

AN INDIANA GIRL

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BY

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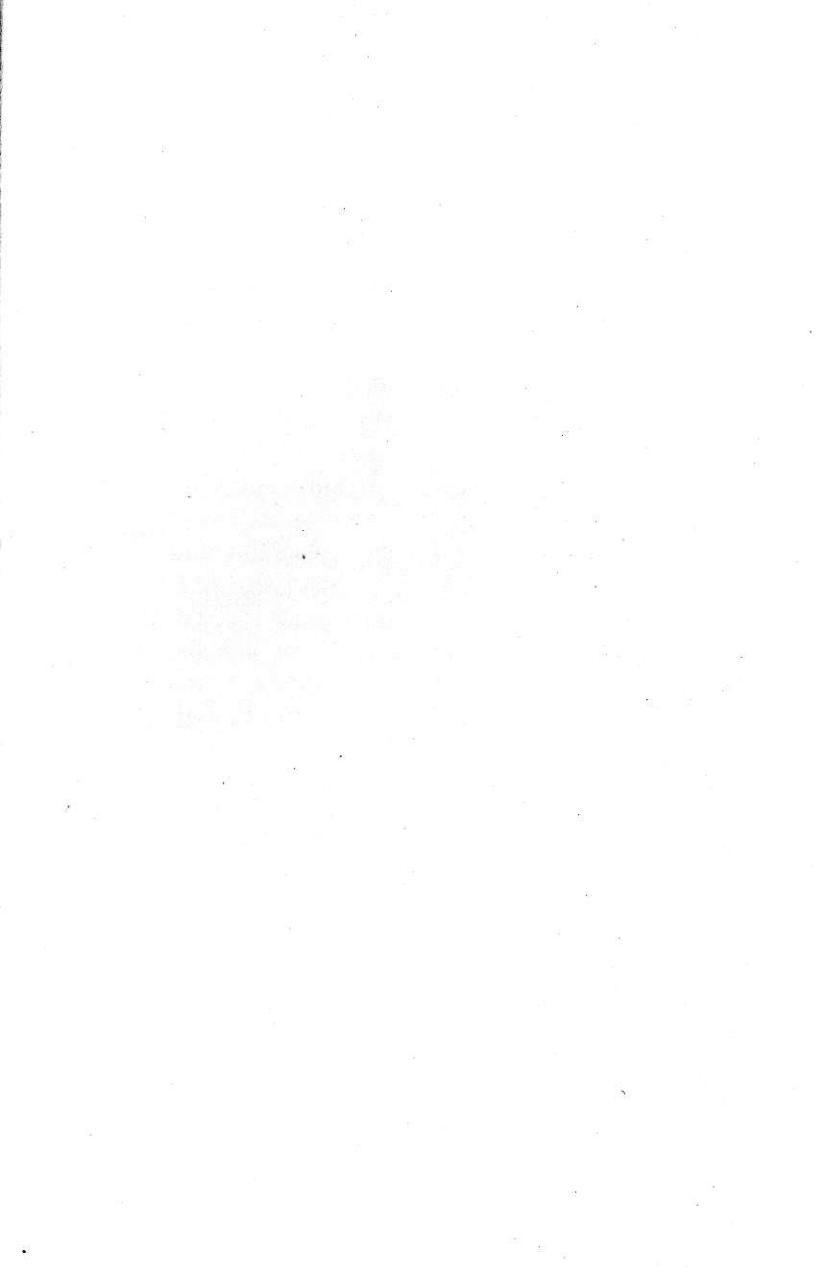
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3/8/89

TO
MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM H. LINCOLN

AS AN EARNEST OF THE SENTIMENT PROMPTED BY YOUR
FRIENDSHIP TOWARD ME, AND IN PUBLIC RECOGNITION
OF THAT FRIENDSHIP, WHICH HAS BEEN MORE PERFECT
AND UNSELFISH THAN ORDINARY FAMILY AFFECTION,
I GIVE TO YOU MY FIRST THOUGHTS ON HAVING COM-
PLETED THIS WORK, WHICH HAS BEEN BUILT FROM THE
ENVIRONMENTS OF YOUR INDIANA HOME.



PREFACE.

IT was on my first trip to Ashville that I met Uncle Nace Tipman beside the road. "Th' Yaller Front's th' on'y one I knows of," he replied semi-seriously to my inquiry, adding reassuringly, "It ain't much fer pretty, but it's all right fer good." I have his words yet, written in my note-book of things generally, and I lived long enough in that hostelry to have both ends of this sentence verified. To use his words: "Th' Yaller Front was not much fer pretty," but like the people who ran it, and those who frequented it, the beauty was inside. A rough exterior, surrounding well-kept and clean, if crude, beauties. Here was an atmosphere wholesome bodily and mentally. Live where the bread is cut to thick slices, the butter served in chunks, rivaling those of the meat; where the sauces are thick and the pie is quartered, not sixteenthed, and you will live in generous impulses of thought as well.

I learned to love the people. What else was there to do when they accepted me unquestioned and indicated their faith in me first? To me all of this story happened only yesterday, and as I read it I am back again in Dole's old rustic splint-bottom chair out on the sidewalk, bracing my back against the window cas-

ing. Overhead is the board awning ; beneath are large cracks that merge into the street. One crack is broader than all the rest. That is the one that led to dreamland so often in the gentle, summer days. Parts of the story—the uglier parts—must have come to me then, for they are only fiction. The good things, the lovelier things, were the actual happenings and my incentive to write. If I have told enough of what I most wanted to tell, to offset my unmerited attributions of base motives, I shall be happy. They have taught me much. My gratitude could do no less than show the how of it. But I shall always have one regret, and that is that I was not a better pupil.

AN INDIANA GIRL

CHAPTER I.

All along the main street, from the blacksmith's shop to the hotel, three blocks away, the tiny stores were closed, their doors locked, and each slumbered in a splendid moonlight that bore more gently because this was the night in a day of rest. The lovely light carried a holy softness, solemn and inspiring, that recalled other days of goodness in a visionary way, as lovely things only half real, while the vigor of an almost born strife—a new day of work and effort—seemed but one heart-beat away, and it was easy imagining the soft light as being the forerunner of that day.

Meeting had let out half an hour ago. The street had been a busy hum of babble and good cheer, in gossip and good-nights; then the groups dissolved over flagstone byewalks, and the night again became silent and serene. But, by virtue of the demands made upon it, Orrig's drug-store remained unclosed, and two small lamps extended an invitation to belated ones to

join the Sunday night meeting of recreative humor now in session there.

"Oh, ho! no. Don't get me to give in my mite," said Landy, blusteringly. "I'm clearin' out o' here soon's I get done up to ——," and he jerked his thumb in the general direction of his employer's farm with an air of secrecy that each of his dozen listeners observed with befitting nods of approval and regard.

"Well, I ain't sayin' anythin' one way or other," remarked Orrig, as he finished his work for the night. After kicking the cellar door into place, and locking it, he straightened himself with a grunt and proceeded: "But it 'pears to me that they's been more pews'n we need here lately, an' afore we goes to buildin' a bigger meetin' house, gospel or somethin's got to strike the old one harder'n it has yit."

"Gospel don't get in nowhere less'n it's brought," said John Carey, significantly, but hung his head in the pause. Each man knew the thought uppermost in the mind of his neighbor, and each sullenly held his own counsel until Landy exploded in corroboration.

"As I say, it ain't my party, because I am soon gettin' away, but John, he's right. It takes more'n a fine house to make men upset in their head over religion. You got to have a exhorter or somethin' to come up against, an' that's what you ain't got."

Again there was a pause, but no one seemed willing to carry further the line of talk, though the unanimity of thought was obvious, and Snellins, who sat against the counter in the iron saddle of a sulky plow which had been brought in for repairs, became embarrassed by the

gravity of things, and, as much in self-consciousness as from a sense of duty, said meekly: "The parson's young, men; remember he ain't much more'n a boy."

"Young! young? you say," shouted Landy, when the seat brace slipped from under Snellins, letting him to the floor, and the group laughed uproariously at his discomfiture. Arising more demure than ever, and rearranging the saddle with unusual care and attention, he asked:

"Well, ain't he?" The smiles were general. "An' that's why I'm his friend," he ended, feebly.

"I guess he ain't much your'n," Landy replied, tauntingly.

"Why not?" he asked, much pained.

"Now look here, Snell," Landy began, "it ain't fer you to know everything; you're too smart an' bright already, an' if you got anythin' more into your head it would crack."

"Mebbe he's got one idee too many now," said Orrig, with assumed seriousness, which was held by everyone until he started the laugh himself, when the witticism received full recognition.

"But tell me why he ain't," persisted Snellins.

"Well," said Landy, winking largely and screwing up the corner of his mouth, "you see, it's this way. I heard some things that you ain't heard mebbe. You didn't know that they's been some letter-writin' goin' on between the parson an' the gov'ment, now did y'? An' y' didn't know that that writin' was mostly about you, did y'? Well, it wuz!"

"Me?" Snellins replied, startledly.

"Yes, you! They wanted to know where you wuz."

"Not where I wuz," he mumbled, as he revolved the idea in his poor mind.

"That's what I said," continued Landy, "an' they're goin' to send somebody here to *see you*," he ended with forceful emphasis.

"Mebbe," said Carey, after time enough had been given for Landy's last remark to sink in, "mebbe it's about what you been adoin' while you was away last summer that th' gov'ment offercer is comin' fer y'."

Snellin's face took on an unexpected look of understanding at this remark. It seemed to awaken a clear, live thought in his bewildered mind, and he stared at the speaker in questioning fear.

"Let him alone now," said Orrig, with a sympathetic smile, as his better nature responded to the weaker man's helplessness. "Come on, clear out—everybody!" he continued, with a laugh. "I've got to close up."

"Gov'ment officers!" said someone, in a startling whisper, as the group broke up just outside the door, and they all chuckled as they bid "Poor Snell" good-night.

Disregarding the two short stretches of sidewalk that bordered the street, Snellins stepped out into the road, facing toward the east. The light fell upon his back and cast a short shadow before him that he saw without observing, and, as it moved along with jerky motion, he tried to uproot the doubt of the parson's friendship, which grieved him sorely. Times without number a

smile spread over his face only to be driven off by a doubt insubordinate to his heart's good inclinations.

"No, no! Not the parson," he murmured, in a tone that wheedled himself, and smiled under the influence of his own reassurance. "But smart men has been deceived before my time," he continued, after an interval of jumbled reasoning, his head repeating its dubious twitching with each utterance of this sentence, and the sense of self-preservation, adding a weight to his slowly yielding assurance, drew that reasoning down irresistibly and left him finally without hope or combative energy.

The wound so fresh, at the thought of the parson's betrayal, would, in other times, have served him for a week's sorrowing, but now he could not cling to it; the childish effort to nurse the pain and hold it at his heart was fruitless, for the fear that followed close upon the betrayal chilled his every consciousness and left him, body and soul, unalive to the weight of sorrow or the pain of throbbing self-pity. Yet his mind clung with tenacity to the thought. It was a barrier to other things that were creeping in upon him, and he transplanted the rambling pity to those who were nearest to him, unconsciously hoping thus to ward off the impending danger.

"I knew it. They told me; sure they told me," he said. "An' Miss Virgie! what will she say?" he asked, as his troubled mind ran from cause to effect. "To-morrow they said—was it to-morrow—or wasn't it? Yes, it is to-morrow. Poor Miss Virgie; and I am bringing the shame!"

He trudged along the imperfect road, up the hills and down again, with an even stride that took no note of the changes. His head hung forward in deep dejection as his mind grew blank and inoperative under the spell of self-shaming. Then he stepped suddenly across the border line of moonlight into the purple shadow of a stretch of sycamores, and the change awakened him. Lifting his face heavenward, the sky's light shone on his eyes, and a quick resolve flashed back, glistening for the instant with wild activity on their surfaces.

"He will not find me!" he said. Then again, "He will not find me!" And still again, until the resolve wore itself into the beating of his quickened steps as he hurried on. Another mile in the increasing darkness and the resolution gave way to the counting of his measured pace, the rhythm gradually drawing him down again to the pity of it all, and his heart would occasionally interject, "Poor Virgie!"

"One, two, three!" he counted, with feverish application, when "Poor Virgie" thrust itself into the calculation. "Twenty-five, twenty-six" . . . and . . . Ah! he held the distraction away this time. "Thirty, thirty-one. Poor Virgie, poor Virgie!" he repeated. The loss of self-will was maddening; he became confused, gave up in despair, but began again inadvertently, and then (wonder of wonders!) found himself fighting against the unconquerable rhythm that he had so recently wooed.

The road was to be wooded now the balance of his journey. On each side the trees sprung up with majestic solemnity, and, as he fought against the ringing

sway of his footsteps, a vague consciousness such as he had never known took hold upon him. It was a consciousness of the awful things of night, and, as the trees took up the swing that was carrying him along, his eyes glued themselves with frantic fascination upon the caravan. The blackness that stood as a block, fitting in snugly with the border lines of trees, held him so closely that his every motion swung the whole, and his forward strides seemed to yield no resultant progress. A fleecy cloud moved over his head from behind and gave the panorama a backward-sliding appearance as he watched it hanging seemingly stationary, while he and his surroundings slipped away and away toward the town from which he had just come. He felt as if he were suspended in a moving mass, and in despair ceased his efforts. Then the terror of inactivity froze his heart, and he could have screamed because of his helplessness. The cloud moved on and dissolved with other clouds. It was a respite in which his mind gained new life, but it was the life that aided terror. These ominous words, "the officers," recurred to him with an inrush of dread that surrounds unknown things, and, as the delusion above his head began again, he felt himself drawn backward to vivid impossibilities.

"The officers," he repeated, as he watched the clouds from under his brows, momentarily expecting to be thrown further backward into the talons of some dreadful terror-conceived, undefined situation. His arms hung loose at his sides as he stood resignedly motionless. Suddenly his face twitched, his right hand jerked, palm outward, as if in a gesture to support an action

of the brain. His head instantly lifted and his seeingless eyes held the light of a lowering heaven that feebly penetrated into the black tunnel of trees. Slowly and low he laughed at first, then horribly, with growing emphasis and increasing staccato; but the fear was gone. Not a trace of that remained, and, as the strong voice assumed its full force, the echoes rung back a wild, mad laugh that wakened the sleeping forest things to a confused unusualness.

Twice—thrice was the apex of his strengthful laughing reached before he came to a much lessened chuckling, and then the phrase of a much expressed sympathy came back from his shattered mind. "Poor Snell!" he said, and laughed uproariously. The words seemed to please him. They were all that were familiar now—all that he could remember, and he repeated them unceasingly. Turning, at last, he retraced his steps. Back toward the town he went, faster and faster, ever increasing in speed until he ran with all the ferocity and energy that had impelled his laughter.

Where the roads branch he fell, and lay upon his face while he panted and regained his breath. Finally, sitting upright, the mile-post caught his eyes, and, after contemplating it with a bewildered look, he gradually grew to smile, and nodded, not in recognition, but in a sense of companionship. He raised his hands and looked at them seriously—wonderingly. Their cuts and bruises excited his pity, and he said, "Poor Snell!" though he seemed to know no pain, and, done with this, he arose and tottered away toward the river, just at the edge of town. He made his way through the scrub

oaks, unmoored a boat, pushed out into the muddy stream and floated away, still contemplating his bleeding hands and quoting, "Poor Snell!"

Ah, the pity of a man! Think of it—a man gone mad!

CHAPTER II.

"Good morning!" came the cheery greeting, in response to a knock, at near the noon hour. The young woman wore a pleasant smile of unusual affability, and because of this the caller found himself for an instant at a loss for the best manner in which to make his wants known.

"Does anyone named Snellins," he began. Then, reaching into a great pocket, he pulled out a bundle of very legal-like-looking papers, and, turning them back until he found the desired one, continued: "Benjamin Snellins is the name. Does he live here?"

"Yes," she said, after waiting patiently through the action that he had depended upon to cover his momentary embarrassment, and in which the unnecessary first name had been brought into use. "Yes, but he is not here now. Perhaps father can help you, though," she added. "Shall I call him?"

"If you please," he replied. She turned smilingly and left him standing there while in the near regions of the little house, though just out of his sight he could hear, in tones that held a world of filial love, "Father, there is a gentleman here who wishes to see Ben. Will you please come in?"

The answer was not audible, but her gracious invitation for him to "come in" was distinctly so. He entered and remained standing until he heard a pair of heavy, muddy boots being scraped outside the kitchen door; then, smiling, he stepped forward to greet an old gentleman as he came through the house and into the room.

"I am sorry to have taken you from your work," he said, earnestly, "and, if you will return and let me go with you, I can talk to you there just as well. I wanted to see Benjamin Snellins, and, as he is not here, I will have to wait for him anyway."

"Well," laughed the other, "I was only fixing a bit of fence, but, if you don't mind looking on, you are very welcome to come," and with that he led his visitor through the neatly kept dining-room, where, with a great apron that reached from her chin to her toes, making her look as though her pretty head stuck out of a tent top, was the cause of his early embarrassment doing some of the many things that big-aproned women always find to do, and, to judge from the odor as they passed through the kitchen, that garment had been more or less busy around dinner preparations.

After the kitchen the pair moved down the walk, past the hen-house to where a fence, radiant in the noonday sun, shone back in patches of new additions that had taken the place of the old, weather-worn and worm-eaten ones.

"My name is Harvey," said the younger man, picking up a strip of lath and looking at it as critically as though it were the subject of his speech. "Frank Har-

vey," he went on. "I am a United States special pension examiner, and I am sent here for a deposition of Mr. Snellins on a case that he knows something about, it seems."

"I guess he can help you all right enough. I have often heard him speak of the army. He enlisted from somewhere down in Vermont, I think, and, I guess from all of his grunting and complaining, he's mighty sorry of it. He got a wound in his head somehow, and it has given him a sight of trouble, as he expresses it, but he could not get a pension on it, and that is what makes him so mad."

"I cannot understand why he should be held out of it," Frank replied.

"Ben don't want a pension. I don't believe that he would take it if you gave it to him. What's the matter with him is, he is just a natural kicker. He is always full of trouble of one kind or another, and, if it was not that, it would be something else."

"Does he work for you?"

"In the winter he does. He goes away every summer—no one seems to know where; but in the winter he turns up just as regular as clockwork. You are lucky to find him back now; it is a week ahead of his time, and he has already been back two."

"A sort of nomad," ventured Frank.

"A sort of blamed fool," said the old man, explosively. Then, in fear lest he should be taken too seriously, he added: "He is just an all 'round crank that no one can quite understand."

"Well, he must be a strange character," Frank answered in quick sympathy.

"There now—that is done, and I guess Virgie must have something for us to eat by this time, so we had better go in. Women are terrible when you keep them waiting," he said, in mock fear, as he gathered up the saw and hammer and a few nails that were scattered about.

"Then I may eat with you?" Frank asked. "I had expected to get to Ashville in time for dinner, but I hardly think I can make it now."

"I suppose that the little one has fixed for both of us, and, if she has not, I will divide with you," he said, smiling, as they went into the cosy little dining-room that would have been appetizing in itself without the many dishes already there heaped full of smoking-hot things.

"I guess I can afford to divide," said the host, as he beheld the bounteous spread, and accompanied his remark with a nod toward the table, a look of mild approval stealing over his kindly face.

"And still appease your own appetite," laughingly replied Frank.

"Yes, indeed; and it would not make much difference how big it was either. Well, little one," he added, looking expectantly toward the kitchen door and raising his voice just a shade higher.

"In a minute, father," came the answer, and the men remained standing—a pretty compliment from father to daughter that filled Frank with a vague wondering. Then in came a great dish of smoking some-

thing; he could not tell what it was, followed by the most charming representative of sweet and girlish naturalness that he had ever seen.

"Don't let it burn you, dear," her father said. "Here, let me take it," and, as he leaned forward and placed the dish on the table, he turned his face up toward them.

"This is Mr. Harvey, Virgie; and Mr. Harvey, this is my daughter." Then continuing, as he regained his upright position, "My daughter, Miss Virginia Brandt."

The dinner began with a simple thank-offering by the host, father and daughter bowing their heads in devout gratitude. Harvey was unusually moved by the sincerity and earnest reverence of the two humbly lowered heads, and his heart melted under the tender influence.

"Now, don't keep jumping up all the time, dear," said George Brandt in mild complaint as the meal progressed. Then aside, as if in explanation to Harvey, "She works too hard altogether. She's a regular little busybody."

"You must not say things like that about me, father, for a busybody is an old gossip, or some such horrible person, and I am sure that I am not old," Virgie laughed.

"No, I should hardly say you were," he replied.

In the table's centre was a large bowl filled with golden rod, and, as father and daughter sat opposite, some of the matted sprays obstructed his range of vision, and he leaned to one side, at the beginning of the table-talk, gazing, you might think, critically, as though, under the disguise of his remarks, he would

absorb as much of her sweet girlishness as he could while that excuse lasted.

Virgie, naturally, was used to her father's ways ; she understood him thoroughly. He had been her gallant, her adorer, her sort of worshiper for as long as she could remember ; but it was only in her later years that she had come to realize the beauty, the unselfishness of his devotion. From the child who accepts everything as natural, thinking her life filled with only the things that are as they should be, never taking into her small reasonings the home love that surrounded her, deeply absorbed in appeasing the five senses which, always busy, moved by curiosity—childlife's greatest impetus ; she had gradually grown into the realization of the care that had protected her, through the exploring of baby things, on through the selfishness of childhood until now, in young womanhood (she was in her eighteenth year)—the value—the true worth of that love and care—surged in upon her in its daily manifestations with a warmth that made her own life glow in sweet response. But, in fear that her father's admiration might not be shared by their guest, she hastened to change the subject.

"Have you heard from Ben yet, father?"

"No, pet ; I suppose that we will, though, very soon. Don't you think we will?"

"No-o," she answered, perplexedly, "I feel, some way, as though he had left for good. Something must have happened. Oh ! what could it have been ? I am worried dreadfully."

"I hope that he will return soon," said Frank.

"He will be back shortly," George Brandt replied, "for he knows that we have lots of work laid out to do. He ought not to have gone away," he added, with just a shade of annoyance.

"I want you to promise me something. Will you, father?" Virgie asked, tilting her head one side to get a better view of him.

"Unconditionally?" he questioned; then added, "I don't know how I am going to keep up with your fancies if I have to keep looking into those blossoms all the time. I cannot see whether you are for sure serious or just laughing at me."

"I am really serious," she said, rising and taking the obstructing flowers from the table. After placing them on the window shelf, and re-seating herself, continued, "You can see now that I am."

"Well, I promise then," and both men looked at her. The apparently unwarranted change made them wait interestedly for her reply.

"Please do not be cross to Ben if he comes back. He is awfully trying at times I know, but he is such a faithful old simpleton, and I am confident he does not mean to do wrong. He tries so hard to do what you want him to."

"But he takes affairs into his own hands too much, my dear, and always at the most awkward times. It has come to such a state that I cannot put any dependence in him, and now you wish to keep me from having a plain talk with him. You are——"

"Plain talks always mean disagreeable things," she interposed.

"People who do disagreeable things should only expect as much in return," her father protested.

"Yes, but you have promised me," she said, while the displeasure of her father had taken much out of the pleasure of having gained that promise—a fact very evident in her sweet face. Then she added, exultingly, as though a perfect solution had occurred to her: "Let me talk to him. Of course I cannot scold, but I will be awfully serious."

"A pretty method of casting pearls," he said, yielding the case reluctantly.

Frank had listened to the amiable discussion, and at its conclusion had no doubt left in his mind as to which, if he were to choose between the father's annoyance and plain talk or the daughter's impulsive reasoning, would be the least humiliating.

"It does not matter much to me now what time he returns. I have no other people to see this side of Callings, which I should judge is twenty or more miles from here, and I cannot possibly drive there to-day, so you see I shall be forced to remain to-night at Ashville anyway. No—no more potatoes, thank you," to Mr. Brandt, and, continuing: "I was forewarned by my predecessor when I accepted this territory that it rivaled the mountains of Switzerland to get about in. Of course I have not found it quite so bad as that," he laughed, "but, without a railroad in the county, I am forced to drive everywhere, and at times it is most inconvenient."

