you?"

"Six, and sister's four," was the answer.

Mrs. Trott, still with the look of concern on her face, was putting Tilly down, that she might empty the pails, and while her back was turned the little girl crept confidingly to John's disengaged knee. With a laugh, he took her up also. He was strongly drawn to them both, and why he couldn't have said, unless it was because they were friends of his mother and had given her such an endearing appellation.

Mrs. Trott brought the pails back. She still wore an embarrassed look, which, in his preoccupation over the children, he failed to note.

"They are very nice and friendly," he smiled up at her, an arm about the body of each child. "Whose are they?"

"Now you must go back," Mrs. Trott said, with obvious evasion, holding out the pails to Joel. "Tell your mother that I am very much obliged."

"But mother said we must rest awhile here and not come right back," the boy answered, leaning on John's shoulder.

"No. I's tired, grandmother." Tilly drew back also into her snug retreat. "Where's the tittens, brother?"

But Joel could see kittens any day, and John was now showing him his new gold watch and chain and Tilly was admiring his scarf and pin, daintily touching the rich silk with her tiny sun-browned fingers.

With something like a sigh of resignation Mrs. Trott sank into her chair and listened to the chat of the trio. That her son was charmed with the children of his former wife she saw plainly. What would he do or say when told the truth?—and that it was due him to be told she did not doubt.

"They are beautiful and lovely," John said, when they both left his lap and went behind the cabin to see the kittens. "Whose children are they?"

"I see that I must tell you and be done with it," Mrs. Trott said, with a warm flush. "Can't you guess?"

"Why, how could I guess?" he asked, wonderingly. "They call you grandmother, too—how is that?"

"John," she gulped, "they are Tilly's and Joel's!"

His moving lips seemed to frame the words she had spoken, but without the issue of sound. They were both silent for an awkward pause; then he said, haltingly, "I did not know that they were in this neighborhood."

"Mr. Cavanaugh told me that you didn't know about them and me," she answered, all but apologetically. "Oh, John, I hope you won't blame me, but I simply could not have lived without them! They are responsible for what I now am. They came to my aid immediately after you were reported dead, and have stuck to me ever since."

"Then they are the friends Sam mentioned!" John said.

"Yes, they are the ones. They wanted me to come live with them after they married, but I couldn't— I simply couldn't; but I did consent to live near them like this, and I am glad, for they have been like loving children to me. John, you don't know how noble and unselfish poor Joel is. Nothing has ever prospered with him. He has always had bad luck, and yet he never thinks of himself. I was with Tilly when both her children were born. She seems now like a daughter, and Joel a son. As for the little ones, I love them with all my heart. I owe it to you to tell you the truth. Had I thought you alive, of course, I could not have been so intimate with them, but we all three thought you were dead, and, somehow, drifted together."

"I know, and that is all right," John said, a shadow of his old brooding despair in his eyes. The prattle of the children behind the house came to his ears. Through the doorway the midday sun beat yellow and warm on a crude bed of flowers close by. Mrs. Trott continued her recital of past happenings. She told even of Tilly's visit to the old house; of her occupying his room, of her own and Joel's vigil on the outside. She spoke of the saddened years in which Tilly had refused to think of marriage, and how she herself had worked with Joel to bring it about.

"If I knew one thing," she presently said, gravely studying his face, "I might feel that I had a right to tell you something particular about Tilly. I mean if I knew *one certain thing* about you yourself."

"Me myself?" he cried, groping for her meaning.

"Yes, you, John. Mr. Cavanaugh hinted at what he thought your present feeling for Tilly is, but I'd have to know for myself before—before I'd feel at liberty to tell you what I have in mind. Mr. Cavanaugh said you hadn't said so in so many words, but that he was sure that you still feel the same toward Tilly that you did before you and her parted."

He had lowered his head. He now interlaced his fingers between his knees, and she saw them shaking.

"She is the same and more to me," he said. "As long as I live I shall love her."

"Do you really mean that, John?"

"Yes, and much more," he answered, firmly. "I don't blame her for anything that she has done. She had every right to marry. I counted on it happening even earlier."

"I see you are in earnest, and I'll tell you," Mrs. Trott said. "John, she finally married Joel, but she did it only out of gratitude and pity. She was grateful to him for helping *me*, do you understand? After you left, she actually looked on me as her mother, because—because I was *yours*. Then she pitied Joel because he was so unhappy without her. But, la me! the other day, when she found out that you were alive, no angel in heaven could have been happier. She tries to hide it—she hardly knows what it means—but she can't hide it. It shows in her face, in her laugh, in her dancing movements. She has no idea she will ever see you again, and she doesn't dream of leaving Joel or the children, but knowing that you are alive and doing well has made her blissfully happy. Hers is a great, unselfish love, if there ever

was one.