"What has come of that scheme to run a road across the northeast corner up there?" asked George Brandt,

who, with the exception of the weekly rural paper that found its way to his isolated home, had lost all knowledge, if not interest, in the doings of the outside world.

"Their plans failed."

"Was that it?" he asked, putting one of those questions to which no answer is expected. In his tone a lack of interest in affairs outside his own was plainly manifest, and, with the meal finished, they arose from the table.

"You will find it rather slow waiting around here," said Brandt, "but, if you care to read, there are some books in the other room, perhaps not of the sort you like, but they will help fill up the time. I find that in idle hours they carry me over many a gloomy thought, and at the same time I feel as though I had accomplished something, even if I have only re-read some one that is already quite familiar."

"Perhaps Mr. Harvey would prefer being out of doors, father, even if he has only you and your work to watch," suggested Virgie.

"If I am allowed to express a preference, I believe I would rather follow your father's suggestion, as I drove quite late last night and am afraid I am in for a siege of cold now, and I must take no chance of prolonging it," Frank hastily interposed. "That is, if I do not intrude?"

"You will not intrude if you do not try to help me. Men always seem to think that they know how to wash dishes and do lots of other such things, and I have yet to see the first one who can," she replied, with charming frankness.

"Well, I had not thought of offering my services," Harvey replied, laughingly, "but I might prove to *be* the first one—if you will only give me a trial."

"There it is. You all *think* you can!" she retorted, with great emphasis on the "think." "Men are so wonderfully versatile that they think they can do anything, but they never rise to expectations, at least not to their own."

At this juncture her father, who had been looking from one to the other amusedly, put on his hat and went out.

"You will find the library in the other room."

"Then you will not give me a trial?" he asked.

"No," she replied, rather shortly, and commenced to hum as she went about her work.

"A strange mixture of ideal loveliness with her parent and at times of uninviting incivility with a stranger," thought Frank, as he started toward the library indicated. "Yet I *am* a stranger," he mused, standing with his chin in one hand and his elbow in the other, running his eyes over the book-shelves in an abstracted manner. "What else could I expect? I have, after a fashion, forced myself upon them, and uninvited people should not expect too much. It is not the first indifferent reception that I have had," he went on, but the too apparent contrast had left a little twinge of wounded vanity in his heart that any amount of such sensible reasoning would not remove. He took a book at random and seated himself near the window, where he remained long looking out on the huge, majestic

sycamores that mingled a riot of confused colors with the smaller, sturdier oaks, trim maples and angular black gums. There was green running into red and brown and yellow and back to green again, the dominating color, from which the others had come to make this color harmony, but he took no note of these as he gazed in dreamy meditation.

Brandt's house was situated far up in the hills of Broom County, where few men enter from the outer world, and from which the inhabitants—a strange, mixed people—seldom come to lend picturesqueness to more civilized surroundings. There are many men who can tell you of Broom, by which the district is commonly known. Men who have lived nearby, working their lands into rich harvests, which, when garnered, leave them naught to do but to speculate on the crop to come. Lands that yield only substantial things, material things, and, in the absence of that romance in their lives to which all men and women turn in idleness, these nearby farmers and townspeople have turned to "Broom." Exchanging their stories, burnishing them up with bits of imaginary untruths when the occasion warranted until, on the whole, they are wonderful tales of a savage, ignorant people—the descendants of criminals advanced by wild living. From these one would be led to think that all of the escaped convicts of the Union had found refuge and bred there. But, if you were to ask one of these great tale-relators what *he* had seen among the hills, you would doubtless find that he had never ventured beyond the very border of its wildness, and in the end it might dawn upon you,

that is, if you cared to follow out the subject, that the tales were but traditional and the purest fiction.

It is true that into these wilds have straggled, now and then, a fugitive in an effort to seek seclusion from a rigorous law. They have never remained long; such men are fond of darkness, but of the sort that has in it the flickering of dim lights and a sense of companionship in a surrounding of fellow beings, even though they may know none of them, and not the darkness that echoes back their own miserable thoughts in creaking boughs and moaning winds. Her population was more a mixture of chance inhabitants of a far different character than Frank Harvey had been led to believe, and as he sat, book in hand, before the window looking out upon the road that wandered down in a deep decline, edged by a handsome wall of autumn-touched trees, he wondered at the unusual gentleness that he had found here, where every tale had spoken of naught but wildness and depravity, and he was much at a loss for an explanation.

With a gesture, that indicated a dismissal of the subject without reaching a result, he opened the book and looked at it for the first time. "David Copperfield, as I'm a living sinner," he said to himself, and, much pleased with the choice that he had unconsciously made, he promptly broke into the middle of it. The book was a favorite of his. Hardly to be counted as a novel-reader, he was not without a leaning toward this one and two or three others into which he had forced himself until, becoming interested, he had gone on to the end. A second reading of Copperfield had not suf-

ficed to tire him, and, with this renewal of old acquaintances, he was soon absorbed.

"You are obeying orders beautifully," said Virgie from the doorway. "You seem quite interested."

"Indeed I was!" said Frank, with enthusiasm.

"Do you enjoy reading so much?" she asked.

"Only at times," he replied. "I guess it is because of the smallness of my circle of book friends that I feel so well acquainted with each of them. Then, too, I admit them so seldom to a review of their sorrows and pleasures that I am much impressed when they do talk to me."

"It is David Copperfield," she said, and the name came in a tone of fondness; then, holding before her breast the shining plate and tea towel that she had brought to the door, she leaned forward and looked at an illustration in the book, and continued: "It was Dickens' favorite, you know, and I believe it is mine, too. I have never quite decided which of his works I like best. He has such an uncanny way of bringing the people to you, and after you have become absorbed you regain your own surroundings, with a feeling of their absence, they leave you then and something seems lacking; so much do you miss their going away that you feel disappointed."

"Then he disappoints you," said Frank, mistaking her impression.

"Oh! indeed no," she replied quickly. "The real charm for me lies in that—in that—what shall I say? 'In that disappointment' hardly expresses it. I guess,

after all, his seeming to have written just for me is where the pleasure lies," she ended abruptly.

"I would have given anything to have said that," smiled Frank. "I think that you have covered it all in just those few words."

"And if I have," she said, "I do not suppose he would feel complimented at being so easily dismissed. Yet one cannot be a whole review, for, if we were, we would only be living the lives of others, and then we could never arrive at anything ourselves."

"I think that you are right," he agreed, and, after a pause, asked: "Has Mr. Snellins returned yet?"

"Then we are to dismiss poor Copperfield and Dora and all the rest without the least bit of sympathy," she said, seeming reluctant to give them up so easily; but, continuing, with her interest much abated: "No, we have seen nothing of him yet. You shall know, though, just as soon as he arrives." Then her curiosity, seeming to get the better of her, she ventured: "Is Ben asking for a pension?"

"No," Frank replied, in a non-committal way, and Virgie turned her attention to the plate again, not knowing how to proceed. "If he does not want a pension," she asked herself, "what can a pension agent want of him?" The unsatisfactory answer to her first question only served to make her the more curious, and it was a curiosity in which she felt no reproach of conscience, for "had not Ben always made a confidant of her, and accepted her as a sort of adviser?" she asked herself. "Surely there could be no harm in her knowing the present need of him," she argued, and, since a direct

question had elicited nothing, she approached the subject from another point.

"I think he failed twice," she said.

"So your father told me; at least he said that he had failed, though he did not say how often. It must have been through some fault of his own."

"But he was a soldier, so how could he fail?"

"I would not dare attempt to answer that," Frank replied. "The cause is too remote a one to be guessed at, and I have had no opportunity to study his case."

"But you are going to now," she said, in a way that implied a question.

"Well, no; I have not come for that, but I shall be glad to help him in any way that I can," he said, and she started with instinctive fear, looking at him searchingly. "It is as a witness that I shall interview him—in reference to a companion that served in the same regiment that he did, and his will be the last deposition that goes to make up the case." After which Virgie sighed relievedly.

"Then it only remains for Ben to decide it?" she asked, regaining partial composure, putting her question into a form that would draw from him the most information possible—not attempting to conceal her renewed curious interest.

"Well, hardly," he replied, amused at her lack of knowledge and evident desire to have an explanation. He was familiar with the total ignorance of the people at large, and individuals in particular, as to the workings of his department, and he had been drawn into an

explanation of it so often that he had reduced it to as few words as possible with which to enlighten the inquisitive and interested ones, and though the form was an old one, and he had grown weary of it with the frequent repetitions, he felt called upon to again explain the mystery of the work.

"This Mr. Snellins," he continued, "will have scarcely as much weight in his testimony as you seem to think, for, by a count of the depositions that have already been taken, there are now forty-three, and each is equally as important as his will be. You see," he said, entering into a full explanation, "when the first application for a pension is made a list of perhaps five or six names is given as references, and to each of these persons it becomes necessary to apply, no matter where they are, for any information that they may be able to give. Naturally, the first depositions given are friendly to the applicant, so that their statements are as good as valueless, but among them there invariably occurs a reference to a somebody else who can shed a little light on the matter, and then it becomes the duty of the examiner who has taken that information to refer to the someone mentioned when he sends the summary of his interview to the department. Then from the department the papers are packed off to the examiner who has that territory in which the someone referred to was last known to reside, and, if that someone can be found, his deposition is taken, added to the pile and again the lot is returned to the department, with the summary of this examiner, which is his individual opinion of that one man's testimony. And so the story is

piled up, a little added each time the lot are sent out, until the whole is as complete as can be made."

"But it must take a long time," said Virgie, to whom the carting about process seemed quite unnecessary, "and a man could starve a dozen times over before his case was settled."

"I suppose it does appear to have a good bit of red tape to it," Frank said, "but, with the millions of dollars that are distributed annually, unusual precaution is necessary."

"Why can they not write to these people?" she asked, seeking a simpler and easier means for deciding a case.

"Because the informers are generally quite lacking in a knowledge of the information desired, and then, too, the testimony must be given under oath."

"Oh!" was all she could say, for to her the process of administering an oath, which she had never seen, though often wondered at, seemed an awful thing. The mere thought of such a proceeding had always produced a depressing effect upon her.

"Have you any other suggestions?" he asked, feeling well repaid for the explanation by her attentive following, and much amused by her earnestness.

"If I had I would hesitate to give them after so palpable a failure of my first one," she said, regaining her habitual cheerfulness.

"Then I shall ask a favor of you," he said, his having become master of the situation leading him to a facetious bent.

"And that is?"

"That you bear witness to the testimony of Mr. Snellins if he ever returns." And, in her quick change from a cheerful expression to one of depression again, he found a strange sense of satisfaction in being able to sway her moods.

It is difficult to describe the satisfaction that arises in the mind of a good man when he finds himself in control of a situation that had, from its beginning, seemed hopelessly lost. It is the bringing about of the result that is partially desired, yet not directly aimed at because of its seeming hopelessness. Such a conclusion is gratifying in the extreme to the man who has never obtained results except by a concentration of his best efforts toward the end in view.

Frank Harvey had been largely benefited by the process of having the corners rubbed off, as all young men are supposed to do before they can arrive at anything worth arriving at, and he had accumulated enough experience with people and their ways to be a very level-headed fellow. He was, therefore, a little reluctant to take credit for the moods or humors of the people that surrounded him. He knew that, with Virgie, the fear was but the emotion of a previously conceived situation, and entirely outside any influence of his own. If she had chosen to cry, or have laughing hysteria in turns, he would not have felt responsible for the mood. He was quick to detect other influences than his own at work, even though she was following his line of conversation. People could indulge flights of either sort of emotion from a central point of stoicism, he would have told you had you asked him, but it would depend alto-

gether upon themselves to what degree they carried them. Yet, with all his lack of self-crediting, there was within him a something akin to satisfaction in the ready sympathy he found where he had thought no one but her father could influence her.

"Oh! I never took an oath in my life," she said.

"The service I ask will not require it of you; that will be for Mr. Snellins only. All that I ask of you is to bear witness to the testimony, and then sign the document."

"Will my name go to Washington?" she asked, excitedly.

"Yes," he replied, smiling at the wonderful importance she attached to that fact, and thinking in the meantime of the little note that would be taken of her signature in the great bulk of matter that goes to Washington to be seen only by disinterested clerks.

"But, what if they should ever send for me, or write to me, or something," she said. "I would be frightened to death."

"Little chance of that," he replied, smilingly. "Witnesses in the position that you will occupy are never called upon."

"Well, I hardly know," she said, undecidedly. "I must ask father;" and, excusing herself, she left him. Unable to concentrate his mind upon the book he closed it, and sat looking out the window as he waited for Snellins, who was not destined to come.

CHAPTER III.

The afternoon dragged itself out until the short day had reached that time when the shadows, that not long before boldly and clearly outlining short counterparts of the trees along the road, had grown much longer than the trees themselves. Stretching across the road in weak lines, breaking in irregular, sharp angles over the stones, and, rising up over the hedge that bordered the opposite side, they died away among the stubble and clodded ground in a barren cornfield.

Harvey arose, his patience much exhausted by the long wait. He had not expected to leave the district that night, but the prospect of having to waste the afternoon had not occurred to him. He concluded that he could not wait much longer if he was to get to Ashville before dark, and to drive there after dark through the irregular country, with its steep hills and loose stones, was not to be thought of. With a feeling of regret for the lost time, and a little nettled at the prospect of having the hard ride over again, he pulled himself together and sauntered into the yard, where he found George Brandt, still busy with the building that was in thoughtful preparation for the storms of a winter not far away.

"Well, young man," said George Brandt, standing with a hammer poised above his head, just where it had stopped when he caught sight of Frank, who wore a gloomy expression, and walked slowly with his hands pushed deep into his trousers' pocket, "I guess you are going to be disappointed this time."

"Yes, I guess I am," he replied, trying to regain at least a semblance of cheerfulness in accepting the inevitable, but not succeeding with much grace.

"We have to make the best of these things, though," said Brandt, continuing with his work. "Look at my position—can't say a word to the villain when I do lay eyes on him. Bound hand and foot, you might say, by a promise. But a man's word keeps him out of lots of trouble sometimes, I suppose," he added, philosophically. The thoughts he did not speak were very emphatically expressed with the hammer.

"It will be dark in an hour from now," Harvey said, resolved to give the day up as wasted, "so I had better be starting."

"I am mighty sorry your trip was for nothing; however, you may have better luck to-morrow. I cannot promise though. Ben is such an unreliable fellow. You have learned that to-day without my telling you, but I think he will surely be back this evening."

Then Frank bid the old man "good-bye," and as he drove away over the rough road he could hear the industrious hammer above the rattle of his light wagon's wheels.

"B'n up to Brandt's, have ye?" said the voluble landlord, rounding up the information he had succeeded

in drawing from Harvey during the evening meal, as they sat down by the office stove—a modest counterpart of the mammoth round, two-piece, cast-iron kind we are used to watching from a comfortable distance as they grow rapidly redder and redder after a vigorous prodding by the station agent, who so easily glides from the menial position of janitor to an exalted “company’s agent” (that fact being embroidered on his cap), which is donned just as the redness reaches a cherry ripe and the train comes in. But the country railway station and agents and such things have nothing to do with Silas Dole, the landlord (commonly known as “Jolly Si” because of his good nature and his bouncing way of showing it); though the stove has much to do with him, because, with the chill evenings coming on, it had again resumed its importance as the central point from which many legs of various lengths led out like spokes to a wheel of good fellowship. “Si” was about to resume the conversation where it was left off in the dining-room, but he was called away to take down a clothes-line and attend to other chores, and when he returned some of the “regulars” had dropped in. In the introductions that followed he was restrained for a time, but not for long, and at the first opportunity took it up again.

“B’n up to Brandt’s?” he commenced. “Smashin’ fine man Brandt is—treated you square I ’low?”

“Well, yes, I had dinner there,” Frank replied.

“Couldn’t a-b’n no other way; he never was knowed to do a mean thing since he’s b’n ’round here, an’ that’s thirty-six year.”

"Nigh onto thirty-eight," said Lem Henderson, from the other side of the stove, with a positiveness that set his foot to bobbing.

"'Taint now, be it?" asked "Si," a little surprised at his miscalculation, and Lem's head nodded a continuous assent in union with his foot.

"Well, it were in the spring o' the year anyhow," continued "Si," "an' him an' his woman come a-draggin' in here so pesky tired that we jest had to give 'em room ef it did crowd me an' Faribee some. You remember we hadn't nothin' but that log place then—what you an' Peters' boys helped me to build?" he asked of Turner, who up to this time had apparently been deep in thought or in a trance, or some other brain-absorbing state.

"I swan I do," said he, rising to the occasion with unnecessary enthusiasm, and, continuing, "Sam Peters was shot about the middle—"

"Yes, I hear'n tell about that," said "Si," breaking in on the equally voluble Turner, who at once resumed his thinking attitude, vanquished but not in the least offended.

"We kept 'em along o' us fer nigh a month," continued "Si" retrospectively. "His woman was plum give out, and fust think we knowed she was down with chills an' fever, an' Brandt went clean crazy. You couldn't-a no more talked horse-sense into him than nothin'. Kept a-callin' hisself a blamed fool an' wuss things, an' when she sort o' come round agin she must-a 'greed with him, 'cause she give him one layin'-out I shan't never forgit so long as I live. Said she

was tired a-bein' passeled about over the country 'thout never knowin' whur she was a-goin' to next, an' 'bout th' time she got through she 'lowed they'd better stop right where they wuz ; an' Brandt, he didn't seem to know 'zactly what he was a-wantin', so they tuk up that bit o' lan' down whur he bees now, an' in less 'an three years she'd managed t' get hol' a right smart o' groun' 'round thur. They didn't bother much 'ith thur neighbors then, 'cause they wan't none noways handy, but we used to see 'the lady' (that's what folks got to callin' of her) once in a long while. Well, one night 'long come "Doc" Seebert an' gets Faribee an' takes her down thur, an' when she comes back she's got a bundle, an' she jest looks 't me an' says. Says she : 'Si,' you'll go an' 'tend t' things ; Brandt, he ain't fittin'.' An' when I see him I knowed he wan't. 'Lem' can tell you how onfittin' he were," said the narrator, looking at Henderson, who with solemn face nodded assent without attempting to break into the tale.

"Then," he went on, "we kep' that little bundle here with us fer weeks an' weeks, 'til 'way into the summer, an' one day Brandt, he come over an' says to me; he says, an' he was looking mighty down in the mouth, 'Si,' says he, 'I guess I be all right now,' an' I says right off—"fine as a fiddle," an' I jest stood a-lookin' at him. I didn't kinder know what else moughten be the best thing to say, an' he jest stood a-lookin' at the floor. So what do you think? That blessed baby goes an' sets up a-yellin' in t'other room, an' he looks up smilin' kinder weaklike, an' then I knowed what he'd come fer ; so I calls Faribee an'

she brings the baby in, an', when it kep' on a-cryin' an' stickin' its little fists in its eyes, Faribee says : 'That ain't no way to be a-greetin' of your pop first time you see him. Young ladies should be a-havin' of better manners,' an' Brandt, he smiles again more happier an' looks at her, not knowin' jest what to do. 'I s'pose I should be takin' her home,' he says. 'I don't 'low you will,' says Faribee, speakin' up prompt. 'I ain't a-goin' to give her over jest yet. What does men know 'bout colic an' cramps?' she asks him, an' he looks foolish an' 'lows he ain't very knowin' on them things, but he keeps on, an' says, 'I'm a-thinkin' she'll be a bother.' 'You go about your business,' says my woman, makin' out she's cross, an' after-while he goes away, an' we jest kep' that baby all through that summer, an' the winter too."

"I remember one night, jest 'bout 'long this time o' year, Faribee says to him—I can see him now, settin' up straight, like company manners an' all (he was allus that way), an' me back agin the wall, on the hind legs of a cheer, an' Faribee, she'd been a-hummin' to the gal, when she stopped all of a-suddint an' says : 'Brandt, you're a tyrant ; here's this baby nigh a growed-up woman, an' she ain't got no name yit.' 'That's right,' says I. 'Well, what would you suggest?' he says, smilin'. 'Lord have mercy on the man,' says Faribee. 'If he ain't a-goin' amongst strangers askin' fer a name fer his own!' 'Well,' says he, 'sif he wan't jest sure of hisself, 'I have been a-thinkin' of it, an' we might call her Virginia, pro-widin' it 'ud be all right,' he says, which opset my

woman a bit, 'cause she'd sort o' settled on 'Jennie,' but she had to agree with him, an' first thing we knowed ever'body was a-callin' of the little one 'Virgie.'"

"Well, sir," "Si" commenced again after a short pause, "he tuck her home that nex' spring, an' I don't believe the wife an' me was ever lonesomer; it was awful the way we missed that baby. But when she was a little gal he uster bring her over to see us ever' few days, an' afterwhile she got to comin' of her ownself, an' she never got tired a-tellin' her 'Aunt Faribee' 'bout the great things her father was a-teachin' her out o' books, 'till the hull distric' tuk her up an' would a-spoiled her, only she wouldn't let 'em. She don't have much time to come here no more, 'cause she has such a heap o' things to do, helpin' her pop an' the new parson an' the poor folks, though Lord knows we're as poor as anybody; but sometimes she drops in an', rollin' up her sleeves, she'll put on a apron an' work about jest as common as dirt, an' when she laughs an' talks like nothin' wasn't a-botherin' of her it's a sight worth seein'."

"Well, I guess I'll be a-goin'," said Henderson, rising slowly and straightening his stiff, weather-warped old legs.

"Don't be in a hurry," said the host, genially.

"Th' woman's got rheumatiz now, so she's sort o' cross, an' don't do to aggrivate her now, so I best be a-goin'," he repeated.

"Ever'body knows his own afflictions best," said "Si," smiling.

"Now it ain't so bad since it's turned cool," said Henderson, missing the humor of his friend's jibe, and continuing, "an' Brandt's girl give her somethin' now, so she's easin' up a bit, an' now, so I ain't a-gettin' complained on 'smuch 's it was," he said, with his "now so" covering the pauses in which he ruminated through his rusty brain for words to express himself.

"Can't keep a man away from the busom of his family," and, winking at Harvey, Dole bid the homeward-bound patriarch a cheery "good-night!" and closed the door after him.

"Pensions is a good thing sometimes," started Turner before the host could regain his chair, but Frank was not in the mood to go over this—to him—tiresome subject again; therefore, he rose hastily, and, complaining of fatigue, shook hands all around and followed "Si" up a narrow stairway to a little lamp-lighted room, where he soon lost the procession of strange characters that had made up the day in a sound, healthy sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

“Miss Virgie,” the name by which she was known among her simple and affectionate people, had indeed grown to be a very busy young woman, as she gradually assumed the cares of her many friends, who took pains to lay before her their most trivial woes with the desire to have her sweet, sympathetic company. In the companionship, of which she found time to give to each a little, there was a sympathy tempered by a happy knowledge of the ways to extract from a hard, work-a-day and seeming profitless existence the happiness to be had from little things. She carried into these prosaic homes the light that made her people forget their cares in the analysis of trivial causes. She would go deep into the woes of some poor soul, and, as she hushed a wailing infant into repose, or in other ways helped to lighten some aggravating burden, seeking out the source of their troubles and, taking each in turn, she would laugh them away as imaginary ills, or temper them with a sweet and sincere sympathy that never failed in good results. Her visits left a better reasoning and understanding of life, and satisfaction in doing one’s duty even if there were no other reward than that of having done it well.

She loved intensely her wild surroundings. In her early girlhood she had had only her father's love, but George Brandt was not the kind of man to understand a child's ways. Men seldom do. She was, therefore, without the instinctive sympathy that only a mother can impart. She had been given books—always books. Lacking in the inventiveness that a mother permits full sway, her father attempted to furnish nothing as a pastime for Virgie but his own favorites. Yet she did not suffer for a lack of guidance into the mysteries that are always before child-life. The hills furnished rocky caves, into which she would worm herself, and there, surrounded by the fairies of her imagination, live in purer innocence than a less wholesome atmosphere could yield. She watched the mother quail guard her eggs until the great covey was a peeping fact hiding in the heavy brush, and at the end, when the little wings grew strong, they would rise in a mighty, startling whirl when she approached too close. Tumble bugs and bumble bees, wasps and butterflies—these were the embodiment of fantastic conceptions. The ants built castles for her and did fascinating deeds of toil and carnival in their arenas of sand. Once a gopher sat on a fence and quirked his tail, obligingly vacating his tunnel home that it might receive her flower offering to fairyland. The sweet William petals never would terminate after a most arduous counting, but the heather-bell's day was done with her departure, and they drooped in sorrowful slumber out of loneliness. From these gentler things, which could teach only goodness and inspire

only interested wonder, she grew into a knowledge at once beneficial and tending toward the sympathetic.