"You can't mean what you say," John faltered, his eyes beaming, his face aflame, his breast heaving.

"Yes, I do," his mother assured him. "I don't know that I'm doing exactly right to tell you, but I have told you. I can't fully make her out on one thing, and that is whether she believes you still care for her or not. Sometimes I think she believes that you still love her. I don't know why she is so happy unless that is at the bottom of it."

CHAPTER XII

John rose to go. Promising to return the next day, he started back to town. By choice he went through a strip of forest-land. In some places the growth of trees, bushes, and vines was dense. Small streams trickled through the moss and grass over pebbled beds, clear and cool in the shade and warm in the open sunshine. Above the blue sky arched, with here and there a white cloud against which some buzzards were circling in majestic calmness. For the first time in many years he felt that he had not loved in vain. Tilly loved him. He loved her. She had suffered; so had he. The world had mistreated them, that was all. He remembered something she had once said about love being eternal. How sweet the thought now was!

The next morning he was at his mother's cabin again. He had a plan to unfold to her. He described his life in New York, and spoke of the many advantages of living there. He wanted her to come with him. He would give her every comfort that could be thought of. His income was ample. They would be company for each other. The things she wanted to forget would never follow her there. She would make good, new friends and end her days in contentment and comfort.

She listened to him attentively, a warm stare of maternal pride in her meek eyes, but when he paused she slowly shook her head. She seemed embarrassed; then she said: "I couldn't do that, John. You may think it odd of anybody, but I really wouldn't like a bustling life like that now. I've got a taste of this, and I think I'd rather keep it. Then I must be honest with you. I mustn't keep back anything. The truth is I don't want to leave Tilly and Joel and the children. I've got used to them, I reckon. I think they want me, too, I really do; at least I hope so. I've found this out, John; people either like one sort of life or the other. When I was living like—like I used to live, I wanted that and nothing else, but now I want this and nothing else. I wish you could live here, but you know best about that. It would be wrong in some ways, for, considering the way you and Tilly feel about each other, and her duty to Joel and the children, it wouldn't be best for you to be close together. I was thinking about that last night and wondering whether you and her ought to meet even once again. It seems to me that it would be awkward for you both, and hard on poor Joel."

"I had no idea of—of meeting her," John said, in a tone which sank beneath his breath. "I must spare her that."

"It is a pity—a pity, but it will be best!" Mrs. Trott sighed. "I wish I could see some other way, but I can't. How long are you going to stay?"

"Not longer than a week," he answered. "Are you sure that you won't go with me?"

She slowly shook her head. "No, I must stay here, John. I couldn't leave them— I really couldn't. They have wound themselves about my tired old heart and I want to stay near them. I wish I could help them out of their terrible poverty. The children ought to be educated. They are wonderfully bright."

They sat without speaking for several minutes; then John said, suddenly: "Do you think we could, between us, devise any way by which I might help them substantially? I assure you I have plenty of money for which I have no need."

"Oh, that would never do, John!" Mrs. Trott exclaimed. "Neither Joel nor Tilly would accept it. That is out of the question."

John's face fell. "I was afraid you'd say that," he sighed. Then, with a start and an eager searching of her face, he said: "Will you answer me a direct question? If you, yourself, were to come into some money, at your death would you want them to have it?"

"Why, of course!" she answered. "That is all I'd want money for now."

"Then the way is clear," John beamed, and his voice throbbed with excitement. "You are my mother. You can't keep me from making you comfortable out of my useless means. I have some absolutely safe securities that bring in good dividends. Before I return to New York they will be in your name at one of the banks in town, with a cash deposit to your credit. The income on the stocks amounts to about three thousand a year. Remember, I am in no way suggesting to you what you should do with the principal or the interest, but legally to be on the safe side, you ought at once to make a will."

"Why, John— John, you astound me!" his mother cried. "Mr. Cavanaugh intimated that you were not particularly well off, and here you say—you say that I am to have three thousand dollars a year from you. Why—why—"

"It is nothing," he said, smiling. "I want to do it, and you must help me. If you should decide to do so, you can convert

some of the stocks into money and buy Joel a farm on which he could make a good living. After I am gone they won't refuse it from you, for you owe it to them, considering all they have done for you."

Without knowing it, Mrs. Trott was weeping. Great crystal tears were on her cheeks. Her still beautiful lips were quivering; her slender hands were clasped in her lap.

"Oh, John, John, can it be possible to do this for them?" she half whimpered. "I want to do it. I want to help them, but poor Joel is so sensitive and proud that—that—"

"You owe it to him, and I, as your son, who left you unprotected, owe it to him also. When I am gone he will see that it had to be. Let him know about the will in his children's favor, but give him to understand that the money is from *you*, not from *me*, and tell him, too, if you can do so adroitly, that I shall never come this way again. This is his home, not mine. As for Til—as for his wife, I shall not meet her while I am here. You are going to help them substantially—that is the main thing. *You*, no one else."

"Oh, it would be glorious—glorious!" Mrs. Trott dried her eyes on her apron. "As for Tilly, Tilly—it may seem to you a strange idea of mine, John, but somehow I believe, actually believe that she would accept the money from you as readily as she'd give her last cent to you under the same circumstances. She is a strange, strange little woman, more of the next life, it seems to me, than this. She has been an angel of light to me and I couldn't leave her; even if you were an emperor offering me a throne I'd stay here. In taking your money, John, I am taking it on her account. She will see through your plan, but it will only make her the happier, for she thinks your soul and hers are united for all time, and it may be so, John—it may be so. Love like yours and hers ought not to die. How could it?"

He sat silent. All the morbid hauntings of his past seemed to be withdrawing like shadows before some vast supernal light. His body felt imponderable. A delicious pain clutched his throat and pierced his breast. He was ashamed of his weakness and tried to shake it off, but it continued to thrill and sob in every nook and cranny of his hitherto unexplored being. The woman before him seemed more than mere flesh, blood, and bone. A veritable nimbus hovered over her transfigured head and shone against the unbarked logs behind her.

CHAPTER XIII

By choice, he started home through the wood. He wanted the feel of the grass, heather, and moss beneath his feet; the scent of wild flowers in his nostrils; the bending boughs of great trees over him; the minute sounds of insects in his ears; the flight of winged things in his sight. Deeper and deeper into the wood he plunged. There seemed something to be drunken like an impalpable spiritual elixir. He held out the arms of his being to it; he opened the pores of his body and soul to it. The far-off hum of the town's commerce and traffic seemed an insistent denial of the intangible thing for which he hungered, and he closed his ears to it. Presently he heard the sound of breaking twigs and the stirring of dry leaves behind the vines and boulders close by on his right, and he paused to listen. Then there fell upon his ears the soft voices of children, and, carefully parting the pliant branches of some willows, he saw in a little grassy glade Tilly's daughter and son. They were gathering flowers and ferns. Little Tilly had her chubby arms full, and Joel was plucking more.

It was a beautiful sight, and yet it drenched him with infinite pain. He was tempted to attract their attention, to take them into his arms again, but he checked the impulse.

"What is the use?" he muttered. "They are hers, not mine—*his* and hers, not *mine* and hers."

Softly he moved away. Presently he came to a fallen tree and sat down on it. He could no longer hear the children's voices. However, another sound broke the stillness about him. It was the rapid tread of some one hurrying through the wood in his direction. The branches of the bushes in front of him parted and Tilly stood facing him, her cheeks and brow flushed and damp from rapid walking. That she could be so beautiful as now he had never dreamed possible. The years had added indescribable charm and grace to her every movement, feature, and expression.

"Oh, John!" she cried, holding out her hands as appealingly and naïvely as of old, "the children are lost! They started for your mother's cabin, but haven't been there. There are dangerous places in this wood, and—"

He smiled reassuringly as he took her hands. "They are all right," he said. "They are just over there. I saw them only a moment ago."

Their hands clung together, but neither of them was cognizant of the fact. It was as if not a day had elapsed since they had parted. Forgetting every law of propriety, he drew her into his arms. Her uncovered head went as of old to his shoulder, and he was about to kiss her throbbing lips when, with her hand to his mouth, she suddenly checked him.

"No, no, John!" she said, and she disengaged herself from his embrace with a firm, resolute movement. "I understand how you feel, but you mustn't— I mustn't. I want to—yes, yes, I want to kiss you, but it would be wrong."

"Yes, it would be wrong," he groaned, and turned white. He sat down on the trunk of the tree. She stood before him. Neither spoke for a while, and the prattling voices of the children sounded on the warm, still air.