From her father she inherited that which was his best characteristic—a love of books—an inheritance that he cultivated to its last degree ; and from her mother Virgie bore in counterpart that force that had been brought out in her later life through necessity. It was only natural that, with these two characteristics dominant, the knowledge gained from the studying of studies by great men and women, and the energy to do that which she was prompted to do, there was always the opportunity occurring to her active mind that she should drift among people and sway them with these forces. Her influence grew to be an important factor in the Ashville “meeting-house,” and gossips had been known to say that Royal Kent, its young pastor, was merely Virgie’s mouth-piece, so strongly did he feel her influence, though it was scarcely come to that.

“But we will have to do something, Miss Virgie ; our finances are in an awful bad way, you know,” said Kent the next morning after Harvey’s visit, as he stood, one leg thrown over a corner of the kitchen table, and looking a picture of hopelessness.

“Yes, I know, but the old, stale amusements at which you ask people to give their hard-earned dollars at the same time you ask for their souls, is not productive of Christians. It leaves a bad flavor, and they will not go together,” she answered.

“Then, why don’t you suggest something else? It isn’t like you to tear down and not build up.”

"I have been thinking," she replied abstractedly, looking at him as though he did not count in her reasoning, "for some way to infuse a little novelty into it."

"Yes," he said, awaiting her solution with interest.

"I was wondering if we could not get up a nutting contest," she said slowly after a pause.

"A what?" he asked in surprise.

"A nutting contest."

"What good would that do?"

"Why, it would do just what you want to do, and the people would know from the start just what they were working for without any varnishing over of our real object."

"I don't see how you mean to do it. I don't quite understand," he said perplexedly.

"You must first get everybody interested in the contest," she said, beginning to unfold her half-formed plans. "Then we must place a sort of premium on labor by making the slow ones pay for what they do not do, and those who are energetic will have the tax taken off in proportion to their work."

"But how about the women members, especially the old ones?" he protested, as her idea grew clearer to him.

"Of course the old ones cannot do anything but get their boy and girl relations to help them out ; but you will see the younger ones take hold all right, and, with everybody interested, the rivalry will be great fun. Do you not see what great results we shall obtain?" she said enthusiastically, and more confident as she progressed with the idea which was rapidly becoming

more feasible to her, the possible results surging in upon her so fast that they tumbled over each other at the risk of becoming confused, which inspired her to convey them to her listener in quick, choppy sentences.

"There will be some who will be glad to pay just to get out of it, but they will take it in a good-natured way. Some will fail to gather enough, and they will have to contribute for their lagging efforts or inexperience. But I know that everybody almost will take hold if you tell them the right way, and the result will be that they will scour the country and bring in a harvest beyond the wildest dreams, and this harvest will be yours to market. The proceeds will be magnificent I will promise."

"I don't know," was all Kent said as he tried to foresee the end. He was a peculiar man this Royal Kent. Why he had chosen his present surroundings had never been explained any more than he had chosen to tell whence he had come ; but that he was a respected idol among the women of his congregation was very evident in their affectionate references to "the parson." He had a way of rousing their sympathies with smooth, sweetly-modulated sentences, and, while his great size did not exactly intimidate them, still it had a dominating effect ; but this, followed closely by his almost soothing tones, left an impression akin to the pleasant recovery from defeat, or, to better describe it, the re-assembling of jarred emotions into a sense of delicious quietude, and since all women are emotional, though in different degrees,

these endowments had a wide range for action. They very naturally credited him with the more pleasing sensation, and it gave him an enviable popularity among them. But with the sterner portion of his followers he could never decide just how he stood, and, in truth, that portion was a little at a loss to know its own opinion ; their impressions were so variable. At times his talks had the senescence of borrowed thought, and there could be no mistaking the lack of assurance that backed that thought, but in the main he seemed to have a hold on some deduction of his own, and then he would clothe it in an earnestness, though it might be assumed, that carried conviction, and for the time they would discard unpleasant impressions and try to condemn themselves for errors of judgment ; yet, somehow, they could not feel secure in any reasoning.

This was unfortunate for Kent, as he was keenly alive to his own faults. He gathered the wrong impression and took the wrong manner of correcting it. Striving to create in their minds an understanding of what he desired to do, he held out to them possible results that somehow he could never quite reach, and in the failure they felt rather than questioned his insincerity. They were not given to analyzing a man's mind in its more delicate shading. Being men of deeds themselves, they judged by results that he did not or could not attain ; they, in consequence, felt a slight distrust—an unconscious questioning.

Virgie had often aided him with advice, and it had almost always proven successful in results, though

his own lack of force had at times caused him to fail in carrying her unique conceptions to a successful issue, and here now was another scheme, in answer to his request, of which he was very doubtful.

"What ! don't you know?" she asked, and, with the confidence born of many successes, she was just the least piqued at his doubting the outcome of her suggestion.

"I was thinking how it could be pulled through," he replied, half apologetically.

"You don't need to 'pull it through' at all," she said, not to be discouraged. "All you need do is to make the announcement tomorrow and refer everybody to me as the manager, and I will see to all the pulling."

"That would not be fair, now, Miss Virgie. You make me feel like I was not to have a hand in it."

"Oh ! you will have plenty to do," she answered gayly, and then, as she was going to respond to a rap on the front door, she added, "but you leave the details to me."

"Has the wanderer returned?" asked Harvey, after the happiest expressions in greeting Virgie. The sharp morning air, tempered by the slowly-rising sun, had exhilarated him to a most buoyant state of cheerfulness, and he had forgotten entirely his vexation of the previous day.

"Not yet," she replied. "Won't you come in?"

"I suppose I must make the best of it," he said, as he went indoors ; but this added disappointment could

not depress him for long, nor in any great degree, for the beautiful scenes through which he had just come had imparted too much of their glorious freshness to permit of a sudden reaction.

Virgie closed the door and followed him through the house to the kitchen, a little annoyed at the ease with which he accepted the freedom of her home, but she would not caution him against coming upon her other visitor, although she could anticipate his surprise in the sudden meeting, a result that she thought due him for the liberty he was taking.

Frank stepped into the kitchen without any particular reason for going there except the slight attraction of having been there before. Following out the impulse he happened at once upon Kent, the momentary embarrassment driving from him a sentence already prepared for Virgie.

The men looked at each other in genuine amazement. While the situation was an unusual one, there was more in it to strike them forcibly than the chance meeting. They were each an almost exact counterpart of the other. To one who might study them closely the differences would be easily discernible, but at the first glance, both near six feet tall, large and symmetrically built, and smooth-faced, they seemed of the same mould, and, as the resemblance struck them on the moment, they observed each other closely—earnestly.

"This is Mr. Harvey, Mr. Kent," said Virgie, after a time in which she enjoyed the situation for all it contained.

And then they shook hands heartily, each smiling at the other, conscious of what was in his mind, though they exchanged commonplace greetings without reference to it, each perhaps half hoping his new acquaintance might introduce the thought.

"You seem doomed to disappointment," said Virgie, trying to relieve the situation a bit, as the young men continued to look at each other in a helpless fashion, addressing herself to Frank.

"I did not have any thought but that he would be here," he answered. "But it is the unexpected that happens, and I suppose I must make the best of it," he added, nothing better than his first utterance recurring to him.

"I am sorry you appreciate our hospitality so little," she said.

"That is hardly a fair way to interpret my remark," he replied smiling. "I do appreciate it, and very thoroughly too, only it is the having one's plans so completely upset that makes it uncomfortable. Disappointments can be toned down considerable at times by introducing pleasant things, but somehow they cannot be buried entirely at will. It takes time to do that."

"Your apology is accepted," she replied jestingly.

"I am sure there could be no more acceptable hospitality, at least in these parts," said Kent, entering the conversation at the first opportunity.

"It was more than I could have expected under the circumstances," Frank replied.

"Well, if you are so grateful for our small civilities," said Virgie, purposely exaggerating his meaning, "I think we should be able to relieve the monotony of your situation the least bit more, and, as the outlook for your remaining with us a little while longer seems very probable, we might permit you to share in a little plan we are forming."

Quick to grasp the remotest possibilities, she had readily seen where she might relieve, in a measure, his trying position and at the same time make him an added force to her plans. She had unhesitatingly laid the foundation for his usefulness, and Harvey, too energetic not to accept a diversion from a situation which held only promises of complete idleness, readily fell in with her undisclosed suggestion.

"You may have my services so far as I am capable," he said; "but I would add that you must count on me only as long as I shall have to remain to wait for Mr. Snellins."

They accepted him into their scheme for replenishing the weak treasury of the meeting-house, and in the interchange of ideas there were suggestions that grew and improved as the plan unfolded to them. The men became mutually sympathetic, following Virgie's rapid lead until their talk drifted onto other things, and in the end they became interested in each other, and Kent promised that, if the day did not bring forth the missing Snellins, and if Frank was to remain in Ashville, that he, Kent, would call at the tavern for him after supper, when they could spend the evening

together at Kent's home, an invitation which Frank readily accepted.

The day dragged itself out. Virgie went away on some errand, but returned early, and they dined as the day before, but, it being Saturday, both father and daughter were full of special work, and as soon as the meal was finished Virgie was off to visit some of the church members and obtain their support for the morrow. So Frank read as much as he could, and thought more, but when the evening commenced to arrive there was still no Snellins, and he was obliged to return without having accomplished anything.

Harvey was again filled with wondering, and this time at the strangeness of choice in the selection of such an odd setting as he found the educated and probably world-wise Royal Kent; and he spoke of Kent to "Si" at supper, hoping to find at least a partial solution, but the usually communicative "Si" for once failed to communicate, so he dismissed the thought from him and simply waited for Kent's arrival.

"Still with us, I see," Kent said, as he entered the tavern office, and aside, "Good evening, 'Si!'"

"'Evenin', Parson," "Si" replied.

"I am doomed, I guess," said Frank.

"You take it easy enough," laughed the parson, and then went on: "Get your hat and come on over to the house with me, where we can talk," and Frank, putting his hat on, the men left the room, where a speedy jumbling of voices indicated that their striking resemblance had not been lost on the "regulars."

The parsonage in which Kent lived was a very small affair, but it sufficed to the needs of its tenant. He led Frank at once to what he called his study, a misnomer insomuch as it bore every indication of recreation rather than of studious thought, and in the things with which he had surrounded himself Frank experienced a sensation of familiarity. They spoke of the worldly man and the college man combined, and not of the man whose life has been a constant seeking for truths, deeper truths, holier truths ; yet, withal, he was not surprised, even if he had not expected to find them there, for the morning's acquaintance foretold these surroundings. They were of Kent. It was the man.

CHAPTER V.

"Do you smoke?" Kent asked, offering Frank a cigar and lighting one himself. "I cannot educate the people here to the idea of a smoking parson," he went on, "though it is quite a general thing in cities."

It was just the using of other men's deeds and thoughts that marked him as insincere. The appropriation of their vices to excuse his own, and, though he had not analyzed it, Harvey felt that the man had better have said: "I smoke because I want to smoke," or "I smoke because I do not feel that there is any wrong in it," and, in truth, Kent would have expressed himself correctly had he said either of these, but it was his misfortune to be lacking in expressing his convictions properly, to convey their real truth, and thus he was constantly creating a harmful and an untrue impression of himself.

The young men readily dropped into an easy talk of the place and people with which they were surrounded, yet Harvey's knowledge of these things was so limited, and Kent seemed so reluctant to talk of the world outside his own, that they eventually drifted, by easy stages, to a discussion of the contest that had drawn them together in a kind of mutual interest.

"It will be either a colossal failure or the most successful novelty that I have ever seen," said Kent. "But, somehow, Miss Virgie has a way of carrying her plans to a successful issue, and you cannot help but feel a confidence that the results will be all that she predicts."

"If your people are any way susceptible to novelty the idea must succeed," Harvey replied, "for she will sway them irresistibly."

"Did you ever know a woman to possess the magnetism that she has? Women are naturally attractive, but it seems always in a small degree. Their scope is usually limited to a smaller field, say their home circle, or perhaps a circle that includes their relatives and a few friends, but for them to accomplish anything, that is, so far as humanity is concerned, is quite an unusual thing," said Kent, the subject leading him on to other observations.

"I agree with you, but only partially," Harvey replied. "It may be true that a woman's influence is confined to a very small circle usually, as you say, but I hold that it is scarcely less potent because of its limitations."

"It was with the results as achieved by men that I was drawing the comparison. What proportion of feminine achievements against those masculine have we? Is the percentage not a very insignificant one?"

"I am afraid that you lose sight of the fact that whatever man accomplishes is taken up and cried about, while with women the reverse is true. They exert an influence that lacks publicity, for it rather

seeks retirement, and is lost in the home circle of which you speak, while it may be that theirs was the head that planned and carried to a successful issue the very achievement their masculine relative or friend receives the credit for, which easily accounts for the uneven percentage."

"Yet is it not true that women give less than they receive?" Kent asked.

"In a material sense, yes ; but of the things that we cannot measure, because they are without a fixed valuation, there is a decided credit on her side," said Harvey.

"Supposing, now," said Kent, "that the man loves as intensely as the woman at the outset. Don't you know that the time will always come when love will be toned by worldly or other affairs into a milder form, and then he seeks to make of its object a companion. What happens then? He is brought face to face with the fact that he is no longer equal to the occasions of her intensest moods ; he cannot meet her fascinations with the understanding he once knew, and in the effort to atone for that failure he turns to material things as the next most suitable offering. That they are accepted goes without saying ; for there was never yet a woman who, in lieu of homage, would not accept and feel these homelier things desirable. It may be, since homage and material offerings are so inseparable in the average case, that she cannot detect the division between them, and, taking one for both, she craves and accepts, yet still craves, always in-

creasing her demands until, as I have said, she receives more than she gives."

"I am sorry that I cannot agree with you there," said Harvey, "at least in the motive that underlies the result. I am afraid that, in the order of circumstances, you have failed to grasp the exchange between the two, as it lies hidden beneath the achievements of the man, and yet is most often evidenced in his achievements. Of course we make offerings, and why should we not? We, as men, have these things to give. But let us suppose what would for many reasons be impossible; still we can suppose the case. Let us suppose that we be left a race of men only, and, in the interchange of ideas among ourselves, is it not highly probable that long before we became extinct we would have lost the effect of what is oftenest termed the 'refining influence,' and in the competition for each other's possessions an unholy rivalry would soon exist which, in the absence of that better influence, would degrade us. This competition would only be the first step on a downward track, until our one generation would surely find us indulging our aboriginal instincts, ambitionless, careless, thoughtless at its end. We would be everything we are not now, and just for lack of the guidance, the watchfulness and the care our women have given us. Surely we should be satisfied to share these better results with them."

"It is a rather sentimental view that you have of it," Kent laughed. "I can hardly reach that point where I can take all the glory of a man's achievements and,

ruthlessly stripping him of their credit, pass them over to his feminine inspirators, parceling out this to his mother, that to his sister, and others to his wife."

"No more can I," Harvey replied earnestly. "But the fact that men reach known heights so much oftener than do women does not lead me to believe that only men are successful in their aims."

"Perhaps you are right," said Kent. The view was a new one to him, and, while he could not be counted as narrow-minded, his thirty years had not given the clearness of vision that Harvey possessed. He was more the man to accept things as they seem, rather than analyzing them from a diametrically opposite starting point. Yet he was impressionable, and quickly accepted Harvey's reasoning, because it seemed original in its method and forceful in its application and results. "I had never looked at it from just that point," the parson said.

"Two people hardly ever do take life and its affairs the same way," Frank replied good-naturedly, "and the chances for wrong conclusions are limitless. I am always finding myself in error just because an impression has started me on the wrong track."

"Well, there is some hope for the man who will see and acknowledge that he is wrong. Don't you think there is?"

"Indeed I do," Frank laughed. "So we can each continue hopeful, I think."

"I don't know," Kent said seriously. "I make so many mistakes, and, when they come back to me, of course I try to correct them."

"And are you not successful?"

"Sometimes, but, while I am busy with them, I go on making others."

"An endless chain," Harvey laughed.

"That is near it," Kent replied.

"I fear you are quite hopeless then," Harvey said, and both men laughed, partly at their own frank confessions, but more because each felt called upon to accept the other unseriously. Their mirth soon waned, as their minds would not relinquish the subject where their conversation had ended, and in its continuation there was much to reflect upon.

Men seldom if ever attempt to read their fellow-men by physiognomy, as women often do. A man may be aware that his neighbor has an unusually square jaw, but he only looks at it as being different from the ordinary jaw. He does not say, "Now, that fellow has a square jaw, so he is a prize-fighter with a bull-dog disposition," for he knows that there are persons in other occupations with jaws that indicate tenacity, while there are fighters without this particular kind of jaw, and since he has never noticed the kind of ear a musician has, or the eyes of a poet, in fact any of the features of people whose disposition or inclinations are daily before him, he does not judge by these things. At times this seeming lack of knowledge comes to him with regret, and he resolves on the spot that, at the first opportunity, he will take secret lessons from some of his feminine friends, whom he has heard reading character like so much print. It is a resolve in keeping with the feeling that he will some

day read up on art, because someone has in his presence been talking art to someone else, and he could not understand; or he sees a lightning calculator doing wonderful sums for a gaping crowd, and in that expertness he finds his own mathematics very rusty by comparison, which occasions another resolve: "He will go and become expert—not just now, but very soon, and after all he does none of these things. The reason he does not is because they are out of the line of his daily needs. He could not use the knowledge if he had it, so these far-separated occasions only serve as reminders of the things in which he is lacking, though they are by no means essential.

Royal Kent would have given much to have been a physiognomist at the conclusion of his talk with Harvey, for he could derive nothing of the character of his guest from that talk unless it be his positiveness. He unconsciously depended on others, more or less, for the expressing of his thoughts. He never took so positive a stand that he could not modify it to another's views if the occasion demanded, for he disliked argument for argument's sake, or, for that matter, for any result it might obtain. He was all at sea as to the best way to proceed with Harvey, since his first observation had brought such an unusual amount of opposition at the outset. The fact is that the best way with most men is their own way, but Kent did not have the confidence in himself to act naturally, at least when he felt the equality or supremacy of another's mind, and in consequence his manner in all such circumstances was an uncomfortable one for his auditor. The knowl-

edge of things in general was in him and easily discernible, but his withholding it from you, as he followed and agreed to your line of thought, gave the impression that he was weak, and perhaps he was, though you might still cling to him in a hope of obtaining that which he had—that which you knew he contained, but which he could not produce.

Harvey found the keenest delight in the study of character. And here now he had happened upon a character study that claimed his deepest interest. He discovered the free and easy social code upon which Kent was built, and the impossibility of its successful application to the calling he had chosen was at once apparent. The manner in which Kent toadied to the ideas of his guest amused Harvey because of its palpaleness, and in Kent's unique character he found much that was fascinating.

"Then I shall see you at service in the morning?" Kent asked, as Frank rose to go.

"Indeed you will," he replied. "I am very much interested in the outcome of your nutting contest, and I shall be there to watch the hold it takes on your people."

"Well, come early ; I should like to have a little talk with you before service ; 10.30 we begin. Come earlier if you can."

"I will be among the first," Frank replied.

CHAPTER VI.

Of the many edifices that have been built and dedicated to the worship of God there are a few that have borne no little interest to the exploring mind. Of these few, the interest taken in the ones classed as "meeting-houses," and of the type that Ashville has produced, the comment and study has not been the least. Here in the hills of a region remote from thriving, progressive humanity, sturdy men and loyal women built their little home of worship. The men carried from earlier surroundings only mental pictures of the churches they had known. Harassed by their inexperienced labor and crude tools, they had arrived at a result very slow in coming, and an irregular, in-artistic structure was their reward at the happy end. Yet it was the counterpart of many another pioneer "meeting-house" beautiful to the builders. Differing perhaps only in wild surroundings and the characters who constructed it piecemeal, leaving their sturdy, earnest, individual purposes marked upon its every part, making the whole peculiar to them.

On Sunday morning, as Frank Harvey approached its ground, so sanctified by the many years of devo-

tion and worship, the sun seemed to embrace and fill its beautiful homeliness with a warmth of affection. From the hallowed wall there shone back a partial response through clinging vines, resplendent in the bright coloring of Indian summer. As he came closer the rapid progress of autumn's devastating influence was apparent in the thinness of the remaining leaves. He felt rather than reasoned the approach of colder days, when that ruddy coloring would have gone with the time that had made it glorious, and only a naked ugliness would be left in its stead until a more monotonous mantle of sparkling snow came to cover the remaining vines.

He arrived early, as Kent had asked him to do—earlier than he at first realized—but the triumphant splendor that the light and color contained created a delightful sensation of fresh enjoyment, and in the pleasure of the hour he did not feel impatient. Even the quiet, unobtrusive arrival of the sexton, a humble man, did not distract him. It was not until the decrepit old men and women—those who find a peculiar satisfaction in being the first to arrive and the last to leave their worship—it was not until these faithful souls came to divert his mind that he regained an active interest in people and left off dreaming. He entered and slipped into one of the seats nearest the door, watching the old people as they exchanged bits of gossip, laughing in a quiet way at their own humor.

It was not long until Kent arrived. Coming at once to Harvey, he greeted him with the cheerfulness that seemed to pervade the atmosphere, and, introduc-

ing him to a few of the bystanders, drew him away as soon as he had the opportunity, and asked:

"Get back to the tavern all right last night?"

"Oh! yes," Harvey replied. "Had no trouble at all."

"That's good. Haven't seen Miss Virgie and her father yet this morning, have you?"

"No. I guess they have not arrived."

"I expect you to share their pew with them." Ah, here they are!" he added, as George Brandt and Virgie came out of the group near the door, and Virgie, discovering them, came to where they were standing.

"I was just about to take a little liberty," said Kent, smiling.

"And," supplemented Virgie, her face radiant with the charm of lovely appreciation in the delightful morning.

"And I invited Mr. Harvey to share your pew with you and your father."

"Indeed he may. You shall go nowhere else," she added, as Harvey was about to interpose some objection.

"Then I will leave him to your care," Kent finished, and, excusing himself, left to mingle with his congregation that he might talk with them a few moments before the services.

Virgie had little chance to converse with Harvey, as there were so many demands upon her, and when the little organ gave out its first harmonious chords, as a warning of the beginning of service, she had said scarcely anything to him—to his disappointment.

"We had better be seated now," she remarked, and leading the way up the centre aisle she entered and took a seat beside her father, Harvey occupying the one left vacant on his opposite side.

"You all know, I believe," the parson said, after concluding a list of other announcements, and taking a stand at one end of the platform to mark the difference in his plain, personal talk from the sermon that was to follow. "You all know, I believe, the present state of our finances, and with your knowledge of the necessities before us in the coming winter you can understand how much we are in need of assistance. It is not my wish to make upon you demands that would be disagreeable, or, on the other hand, suggest any plans that will but cover our needs in a small and unsatisfactory way. With the aid of one of our congregation a plan has been formed (here many of the knowing ones looked toward Virgie) that will give every one of us a chance to help just a little, and I think we will each find great satisfaction in giving that help."

Then he proceeded to unfold the scheme for the next day in its entirety, stating at the end that "Miss Brandt would give every one who might take part full information about the details," and adding, "I am sure that there are none who will fail to take interest."

There were some, but they were only among the older people, who already knew, and they continued looking toward the front in unmoved consciousness. To those though to whom the idea came for the first time the novelty and possibilities impressed with a

quick delight, and an excited murmur passed among them as they discussed its phases in variously audible whispers, smiles and pleased expressions indicating popular approval.

Harvey glanced cautiously around over those whom he could see, and became greatly amused at their enthusiastic reception of it. As the sermon commenced the whispering subsided, and all eyes seemed turned on Virgie. Frank looked past her father, who sat studiously attentive to all that the parson was saying, and he thought at first that she was serenely unconscious of her position as she glued her eyes on Kent, but there was the excitement in her eyes that indicated plainly her feelings.