"I'm afraid I have pained you," Tilly said, after a moment, and she put her hand on his shoulder as if to make him look at her. "I wish I knew some other way, but I know of none."

"There is no other way," he declared, his hungry eyes now on her face, the marvel of which still held him enthralled. In all his dreams of her she had never appeared so transcendently wonderful.

"How could she ever have been mine—actually mine?" he asked himself from the abyss into which he was sinking.

"You see," she went on, now taking his hand into hers, "I'd have to tell Joel. I'm his wife, the mother of his children, and there can be nothing in my life that is not open to him. He is the soul of honor, John."

"I know it," John answered, simply.

"This thing is killing him, John," she went on, rapidly, as if taking no heed of what she was saying. "The world was against him, anyway, and the news of your being here so prosperous and successful by contrast to himself has bowed his head to the earth. I don't know what to do or what to say. He knows how I feel. You see, I couldn't hide from him the joy I felt when I heard you were living. I can bear anything now—anything! You see, Joel thinks that you—he has no reason for thinking so, of course, for you have lived up there and he here—but he thinks—it is stupid of him—but he thinks that you feel—exactly the same toward me as you did when we were married. Exactly! Exactly!"

"It wouldn't take a wise man to know that," John said, bitterly, his lips awry, his stare dull with agony.

"You mean to say that you *do*?" Tilly urged, her little hand pressing his spasmodically, her eyes glistening with moisture.

He nodded slowly. "How could I help it? You have done nothing to alter my feeling toward you except to deepen it. How can I overlook the fact that you befriended my mother (after I deserted her) and made her what she now is?"

"That was nothing but my duty, and my love for her," Tilly answered. She paused for a moment, and went on:

"Then you don't blame me for *marrying again*?" This was tremulously uttered, and the speaker's eyes were now downcast.

"No, I expected it. In a way, you owed it to Joel. In fact, I owe him more now than I can ever repay."

Tilly released his hand and sat down on the log beside him. Her little feet were thrust out from her, and he saw her poor tattered shoes and noted the coarse dress she wore.

"I've always wanted to know one thing," she faltered. "A thousand times after the report of your death I wondered if you died understanding how it was that I left you. Did you know why I left our little home so suddenly, John?"

"Why, to escape the awful scandal that was in the air; but what is the good of bringing that up now?"

"Ah, I see, you didn't quite know the truth," Tilly cried. "John, my father was practically out of his mind that day. He died not long afterward of softening of the brain. He had a revolver, and would have shot you if he had met you. I was expecting you home every minute, and when I saw that I could pacify him by going right back with him I did it."

"Oh, I see!" A great light broke on John. "Then it was really to save my life."

"As I saw it, yes," Tilly replied. "I wrote to you once, after I got to Cranston, but I learned afterward that father stopped the letter. I was kept like a prisoner at home, John, until the court, under my father's influence, and a narrow-minded jury had annulled our marriage. In spite of that, I was ready to go to you and only waiting for a chance, when the news of your death came. I didn't blame you for leaving. I knew that you did it in despair of any other solution, and also to help poor little Dora. That was a glorious thing to do, and God blessed your effort. How is she, John?"

"Well, and happy—both of them. I had a letter yesterday. They like their work and believe they are doing good."

"And you did that, John—you did it. When your own troubles were greatest, you thought of that poor child. It was the noblest thing a man ever did."

John shrugged his shoulders. "It was selfish enough. I needed a companion, and she became one. For years we were like real brother and sister."

"And then she left you all alone," Tilly sighed. "Oh, John, John, the world has been unkind to you! You see, I have my children. Only a mother can know what that means. I don't hear their voices now. Will you show me where they were?"

He led her through the wood to the glade. A great deadening chagrin was on him. He told himself that she had suddenly bethought herself of the need of the protection of her children's presence. Parting the bushes on the edge of the glade, he looked around and presently espied them asleep in the shade of a tree. Little Tilly's head lay on a heap of flowers and ferns, and Joel lay coiled on the grass at her feet.

"They often do that," Tilly beamed up at John. "We needn't wake them yet—not just yet. I have a thousand things to say and ask, but my thoughts are all in a jumble. How strange it seems to be here like this with you again! I wonder, can there be any harm (in God's sight) in telling the simple, honest truth? I've never done a conscious wrong in my life, John. I did what I thought was right when I married you—when I left you to go home with my father—when I secretly visited your mother—when I finally married Joel—and now while I am here with you like this telling you that—that—"

She broke off, her all but etherealized face paling and growing more rigid.