With the services ended she at once became the centre of a questioning group. Mildly smiling on the younger boys, who were exceedingly boisterous, she answered all the questions she could when able to make herself understood, and in the end each one of that small assemblage was filled with a determination to do his best, swayed by the excitement of the others, and electrified by her enthusiasm.

The following morning Harvey started early and drove out to Brandt's. He felt the hour an unusual one, and had many misgivings as to whether he had best not wait until later ; but, as he drove through the town and along the road, he met so many merry parties already busy with their chosen work, that he was soon convinced that the day is old or young at seven in the morning as habit has made it for us.

He found Virgie finished with her home duties and about to leave.

"We cannot let you remain here all day alone," she said, "and, besides, you have promised to help us."

"But how can I help any? I know nothing about the art of nut gathering," he replied dubiously.

"There is no need for you to. If you really care to help there will be plenty for you to do," she said, starting off through the woods opposite the house, and Frank followed meekly, for he had not the slightest idea as to where he was going or what would be expected of him.

The route she had taken led, by way of a narrow path, through the thick underbrush and massive trees that skirted the road, and as they moved along the fallen leaves rustled harshly as they swirled about their feet. When they came out into a narrow strip of clearing he took up a place beside her and resumed the broken conversation.

"If you are going to town why could not I have taken you there in the wagon?"

"There are too many parties already out that I wish to see. I cannot leave them to work all alone," she replied, and, disregarding his proffered aid, she crossed rapidly a small stream, stepping quickly from stone to stone with a deftness that came of experience. Then up a gentle slope she passed into another path so narrow that the protruding briar bushes forced him back to the single file again until they came upon a group of boys so intent in their work that Virgie's approach was unnoticed.

"I can't shake the darned things down," said one of them, aggravated by his fruitless efforts.

"Where are the darned things, Jimmie?" Virgie asked quietly, as she looked up into the tree.

"Well, I can't get 'em loose anyhow," he protested, abashed at her perfect mimicry.

And, without further reference to his outburst, she asked, "Have you been very lucky?"

"'Bout three bushel," replied the erring Jimmie, and, regaining his interest, continued, "Griffin kids an' Tim Sanders 's on'y got less'n two."

"Well, you *are* doing well," Virgie laughed encouragingly, and started on.

Another walk of some ten minutes brought them to a party of both young men and women. Harvey was soon aware that the ungracious reception that they gave him and Virgie was entirely due to his own strangeness to these healthy, simple and pleasure-loving lassies and their swain, who had made use of the occasion for a general outing. Still the young people accepted the situation good-naturedly, and when asked as to their success rather shame-facedly confessed that they "had not commenced yet," though the cause for such tardiness was evident in their enjoyment of everything else but the labor portion. So Virgie only cautioned them against losing their forfeits, and as she and Harvey left, one of the most bold among the young men cried after them that she might expect a record by their efforts before the day was over.

"Why do they all seem so fond of you?" Harvey asked, and, not trusting the reply to her, at once an-

swered his own question. "It must be because you understand them so thoroughly, is it not?"

"Is it not natural that I should understand them?" she answered evasively. "Have I not been brought up among them? Am I not one of them?"

"Your having been raised among or with them does not necessarily make you one of them, and though you accept their interests as your interests, and their happiness and sorrows as your own, still I believe that you will grow out of an interest in their simple ways—if not just now—perhaps when you are older."

"Oh! I know I never shall," she replied positively. "They are too dear to me."

"Granting that they may be dear to you, is it not because you have only come to understand them, and in using that knowledge sway them to actions that are of your originating and not their own? Is it not the controlling their lives in a large measure that fascinates you?"

"But they do these things themselves—in their own way. It is only for me to suggest, now and then, a small remedy. I assure you that their small demands are in no way tiresome."

"I am afraid that you do not understand my meaning," Frank said earnestly. "You are wielding an influence that is more far-reaching than you seem to appreciate, but in time I think that you will know the scope of that influence, and when you do you cannot enjoy it long without the added knowledge of the limitations. Then you will have grown to a fuller appreciation of your capabilities. The smallness of this

field of usefulness will surprise even yourself, and you will be inclined to cast about for other worlds to conquer."

"You would have me become a very ambitious person," she smiled, following his line of thought as best she could, but wondering at his conception of her. In her own mind she had never dreamed of any other future. Her life would mature and end just where it now commenced to show results, and his reasoning had opened new possibilities far beyond her immediate acceptance. He was giving to her, ambitions that were beyond her imagining or filling in of details, just at the present at least, though she was impressed by his introducing the thought of greater things into her very busy life.

"You are ambitious now. I would only have you become more ambitious, for I feel that your capabilities are in a measure wasted upon these people."

"Oh! do not say that. You make me feel that my interest in them is lost in their selfishness. They are not selfish, and I will not have you think they are," she objected, in defense of her friends.

"Perhaps they are not, but what do you receive for your efforts?"

"Their gratitude; and, even if I did not, there is the satisfaction of having done the good one has set oneself to do."

"I suppose it is all we have in any case," he said, half convinced. "But I only thought you might have a larger field for your usefulness," he added, as they

emerged from the woods and entered the edge of the town, each busy with their own reflections.

They went straight to the parsonage, where Harvey sank into the first chair he could find. The long and uneven walk had tired him considerably. Virgie, accustomed to continually running about, was not in the least fatigued, and remained standing as she talked to the elder "sisters" who were assembled, as is their wont at the least provocation where officiousness has an opportunity.

The party was not a very animated one. Frank likened it to the quietness that pervades a polling place on voting day, where everything orderly and almost without interest speaks of a suppressed force that only awaits the coming in of returns to burst into noisy enthusiasm. As the day wore on, with a little flurry of excitement now and then occasioned by the returns from some not over-ambitious individual who had done just what he or she was asked to do—no more, no less—he wondered if it would not yet fizzle out to an uninteresting end, with nothing to relieve its tameness but these spasmodic arrivals. He feared the result for Virgie's sake. He knew her disappointment would be keen, and he found himself blaming the people. "A stupid lot at best," he reasoned. "She was mistaken to expect them to rise above a mediocre appreciation of her ambitions." But he allowed his sympathy for Virgie to carry him beyond a fair decision, and when the afternoon had reached almost twilight he grew to have a better feeling toward her people.

Wagons, buggies and carts kept driving up in bewildering variety, the merry occupants dumping the results of their day's labor upon the lawn. In the rush there were none who received a correct credit for his amount, as boxes and baskets, and sacks upon sacks, were strewn over the ground, each merry worker adding his contribution with alacrity, causing such confusion that Harvey, whom Virgie had pressed into service as a kind of record-keeper, finally gave up the situation as a helpless one, and nodded or laughed his acknowledgment to each as he could get their attention.

When darkness came on the excitement grew to fever heat. Someone suggested a "bon-fire," and it was taken up with wild shouts by the boys and younger men. Great heaps of crisp, dry leaves were gathered and set ablaze until the whole neighborhood was lighted by their ruddy glow. The children danced about in broken circles, likening themselves to ferocious Indians, shouting and singing themselves hoarse, while parents looked on smiling and laughing their sympathy, the fun continuing until the last belated party had arrived.

Then "the parson" was made to mount a box and speak to them. Thanking them for the interest they had taken, he gracefully credited Virgie for originating it. When he had finished, those who could get to her hugged or kissed her, and bidding her good-night, reluctantly dispersed to their homes.

When all had gone but Virgie, George Brandt and

Harvey, Kent invited them in to supper—an invitation each refused.

“Are you ready, dear?” asked Brandt.

“Quite ready, father,” she replied, as she surveyed the great, dark pile at the foot of the yard, where the smouldering leaves cast fantastic shadows as they started into little blazes of light and burned to ashes in the early evening darkness.

“Will we see you tomorrow?” she asked of Harvey.

“I will call in as I leave, for I am going away tomorrow,” he answered half sadly.

“And not wait for Ben?” she asked, surprised.

“No. I do not feel that I can waste any more time on him.”

“What do you think of my people now?” she asked, her face beaming with the satisfaction of his defeat.

“I am only convinced the more of what I said. That you are capable of greater things,” and as she was driven away she was again perplexed by his understanding of herself.

CHAPTER VII.

"Yes, I am sorry to leave here," said Frank the next morning, shortly after his arrival in the house of the Brandts. "I got to thinking what an interesting time you have made of it for me when otherwise it might have been fearfully monotonous." "Oh! yes, it was you!" he continued, as she was about to deny the credit he gave her. "And last night when I went to my room the odor from the smoke of those leaves was still about my clothes, bringing up old memories. Strange, isn't it, how some particular thing will appeal to our senses—like that smoke did to mine—at once associating itself with some old chain of thoughts and setting them in motion again?"

"What were your thoughts?" Virgie asked simply.

"Well, I hardly know; they were so varied," he replied laughing. "The most impressive one, though, was a recollection of the fires we boys used to have. Somehow it saddened me to think that I could never have them again, but now, when I think of it, they would hardly prove interesting if I could."

"Then why regret leaving behind the things once outlived—episodes that are without further interest for you?" she asked.

"Perhaps that would be a more philosophical way of looking at it, but at times little patches of sentimentality will creep in, and when they do we are bound to wish for or regret the loss of incidents that we would probably not care to live over if we could. Would you be surprised," he asked seriously, "if I were to tell you that I much regret leaving here?"

"But you are coming back?" Virgie said, attempting to laugh, and not understanding altogether his sentiment.

"No-o," he said slowly. "It is because I shall not be able to come back that I feel, I suppose, a regret."

"You have not seen Ben yet," she suggested.

"That is true—I have not seen him," he laughed, as the introduction of the unreliable Snellins caused him to reach a happier plane. "But someone else will," he added.

"And why not you?"

"I am going to leave here for Washington."

"I believe I envy you," she said, smilingly.

"But are you in doubt?" he asked.

"Ye-yes," she replied, hesitatingly. "You know I have never been away from here, so I do not know if I should like it anywhere else."

"You would find much there to interest you."

"Yes, I know ; great people, and energy and life, and all that," she said, enumerating the things that her conception of the city gave her. "I really believe I do envy you," she said, conclusively, fixing her gaze upon a button that she twisted to a tension and allowing it to unwind itself with a spring, she continued in

quick explanation: "But not in the way of taking your place. I do not mean that kind of envy. Father told me that he once had a brother there—a great man."

"Perhaps I shall get to see him," Frank said, "and if I do what shall I tell him for you?" he asked.

"You need tell him nothing of us," she replied, alarmed, "for the family ties are broken quite beyond repair. They have not seen each other, let alone heard of each other, for years."

"That is too bad," Frank said, disappointedly.

"It seems so, doesn't it? But it must be as they wish it, or else they would have looked for each other long ago."

"Yet, if I do see your father's brother, your own uncle—would you like for me to tell you of him—the sort of greatness he has attained, or any of the other things I find out about him?"

"And how he looks and what he does," she added in breathless interest, "and maybe about his family—that is, if he has one. I would be delighted to know of them. But you say you are not coming back," she finished, and her face was full of disappointment at the thought.

"Yet I might write," he suggested, amusedly.

"Would that be quite right?" she asked, her sweet innocence trusting to his honor.

"If you wish it, yes," he replied seriously. "Then, too, it would be in the interests of the family," he added, more to ease his own conscience than to impress her with the correctness of it.

"So it would ; and if you see them, or—I mean him—you will write to me?" she asked.

"Gladly," he replied.

Virgie was filled with an anticipation of the pleasure she would find in this news from a world as strange to her as her limited reading of it could make it. The very meagreness of her knowledge allowed her imagination full sway. She had peopled the outside world with beings so superior to those she knew that the good news seemed outside the boundaries of belief. The calmness with which this man discussed the things she had so magnified for herself brought her to realize that her enthusiasm showed in sharp contrast to his serenity, and she tried to make herself believe that that enthusiasm was in some way unwarranted. In this she succeeded in only the smallest degree, yet enough to introduce another subject, endeavoring to cover the disclosure of her own extravagant imaginings.

Their talk, from her leading, took the form of commonplace things, of which they each knew something, until her father came in.

"Hello, Harvey !" he said ; "I hear you are going to leave us this morning?"

"Yes," said Frank, "I have had to give it up."

"Too bad, too bad ; I cannot understand it myself, but I don't suppose that there is much use of your waiting around any longer."

"Mr. Harvey is going to Washington, father," Virgie broke in after a short pause.

"He is?" And George Brandt's face lighted up in quick recognition at the mention of Washington.

"Yes, I shall go almost directly there after leaving here," Frank explained.

"Well—" said George Brandt, and then paused musingly.

"Well, what, father?" asked Virgie, and both of the young people looked at him expectantly, each knowing what was in the old man's mind.

"Oh! nothing," was all that he would say. "Haven't seen the parson this morning any of you, have you?" To which neither replied. Virgie had hoped that her father would make some reference to his brother. She knew that he had started to, and concluded that it must have taken some strong reason for him to change his mind so quickly. She thought of the communication she had arranged with Harvey to establish between her and her uncle, and feeling, after her father's silence, that perhaps she had better ask him not to write, she decided to do so at the first opportunity. But the absent parson put in his appearance, and the looked-for opportunity did not present itself.

"So you were going to leave without bidding me good-bye?" said Kent, in a tone that held just the least reproach.

"Hardly that," Frank replied, laughing. "It would be a poor return for your kind hospitality. No, I called to see you early this morning before I left, but you were out for a walk, they told me. Such unheard-of hours as you people keep," he continued, looking around at each of them. "Why do you ever go to bed at all? Why not just stay up if you find it necessary

to be about before daylight? You might save yourselves the trouble of retiring."

"You know about the early bird, don't you?" Kent laughed.

"Pretty example indeed is that," Harvey replied. "But we are not birds, nor do I think one misses any of the things that the wandering about before dawn is supposed to get, especially as one's own faculties are only partly awake at that time."

"You should make a difference in the needs of different localities," George Brandt advised.

"I had not thought of that," Frank laughed. "It suggests another bit of wisdom in keeping with Kent's. 'When in Rome,' you know—but, never having lived in your Rome, I of course did not realize your necessities. But where is this striving to be the 'early bird' going to cease? You are apt, after all, to follow my suggestion and remain up all the night!"

"Hardly that bad. I think it has reached the limit now," said Brandt, amusedly.

"I sincerely hope so," Kent added, in earnest good humor.

"Well, to realize that at least one evil has reached a limit must be a satisfaction to you who are responsible for it," Harvey replied.

"But I cannot see wherein the evil lies," Virgie said seriously, for the custom was one of her greatest pleasures, and she followed it solely for the love of the freshness that early morning contains. "I am of the opinion that your introduction of adages has given you

a wrong impression, because you have let only mercenary objects apply to our customs. What have you to say against anyone's being up and about in the early dawn who enjoys its clearness and its beauties as I do?" she asked of Harvey.

"Yes, what have you to say against that?" Kent asked, immediately sliding out of any responsibility, and laughing at Harvey for the predicament he found himself in.

"Isn't it rather unfair of you to leave the whole thing to me?" he asked. And to Virgie: "I am afraid that you take me too seriously. I was arguing more to cover my own laziness than I was to find fault with your energetic lives. If you will only forgive my attributing so much to the mercenary side I promise never to be guilty of it again."

"Is it customary for worldly people to excuse themselves at the expense of someone else's achievements?" she asked, reluctant to let him off so easily; and, too, she could not immediately overcome the offense his first criticism had produced.

"Hardly customary. I should dislike to think that the knowledge of worldly people only broadened them to make them that narrow. But I am afraid that in many cases their wider understanding of people and things allows them to handle the truth in a manner to convert it to their own needs; in a measure leading you to believe an omission in themselves a virtue by comparison, while another's virtue may be distorted to appear as folly or even sin."

"But such people are insincere; they are true to none, much less to themselves," she asserted, in faint disgust.

"Most assuredly they are untrue to themselves, but when they have reached the stage of absolute self-belief in their own virtues there is no undeceiving them, as they prove everything by logic, and you can reach almost any conclusion that is desirable and agreeable to you if you will reason that way and at the same time deceive yourself."

"If worldly people are like that I do not care to know them," she said decidedly, at which the men all laughed.

"Harvey is right," her father said, retrospectively. "There are many just such people, and in the minor details everyone is troubled that way. In a small degree I might say I was one of them once."

"But, father, you did not deceive people? You could not do such a thing as that."

"Well, I hardly know whether I deceived them or not," he smiled, "but I thought I did. Anyway, it turned out that I was the most deceived of them all, which goes to prove Harvey's theory in one case at least."

"I do not quite understand," Virgie said, in an undertone. The idea of deception filled her with disgust, and at Frank's having suggested its being general she could have laughed, disbelieving his reasoning in its entirety. But for her father to claim it as truth—yes, and give the support of his own—to her—perfect and sincere life, forced her to accept the subject, repellant

as it was, and try to reason it out for herself. For many days afterward she reviewed the thought, giving her imagination full sway. Bringing to bear upon it the lives and actions of such people as she knew, she could derive nothing but her first instinctive dislike. That dominated her every self-argument, and when she concluded that her understanding of "people and things," as Harvey had called them, was too limited to aid her in the solution, she turned to wondering in what her father could be deceptive. While she felt that she could never distrust him, still the awakening in her of unpleasant truths had commenced. His words came back, always with a lack of their real meaning, that made her sad in her misconception of them and him.

As they all stood at the gate, when Harvey was about to leave, she thought of another deception—the one in which she was to take a part—and again she would have asked him not to write to her if a chance had occurred, but the farewell was so general that no opportunity came to them to speak alone. She broke off a great stalk of crimson hollyhocks and stuck them in the whip-socket, thus hoping to come near enough to speak to him alone. Her pretty thought was misunderstood. Everyone laughed at the impulsive kindness. There was no pause in their conversation, and he drove away, leaving her with a heavy heart and reproachful conscience because of her first deception.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Harvey had gone the men stood just outside the fence and talked of him. Virgie went through the gate and leaned against the long chain that served to pull it shut, and there waited for him to come into view for the last time on the brink of a far-away hill. Her thoughts followed him over the road as far as she knew it on through the district she could picture from the stories of her friends—then out into the pliable unknown that revolved with a panorama of imaginings.

From where the men stood the road was obscured by a line of trees, but she knew from long intimacy with the hills where best to first sight advancing travelers, and when Harvey came into view again, more than a mile away, she was the only one of the trio to see him. She watched eagerly for him to turn, forgetting altogether his newness to the surroundings, and a merry laugh of triumph was on her lips as she stood in readiness to wave him a farewell which would surprise Kent and her father. She watched the receding vehicle intently, starting twice or thrice as she judged Harvey was about to turn. As the team passed over the brink and slowly sunk from view, leaving only

Frank atop the wagon in clear outline against the sky, she thought of a geography lesson wherein a ship passed over a round sea, leaving but its topmasts to the view, and she could have shouted as the last chance was slipping from her. Then he too was gone, and she flushed self-consciously as her eagerness came before her, and her wounded feelings made her resent his lack of recognition. All the joyousness left her heart, and she would have remonstrated, but neither of the men had seen, and she turned hastily and rushed indoors filled with a despair that she could not understand.

"I might think that you two had been brothers at some time long ago if I believed in reincarnation—you look so much alike," laughed Brandt.

"The resemblance is all on the outside," said Kent dejectedly.

"Maybe so, maybe so," Brandt replied, taken out of his good humor, "but the outward resemblance is wonderful nevertheless. I never saw anything so striking!"

"More's the pity that it could not have struck in," Kent replied, musingly. Then went on with a livelier interest in his remarks: "Did you ever observe the interest with which likenesses are discussed—the wonderment with which people take it, and all that?"

"Yes," Brandt assented, not grasping the point, but contented to wait the continuance.

"Then did you ever take into your calculations the millions of us that there are existing now and have existed in the past, and no two ever of the same exact

mould? If you have I believe that you will think as I do, and that is that the wonderment should be over our *differences* within apparently so limited a design instead of a similarity being remarkable."

"I had never thought of that," he replied, knitting his brows and looking at Kent studiously, though not contemplating the subject under discussion so much as he did Kent's unusualness and strange way of making untimely and valueless observations.

"I guess I had better get to work," he said after a time, then stood a moment before he left Kent awkwardly, and Kent sighed and went in to where Virgie was sitting in a blue study.

No word of recognition came from her, nor was his mood one that missed her habitual cheerfulness. He crossed the room and seated himself in the low-silled window, pushed the drapery back carelessly and watched a blue bottle-fly reflectively as the last of his kind buzzed with frantic energy against the green mosquito bar. His carelessness with her dainty curtains caused Virgie to observe him more closely, and in doing so she detected his ill-humor.

"What is wrong now?" she asked, forgetting at once her own dejection.

"Oh! nothing," he replied, taking his eyes from the fly and turning toward her a serious expression.

"Honest, now?"

"Nothing much, anyway," he said. "I am just lonesome."

"Lonesome?" she asked, surprisedly.

"Yes, lonesome," he snapped. "I was thinking of Harvey and where he is going. Somehow it brings back old memories, and they make me lonesome," he went on peevishly. "Out there, where people do things and live, life is worth while," he concluded with a sigh.

"But people work hard here," she suggested.

"Of course they do," he assented. "That is all they do do—is work—manual work, but it is brains—brains—brains, I tell you, that count in the doing of things. What is there here to hold interest? What is there of man-made art, or of letters, or of science, or study? No friendly pitting of brains against brains. Just as Harvey implied, we are early risers that we may be long workers. But we never think or study."

"Mr. Harvey was only joking," she replied resentfully, and yet without the knowing why. She could understand but a portion of his reasoning, and that understanding awakened only antagonism in her breast, but his talk of the world of letters and man-made art was of things outside her narrow life, and she felt incompetent to debate upon them, though in the antagonism he had awakened she sought for reasoning to place against his own, and when the thought occurred to her she continued :

"Of books I know but little, and of man-made art, as you term it, I know less ; but we have God-made art, which must be best after all," she ended reverently, and the incongruity of this remark to a preacher of God's word was lost by both of them.

"Oh ! I know, but that is just nature. Are we to stand still there and make of nature a means for a bare work-a-day existence? Do you suppose God gave us these things that we might simply grub potatoes and raise corn for food and seed, then more food and more seed again as the years go by?"

"I don't know," she replied dubiously, unwillingly accepting a portion of his argument.

"You do know—you must know, that there are better things than these, and out in the world is where they live and feel and enact them. Oh ! Virgie, there is where life is worth while," and he let his thoughts carry him back to the environment that prompted his words.

Virgie watched him intently, waiting for more until she saw he was not to continue, then she too slipped off to the things she knew to those of the outer world, using Harvey in the very situation her mind conceived, and surrounding him with a visionary world of her own conception.

"I find plenty to do here," she ventured without much force, but to incline him to further talk.

"I know you do," he said tenderly, throwing off the reverie that had held him silent, "and, if it were not for your example, I know that there would be much more of my present humor for me. You lead me into interesting things that I could not find for myself."

"Then why not continue in them—not half-heartedly, but like I do—with all your interest?"

He looked at her for a moment, then a smile spread over his face and he said : "I am not big enough to live little things."

"Not big enough to live little things!" she repeated after him. "I do not understand."

"Perhaps not," he said, seriously, "for you have never known the big men and women who live and do little things that make them big, much less the little, superficial people who live or try to live big things and are little still. The latter kind do not exist about here."

"I believe I know what you mean," she said slowly. "You mean people who do things ill or well. Is that it?"

"Well, partly yes and partly no; but, from your limited field for examples, that is as much as you can derive from the things I have said."

"I tell you, Virgie, you cannot know how hard this life is after the other. It is wrong for me to say such a thing, but I feel it, and I am not living a truth when I seem different," he said, his inventiveness ever ready and always convincing where he would bolster up his own changes of mind.

When Kent, in boyhood, wavered in his first purpose, he doubtless found some difficulty to explain the weakening, but, with the practice of years, his reasoning became ingenious, and at times when he brought this faculty to bear upon some newly-conceived desire his arguments were so strong as to awaken his own sympathy, and his heart would grow tender under the fancied abuse of his circumstances. With the ability to arouse almost to the point of tears his own sympathies for himself, it was not surprising that Virgie should follow his seemingly sincere reason-

ing. She pitied him and wished that he might have the things he craved, though she knew not what they might be.

"Is it so different here, then?" she asked.