He clutched her hands. He held them passionately, desperately to his breast. "Go on!" he panted. "For God's sake, go on! I am starving for a word from your lips. I've heard you speak a million times in my dreams. Night after night I've lived with you in our little cottage, only to wake and find it a damnable mockery, with nothing but the dull grind of life before me."

"What I say I would say to Joel's face if I could do so without killing him." Tilly smiled wistfully. "John, I don't believe a true woman can love but once in the way I loved you. She can many; she can have children when she thinks it can bring no harm to her dead lover, but, if she is a genuine woman, she will exult when that lover rises from the grave and stands before her again. Dear John, I could take your suffering face between my hands and kiss your lips as no woman ever kissed a man's lips before. Yes, I could do it, and I'd die to be able to do it again, but it is not to be. My body may not love, but my soul may, and it is an eternal thing, John, and so is your soul. Those children have a right to the care of a mother who is untainted in the sight of the world. Their poor, patient, unfortunate father deserves as clean a wife

as the earth can produce. I know you love me— I know it. I feel it. I see it. But we've got to part. I believe in God. When I doubt God I suffer and am forced back to faith by the pain I feel. Believing in God, I also believe that the greater the cross put upon us the more patiently it must be borne. My cross is to live without you—yours is to live without me. But, oh, my heart aches—aches—aches for you! It seems to me that your burden will be heavier even than mine, for I have my children and you are all alone. John, John, you are young yet. Don't you think that if you were to marry some good girl and have children of your own—"

"No," he broke in, shuddering. "Leave that out! I couldn't do it—knowing your heart as I now know it."

"I see, I understand, and—yes, I'm glad. Oh, I can't help it, John. I'm glad. When do you leave here?"

"Very soon now—in a few days."

"How strange, oh, how strange!" she mused, aloud. "And after this—after this brief moment I am not to see you again, or hear from you—yes, I'll hear through your mother, for she tells me she is not to leave with you. How odd that is, too! Joel and I and the children have robbed you even of the mother who bore you. You never knew her as she now is, John, and that is a pity, too. In her rebirth she is as saintly as a consecrated nun. She does not know that she believes in God, but she does. There is a streak of doubt in her as there was in you. Are you still an unbeliever, John?"

He lowered his head, shrugged, and contracted his brows. "I don't like to say—to *you*, at least," he faltered. "Not to you, Tilly."

"But you may, John—it won't pain me at all. I used to think that the worst sinners were those who denied the existence of God, but I now think there may be persons so godlike that they can't realize the existence of any God outside of themselves. John, you are godlike. If I could think of you as sinning, I'd sin in that thought alone. Go on calling yourself an atheist, and the angels will treat it as a holy jest."

"I don't follow you," he said, wearily, as if he would dismiss the subject. "You are mistaken about me. I am just an average man. But I don't believe as you do. It may be beautiful—it no doubt is, but I can't grasp it. It never came my way, somehow."

The wood was very still. Under the beating sun, the wild flowers and tender leaves of plants were the shelter of myriads of moving things visible and invisible. Suddenly a locust sang in the top of a persimmon-tree. A crow flew cawing over a distant field. The rumble of a farmer's wagon was heard on the road. Tilly's face was steadily raised to John's. She put her hand on his arm, the arm she used to lean on so lovingly in their walks on the mountain road.

"You can live without conscious faith, John," she said, in the sweet treble tone he had loved so long, "but I cannot. If I doubted, as I did once when we thought Tilly was dying, I'd wither up in despair. You may as well know the truth. I live only for my children, John. Joel has to suffer in not having all my heart— I can't help that. He must suffer, too, because he makes no headway in life and is unable to provide well for me and his children. I can't help that, either. That is his cross and he is bearing it like a saint. But as for me, I have two things to live for—my children and your mother. God has put them in my hands and I must care for them. Do you think I could live without faith now? Why, I know God must help me care for them. I am praying for that. Night after night—day after day I plead with God to provide for those three. I want to see the children educated. I want to keep your mother as happy and peaceful as she now is. She is my mother now—she is also Joel's; she is the grandmother of my children. Don't you think my prayer will be answered, John?"

"I know it," he said, suddenly, recalling the compact just made with his mother. "I know it."

"Then you believe, too," she cried, eagerly, wonderingly.

"Yes, I believe that," he admitted, reluctantly. "Something will happen—something will turn up. You must never lose faith and hope."