"As different as night from dawn," he replied, turning his eyes upward impressively. "And, without you here, I should have gone away long ago."

"Who—me?" she asked, stabbing herself with her finger and looking foolishly pleased.

"No one else but you. You have been much more to me than you can realize. Without you here to help me I would have done these things all wrong and ended in defeat and humiliation," he said in an insincere burst of self-disparagement that made her forget herself and remember only him in quick sympathy.

"Oh! no," she said, with a gentleness that pleased the vanity he had himself been wounding. "You might have done even better."

"Impossible," he replied, shaking his head dejectedly; "that could never have been. If you will not take the credit yourself I must tell you of it. But wait," he said as she turned away, "your modesty must not keep you from hearing. When you have done so much for me why cannot I give you the credit of it? I have learned more Christianity from you than I ever could have from the Book. I have learned more charity, more nobility and more love—yes, more love than ever I knew before—for men and women, and, teaching me these, you have taught me to love—"

She turned quickly and looked startledly into his eyes. "Yes—you must have guessed long ago. You have

taught me to love you !” he said, remaining seated, but reaching out and laying his hand over hers in the old, friendly way.

“But I have not guessed,” she protested.

“Then it has taken until now for you to know,” he replied happily, “and now you know from the surest source.” He paused. “What have you to say to me, Virgie?” he asked, attempting to see her face as she leaned her head forward. Then, when she did not reply, he resumed : “Of course you must love me in return. It is just your modesty again,” he said, reassuringly. “Speak to me—tell me?”

She raised her head with her eyes opened wide. There was a look of pain within them, more of pity and wonderment than of self-condemnation. The avowal was so new and unexpected to her that she felt no remorse for herself—only compassion for him.

He looked into her face eagerly—intently, misconstruing for the time her expression of gentle sorrow, and watched confidently expectant for the change to smiles that would happily herald his victory. She returned his gaze with an intensity born of deep feeling, unconsciously struggling to convey her thoughts without words, and yet he would not or could not understand. With the quickening of her heart her mind moved on in sympathetic unison. She saw the stages of their friendship as it had grown through simple happenings and become endeared to her. She was innocent of the poesy of her surroundings and knew not the reason for the beauties of their friendship. If she could have contrasted the rustic simplicities of her

world with the stern hardness of Kent's, and realized the impression their ideally tinted loveliness had made upon him, she might have foretold the craving he would some time have to possess. But she could never have guessed the outcome, with only her simple flower and bird friends to tell her with signs that speak nothing of human ambition, and the awakening was sad. She reviewed in a tice the joys she had derived from their friendship, and realized at the same time that the end for it all had come. Slowly she drew her hand away and looked at him with pitiful pleading for an instant only, as the sorrow at her heart forced out two drops that dimmed her eyes, and her lashes met to take them up as she turned her head.

He caught her chin in his hand, turned her face up to his own and looked into her startled eyes in a temper that clouded his brow.

"Then you do not love me?" he said, and she drew her head away from his grasp, stung by the indignity.

"You were wicked to make me think that you did," he continued, throwing himself out of the window-seat and stalking across the floor. Then she buried her face in her hands and wept for fright at the responsibility that he imposed upon her.

Kent watched her grief with a sense of satisfaction. It tempered some his own disappointment at the first, but, as his humiliation grew, just so much did his anger increase until he ceased to give her sorrow a place in his reasoning, and with a quick resolution he left the room without further word for her.

Virgie watched him leave with mingled feelings of sorrow, anger and perplexity. She felt that she was in some way responsible for the outcome of the affair, and yet—"Had I but known" she kept repeating to herself. The sense of her own innocence aided her to excuse herself. Not entirely, but enough that she came to feel a deep anger and resentment for his accusations of deception, and withal she became so perplexed she was miserable. She sat rocking a long time after he had left, giving these feelings full freedom, and at no time deciding any one thing quite positively.

CHAPTER IX.

When the breakfast work was finished the following Sunday Virgie entered into her preparations for church with a reluctance that was entirely foreign to her customary, eager interest, and she hummed unconsciously a simple air in troubled repetition. She had said nothing to her father of Kent's proposal, and he had not guessed that aught was amiss with them, though her singing attracted his attention, as he was familiar with that characteristic of hers, and wondered much as to the cause for her disturbance. As they drove away he addressed himself to her several times in the tones of his light-heartedness, and, receiving only monosyllabic replies, finally grew serious and troubled over her pre-occupied manner. He was on the point of asking her the cause for her worry, but forebore doing so, trusting that she would enlighten him in due time, assured that he enjoyed her closest confidence.

Upon their arrival she led him at once to their pew, carefully avoiding that portion of the congregation that were conversing on the front platform, and studiously avoided Kent's glance of recognition as he grudgingly nodded to her father from back of the pulpit.

"Law me!" said Mrs. Martin, under her breath, as she quickly caught the sign of estrangement between the two young people.

"Did you see that?" asked Sister Callum, astounded, with her eyes glued on Virgie, and then both ladies watched her assiduously during the whole service.

Kent was nervous but forceful, talking over their heads and addressing the wall at the back of the room with an overdrawn earnestness that amounted to almost anger. His auditors listened in wonderment and were moved by his vehemence as they had never been before. Sister Callum and Widow Martin were roused to a high pitch of expectancy as the thunderous tones vibrated through the little room and shook them with a momentary terror. They felt the responsibility of the new conditions that were constantly becoming more evident between these young people, and they absorbed every look, action or word of each in the hope of a solution.

The parson drew his sermon to a close in a voice that died away in despair. The men looked into each other's faces for the approbation they felt at his unusual flight of oratory and the sincerity that backed it. The choir arose, still under the spell, and with an effort brought themselves to sing an anthem in a disjointed way until the leader recovered self-control. As they sang Sister Callum collected herself sufficiently to say: "Well, if that ain't the beatenest thing ever I see! What you suppose 'tis?"

"It certainly beats all creation," Mrs. Martin replied, unable to discuss the matter further for lack of

enlightenment, but speedily resolved to learn more at once.

Virgie passed out of the church hurriedly, bent on getting away from her friends to where she could nurse her own feelings and reason out her much-perturbed thoughts ; but Brandt insisted on remaining for a moment to discuss the sensational sermon with the admiring members, and Virgie was drawn back into their midst an unwilling listener.

Widow Martin made her way hastily to their group and engaged Brandt in a discussion that to Virgie seemed interminable. She curbed her impatience with the greatest effort for some moments until a mode of relief occurred to her, and, turning to Mrs. Martin, she asked amiably, "Why can't you come and take dinner with us, Aunt Sarah?"

"But the children?" protested the widow meekly.

"Oh, we have plenty of room for them in the wagon if you will only get them together. I expect they are hungry, so we had better start !" And she moved off with her father, while the delighted widow went in search of her two offspring.

"M'land, but she's in a rush !" said Mrs. Callum as she passed, a child in each hand, and a smile of eager expectancy spread over her kindly old face.

"Comin' to meetin' to-night?" asked the sister significantly.

"Caint tell ; mebbe," the widow replied, as she hurried out to take a seat beside Brandt in the front of the wagon, while the two children piled in the back seat with Virgie, grinning with joy to be in her company.

She took each of them by the hand in pleased relief, smiled on their evident happiness, and drew them just a little closer in love and sympathy.

"Ain't heer'n anythin' o' Snellins yet, hev y'?" asked the widow of Brandt by way of introducing conversation.

"No, we haven't. Funny thing about him, isn't it?"

"Oh, I reckon he'll be back!" said the widow pleasantly, in an effort at re-assurance.

"Love Aunt Virgie?" asked Virgie, drawing the two smiling faces around in front of her own and looking seriously into their laughing blue eyes.

Gyp, the girl of eight, threw her arms around and kissed her impetuously, while Bennie, the boy of four, being crowded out of reach, replied, "Ness, 'um," by way of affirmative.

"And Virgie loves you too. What a pretty pin!" she added, as she caught sight of a brooch all too old for the child. "Where did you get that?"

"Mommie give it t' me. It uster be hers," said Gyp, with no small pride.

"Didn't," said Ben.

"Why, Bennie!" said the widow, turning quickly, with a look of disapproval and alarm.

"I seen the man bring it," insisted the boy doggedly.

"Mommie always had it—she said so, so now!" said Gyp, with childish faith in her mother's statement.

"Babies, babies!" Virgie laughed. "Shame on you for quarreling this way."

"I ain't a baby," said Bennie, for the time diverted by masculine pride from the point of his former argument.

"Well, I ask forgiveness. You are not a baby then, but who would ever have expected a man to raise such trouble with two helpless young ladies like sister and I, and on Sunday, too?" Virgie said, in a conciliatory tone, as she watched his darkened face with an amused smile.

The child's eyes blinked in perplexity as he tried sturdily to fathom the position in which he found himself. He realized his false assumption of manliness, yet could not but feel that his deception had carried conviction. The rebuke, however, placed the situation beyond his grasp, and he finally yielded with a sheepish smile. Virgie laughed outright, lifted his face to hers and kissed him squarely on his ruddy mouth. Recovering himself with solemn dignity he looked Brandt full in the face as the old man turned about, and his expression was so defiant that Brandt opened his eyes in wonderment.

"My goodness, what a scare you gave me!" he said, drawing himself as far away as the breadth of seat would permit. Bennie laughed foolishly, and followed up the advantage with a mild onslaught that ended by his nearly falling out of the wagon.

"Now, you behave," said his mother, with disgust in her voice, but pride in her heart.

"What was all the row about back here a while ago?" asked Brandt, disinterestedly.

"Why, Bennie he said," began Gyp, when her mother's face scowled a warning that left the baby mouth wide agape with fear and the unended sentence still hanging to her lips. Then the widow as suddenly gained her smiling composure and drew the questioner into a discussion that ended all thought of his inquiry.

Virgie gathered the little girl quickly to her in convulsive sympathy, and, while no word was said, each wondered much at the sinister look of warning.

"What does the secrecy mean?" she asked herself as the boy's statement came back to her. "And why should a trivial gift be the cause of so much unpleasant difference of opinion in this little family?" Always unsuspecting of wrong-doing, she could supply no solution but that of family jealousy, and this only increased her perplexity. It was much too improbable that in childish differences a mother could take the exaggerated fear Mrs. Martin had shown. Yet no other cause would occur to her, and she carried her cogitations the balance of the journey, ever recurring to them in the intervals of the others' conversation.

In the house she assisted her little guests divest themselves of their outward wraps, and, pointing to the bureau drawer for the widow to get an apron, she changed her own gown for a simpler one, and the party moved out to the kitchen, where Brandt had already filled the wood stove and was on the point of lighting the chips.

"I will do that if you will get some water, father," Virgie said, taking the match from him.

"All right," he replied. "Come on, folks," and he beckoned for the children to follow him out to the well. "Now, Bennie, you say when, and Gyp and I will be the grinders," he said, and the three worked industriously till the kettle and drinking bucket had been filled, when they returned to the kitchen not half so breathless as they pretended.

"As I wuz sayin' when them harum-scarums come in," resumed the widow, covering the import of her remarks by a reference to Brandt and the children. "As I wuz sayin', it wuz the first real and mighty gospel I ever heard him preach. He's got the power a-workin' in him now fer sure ; but my land ! where'd he get it all a-sudden? That's what beats me." She paused and glanced furtively at Virgie, but, obtaining no reply, resumed : "Ef it wan't fer his tex' I'd a-thought, an' I don't 'low I'm th' only one, thet he'd news from somewheres thet wuz full of joy without end. He's jest like rheumatism fer signs—always showin' his kind o' weather long afore it comes. But there's his tex' again. 'What of that?' I ask myself. When he held out his hand like this (and here the widow thrust her hand and arm out full length toward Virgie with imitating emphasis) an' said 'Earthly hopes air on'y sorrow. God gives hopes thet air of joy fulfilled.' Thet's not happiness," she resumed after a pause, "thet's disappointment—thet's what it is—thet made him say it th' way he did," and, though she gave no evidence of observing her auditor's agitation, she throbbed with an inward satisfaction difficult to conceal.

"I say 'amen' to the sentiment and truth of his statement," said Brandt seriously, but the old man's "amen" was not of literal inference, as he only intended to corroborate the parson's assertion and not perpetuate it. "Ambition was once my only word, but the hope it inspired has gone with it," he said, and sighed regretfully.

"What a deep impression the sermon has made upon all of you!" said Virgie, smiling feebly. "Please let us forget it, or, not forget it exactly, but why not cheer up and profit by it. All hope is not gone yet. You know there is still lots and lots of happiness for everybody, so why not make the most of it?" And, though still suffocating from his words, that filled her with guilty shame and partial resentment, she led them back to smiles and laughter through the medium of the children.

The meal finished, and the women occupied with their feminine interests, Brandt slipped away to his room of books, and, throwing himself into his easy chair, gave his thoughts over to other days, influenced by the young parson's burning words.

In early boyhood he had been a firm believer in opportunity. The earnestness of this conviction keeping him ever alert to the possibilities of his surroundings and honestly desirous of success. His grandfather was an illustrious example of the self-made man, and George, being his namesake, had patterned himself as near as he could after the grandparent. He had held "opportunity" as the keynote of all success, and yet he had failed always in his own opportunities. He

knew now, as he sat alone, an exiled old man estranged from his own people, the cause of his failure, and he reviewed for the thousandth time, as he had done in late years, the elements of his failures.

There was the lack of self-assurance in his nature that was a counterpart of his mother's—a sweetly, dependent woman without a will or convictions. From the other side he had drawn his father's impatience and feverish nervousness. These had caused him to jump at results without going into their causes, and his opportunities had been missed for lack of helpful assurance, confidence and sturdy application. He tried to do and failed, then tried again and again, and always failure came to reward him. He knew now the cause of it all, and Kent's words impressed him with their strangely fitting application to his own hopes. They were near bringing him back to his youthful feeling of resentment against causes outside his own making when he went drifting off into the happy days of his wooing that lasted into a delicious nap of refreshing dreams. His tired brain took up the order of his early days in glowing sequence and bore him along in a labyrinth of joys unspeakable. The sad departure from home and friends, with all its attendant mortification, did not come into the spell as it should have done to make the dreams complete. He vaguely felt this portion of his life's story lacking, and moved his head uneasily as he slept. His brow contracted as the truant facts eluded his control, and the trouble of it all finally caused him to assume a meditative expression, and still he slept.

There were those days of his father's disgust and anger, his friends' unwelcome pity and his wife's despair. Then the terrible journey, in which he was torn between love and compassion for her sufferings and hatred for himself and the world. The days of privation, in which she bore the ills so foreign to her old home life with a strengthful fortitude, and, helping him through his almost total collapse, lead him up to renewed effort that surprised even himself.

These were the things that troubled his dreams now, for they would not arrange themselves in chronological order, and his slumbering consciousness felt their wrong connection ; but, when he finally awakened with a start, they came about quickly in cruel procession. He arose and went out into the yard repeating, " Earthly hopes are only sorrow, but God gives hopes that are joy fulfilled," the words consoling him mightily.

CHAPTER X.

"As th' feller says," began Doles one evening to his assembled guests, as he assumed a lofty expression of wisdom, and contemplated each member of the group slowly to their individual embarrassment, "as th' feller says, 'th' more you give some folks th' less they have time to say 'thanks.'" An' that's jest it. Now, I ain't sayin' anythin' again' Ashville in general, or anybody in partic'lar, but it does seem to me like we all ought t' be thankful fer what we've got one way or 'nother. Here's our mysteries," he said with an oratorical flourish, and each of his auditors, beginning to perceive the levity of his remarks, smiled faintly in restrained anticipation, "an' our marriages," he added, "an' the marriages thet's in the egg yet, so to speak, as the feller says : 'What of them?' Ef Ashville ain't got more comin' happiness to the inch right now than ever before she hadn't ought to celebrate Thanksgiving'," and here the smiles assumed broader proportions.

"Well, I dunno," said Orrig, who had dropped in to deliver some borax to Mrs. Doles, and remained to help the host in any bit of jollity that might be afoot,

"I never put in much time a-readin' much, an' it's hard fer me t' dip down into the waves when talk is runnin' high-flown, so I jest has t' drift, as the feller says, an' never get into th' bottom of things. But I'm willin'—mighty willin'—t' follow th' lead anywheres it takes me ef I on'y has somethin' t' hold to, as the feller says. Lemme understand you now, 'Si,'" he said, assuming an expression of inquiring innocence. "I 'low, of course, you air referrin' to a couple thet's goin' t' be jined, mebbe?" Here one of the listeners moved uneasily and tried to smile with lacking concern.

"Thet's what I read in th' paper here lately," 'Si' replied, nonchalantly.

"Wonder how I come t' miss thet?" said Orrig, in assumed disgust. "But then, thet's jest me. I never do see anythin' afore it hits me. Lemme see," he resumed after a pause, and with apparent change of subject, "I thought I hear'n you say over t' th' store one night, Landy, thet you wuz a-goin' away som'mers? I 'low it wuz you as said it, or am I out o' my memory?"

"Well, what ef I did?" Landy replied sullenly, tilting forward on the front legs of his chair and cutting a sliver from the floor between his feet with his knife, after which he recovered his upright position, but without raising his eyes.

"Oh, nothin'—nothin' 'tall!" said Orrig. "But—"

"You an' Doles is all-fired smart, ain't ye?" said Landy, and the confession was received with wild laughter, while John Carey and one or two others made efforts to congratulate the prospective benedict.

After the merriment had subsided somewhat he re-

sumed with assumed confidence and excited volubility : " I 'low I'll be as thankful as most when it comes time fer Thanksgiving' ; but, befer y' got t' talkin' on me, I wuz a-thinkin' of him as has th' thanksgivin's t' hold up. Th' one thet's in thet business. I don't need t' give no 'nitials, an' I am here t' say thet I wouldn't be in his shoes."

A serious calm fell upon them all at this allusion, each taking into his mind's eye a retrospect of his own actions when in contact with the one referred to by Landy, and out of them all there was no one who remembered a deed, a word, or look that was to his own credit.

" I see you all know what I'm talkin' about," he began, with more positive earnestness, " an' bein' fixed as I am, I know jest how he feels. I dunno how t' feel much neither, but ef it wuz me I'd keep my word an' clear out—thet's what I'd do, an' do it quick, too."

" Then, why don't he?" asked someone, " er else shet his mouth an' not cry like a whipped baby."

" As I say," began Landy, arising from his chair and retorting angrily, " as I say, I don't know much about feelin's, but what I *do* know is thet his hurts is wuss than airy whipped baby's ever wuz, an' what's more, it's late fer you to be gettin' th' first lesson o' how babies feel, but ef y' don't take that back I'm a-goin' t' learn y' afore it gits too late."

" Mebbe I'm wrong about that p'int," said the speaker quickly ; but what I *do* hold to is, that he's gettin' jest what's a-comin' to him, an' I 'low ever'body here agrees on that."

Landy cast a hasty glance about him, and, seeing no look of disapproval to these words, angered almost to the verge of speechlessness.

"You're not men!" he said at last, "not a one of you, an' you're the fish-eat-fish kind. Kickin' when y' got somebody down. I'm the parson's friend, d' y' hear? Y' can't none of y' help a man when he needs help, but where I come from men are men, an' bein' as I'm here t' stay now, I'm goin' t' be his friend!" And then he rushed out, leaving the door open after him.

"That's what Snellins said: 'I'm his friend,'" quoted Orrig sententiously, but the last vestige of humor was gone from them, and the sally was lost.

Landy walked quickly the length of the street, and, turning in at the gate, knocked on the rectory door. He waited impatiently for what seemed to him an interminable interval, and knocked again. Receiving no response he opened the door quietly and stepped within.

"Oh! it is you, Landy. Close the door quickly and come in. I was afraid to respond, as I could not let anyone else in now." Kent struck a match and lighted his study lamp. Landy looked about him in quick surprise, entirely forgetting his own anger in the confusion of his surroundings. The chairs, tables and other furniture were upturned in a jumbled mass in one corner of the room, and the lamp hanging from the ceiling was about the only article in its normal position.

"What's happened, parson?" he asked in alarm.

"He's gone," Kent replied in despair, "and I am afraid, Landy, that I hurt him in the scuffle."

"It's you that's hurt. Look at y'! He mighty nigh fixed y'—you're all tore up an' bleedin'! But where's Martin?" he asked, in added alarm.

"She's in the other room overcome with fright."

Landy rushed away, not waiting to hear more, and Kent examined his dilapidated clothes as he tried to bring himself to an understanding of the situation.

Widow Martin was in an adjoining room, and as Landy entered she watched the door open in dumb terror until she realized the change in affairs. With a last effort she arose and fell into his strong arms in pleased relief.

"Oh, Landy, he's gone!" she said faintly; but, regaining assurance, she became excited again: "He's killed th' parson, Landy—th' parson, he's killed him! What will we do?"

"Kent's all right," he said, consolingly. "He's cut up some, but I don't 'low he's hurt much. Tell me how it happened?" he said, re-seating her gently and placing his big hand on her shoulder.

"It wuz my fault," she began, when the tears came and choked her further utterance.

"All right, now; all right. Don't cry. I'll bring him back," he said, patting her tenderly on the arm and starting to leave.

She caught his hand quickly, begging him not to go, but he smiled faintly and withdrew it as he said:

"We can't let him get far, y' know; so th' quicker I go the sooner I'll bring him back."

"But he'll kill y'. I know he will!" she protested.

"No, I don't 'low he will," he replied, as, with a last, re-assuring pat upon her back, he left her to her tears.

Landy had not gone long when Kent entered the room, and, looking hastily about, said :

"Where is he? Where is Landy? We must go bring 'Snell' back, and we must go at once. Tell me where Landy is, Martin?"

"He's gone!" she said, in self-reproach, between sobs. "An' it's my fault!"

"How did Snellins get out?" Kent asked sternly.

"I opened th' door jest t' look at him," she replied, "an' he laughed at me an' pushed me back as you come in, an' you know th' rest," she ended abruptly.

"Well, never mind—never mind," he said soothingly.

"Air you a-goin', too?" she asked startedly, as he prepared to leave.

"Yes, Martin. I feel that I should help Landy find him. Two will be better than one, and we must bring him back before anyone meets or has any trouble with him."

"My land!" she exclaimed, in unconquerable fear. She locked and bolted the door after him, and, regaining her own room, locked its door also. Placing a chair with its back to brace against the knob, Martin for the first time thought of her babies. She went to the side of their bed, and, scanning the boy's face, breathed a sigh of relief on finding him in a sound sleep. Drawing her chair up close that she might feel the sense of their companionship, she was startled by

a whispered "Mommie." She turned quickly and found Gyp with her eyes wide open and filled with terror. The mother expressed a gentle "Sh!" and, placing her hand under the coverlet, took that of her baby's, while she crooned an unintelligible lullaby that soothed her into slumber.

Kent reasoned that, as Landy had but a few moments the start, he might catch him if he accelerated his own speed. He, therefore, concluded it would be best to take a cross-country route, as that would serve the double purpose of aiding him to avoid any of the townspeople who might delay him with curiosity over his bandaged head, and also give him the advantage of many yards in overtaking Landy, whom he judged would make straight for Brandt's by the road.

He avoided the main street in town, and waited, before crossing it, until he had reached the outskirts, and even then he cast a hasty glance in both directions before he hastened over. The night was grown cold, and the parson turned the collar of his great coat about his ears, which gave him confidence in the secrecy of his identity if anyone should, by chance, see him from a distance. It had ceased snowing after an hour's fitful attempt in the second fall of the season, and as he crossed the road he looked back at his own tracks, and smiled as he thought of the importance a less honest purpose would have given them. They were distinct, and without distracting fellow-paths in the hazy light, and he worried over them, despite his self-ridicule, as troubled minds will worry over trifles. Climbing a fence he made across a lower field to Weller's private

footbridge that joined the farm lands, and from here he struck off for the section road, a half mile south. Reaching the grove he stopped and listened, and back by the bridge he heard a sound that caused his heart to thump audibly in his silent surroundings. Only a second and then Weller's dog, that had happened upon his path, set up a wailing, hollow and dismal. Another pause and the hound began again. Up on the crest of the hill a door opened, and Weller stood, lamp in hand, shading his eyes, trying to see into the night. He said something about a "darned rabbit hound" to his wife inside, whistled sharply and returned, closing the door. But the dog was obdurate and began again with renewed energy.