Tilly looked up at the sun. "It is eleven o'clock at least," she said. "I must be going. I have to get Joel's dinner ready. I shall tell him about this, of course, and now"—she choked up—"this must be good-by. How can it be? It doesn't seem possible—that is, *forever*. For, if it were possible, the God I adore would be a fiend. We are going to meet in another life. As sure as you and I stand here loving each other as we do, we are going to be reunited. A stream of spirit will connect us even while alive. If it were otherwise, there'd be no law and order in the universe, and law and order are everywhere. Yes, we'll meet again, someway, somehow, somewhere."

She held out her hands. He took them into his. He was drawing her to him, the old fire of divine passion filling him, when he felt the muscles of her fingers stiffen defensively, and she turned her eyes to the sleeping children.

"No, no! No, my darling," she said, a fluttering sob in her throat, her eyes filling. "We must be honorable. Good-by.

Leave me here with them, please. I'll let them sleep a moment longer and then take them home."

"Good-by," he said, turning away. The bending branches of the bushes came between her and him. Like a plodder who has become suddenly blind he staggered forward. The earth seemed to sink as he trod upon it. Wild-grape vines whipped his brow and cheeks. Stones slipped and rolled beneath his feet as he groped along. He was panting like a wild animal long and closely pursued.

He had turned away from the town's direction. He told himself that he could not just now meet Cavanaugh and his wife with the meaningless platitudes of daily life. A rugged, wooded hill rose before him. He paused, rested awhile, and then began to climb its steep side. Half-way to the summit, he stopped and looked about him.

There lay the growing town where his boyhood was spent. There loomed up the graveyard, with its ghostly slabs and shafts. There was the old house which had haunted his dreariest dreams, and there—yes, there was the cottage which had been the shrine of his sole joy in life. Drawn close together in perspective and full of meaning they stood—his House of Despair, and his Cottage of Delight. From both he tore his clinging gaze. Beyond his mother's cabin lay an undulating meadow and another log cabin. Along a narrow path walked a woman holding the hands of two children. Across the furrows of a corn-field to meet the three trudged a man without a coat, an ax on his shoulder. They met. The man took the younger child up in his arms, and the three others walked onward through the yellow veil of light.

The observer groaned, filled, and sobbed. Through a mist of unrestrainable tears he watched fixedly till the group had vanished in the cabin. Then he started toward the town.

CHAPTER XIV

A few days later Joel Eperson stopped his wagon, which was loaded with wood to be taken to town, at Mrs. Trott's cabin. He left his horse unhitched and stood before the door. Mrs. Trott, who was within, heard him and came out smiling.

"The children told me," Eperson began, "that you wanted to see me."

"Yes, Joel," she answered, taking one of the chairs in front of the cabin and indicating the other with a wave of her hand. "We've got to have a talk, and what do you think? It is business this time."

"Business?" he echoed, puzzled by her mood and mien.

"Yes, and I am going to say in advance, Joel, that you have got to lay aside some of your old-fashioned notions for once in your life and be sensible. Joel, John is going back to New York very soon, and he is not coming here anymore."

"You say—you say—?" Eperson's moist lips hung loosely from his yellowing teeth, and he broke off, only to begin again. "But why do you tell *me* of it, Mrs. Trott?"

"*Mrs. Trott!*" the woman cried. "Why do you call me that for the first time? Hasn't it been 'Grandmother Trott' all these years? Listen, Joel. You are too touchy for your own good. I am telling you about John because you ought to know it. You may be silly enough to think that he wants to come between you and Tilly, but he doesn't, and she wouldn't encourage it, even if he did. So that is the end of that. The next thing is my own business with you. Joel, John is better off than we had any idea of, and what do you think he has done? He has turned over to me in my name a big lot of stocks that bring in a fine income, and, besides that, he has placed to my credit in the bank several thousand dollars to invest as I like. I am a rich woman, now, Joel."

"Fine! Fine! Splendid! Splendid!" Joel cried, impulsively, and then his face began to settle back into perplexed rigidity as he sat and waited.

"Yes, it is fine," Mrs. Trott went on, "and what I want to see you about, Joel, is this: As you know, there are several splendid farms around here with good houses on them that are offered for sale. Now I want to buy one of them, and I want you to help me do it."

"I'll do anything I can," he answered, lamely, for he well knew that she had not finished what she had to say. "I am afraid that I am not a good business man, however, and that the judgment of others—"

"I really want the Louden farm," Mrs. Trott said. "Mr. Cavanaugh says it is a bargain. He built the big house that is on it and says that it was decidedly well made out of the best materials. It is a beautiful place, as you may know, with the fine spring and fruit and shade trees and stables and barn!"