Kent dared not move. The door opened, bringing Mrs. Weller to view, her last word of a finished sentence becoming distinctly clear. "Wrong," she said, and he readily filled in the preceding words by the tone of this last one.

"She insists that there is something wrong," Kent said, as the farmer stepped out, adjusting his overcoat.

Weller unwillingly stumbled down the slippery hill to where the dog stood, head uplifted, emitting his doleful howls.

"What y' got—a gopher? Darn a rabbit houn' anyway!" And he shoved the dog away with his knee. "Well, I'm jiggered!" he said, as he held his lantern close to the ground and moved it along from one print to another. Suddenly he jumped to a conclusion, and, hastening back to the house, he told his wife of the

actual discovery, as he hurriedly bundled himself about with heavy clothing preparatory to departure.

"I didn't put no stock in any o' them mystery tales," he said between tugs at his clothes. "Even ef they wuz seven er eight eye-witnesses, an' bein' as it's two weeks now sence the last, and I wuz about disbelievin' everybody. But Great Jupiter ! ef it ain't turned up right in my own dooryard, with this mystery man a-prowlin' about."

"Be y' a-goin' arter him?" asked Mrs. Weller with quiet concern.

"Not by my loneself," he replied. "I'm a-goin' up t' town fusst." At this he took up his lantern again and started away by the road, constantly alert for surprises, with the hound close at his heels.

Kent remained standing in the brush until all was quiet again at the house, and when Mrs. Weller had closed the shutters, unrolled the shades and turned down the lights, he turned and resumed his journey. Having lost so much time, he concluded that he would now be unable to overtake Landy, so he stepped out into the road and walked slowly, as he swung his arms across his chest to revive his circulation, forming plans of procedure for his approach to Brandt's.

Weller hastened on, constantly increasing his speed as the importance of his find grew upon him. He hurried up the street, and, bursting in upon the remainder of the group in the hotel office, exclaimed :

"Git yer lanterns an' coats on, ever'body. I've got him cornered !"

"Got who cornered?" laughed "Si."

"The mystery man," said Weller, anticipating the effect of these magic words.

The room was all excitement on the instant, each man making for his outer garments and lantern in confused haste.

Weller, scarcely awaiting their preparations, started away, spreading his news into the stores as he held their doors open. Thus the crowd was soon augmented to a point of containing nearly all the prominent citizens, and they followed Weller's lead as he took the short cut returning homeward.

"Is it a man, Mr. Orrig?" asked the druggist's apprentice, as he remained close to his employer.

"Men don't live on roots and stones," Orrig replied mysteriously, to which the lad gave a shudder for response and an unspoken wish to be at home, though he dared not leave and return alone.

"Now here's where I discovered him at," said Weller at last, with an air of pride. "An' he made off fer my grove there," he ended, as he shrewdly inspected the direction of the footprints and pointed their way.

"Well," asked someone, "what we goin' t' do?"

"Lemme see ef th' tracks is a man's tracks?" At which the apprentice raised his cap by means of his hair. "They be no hurry t' go into th' woods after him long as Weller's got him cornered there," said Doles sagely.

"Mebbe 'Si' 'd like t' go back an' wait till mornin'," said Weller, sarcastically.

"I don't 'low I would," "Si" retorted amiably, "'cause long's it's a man's feet thet's b'n here, I 'low

they's 'nough of us t' take keer o' him." And he resumed the march, with the others following eagerly.

Once they had reached the open road their eagerness grew apace, and knew no restraint such as the woods had placed upon them. They hurried on breathlessly—happily—until they found the tracks turned to a sharp angle, and a broken place in the snow on the top rail of the fence showed distinctly the crude method in which that obstruction had been overcome, and then the imprints in the snow began again on the opposite side, running away into the densest portion of Brandt's thicket. Here their spirits fell, and they stopped to discuss the uselessness of further proceeding. Weller's hound climbed the fence, proceeded a few yards, then looked back at the group expectantly. Becoming impatient over the delay, he suddenly raised his head again and howled.

"Drat that dog, anyway," said Weller angrily, after being nearly raised off his feet by the sudden noise.

Kent, who was not far away, and reconnoitering about Brandt's house, stopped quickly at the familiar sound. He listened intently. Again the dog howled, and, concluding that something was amiss, he was driven to a quick expedient. To hurry away meant to have that noisy dog follow him home, and perhaps Weller with him. To climb a tree would be to make himself ridiculous ; but, in any event, to go away without Snellins was out of the question. He felt almost helpless for a means of maintaining his secrecy, and was about to step forward and disclose himself to Brandt by seeking admission to the house when an

inspiration came that struck him as effective, if decidedly humorous, and he acted upon it at once, the feeling of novelty and risk making it appeal with irresistible force. He held in his hand where he stood one end of a broken, unused swing rope, and, realizing its usefulness, he took a firmer hold and pulled himself from the ground to test its strength. Being sure of this he next threw it as far as he could over the limb of a tree, and going around in a large circle, making his tracks clearly distinct, he climbed up to the bough, made ready and swung off. It was a long reach that he was attempting, and for the instant he doubted the success of his venture, but the momentum of his weight on the downward course served to carry him on and up until he had reached its apex, just beyond the chicken-house fence. There he let go of the rope and dropped off fairly within the inclosure. As he slipped quietly into the roost a surprised cackle greeted him, but, remaining quiet, the chickens resumed their slumber, and he securely awaited results.

CHAPTER XI.

The debate between Weller and his companions, inspired at the time by the inscrutability of the woods, was of even shorter duration than the one held upon his farm at the beginning of the search, and they climbed the fence with weakened determination as Doles again took the lead.

On and on the tracks led them. A straight line—that bespoke familiarity with the environment in the mind of their maker, and each one of the party felt within himself a growing conviction that the missing Snellins would be found at the end of their search. They grew eager as they neared the house, excitement lending volume to their voices ; but, as they arrived within the yard and came upon the confusing tracks, they halted and drew together again for another conference.

“He’s not gone inside, sure,” said Orrig, deductively. “Fer they ain’t any tracks up t’ th’ door !”

“Then Brandt don’t know nothin’ of it,” John Carey said.

“Who thought he did?” Orrig asked contemptuously, though this idea suggested another to him immediately.

"I 'low I'll call Brandt," he added, positiveness lacking in his voice, while he looked about him hoping for some expressed support.

"Yes-s, call him," they all said quickly.

"I would, only I don't want t' scare her," he replied considerably.

"Then make some other kind o' noise that'll wake him," suggested Carey readily.

"What a fool you be !" said Doles. "Don't you suppose thet thet 'd scare her wuss'n th' other?"

"Well, I don't know," Carey responded meekly. "What can we do?"

"Carey, you're wuss an' wuss," Doles began, when the door opened and Brandt stood in the light, with his daughter close behind him, both shading their eyes and peering into the darkness.

"What's wrong here?" he asked sternly.

"Say, Brandt, here's Doles an' me an' some others," said Orrig confusedly.

"Is that so?" he replied, relievedly. "But, why don't you come in and tell me what is up to bring you all away out here to-night?"

"No, we want you to come out," said Doles.

The old man's brow knitted in perplexity as he returned inside for his coat and hat, and Virgie still stood in the doorway endeavoring to distinguish the visitors through the darkness. When her father reappeared she too went after her outer wraps, shortly joining the group.

"Snellins, you say?" she heard her father repeat as she came upon the scene of action.

"Mebbe, an' mebbe not," said Orrig; "but it's mighty mysterious all the same that the tracks should lead into your yard an' then end up here."

"But where do they end?" Brandt asked, much concerned.

"Over there," said several in chorus.

"We kep' offen 'em on purpose," Orrig explained.

"Loan me a lantern?" Brandt said, as he led the way, and, scrutinizing the prints carefully, he followed their circles until they ended at the tree trunk.

"This looks like the end of it," he said seriously, in constant fear, lest his discovery might prove an unpleasant one.

"Now we'll see what we'll see," Doles remarked, with a confident wag of his head, to which they all chuckled expectantly.

The tree was barren of leaves, and the combined light from the lanterns permeated its every crotch, yet no man nor beast was brought to view. Brandt looked reluctantly at first, then more carefully. Seeing nothing he looked across into the faces of those opposite him, and, observing only expressions of bewilderment, began to appreciate the ludicrousness of the situation, and smiled. Doles sidled around to where Carey stood, first looking into his face for a sign of discovery, then turning his own gaze upward for another long search. The dog stood on his hind legs, and, with one foot against the trunk, barked loudly into the tree.

"Blooch says he went up all right, drat him!" said Weller, coming to where he could get his hound's

view, though he soon relinquished it, being none the wiser.

"Barkin' up the wrong tree," said Doles, with painful sobriety, unable to miss the opportunity for a joke. His words were followed by a hearty laugh. Weller looked foolish and kicked the dog.

"Must a-cut his suspenders an' went straight up," said Carey, beginning to laugh again.

"If this ain't the beatenest, then I don't know!" Orrig observed to Virgie, to which she inclined her head slightly and asked of her father:

"How do you explain it?"

Brandt made a trip around the farthest limits of the tree in the hope of finding somewhere a path that would evidence a man's departure, but, seeing none, he replied perplexedly:

"Too much for me—too much for me. I cannot understand it!"

They were all completely baffled, and, as the ludicrous outcome of their search dawned upon them, they grew more anxious to solve the mystery, thinking meantime of their own discomfiture when the impossible tale became noised about and its truth questioned. With renewed care they again held their lanterns high above their heads and scanned every nook and corner of the tree only to reach the same results.

Kent could not see them from where he crouched, but he could easily follow their motions and picture their amazement from the fragments of conversation that reached him. From fear he came to silent enjoy-

ment of the situation, laughing inwardly with the greatest satisfaction at having outwitted them.

Virgie had said little through it all, rather giving her thoughts to the unraveling of the burl, and at the end, as the group drew over to the opposite side of the tree for a last discussion, she stood by the hen-house in deepest reasoning.

Kent heard the voices diminishing, and, supposing the men had gone, changed from his strained position, moving closer to the door to catch their last words. Again there was a disturbed cackling as his hands rustled the heavy paper that lined the wall. Then all was still as he settled for another and more trying wait.

The smothered cackling jarred Virgie into a quick and surprised understanding. As Kent's hands slipped over the paper she almost cried out at her discovery. Running to the men hurriedly she found them still excitedly discussing their mystification. Their inattention gave her an instant for recovery, and in that instant her inclination changed inexplicably, and she shut her mouth tightly until she could regain her self-control.

Brandt took the men indoors, and while the talk ran high Virgie nervously served them food and drink. They looked to their host for the best explanation, but he was more mystified than they, since no supernatural powers entered into his calculations. Virgie watched her father's face in doubt and indecision. She wished to end his perplexity and unburden herself of the responsibility she now bore. But, reasoning that Snel-lins might fare badly if discovered in his doubtful posi-

tion, she was distressed with her attitude between the two.

Kent dared not move for fear of being overtaken. Therefore he waited, cold and impatient, for his pursuers to take their leave. All the humor was now gone out of the situation for him, as his feet stung painfully and he found himself shaking with increasing chills. The hour seemed interminable, but at last it passed and the townsmen bid Brandt good-night with their final jokes. Kent heard the doors close. The voices died off into nothingness, and he drew himself up, disregarding without fear the murmurs about his head.

Brandt kissed his daughter and, with a last word, shut himself within his study. Virgie waited for an instant to assure herself that he had become absorbed, and with a hurried swing she re-donned her cloak, slipped out of the house and took up a position beside the gate. One minute passed, then another, and her heart beat with frightful energy. With the dying away of the men's voices came the sounds that she had expected, and they startled her even more than they had done before. Slowly the door opened within the inclosure, and the cackling burst out distinctly until the door swung back and muffled it again. Her heart stopped completely as she stood in breathless expectancy. Another pause and the high fence gate moved slowly outward, an inch at a time, and she felt the closeness of the man. She watched him step out onto the walk and move cautiously away. She had been unobserved, and Kent, in consequence, slipped away

with an elation born of successfully eluding his followers. Virgie cared not then that he had failed to see her. She at first underwent a pang of disappointment in not seeing Snellins, but this quickly changed to amazement on half recognizing the intruder. Close to the fence he moved in guilty cautiousness, but once he had reached the gate he struck out with a hasty stride that was free of restraint. She observed his every motion with greatest care, at first inclined to doubt her own faculties. Waiting excitedly for him to come into better view, she stood hoping against hope for a proof of mistaken identity, but when he came to a partially natural attitude his familiar walk grew positive, and she caught her breath quickly in keenest shame.

Try as she would she could find no other plausible reason as the cause of his visit than its having been one to herself, and vaguely she associated his proposal with this his first return since that event. Revolving the possible excuses in her troubled mind as she slowly returned indoors, she felt herself participating in the disgrace, and a shadow was over her heart that she should be a cause for all these supposed doings of his that were so mysterious and contemptible. Naturally enough Kent's visit served as a solution of all the strange happenings that had gone before and about which the townspeople were intensely and interestedly mystified. Soon she left off the stumbling over reasons for his appearance to-night and the associating of motives for the other mysteries that had come to puzzle and depress.

"Oh! what can it all mean?" she asked herself. "What have I done to make him act so? He is disgracing himself and the time has gone by for me to help him. He has made that impossible. Poor Royal!" she ended, over and over again, as each exploration into these things brought her back to the humiliating end he must soon reach, and her whole tender regard for his well-being lived anew with unselfish overwhelmingness.

She drifted into her small chamber and lighted the lamp by the guidance of habit, and without the aid of forethought to direct her movements, as she held to her tender reasoning.

Upon the table, where she had purposely left it that her father might see, lay a letter that had come that day from Washington and—Harvey. Picking it up slowly she held it aimlessly in her hands and looked at the postmark. The weight of its secrecy came back to her from the unhappiness its arrival had occasioned.

Gradually a chill of fear crept over her. She fought with even greater persistency against it than she had done against the recognizing of Kent a few moments before; and yet it clung—clung with all the tenacity of evil, and she was brought to confess to herself that another secret had come to make her its guardian, and this last was the knowledge that the secrecy of Kent's exploit lay within her power, either to divulge or retain, to save him from disgrace. She had kept from her father Harvey's promise to write in the thought that he might never do so. Harvey had taught her of things to her experience unknown, filling her world

as no one had ever done, and in consequence her thoughts had followed him away into this unknown, returning to him with a frequency that made her blush in the consciousness of it. Hoping and dreading alternately that he might keep his promise through these weeks since he had left, she finally became convinced that he had forgotten. Then the letter came, and in the happiness of its reception she forgot for the moment the possible anger of her father in his never having been consulted. Meeting him as she returned homeward from the postoffice she withheld it from him still. All the day it had been a torment, and she took it up with a cold fear—an added responsibility.

First of all now she was perplexed to know whether or not she could protect Kent from publicity. The weight of her own wrong-doing also surged in upon her and tried her sorely. That she could not make of her father a confidant without a full explanation in the parson's case ; and, again, knowing that she had gone outside his confidence by permitting Harvey to write, were either of them enough to depress her. She foresaw that he must inevitably learn the one, and perhaps both, and the sadness he would then experience caused her to bury her face in her hands in anticipated humiliation.

She sat thinking, thinking, thinking. The clock out in the kitchen gonged ten vibrating strokes. Brandt came out of the room shuffling his slippered feet along the floor. Setting the lamp he held up beside the clock, he opened its Gothic door, inserted the key in one hole after the other, turning it over patiently while

he watched the changing shadows on the wall. When the springs were taut he laid the key carefully within the case, closed the door and, taking up the lamp again, returned to his room and rest.

Virgie listened intently to his movements with a feeling of security, following him by the familiar sound until he had reclosed his own door, and then she returned to her thoughts with a quick resolve.

"Father—father!" she said, in mute supplication. "Oh! why have I not told him before? Dear old father!" And her face slowly relaxed into a smile of happy relief, as she felt the closeness of the morning, on which she would unburden her mind to him. She held the envelope at arm's length and blinked shyly, trying to see it more clearly through her tears. Then, drawing the letter from its cover with re-assured strength in the right to have it, she read a second time, but with deeper pleasure, his words of friendliness.

As Kent neared home his high spirits fell on the change from contemplating his own escape to the thought of the failure in his errand. With the return to thoughts of Snellins he was sick and careworn, and his feet lagged from over-exertion. He walked dejectedly up the path to his study door, and there he turned and looked back along the street, whence there came no signs of life to disturb his musings. Quickly inserting a key he let himself in and closed the door softly. A stream of light penetrated the hangings from the interior room. Seeing it he stopped suddenly with a quick fear lest the voices that came from the next room in unintelligible whispers boded ill.

His study chairs and table were still in confusion from the disturbance of the early evening, but in anxious dread he forgot their chaotic state, moving across toward the door unobservedly. There was no light in his room to guide his movements, and two steps brought him down with a great clatter in the midst of a group of overturned furniture.

Martin, who had been listening with intense awe to Landy in the adjoining room, screamed nervously under her breath, but Landy took up the lamp, his face set in angry determination, and stepped into the doorway between the portieres.

"It's you, parson?" he said, in astonishment. "I thought it was 'Snell,' though I didn't see how it could be, seein' as how I jest got through lockin' him in again."

"No! you have not brought him back again?" Kent exclaimed delightedly, for the time forgetting to nurse his wounded knee as he smiled doubtfully and scrutinized the speaker's face.

"Yes, I hev," responded Landy, with ill-concealed pride. "But, then, shucks, it wuz easy 'nough. All I had t' do wuz jest t' foller his tracks, an' I had him."

Martin had remained quietly in the outer room riveted to her chair with fright, but, hearing only familiar voices and no signs of a disturbance, she came to the door and cautiously protruded her head within. Landy re-assured her readily, and no sooner had she entered than she began in excited admiration :

"Wan't it grand, parson, an' him doin' it all by his ownself, or did you help him?" she asked, her face falling with sudden doubt.

"Tell me about it?" said Kent eagerly. "Is he in the house? How did you do it? Where did you find him? You cannot imagine how relieved I am."

To the first question Landy nodded assent, but the ensuing volley left him embarrassed, and Martin, seeing her opportunity, began hastily :

"Landy tracked him in the snow. Wasn't that smart, though?" she asked, smiling proudly at her future partner.

"Well, partly yes and partly no. In his case it was clever enough, but in some others it is not always so," Kent replied, smiling as he cast a backward glance over his own experience of the evening. "But, never mind, Martin, let Landy tell me himself."

Martin was about to begin again, but she stopped hesitatingly and turned to Landy, urging him to speak by her expressions of sympathetic expectancy.

"Well, they ain't much t' tell, leastwise about my part o' it, 'cause I jest follered him t' where he went, an' when I asked him t' come back he come," said Landy modestly. With renewed interest, aided by Martin's nervous anticipation, he continued : "I fol-lered him by th' snow over 'cross Hege's, an' down th' river-bend a ways. Then he'd struck off straight fer Nigger Hill, an' when I seen thet I picked up some, not knowin' what t' make o' th' way he wuz goin' an' worryin' t' myself, when all at once I run plumb onto him a-pullin' away at some big rocks. He stopped when he seen me an' frowned, an' then he went t' work again as if I wan't anythin' but a tree er somethin', an' I didn't move a step nearer. Bime-by he stops again

an' looks fretful at the hole he's made, an' I goes t' come closer t' him, when he sets t' diggin' again with all-fired strength, workin' faster an' faster. After he gets th' big stones cleared off he throws out dozens o' little fellers that looked round like they'd been tuk from th' creek, an' all one size, an' then I sets in an' he'ps him till I wuz nigh wore out."

"Well, what then?" Kent asked, too impatient to wait over the pause silently, as Landy looked at Martin, who in turn was beaming upon the parson.

Casting one glance toward Landy, who smiled assent, she, with a triumphant flourish, drew from the depths of her capacious skirt pocket a package that was wrapped about with a towel. Undoing this she disclosed a leather receptacle about the size and shape of a banker's note wallet. It was covered with mould and dirt; the wire that bound it was not at first discernible, and as Kent took it in his hand he turned it over critically, looking for an opening, while his companions watched his face exultantly.

"This is strange!" he said at last. "Most clumsily made. Probably constructed it himself. Let me have your knife?" he said to Landy, with sudden resolve, and after removing the wire he slipped the point of the blade in at one end and slit the package all the way across its edge.

His companions drew closer with eager curiosity, and, as a portion of the contents fell out upon the table, they gave vent to exclamations of surprise.

Kent reached for the three gold coins, and, holding them in the palm of his hand, leaned forward to the

light to better judge of their genuineness. They were spotted with a dull coating of green where they had laid in contact with their receptacle, but for all that their yellow glint proclaimed their virginity. He turned his attention to the wallet again, and, working it open, carefully drew forth the package of bills that it contained. The rubber band that had once held them intact was now in separate, shrunken bits glued to the surface, and on the bottom, as he turned it over, Kent's eye was attracted by a memorandum on a yellow slip, both paper and ink bearing evidence of their long burying. Scrutinizing this closely he could only decipher the one portion of writing that had been beneath the fold of the paper, and from this—a set of figures—he reached the conclusion that the total was one that should correspond with the deposit. Laying the bills over his knee he counted them carefully. Adding the three gold pieces his computation was in exact accord with that of the memorandum.

"One hundred and thirty-five dollars," he said aloud, and, turning to the eager watchers, he asked, "What do you think we had best do with it until he needs it again?"

"Law! I don't know," said Martin confusedly. "You keep it for him. He don't need it now anyway."

"I hardly know myself what would be best to do with it," Kent said. "But, never mind, it is all right for the present. Snellins is too, you say. That's good. I am sure we have much to be thankful for. Perhaps you two have entirely forgotten about to-morrow

though. You have been so unselfishly full of poor 'Snell's' troubles. Thanksgiving Day is almost upon us, and I have made no preparation for it, so I am going to ask that you give me a chance now."

Landy was confused by this kindly reminder of their wedding day. Martin looked from him to Kent apologetically, assisting him to an ungraceful exit, after which she "tidied up a bit," humming joyously until she sang herself out of the room to her own domain and happy anticipations.

Kent struggled along with his rebellious thoughts, but all attempts to place them on the morrow were ineffectual. He restrained his impulses stubbornly for a time, but eventually yielded. He took up the wallet and gradually came under the full spell of its mysterious influence. Long into the night he struggled with the problem of Snellins' doings, fitting circumstance into circumstance with infinite care, hoping thus to reach the end over these assembled parts, but there were too many links missing for him to reach a satisfactory solution.

CHAPTER XII.

Quietly and slowly the snow fell that night before Thanksgiving, laying out its virgin cloth with unostentatious goodness, and in the early morn the beautiful spread rolled away in broken lines over street to housetop, and housetop to trees, until far up in the hills it reached to Heaven in an almost indiscernible border line of gray against the hazy sky. Away off to the west lay Nigger Hill, jagged and uncomely, as its sparse trees stood out in stubborn relief against the purer mantle. Down at its base generous fertility had reared a border of giant growths, and from plane to plane of shelving rock leading toward the summit an occasional giant tree had reached maturity; but these were few and only served to spoil the more picturesque outline—beautiful under its rounding coverlet. High up and at the very apex of the hill a dwarfed and gnarled lookout grew, marking the highest point against the sky. Stunted for lack of nourishment, deformed and bent by many storms, it was still the peer of them all. Diminutive it stood in impudent glory, swaying in saucy arrogance with seeming consciousness of its undeserved but fortunate superior position.

George Brandt had observed it many, many times, and as many times had he reflected over the grandeur of its position. It had taught him that this example of eminence was but a parallel of human position, and, if that man who stands at the top must be dwarfed and beaten and exposed to every gale as this tree was, mayhap the fellow-men further down were in as good position, all things considered, as they should wish to be. Given the opportunity some men could stand against it all, and Brandt assured himself that he would have been among these—but reflection brought discernment, and in the review of his serene life he concluded each time that his lot had fallen in the best place after all, and he was content.

Youthful Ashville was the first astir. Many sleds of strange workmanship were drawn out, their polished runners examined and a speedy test given by merry children filled with the double joy of a holiday combined with fine sleighing.

Orrig's apprentice awoke a full ten minutes late, and, dressing hurriedly, came upstairs. He unlocked the front door with surprised joy as he saw the street from beneath the curtains. Stepping out on to the walk he was greeted by a merry whiz of boys as they sped down the road. "Hi! hi!" was all he could distinguish, but it held such bundles full of enjoyment that he responded "Hi! hi!" grabbing up a handful of snow and shooting it at the next squad that passed.

"What y' leavin' th' door open fer? Want-a freeze th' house out?" Orrig asked, stepping up from behind.

"Nozzer," the boy replied with a start.

"An' yer kivvers ! Not a kivver teched yet, be they? What's th' matter—air y' awake er not?" he said, with great severity, to which the apprentice responded by sidling over toward a counter, where he took hold of his work dejectedly.

"What's th' matter with y'?" Orrig asked again, with strange persistency. "Air yer feelin's hurt? I never see sech a lad !" Stepping out of the door he received a rousing welcome, accompanied by a volley that was startling, and he turned and looked within as a knowing smile spread over his face. "Let them kivvers be !" he thundered sternly. "Drop 'em right where y' air,"— and, as the boy looked at him in speechless wonder and fear, he added, "an' go get yer sled. I 'low I can work th' kivvers one morning a year—special' a day like this !"

Scarcely was the town awake ere the sexton had the church bell joyously ringing, proclaiming the day of good old Puritan custom. The air was full of fresh vivacity. Happiness was come in the mere joy of living, and the world seemed to impart great exhilaration.

Kent came to his breakfast with a most happy countenance, and Martin met him with a more evident joy, illy concealed by her over-indulgent attentions. His first observance was of the happy day in which she would again unite fortunes with her ideal man, and she responded with a flurried gesture with her apron as she bade him "Go on !"

Landy arrived sooner than was originally intended, after casting himself about his home restlessly for more than two hours, and furtively observing his raiment

each moment of that time with insecure consciousness. Entering at the study door with unusual care, as he hoped bashfully to avoid Martin as long as possible, he happened at once upon Kent, who was laboriously attempting to construct a sermon for the morning service.

"Hello ! You here?" asked the parson rising.

"I got tired a-waitin'," Landy replied, in dogged embarrassment.

"Well, I don't blame you," Kent laughed. "I suppose that I would be the same way myself, only—" And here he caught Landy by the shoulder, and, clasping his hand warmly, continued : "You are especially to be congratulated, Landy ; for Martin is a jewel. I speak from experience. We have not known each other long, she and I, but she is the kind that a day does as well as a year in which to learn her worth, and I warn you that you will have to be a model to make yourself worthy of her." "No, no !" he added, as his companion choked a bit and essayed to speak. "I know what you want to say, and I will not listen to promises ; so go to her and tell her. Besides I am still without a sermon and only an hour for work." At this he laughed again, and Landy smiled with deep-moved seriousness.

Returning to the table Kent picked up the much-corrected few lines of manuscript, glanced over them wearily and, raising his eyes, stood, leaning one hand on the table, looking out of the window. A disconnected train of thought swirled in his brain. The beauties of life and light and freshness were before him,

and from them grand deductions of precious truths, each a delicious theme for enlargement and exposition, came to him, but he could not hold to a single one. He resumed his seat under the spell of these ideally lofty thoughts. Taking up his pen he slowly drew a line through that which was already written. He rested his elbow on the table, placed his hand against his forehead, slowly closing his eyes. With baffling persistence the thoughts would begin at the middle, or near the end, or anywhere save at the beginning, and, with happiness and contentment everywhere about him, he finally gave himself over to the merry jingle of Thanksgiving in its seductive accompaniment.

"Indeed it is Thanksgiving!" he mused. "Thanksgiving for Martin and Landy, with the bells a double herald of their happiness. Also for me, as I am nearing the lives of my people, there must be one tone of Thanksgiving, for I am happily giving my life over to this end. Results count. Results—that's it, and my efforts are beginning to show results," he was saying contentedly, when —

"Ten minutes to service," announced Martin, with customary punctuality, beaming from between the curtains.

"Service! Not service?" he replied, as he arose.

"No, not service 'zactly," she grinned in confusion, "but fer me an' Landy it is."

"All right," he said, taking up hasty preparations. "You folks get ready and I'll rush through by the time you do."

"We're ready now," she replied.

"In just a minute, then, and I will go with you," he smiled, redoubling his speed to keep down their respectful impatience.

Martin again gave her attention to her wedding gown, while Gyp admired quietly from across the room—Bennie observing the creation not at all.

Soon the little train was in motion, and they moved off happily, Kent and the babies in the lead and Martin following proudly, holding to Landy's unwilling arm. The bell pealed merrily as they turned the corner. Coming to the church platform an ovation burst forth that caused the already erect bridegroom to expand himself most unusually, Kent laughed heartily as he greeted the throng and stepped within, taking his stand on the platform to await their coming.

Slowly, laboriously and with heavy dignity Landy led his companion through the teasing crowd, while Martin beamed upon those nearest to her with unabashed security. The ceremony was short, owing to the absence of any attendant formality. Of bridesmaids, of bestmen there were none. Simplicity pervaded it all. When the end came and they were man and wife, Landy kissed her for the first time with ludicrous enjoyment and pride, and the onslaught of congratulating friends nearly swept them from their position. Even Doles forgot, in the general disorder, Landy's angered speech of the night previous.

Virgie reached Martin after much struggling and implanted a kiss upon her cheek just as Kent was striving to grasp the bride's hand. Each of the young people were laughing gayly, and when they met Virgie

forgetfully smiled pleasantly as she nodded. Kent returned the recognition with pleased surprise, and, as she seemed in no way inclined to follow up the greeting, he drew away, happily nursing this the first sign of friendliness that he had had from her since his angry leave-taking. Without a note for his sermon he stepped into his pulpit and, buoyed up by the happiness that surged within him, he signified his intention to begin. Landy and the new Mrs. George sat in the front row—she fussily settling to outsit the ordeal and he striking at once an attitude of absorbed interest.

"Filled with the joy of this glorious day," Kent began, "and moved by a spirit of genuine gratitude, we have always come here to give thanks to a generous Providence for His goodness. In all Broom County I do not believe that there is a man, woman or child who could live such a day as this one is without a responsive feeling and satisfaction that he is part of it; and this is Thanksgiving, the time in which we lay out our blessings, our benefits, our successes. Following the good old Puritan footsteps, we bring the past year back again and go over it, counting out of each month the things that were given us for happiness. It is a good way, for these are the joys that we have in hand; we can hold to them and add them together as much as we will. The next year may give us disappointments, because we are hoping for so much for ourselves. The happiness, though, that we have had is a sure happiness, because we can cling to it and no one can take it away. For this we should indeed be thankful!"

He became serious as he progressed, taking up con-

dition after condition with an ease and fluency of handling that evidenced familiarity and interest. He was growing nearer his people's interest, or they to his. He came to speak as if he were one of them, forgetting entirely in his earnestness the lack of notes or preparation. After passing over many localisms with engaging feeling, he arose to an eloquence that held his hearers in a spell of astonished admiration.

"Providence," he said forcefully, "has, among His most gracious gifts, given you common-sense, and you have exerted it nowhere with more kindness than in my case." Smiling faintly he paused for the inference to take hold. Resuming he said : "Among our weak I have been the very weakest. To be good is to do good, and there is not a man among you who has done less than I. Yet I look back over the past year and see my blessings sticking up like fence-posts. I have them all in mind now, and each one gets bigger as I look upon it to-day, for they mark the line that leads into your land, and that is where I want to be. The coming year may bring sorrows to you and me, but, no matter what they are, I am holding fast to the thought of the past blessings I have had from your hands, and with these to guide me I want to—and I will return to you all that my power may permit me to."

Again he paused, and they watched him with expectant faces, deeply moved by his sincere eloquence. He stood their fascinated gaze well, as he searched his mind for a continuance of the thought ; but, when he found himself barren of further words, he was forced

to a speedy termination. Finally he said : " Thanksgiving Day is turkey day, too. I must not let you forget the turkey !" And this was rewarded at once by many relaxing countenances.

Brandt was one of the first to greet him as he came down to the door, but Virgie evidenced no intention of doing likewise. In the hearty handshakes that took up his attention Kent felt vaguely a disappointment in her failure to join the group, as was her usual wont. Landy and Mrs. George had also their throng of admirers, and to these Virgie quickly added her company, grateful for the relief to escape observation and cover her indifference. She had been deeply and favorably impressed, after her surprise, by the goodness in his sermon, and under its spell had been drawn to his new strength with irresistible admiration. But, once that spell was gone, the memory of a series of circumstances rushed in on her, the most distracting of which was her discovery of his mysterious visit, and somehow she could not help but feel his new role an evidence of insincerity, and she sickened in this thought.

Kent waited expectantly at first for the appearance of her face among those about him, until the group had dwindled sufficiently for his complete survey of the room. Even then he glanced hurriedly to the outer edge of the thinning ranks, hoping to find her amongst the last. Then he looked even farther over their heads in growing fear, and, in some hesitancy, turned about to find her entirely vanished from the edifice. All his triumph was gone on the instant. He disengaged himself with a sudden coldness from the stragglers

still about him that awakened no small surprise among them, and would have walked away alone but for "Si," who caught up to him and awkwardly pushed beneath his arm a package in newspaper tied with thread.

"Faribee couldn't get over t' th' house while services wuz on," he said, apologetically. "She thought as how she'd surprise Martin—er I mean Mrs. George. Dern ! I can't never get myself t' call her that, an' bein' 's I see you, you can give it to her. It's a weddin' present ere sunthin'. Hope y' hev a good dinner, parson—good's yer sermon. I heerd it. Ef Martin don't feed y' right come over t' th' ' Yaller Front ;' we'll hev some leavin's anyhow !"

"Thanks, 'Si,'" Kent replied, laughing. "I'll give this to Martin, and, if the wedding feast gets too much for me, remember I'll hold you to your word !"

"All right !" said Doles, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "But, remember, I said 'on'y th' leavin's !'" And, turning, he marched away with a proud chuckle over his own wit, while Kent laughed again in momentary forgetfulness.

CHAPTER XIII.

"This is a day to be thankful for, isn't it, dear?" said Brandt contentedly, as they drove home after services, and then, addressing the horse, he continued: "Gee up Billie. Thanksgiving dinner is waiting for you and me!"

"I don't know; I suppose that it is," she replied abstractedly.

"What?" he asked in surprise. "You suppose that it is? Good gracious! What is the matter to put you so out of touch with everything? I thought that you were the happiest of us all!"

"Well, I am not," she replied, in quick anger with herself.

"But what is wrong?" he laughed.

"I have disobeyed you," she said bluntly. But, catching her breath, she hurriedly resumed; "Not exactly disobeyed, but, then, I have gone outside your confidence and perhaps your wishes, and it makes me miserable to feel that I will have angered you when you know what I have done."

She waited then for him to reply, but he only appeared strangely serious, and studiously avoided her anxious glances. Twice she essayed to speak, yet held

herself in check, hoping that he might relieve and aid her confession. But he continued silent, and she finally resumed :

"I had a letter yesterday from Washington—from Mr. Harvey, and in it he has told me some of the things you never wished me to know!"

"And—" he interposed as she ended, while he turned his head away to conceal the relief his face uncontrollably expressed.

"They were about your family and other things that you would never talk to me about, and I have felt as if I were spying when I read them. They have made me awfully unhappy. My night was spoiled, as my day has been, because I did not tell you about it sooner."

"How came Mr. Harvey to write?" he asked, regaining his composure.

"He asked if he might the day he left, and I wanted to know what it seemed like to have letters, and I wanted to know about the things in his world, so I did not refuse when he spoke of it ; but I am so sorry now that I did not," she ended, her voice burdened with contrition and supplication.

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it," he said, re-assuringly. "Of course I should like to have known, but, then, Mr. Harvey is all right without doubt, so there you are—and I will not scold. But never do it again, mind you !" he ended, raising his finger warningly and covering her hand with his own in the same gesture as he smiled forgivingly.

"You are the dearest old father in the world !" she burst out happily, patting the hand in her lap lovingly.

He laughed in delighted embarrassment as he sat silently enjoying her relieved change, but after a time he asked :

"I suppose your correspondence is secret—or is it?"

"Why, of course not!" she replied quickly, and, drawing off her mitten, she dove for the letter, offering by a gesture to relieve him of the reins as she held it toward him.

"No ; you read the parts you want me to hear," he said teasingly, with a significant glance.

"You old simple!" she replied, confused. "As if there were any things in it that you should not hear!" She spread the large pages out on the lap-robe, where the great, scrawly words were very distinct, and, with a last slap at them, began :

"MY DEAR MISS BRANDT :—Back in town again in an environment of rush and hurry, with all its attendant clatter, I find myself drawn to the quiet of your life irresistibly, and this, too, after but a month here. It is a strange thing how humors take hold of us at times, and we want just what we have not and grow sick in the wanting, because we must take other things willy-nilly. Nothing new in that sentiment I know. I do not mention it to say anything new, but only to get up to what I want to say, and that is, that I have become an apostle of country life. It led me into a strange thing the other night, this talking about having the smell of earth in one's nostrils instead of dust as we have it here, and a lot of other like observations. I had only been back about a week when it happened, and intended to write to you then about it, but waited and followed it up, and now I am glad that I did, for I can tell you better, as I know more.

"As I say, I was talking like a farmer would, and telling all I knew about you of the good kind—the nutting contest, Mr. Kent and your father and all, when one of the boys asked : 'What's that name again?' And I said 'Brandt,' and asked him if he knew your father. Of course he said that he did not, but he went on to say that he was with a Brandt, a lawyer, and that maybe you were all related. But

yesterday he asked me to come up to his office and see his employer, and, surprise of surprises, I found your uncle, I think, if you have one! Ask your father if Stanley Brandt isn't his brother?"

Here she paused and turned to her father a look of inquiry.

"Yes," he answered quietly, motioning her to proceed.

"If Stanley Brandt isn't your uncle he was immensely interested—asked me a lot of questions I could not answer and some that I could. I asked him why he didn't write and find out if you were related, and he started to tell me something, but caught himself before he had said a word, and coughed and took your address, and that's all. This all struck me as being strange, so I thought that I would tell you, because I don't believe he thinks your father and himself brothers, and being a big man, hard-pressed for time, I concluded he would forget it in the press of business, so that, if you care anything about following it up, I give you his address on a card, and this explanation may help you some."

"The rest isn't anything much—just wishes to be remembered to Mr. Kent, and then says some clever things about city people and city life to make me think it all tiresome," she explained, as she absorbedly folded the letter. "But I will not believe a word of that," she asserted, and turned to her father with a doubting laugh that died away into silence, as she beheld his face filled with pain and without a sign of having heard her last words.

Brandt was gone back with rapid strides to his early days, when he and his brothers were at home. Instantly Harvey's hurting words brought up each failure of his own in those unfortunate times, as well as the contrasting successes of his brothers, that had been

forever to his shame. Years of peace and solitude had uprooted, bit by bit, caustic remembrances and dulled each incident into an easier forgetfulness. He had remembered them lately only at times, and then with but the vagueness that desire and time made easier. He saw again, as the living image of his brother Stanley was brought before him, all of that intrepid young man's triumphs, all of his achievements, and his final opportunity coming out of them to go to Washington. He saw also his other brother, Wesley, who had reached a fair medical practice at home, while George was still successively failing. It was not in envy at that time that he had found his humiliation, no more was it that that reached him now, but, his having served as a contrast to their successes always at the beginning and even now, was the thrust that hurt, and it wounded his pride sorely. He could not tell his daughter how he had failed and how he had run away—hers was not the nature to understand. Of her sympathy he was sure, but her ideas of himself were that exalted that the running away, and leaving the stigma of utter defeat to cling to the memory of his name, would be a sad awakening, and he dreaded the loss of position he had always held with her. In her happier moods he had often thought to tell her, but as often remained dumb for fear of saddening the mood, or at least this was the reason he gave himself for retaining the thought ; and yet it was more that he could not tell the story and spare himself without holding his honor in greater contempt than silence gave him. In her serious moods he feared the thoroughness of her questioning, but,

now that she seemed about to learn that which he had held from her for so long, he was sore perplexed.

Virgie, impressed by the gravity of his expression, respectfully restrained the running comment she would have liked to express, and permitted no word to escape her to break his, as she judged, reminiscent thought. They rode along in silence until he had resolved upon the course of accepting things as they were, and trusting that circumstances might deal with him leniently. He assumed to take her letter happily, and re-opened the conversation in a manner and tone so buoyant that she was at once radiantly responsive.

At dinner he railed her about her correspondent, and asked, in feigned seriousness, if there was aught in her mind that she believed would prove of interest to her "city" correspondent. To this she replied with happy assurance, though the suggestion of her answering rather appalled her.

"Well, never mind," he said, on noticing her weakening. "I will write to him for you. Perhaps he would rather that I would anyway?"

"Oh, you tease!" was all that she could reply. But he persisted.

"And you can convey his regards to the parson, so as to have a little part in it. That is, unless you wish to turn it all over to me?"

"You may have it all or none," she said quickly.

"Woe is me," he responded; "and Kent coming over this afternoon too, and I thought that you would let me tell him. I do believe that you are becoming selfish!"

"Is he honestly coming?" she asked, hopeful that this was a part of his joke.

"Honestly !" he answered, unconscious of her chagrin on his re-assurance, as she arose hastily and went to the kitchen with no evident excuse.

"Speaking of Kent," he began when she had returned, "brings back this mornin's sermon—and such a sermon as it was. The boy is changing wonderfully. He is, as he says, getting nearer to his people and their lives. I am glad that he begins to see, for this is the only way. People about him are different people from his own. Youth would not excuse him in his position. I know that it hurt his pride to come down from the notions he had formed, but then he is all the better off for having formed them, as burning a young man at the stake of disappointment like that will bring out his better side most surely, and his selfish instincts will become unselfish instincts. I tell you, daughter, his words conveyed to me the beginning of a new life of thought and feeling in him. He spoke cheerily and extemporaneously the happiness he felt, but back of that I listened to his sobs as he must have sobbed in silence. It is a hard experience, but he will know its reward."

"Are such changes usually so sudden?" she asked incredulously.

"The ways of the mind are less inscrutable than those of the heart," he said: "But, be assured, his heart is becoming the dictator."

Impressed with her father's words she reasoned hopefully in an effort to reach his plane of deduction.

She saw, after his having pointed out the signs of regeneration, but she could not, try as she would, accept them as a true indication of Kent's inward self. Doubt's anguish had hold upon her, and those other thoughts intruded to spoil the admiration she sincerely desired to bestow. All the afternoon the enigma was with her work and leisure. Brandt, filled with a renewed vividness of his past, sought seclusion for himself and left her to her own devices. At the first, in her after-dinner work, when most under the spell of her father's laudatory words, she felt guilty to hold another conception than his usually keen and correct one, but as the hours wore on, and she had not his combative influence, the sway of self gained strength and brought her again to her original opinion.

From his library Brandt was the first to see the parson on his arrival, and he opened the door most hospitably ere Kent had passed the gate. Welcoming him he drew him to his own chair, and talked readily in pleased relief. In surprised gratitude the younger man accepted the courtesy, uncertain of his standing, and scarcely comprehending the situation. Brandt talked freely of the day, the people and things sage with an unusual volubility, and Kent grew less self-conscious as his interest deepened until he had forgotten altogether his original lack of assurance.

"Would you know an ungrateful man? Would you know an unfeeling man? You should look at him!" Brandt said warmly, after he had spoken of Snellins for some moments. "Eccentric? Perhaps. But, however valid that excuse may be to you or me, it is

yet without the foundation that will make his actions forgivable."

"Without doubt," Kent replied, "his taking off was other than under his own control."

"Then why have we not heard something? It was evident that he feared Harvey's coming, from that which was said at Orrig's the last time he was seen, and, if anyone has caused him to go away, why have I been unable to learn of it?"

"Because I would not—could not give you the sorrow of knowing."

"You do not mean—" And he paused as he leaned forward excitedly.

"Yes, it is I who knows ; but it is not of his end that I must tell you. It is worse than that—worse than death," Kent replied, his voice filled with a pathos of a double sympathy. "Snellins' eccentricity has taken a more violent form," he went on, adding reassuringly, "but he is at my house now, and I have brought Landy in to take care of him. It is a good arrangement, since Martin is already there, and all that can will be done for him. I must swear you to secrecy, for your daughter should not know until we find out what hope there is, and if the public should learn they would be sure to apprise her at the first opportunity."

Brandt was stunned beyond accepting details, and he stared at the speaker blankly.

"I must go to him at once !" he finally said. "Tell Virginia anything—any excuse will do ; but I *must* see him."

"Calm yourself ; calm yourself," Kent said soothingly, and wait until this evening, when you come in. I have anticipated your desire to convince yourself of the seriousness of his trouble, and Landy will invite you to the house this evening so as to cause no comment."

"But I cannot wait," Brandt persisted.

"You must. If you will be reasonable you can see how it would excite your daughter's curiosity for you to rush off this way. You must exercise some caution, and to-night I tell you—it will only be four hours or so until you shall see him. So be calm for her sake !"

"Oh, this is terrible !" he said, arising and walking nervously back and forth across the room. Then, turning quickly, he asked fiercely :

"Why should she not know?"

Kent looked at him in amazement and anger, surprised at his extreme agitation and angry because of his excited forgetfulness.

"Why should she know?" he responded with like words, but in a tone of masterful rigidity.

Brandt stood before him and, after his reply, watched his face closely ; but he bore the gaze and returned it unflinchingly, and the older man slowly turned and resumed his walking.

Kent followed his movements back and forth until he grew tired of watching, and then relaxed his attention, as he no longer remained expectant of words from the absorbed man.

Brandt walked unceasingly save when he raised his head and halted for an instant and afterward began again.

"You are right," he said finally, stopping opposite Kent. "You are right. It would only worry her and could do no good, but I cannot see her now ; she will be sure to observe my agitation. Give me my hat and coat, Royal—my hat and coat. I will go out somewhere. What a horrible thing it all is !"

"Promise not to go in town?" Kent said suspiciously, assisting him with his coat.

"I will not go until you say," he replied quietly, and Kent closed the door after him in full confidence.

When Virgie entered the room later she was startled into speechlessness to find Kent alone, giving himself over to abject meditation in the gloaming. She stood undecided as to what she should do, and as her confusion grew she became less and less mistress of her actions. He finally turned, and, discovering her thus close, arose to his feet with hasty respect.

"Miss Brandt, good evening !" he said jerkily, and she disregarded the salutation from sheer embarrassment.

"Your father has just stepped out," he ventured guiltily, pointing toward the door as if to prove this statement, and then she turned her eyes in the direction indicated only to bring them back upon him, where they slowly dilated with the arising anger that was back of them. He read aright in the gradual change the impending storm and attempted to avert it by a pleasantry.

"Yes, he went out and left me all alone with my thoughts here in the sticky gloaming," he said, and laughed lamely.

"Why have you come here?" she asked.

"Your father asked me to," he responded quickly, and then he could have bitten his tongue for the very stupidity of that ready excuse. She would think him so mean as to return at the first opportunity, and he had only used it to cover the real object of his visit. But it was said now, and, think what she would, he could not enlighten her if silence was to cost him the last vestige of her respect.

"Was that sufficient to bring you back?" she asked and her scorn hurt him like a sting. "After the other how dare you come?" she went on angrily, her cheeks aglow with burning indignation. "Oh! are men so base?"

"Miss Brandt, stop. I pray you, stop! You do not—you cannot understand. It was not only because your father asked me that I came to-day, but there is more——"

"But father does not know," she interposed. "It was only I who saw you."

"What?" he cried in astonishment, as he divined the reason of her anger. "Is it of last night that you are talking? You did see me, then?" and he smiled faintly in relief, knowing how he would have her full forgiveness when she should learn the reason of that escapade. But she only flushed the hotter to see that he had thought her so bold as to introduce again the subject of his proposal, and they stood facing each other confusedly. It was the tragedy of errors!

But she could not hold her anger long, and, even though she strove to nurse the indignity of his pres-

ence, her hopes relaxed the vigilance over the goodness in her heart, and involuntarily she asked :

“ Can you explain, then?”

“ Certainly I can,” he replied, with a readiness that bespoke a happy ending. Then he paused, appalled to realize that he had bound himself to secrecy that would not permit him to do so.

“ Well?” she asked eagerly.