"Yes, it is splendid in every way," Eperson said; "and you think that you can get it?"

She smiled broadly. "Through the lawyers I have already a binding option on it. The final papers will be signed to-day."

"But how can I help you?" Joel asked, still shrinkingly.

Mrs. Trott hesitated, as if to decide exactly how she should make her next move. Then, with a half-fearful smile, she said: "You remember, Joel, how you pleaded with me, just after you and Tilly were married, to come live with you and her?"

"Yes, for we wanted you—we've always wanted you to be closer to us."

"Well, I want to go to you now, Joel," was the slow reply. "I'm lonely. Another change seems to have come over me. I have learned to love the children so much that I am restless without them. Their little visits seem too short, and on rainy days and in the winter they can't come. Yes, I want to be with you all, and I am asking you to take me at last, Joel."

"Asking me—asking me?" he stammered, comprehending her trend in part. "Why, you know—you ought to know that I—that we—"

"Well, it is for you to take me or refuse me," Mrs. Trott put in, with a wistful smile. "I want to live on the farm. I can't manage it by myself and I want you to take charge of it for me—and let us all live in that big, fine house together."

"But I— Why, I—" Joel broke down again, his patrician face awry from sheer torture, and then sat twisting his gaunt hands over his ragged, quivering knee. "I see, it is good and kind of you, but—but— I don't see how I, myself, could

possibly accept your offer."

"You have to, Joel," she retorted, still with her motherly smile. "You can't refuse a thing that will give me and your wife and children so much happiness."

"But I'd be on—on your son's bounty," Joel flashed from the very embers of his humiliation.

"Absurd!" exclaimed Mrs. Trott. "He says he owes you more than he ever could repay. He says you cared for me when he deserted me, and that you played the part of a man while he was a coward. But that is neither here nor there. Joel, I have willed all my new possessions to you and your wife and children. When I'm dead and gone you will have to have them, anyway, so why not make me happy the remainder of my life?"

He was unable to formulate a logical reply, but beneath the revelation she had made he sat limp and bruised as a flower drenched and beaten by abnormal rain and wind.

"Does Tilly know all this?" he asked, timidly, a cowed expression in his dull eyes.

"Yes, Joel, and she wants you to accept my plan. She will be happy when you do, for your sake and for the sake of the children."

He got up. His tanned face above his clean but frayed collar looked like the mask of some Indian chieftain thwarted in his last patriotic hope. His poor, underfed horse, in reaching for the grass near his bitted mouth, had drawn the reins beneath his hoofs and was about to break them.

"Excuse me," Joel said, and he went to the animal and tied up the reins. He came back. His face was still rigid, his lips were quivering.

"You wish it, you say," he faltered. "Tilly wants it, but how about your son? Would he care for me to share in the benefits of his gifts to you?"

Mrs. Trott deliberated for an instant, then she said: "He is doing it more for you, perhaps, than us, Joel. He declares he owes it to you. I've told him how you have often stinted yourself to pay my bills. I have told him, too, that but for you I'd have remained in the life he so detested. Not one man in a thousand would have treated me as you have done. You can't avoid it, Joel—we are all going to live in that fine house and be comfortable and happy at last."

He bowed silently. That was his answer. He accepted her proposal as a proud man might a shameful verdict of death. He went back to his wagon, raised his tattered hat, and mounted upon his load of wood.

CHAPTER XV

The details of the business were all settled. John was ready to leave for New York. He was to take the midnight train and was finishing his packing in his room at about nine o'clock when Cavanaugh came in.

"I have something to tell you that you may or may not like," the old man faltered. "I don't know how you'll feel about it, but Joel Eperson is at the gate and says he wants to speak to you."

"Eperson!" John exclaimed, with a start.

"Yes, and the poor fellow looks awful, John. He could barely speak. He leaned on the gate like he could hardly stand up. I hope you will be kind and gentle with him. I have never seen such a pitiful sight. It's his pride, I reckon, and it has been cut to the quick."

John said nothing. It was an encounter he had hoped to avoid. He put some things into his bag and pressed them down. How could he confer on any terms with that man of all men? And yet he plainly saw that the meeting was inevitable.

"It wouldn't do to turn him away," Cavanaugh advised, gingerly. "You see, it would upset all the other plans, for I know him well enough to know that if you treat him roughly to-night he will not live on that farm. He would kill himself first."

"He and I will make out all right," John said, turning resolutely to the door. "Will he not come in?"

"I don't think he wants to," Cavanaugh said. "He kept in the shadow while I was talking to him and had his hat pulled down over his eyes."

As John went outside he saw Eperson at the fence. A thing that touched him sharply was the fact that Eperson unlatched the gate and swung it open, as a servant might have done for his master, while he still kept his eyes hidden under the broad brim of his slouch-hat.

"I came to see you— I *had* to see you, Mr. Trott," Eperson muttered, jerkingly. "I heard you were going away to-night and I couldn't—well, I had to see you."

"I understand, Eperson," John said, wondering over his own stilted tone to a man whom he so profoundly pitied. "Will you come in—or shall we—?"

"Yes, we can walk, if you don't mind," Eperson answered, quickly. "I really think it would be better. Curious people pass along and look in windows sometimes, but back here in the wood there is no light and it is quiet."

"Yes, that is better," John agreed. And side by side the two men walked along Cavanaugh's lot fence till they were in the thicket of stunted trees behind the property. Presently Eperson paused, raised his head, and spoke again:

"This will do, Mr. Trott. I really don't know what to say in beginning, for it seems to me that a million things come up, but your mother told me about the property you gave her—the farm and all the rest."

"Yes, yes, I know— I hoped that she would mention it to you," John said, out of a sympathy he didn't dream he possessed. "That was really part of the—the understanding. She needs a comfortable home and she could not look after it herself. She knows, and I know, that you can manage it well, and so—"

"But—but don't you see—can't you understand?" Eperson pushed his hat back and his great, all but bloodshot eyes gleamed piteously in the starlight. "Don't you see that I can't be put on a rack like that and live under it? Do you think I have no pride or manhood left? I am a failure—worse than a beggar. I aspired for that of which I was unworthy—your wife—and I've come to tell you something to-night which no proud man ever in the history of the world told another. I've come to tell you that—"

"Stop, Joel, you mustn't," John broke in, and he gently laid his hand on the shoulder of the other. "That is a thing neither of us must ever hold in mind for a moment. Listen to me. You and I are in the swirl of great laws we can't understand. Of one thing we can be certain, and that is that we love the same woman. Don't come to me to-night with the idea that you are about to get in my debt. I'm in yours. I was a coward. I deserted my post of duty under the first great blight that fell upon me. I was only a poor, bewildered, stung boy, but I fled while you remained, advised, protected, and cared for both my wife and my mother. By so doing, and through your children, you tied the hearts of those two beings to you forever. My mother is a transformed woman through you—my former wife through you is a glorified mother. Don't think I am fooling myself with romantic ideals. I know where I stand. If I were to dare to-day to lay claim to your place, Tilly would turn upon me in disgust and hatred. And why? Because the price to be paid would

be the happiness of the father of her children. That is a holy thing in her eyes, and I, myself, profoundly respect it."

"My God! My God!" moaned Eperson, "you can say this—you can be all this to a man like me?" Eperson's great eyes were filling; his rough breast was heaving; the shoulder under John's gentle hand was quivering.

"Yes, because I admire you from the depths of my soul," was the reply. "Your wife is not for me. My mother is not for me. Your children are theirs and yours. My mother is making a gift to you— I am not doing it. I shouldn't say *gift*. She is trying to pay a debt that she owes you."

A sob broke from Joel. He caught John's hand and stared into his eyes. "I now know why Tilly still loves you," he gulped. "She loves you because you are more of God than man. I don't know what to say to you further, but I will say this—and as the Almighty is my witness I mean it. I'll do my duty as the father of my children, as the husband *before the law* of my wife, and as the manager of your mother's property, but I'll never try to win my wife's heart from you."

John's arm slid around the neck of the bowed and broken man. He started to speak, but his voice clogged with a pain that was delicious. It was as if both he and his companion somehow had stood aside from their bodies and were floating among the trees in the dim starlight.

Presently, and without a word, Joel turned and walked away. He plunged again into the wood as if to avoid contact with any one from the streets of the town. On he went, his face turned homeward. There was a hill to ascend, a vale to cross. He reached the top of the hill. His step had become sluggish. He groaned aloud. He folded his arms and stood staring into the moonlight.

"It is incomplete—unfinished, not rounded out," he muttered. "It cannot remain as it is. I haven't the strength to put it through. I know where I'd fail. I'd continue to suffer, and so would he. He is noble to the core of his being. He is doing his best to help me and her, but he is giving more than he is getting, and that isn't fair. After all, after all, *there is one thing that I can do for him that he could not do for me*!"

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