“ I can,” he resumed, “ but—” and then he paused again, looking helpless, and after a time he added abruptly—“ but I cannot. Good afternoon !” and rushed away, leaving her in astonishment.

Slowly, resistlessly the doubting crept back into her heart after he had gone, leaving her more deeply indignant and farther away from the charity she had tried to force into it ; and he, guessing what she would feel, magnified her hatred against himself, and was miserable to know that he could not help the situation by even so much as a word of explanation.

CHAPTER XIV.

In the evening Virgie refused to accompany her father. He coaxed in mild surprise, but, despite his pleading, she remained obdurate, and he was forced to go alone. Their separation was filled with pathetic dissembling, for each would hold to themselves the sorrows in their keeping, while each strove to shield the other from pain. Brandt bid her guard herself with fine care and unnecessary precaution, and as he lingered fondly, guiltily, she kissed him a second time with strange alacrity. Then closing and bolting the door she threw herself prostrate upon the floor, crying in desolation to feel herself apart from him, without a chance of courting his wisdom or confidence. And this was all before he had turned quite away. He started down the walk, simply unconscious of her outburst, and wondering if he had betrayed aught of his thoughts to her by an unguarded look.

Landy greeted him without a sign or word, and together they went to the parsonage. Brandt grew quickly weaker in anticipating a scene, and he leaned on his companion's arm. As they neared the house, and eventually stopping outside the gate, he stood with one hand upon a post while he overcame his dread.

They proceeded then slowly, Landy uttering constantly rough words of re-assurance, and Brandt seemed to establish a better control over his fears that compassion and intimate familiarity with the patient had inspired. The house was apparently deserted, though in the quietness a lamp burned low, shedding a cheerful light through the study window. Kent and Mrs. George and the babies were all over at the church, and there were none left here now to distract the old man from his sorrow. He followed Landy to a bolted door, and the horror of Snell's having a keeper and being guarded, locked and barred, created at once a new sentiment. Indignation quickened his blood, and with the impetuous resolve to deliver his one-time charge he hastened into the room and stood before the demented man, his mind forming fine reasonings that he tried to voice. He would have talked, argued, consoled, pitied—but no words came. He laid his hand upon Snellins' head with silent gentleness and entreaty, but there was no sign of recognition or even of consciousness of his presence. He paused and looked steadfastly into the man's eyes.

"Ben, don't you know me?" he asked at last, so low that Landy caught only the pathos of his voice. It was a tone that pinched his heart, and he turned his face away to shut out the sight of the utterly hopeless pleading that distorted the features of the kindly old man.

"Ben!" he said again, "Ben—Ben Snellins!" in ineffectual experiment, and then he waited expectantly. After a time he tried again, and flung the poor man's

name into his face with all the force of eagerness. Still this was without result. He watched hopefully until the hope could live no longer. Then he turned to Landy, all the pitiful expression of a lifeless grief, stunned with dull helplessness, but as he turned Snel-lins moved uneasily, and Landy motioned Brandt's attention toward him again with quick expectancy, anticipating the man's only words before they were uttered.

"Poor Snell!" he said, and chuckled. And Brandt's heart beat furiously with deluded hope until the inane tone perforated that hope and entered his reason like a sharp point—and then he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Landy waited inactive, bound by the awful scene, until he felt his own strength yielding, and then he drew the sorrowing man away, leaving him to suffer alone, while he hastened around to the church to remain out the evening with his wife, thus to save the comment sure to follow his non-appearance so soon after their marriage.

Kent saw Landy enter, and derived from his unusual seriousness an instantaneous enlightenment of that which had occurred. He lost then, somehow, the sparkle and happiness that he was appropriately attempting to convey, and his words drifted with his thoughts into gems of pathetic beauty that were spontaneous and noble. His listeners realized slowly the unwonted change, but as surely they came to a respectful following that led them on to deeply-moved sympathy. He talked of sorrows that knew no respite. He told of

undeserved pain that came, no one knew why, unless—and here a bright opening from the tunnel of darkness in which they were living seemed to come before his view, growing—growing—growing with nearing perspective. The sunshine of happiness, narrowed by funneling walls standing at the end, ready to burst into a world of light infinitely larger, surpassingly beautiful, dwarfing beyond previous conception the old way—the present way of hardships and darkness, and he said :

“ Yes, there is pain and there are pangs that come, no one mortal knows why—unless that out of it all we shall live to know the glorious goodness of being free from these, and also the goodness of living, knowing that we are happy, knowing that we are well off, and knowing what the good things are, because we can hold them against the bad and be joyous in the favorable comparison. If one day’s suffering can give us a week of this knowledge, or even if a year of pain can give us the touch to feel an hour of delicious happiness, and feel it deep into our hearts, the pain is worth the bearing. May we all learn to recognize the goodness we may have at hand and enjoy its fullest blessings, as we should learn to bear our reverses, looking forward to the happiness that must come some time.”

He was uttering the reasonings and dictates of his suffering self quite as though he were not before nearly two-score people, and like as if he might be musing in his study alone. But these thoughts were not inappropriate, for they were words of his inner self, counseling the humanly human in the depths of other sufferers, and it drew them to him with poor resistance on

their part, for men suffer much in silence, and reason much in silence, until they are awakened to find themselves but as simply constructed pieces in the machinery of events as are their neighbors, and then they surprisedly give vent to foolish and guilty confessions of private self-study, being aroused to the plan simple in human patterning.

Here again, for the second time in one day, he had bent his classic intellect to the level of their understanding, speaking not in words, but in the deep, sweet language which the heart can understand. The happiness that followed, in having their responsive feeling, moved him beyond the reactive thought of condescension, pointing clearly the way for self-enoblement and giving a taste of the bliss in pure sympathy, and he held to the lesson with a hope of its future inspiration.

When the little household returned they found that Brandt had gone, but they were not surprised, as they had anticipated that he would leave soon after collecting himself. They strove to be merry, or at least light-hearted, but Kent was filled with the glow of his new sensation, seeking seclusion at the first opportunity, while Landy told to his wife the occurrences of the evening visit, throwing her into the depressed state of pitying good-heartedness, magnifying for himself the sadness of it and swaying his wife with constant recountings, making her suffer and suffering for her.

The weeks slipped away with unaccountable rapidity. Virgie found her time so filled with the multiplied Christmas interests and her correspondence with

Harvey that she scarcely noted the change that had come over her father, and the buoyancy of her nature permitted the worry over mysterious things to trouble her but shortly. She met Kent not infrequently, and gradually the doubting of his honesty and sincerity fell away from her, leaving only a dull remembrance. Yet she could not—would not accept him as the others were beginning to do. He was becoming strong in the moving of events. His people, her own people, apprised her constantly of his newer personality—whether wilfully or thoughtlessly she did not know. This as a doubtful penance of a former misconception. Still she held away from the changing tide of opinion, drawing her own line of comparison. Kent's old self, as she had known him, weak, vacillating and obviously insincere, was still Kent's own self. She could not place the mantle of the people's new conception upon his shoulders so as to cover the Kent she had known.

Harvey was writing to her now breezy, clever letters, filled with thoughts rare to her own domain, and his lacking graphicness gave scope to imaginings unreal, but not foundationless. She idealized her surroundings when in the humor of splendid conceptions, and in the midst of wonderful people she held to him as the one claim to make her fancy-pictures genuine. Again, she loved to confuse herself with city noises and distraction, and to find him a master in it all, strong, cool and delightfully polite. That he was so used to all that the world held, and yet so indifferent, handling the things she read ecstatically from his letters in such common-place wording, caused her to become awed

with the importance of her correspondence. She gave her whole mind to the betterment of her portion, often taking a day entire to form the correct rounding of a sentence, and, in struggling for the subject-matter, she worked devotedly. The parson had become a bit of unimportant property in the scenery of her home, although they made her think of him—they forced him upon her ; but he was little nearer to her than some of the others, and she blotted out all past remembrances, using him only for comparison with Harvey, and this to his detriment.

Kent saw her father often, as Brandt called frequently to see Snellins, and he longed many times to ask about the things that were on his mind. Where once he was confident, under the ban of her unjust anger he had now grown hopeless, as her manner changed to tolerating indifference ; and he would have almost dared to talk to her father—seeking light. He grew sorrowful and broken through the desolation of his cares. Her manner was not uninviting nor repellant toward him, yet the barrier of chilling disinterest was ever evident, and he learned to accept her scant courtesies with a resignation that taught him tenderness. He learned the deepest lessons of fortitude in the days he suffered most. He diffused a gentler, more welcoming resignation to his people because of his own sorrow and the steadfast purpose of the ennobling insight into unselfishness which he had given that Thanksgiving night. Virgie did not see, much less did she understand.

It was late in January that she came one day to the parsonage. Little Bennie had been down with fever three weeks, but her calls there had been infrequent during the early part of his illness owing to the unavoidable meeting of Kent, though he quickly understood and found excuses ready at hand to make the home freely at her disposal on her second and subsequent visits. To-day he had drawn away from the sick child's bedside and shut himself in his own sanctum. "Three or four hours at most," "Doc" Murray had told him quietly, and it had tried him sorely to give up a chance of the last word that he had hoped for from the child he loved now most dearly.

All through the fever he had watched alternately with the mother, almost arising to the mother's anxious care and dread. The world came back to Bennie finally. In it were the old funny-faced clock and frosted windows—and Kent, and he grew to be ill-content if the world—his world—was without these. The parson always listened to the child-life wonders with eagerness in their unfolding revelations, and, catching the key of Goblin Land, he went within, drawing forth an array of strange old things that were new even to him, and paraded them in different garbs, as fairies and beggars, princes and pages, and awful giant men, for the child. This was friendship at first, then love all in one day ; and when the relapse came, "Doc" Murray must tell someone that which his practiced eye caught at a glance, Kent seemed the one. He felt bitterness toward the physician at first ; then an eager yearning, as if he hoped to say good-bye to the

baby-boy's conscious mind before he was gone, took hold upon him, and he watched oh ! so eagerly for the returning spark that would be the last.

An hour slipped by and the relentless clock in ungrateful return of Bennie's friendship gonged off the short respite. Martin had divined from the two men's anxiety the approaching end, and she sat apart from them rocking in grief-stricken tenseness. A half hour, then an hour struck, and Kent moved uneasily. He was leaning toward the bed, watching intensely the peaked, fever-worn little face, with all the will he controlled centered upon drawing a sign of recognition when the fleeting instant should come. He was becoming momentarily more expectant when "Doc" led Virgie into the room. He turned reluctantly and, in the first glance, she seemed only the friend she once was, and he raised his hand warningly. She stopped short at the gesture and moved as if to withdraw. It was then that Kent came back from the past into the unhappy present with an agonizing sense of indecision. Slowly he gave his place to her and withdrew from the room. Once in the hall he was overwhelmed by the loss of his place at the bedside, and though he fought the deception as best he could he was drawn back to the doorway with irresistible force. He was just going away again when Bennie stirred, and his own self-control was spent.

Slowly the child opened his eyes. They were too weak at first to express the wonderment his brain felt, but he soon smiled wanly, and, as his last spark of strength revived, his lips moved until he had formed a word.

Virgie laid her hand gently on the coverlet. Kent leaned forward eagerly in the doorway, and Mrs. George stopped rocking, though she did not rise.

"Auntie Virgie," he said, scarcely audible. Then louder, as his strength grew: "Auntie Virgie—man—did—bring Gyp's pin—man did." And he looked at her wistfully.

"Yes, dear, yes," she replied, quickly attempting to re-assure his doubts of her belief, and smiling tearfully.

"He did," he began again. "He's in the house too!"

Kent moved uneasily, but Virgie did not hear, and the mother came quickly to hush his innocent confession.

"Mommer, darling mommer—and Royal!" he said, on beholding her, moving only his eyes in an effort to find Kent. It took all the parson's strength to overcome his inclination to respond, for his first name, as he had taught Bennie to say it, sounded ineffably sweet. Virgie remained rigidly expectant.

"Darling Royal," he said softly, closing his eyes as if the image in his heart were too dear to let escape, and then they watched his breathing sink, growing almost breathless themselves as they followed the respirations. Finally "Doc" stepped forward and took up the limp hand tenderly, when Virgie arose and drew the mother away. She passed Kent with a surprised stare—first to find him so close, and second, in the quick knowledge that he had foreborne to intrude himself upon her, while his rapt expression conveyed more of the depth of feeling he contained than she had ever credited him with.

When she was gone he came and stood over the still form of his little friend—thinking, thinking, thinking—the bitterness in his heart at the lost opportunity near crowding out the sorrow over the baby's death. Standing in an attitude of resignation as he did "Doc" Murray derived only the idea that Kent was contemplating the change, as men had often done before in his presence, but the good man missed entirely the trend of Kent's thought as he stood repeating to himself despondently the words, "Too late," following them into the pathetic hopelessness they conveyed with all the abandonment of self-censure.

Virgie was haunted even into the soothing of Mrs. George by the look of self-restraining that had hallowed the parson's face when she discovered him standing by the door, and though engaged with actions and words foreign to the thought it remained, an accompaniment at once unfathomable and persistent. She alternated between applying her affectionate pity and condolences and the desire to be alone. Landy had remained in the kitchen during the crisis dreading, then hopeful, then fearful, but in the knowledge of his own roughness not daring to come to the succor of his wife, and when the end had come he struggled long with his instinctive awkwardness before mastering it. When he did appear Virgie readily yielded her place to his comforting, withdrawing at once.

CHAPTER XV.

It was just a month and a day from the date of Bennie's death when Virgie took up one afternoon the second of Harvey's unanswered letters, reading and re-reading it with all the zest of freedom after her penance to the baby's memory. Longing as she had to give them their deserved reply the time had seemed interminable, but she set herself to mourn the child's loss in the formality of a month's devotion, no matter if she would retain his memory throughout the years to come. The month's sacrifice appealed to her as short enough at best, and she would not break her resolve, however much Harvey's letters tempted her from her purpose. But to-day she took them back into her life with welcoming relief and set her thoughts at work forming a reply.

"You are the one person in your community who seems to know that there is more in the world than Broom County," he had written. She looked over the lines a second time. The pleasure of his having exalted her above her people was tinged with a doubt, though it served as an inspiration, and she began to write.

"DEAR MR. HARVEY :—Your last letter has come, as well as the other about two weeks before it, but the one is so much better than the other that I am only going to answer that. I should have written sooner, and no doubt you are beginning to think that I am trying to shirk, though I am not. It was out of respect for Bennie—you know little Bennie? You may think that this is foolish, but I could not do less for the darling, and that is the reason I have not written. It is all too sorrowful to think about—our having lost first Big Ben and then his namesake so soon afterward. I will not write about either of them, for it makes me sad ; but this is the reason.

"In your last letter you have so much to say about Annapolis and your dance there. Of course I would like to see Annapolis, but I hardly know what you mean by telling me to 'lookout for the brass buttons !' Soldier stories and soldiers' lives always have been fascinating to me. But I cannot believe that I could go among all the war things that you say are there and be happy, because I should be always thinking of the young men and boys who are trained to shoot and be shot. I should think they would want to dance and be gay all the time that they can to keep from worrying. Do they grow old soon? Their mothers must be nearly crazy about the little boys.

"What a good joke it is to have you think that I am the only one here who knows anything is going on outside our hills, even if it is unfair to father and—oh ! lots of others, who know just what is going on, or almost know from having seen it, while I have seen absolutely nothing? Perhaps my interest has made you believe me very wise, but you must not let yourself be deceived, as I am only the more anxious because I have never known about these things, and I want to know ; so I must keep asking questions to find out.

"I told father about my cousins, whom you met at the party, but he did not seem to remember them. You did not tell me anything except that they were grown young women. You know I have never seen or heard anything about any of my relatives, so I wish that you would tell me their names and what the one about my own age looks like ; also all about both of them. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for writing to me of them, because I had often wondered if I did have relations like other people. It seemed so lonesome not to have any. I felt so different some way. But now I have somebody to think of all the time, and they are so much nicer than outsiders ever could be. Tell me if my uncle is a big, cross man like father—only father's not cross. And is he fat, with whiskers?

"Something that you said to me when you were here comes back to me lots of times lately. You have forgotten what it was of course, but I have not, and when I think about it I am so afraid that it may come true. You said that I would realize some time how little this place is, and that I would want to be where things are different. Those were not your words, but they are what you meant. You also said that the people were selfish and unappreciative. This last thing I will never admit, but the other—well, I hardly know. It does seem at times that I want more than there is here, and then I feel ashamed, because this life has been so good to me. I feel, too, a little sorry and quite afraid when I realize how much I am thinking of outside things and wanting to see them. But maybe my uncle and cousins will satisfy all my wants now, so that I can think of them and settle down and be sensible again. I do hope that they will. Please tell me all you can about them.

"Everything is dull and dreary here now, as it is impossible to go anywhere or have anyone come to see you. Every year winter seems to come a few days later, and this year it was after New Year's a long time before it came, but it is here now in real earnest. Everything is a foot below the snow, and *cold*—my gracious! it would make you shiver to look out of the window into the blue air. Warm weather seems a hundred years off. It seems terrible to have nothing to do but think quietly for so long, shut in from all the folks you know. The prospect is dreadful. I don't like it when I have nothing to occupy myself. Can you keep quiet without anything to do? I never can.

"Remember, now, I want to know about my cousins when you write again, so please do not disappoint me.

"Your friend,

"VIRGINIA BRANDT."

When the letter was finished she contemplated it with cordial disapproval, but could find no words nor thoughts for substitution. She folded the sheets together with inattentive precision, then unfolded them again, dipping the pen with quick decision to make a change that she fancied would be quite the thing, but she poised the holder above the pages a moment indecisively, and the thought was gone. Reading the last

paragraph aimlessly her words influenced the trend of her thoughts. The bleakness of her surroundings pervaded her imagination, and, as she touched up the last flourish to her signature without any view toward beautifying it, she felt the desolation keenly, sighing in the regret of having finished, lonesome and unoccupied now that it was done. Arising she went to the window and breathed on the glass. Then she removed her one plain ring, making fantastic pyramids of circles into the frost in total idleness. She cleared a space with the warm palm of her hand, stooping to look out at the brilliant yet dull landscape. Everywhere was snow—the bushes were submerged, although they served to break the line of the otherwise even surface. The gate-posts were capped with loads that hung askew, and she observed them closely, attempting to find a difference in the twin garments. Turning from the window she moved a step or two, but hastened back on the instant eager and filled with surprise.

A sleigh-bell or, better, a cow-bell dignified by its present use, sounded faintly in the muffled room. Peering toward the point where the road dropped below the farm, she strained her eyes eagerly until they were blinded by the dazzling light without. She shut them tightly once or twice to ease her vision, and, hastily brushing the pane again with her hand, resumed the watching. It was not long until a vehicle came to view, and in it were discovered Landy, Mrs. George and Gyp, wound in a mountain of blankets and robes that would have made them well-nigh unrecognizable to anyone but Virgie. The horse stopped in front of

the gate panting and steaming, and she left the window to go for a wrap that she might greet the visitors and bring them in. Then she paused under the inspiration of a different thought—she would let them surprise her. The happiness would be more complete, and she sat down by the table again endeavoring to control her elation.

Gyp and her mother floundered up to the door talking low but excitedly. The child, restrained by the mother, uttered words that were distinct in meaning, if not in form, to Virgie. She sat out Martin's last warning, withholding her breath expectantly and ready to greet them on the instant of their bursting in upon her. They were waiting for Landy. The pause was too prolonged. She moved just a little and then, unable to wait longer, she flew to the door, threw it open joyously and grabbed Gyp with all the impetuous gladness in her heart.

"Bless your heart!" she said, snuggling her face into the great hood Gyp wore.

"My land!" said Martin. "How you scare a body. I 'low it's us as is th' ones surprised!"

"Oh! it just seems too good to be true," she said, hugging Martin in turn, drawing them into the house and looking expectantly for Landy.

"He needn't come in. I'll explain it to y' later," Martin said, in reply to her expectant looks. "He's in a hurry, an' mebbe best go 'long 'thout stoppin'." Raising her voice she continued:

"We're all right now; you needn't t' stop. Be keerful now, an' look out fer drifts!"

Landy evidenced his understanding by at once climbing back into the sleigh-box, pulling the robe about his legs carefully and yelling "Howdy !" to Virgie's wave of the hand—"Dup !" to the horse, and "You take care yer ownse'f—I be all right !" merrily to his solicitous wife as he drove away.

"This is a perfect treat, Martin. Where did you come from, and where's Landy going? Tell me all about it this instant? I'm simply burning up with curiosity !" Virgie said disconnectedly, as she worked with Gyp's outer garments and chafed the little hands between her own.

"Landy had t' go up t' Uncle Nace Tipman's fer a couple a' days t' straighten out things fer next season. They b'n a-dickerin' back and for'ards right pert since Nace hear'n 'at me an' Landy wuz married, an' thet he wan't a-goin' away like he'd figgered on doin'."

"And you thought that you would come and spend the time with me," Virgie interrupted, "and you bundled yourselves up and came through all the cold and snow and everything away out here. And you are going to stay two days? What a visit we will have !" she broke off delightedly, as she carried Martin's woolen stockings that she had worn over her shoes, together with Gyp's clumsy arctics, out to the kitchen, setting the one pair on the oven shelf and hanging the others over the tea-towel rack back of the stove to dry. When she came back Martin was fluffing out Gyp's tightly-crimped hair, and Virgie stepped at once into her own room. Returning with a comb she sat the little girl before her on a stool and took up the

hair arrangement, leaving the mother without occupation.

"Tell me something?" she said eagerly. "Not a word have I heard from town for a week. What's going on? Anybody sick or married, or anything, since I was among all of you last?" Then to Gyp, "You sit right still, young lady, until I come back!" as she arose and made a trip to the cupboard. Gyp's face brightened expectantly. Returning she handed the child a large piece of gingerbread and resumed her pleasure task, tying the short ribbons into dainty bows.

"They be nothin' new much," said Mrs. George, assuming to be disinterested, but secretly elated with her opportunity for gossip. "The Craigs is sick—all 'cept Millie, an' th' postoffice has a'most b'n runnin' itse'f. They've got the croup mostly. It do beat me th' trouble they're allus a-havin' an' th' way that Millie Craig carries on 'sif her pa hadn't 'nough t' pester th' life outen him as 'tis. How's your pa?" she asked abruptly.

"Father? Oh! he's well. He is somewhere about out in the yard now. But tell me more of Millie. What has she been doing lately?"

"Oh, it's that Fisher young man. Their carryin's-on is scand'lous. Thet girl is a caution! Why, when the Craigs's twins hed diphtheria, there wuz no keepin' her away from other folks's young 'uns, an' I'll swan t' goodness it wuz her 'at give it t' nearly every child in th' hull neighborhood. Mostly ever'body knows how they air cuttin' their didos, an' ef her pa gets hold onto it he'll cut up his ownse'f a bit."

Virgie smiled amusedly, for she was not so far behind events as she had supposed, being thoroughly conversant with the Fisher-Craig subject of gossip, as Millie had told her its deepest import two months before Ashville awakened to an observance of the happenings right under their noses, so to speak.

"My !" she ejaculated encouragingly.

"It's outrageous !" Martin resumed warmly, drawing Gyp to the hearth and brushing the crumbs from her dress into the fire. "On'y yestiddy they wuz out galavantin' aroun' with his pa's best geldin', gettin' theirselves all wet an' near killin' th' horse. Sister Callum seen their goin's-on, an' she told me she wuz a-goin' t' tell Martha Craig jest what she thought. It's nothin' but keerlessness. Wonder t' me Millie ain't caught her death o' cold a'ready."

"What, if Millie's mother knew where she was, Martin, and said that she might go with Kenneth. Do you think that she would want Mrs. Callum's interference?"

"You don't 'low she did, do y'?" Mrs. George asked surprised, but alert for further information.

"I would feel safe in saying that she did," Virgie replied without further commitment. "Ken Fisher is a good boy, and there can be no harm in his and Millie's friendship. They have been almost brought up together, so why should they not grow to be better friends and more constant companions?"

"Y' don't mean t' tell me? Well, my land !" Martin said explosively ; "so that's it, is it? That Callum woman tries to spoil ever'thin' she sets her eyes on," she ended, shirking entirely the responsibility, and Vir-

gie laughed appreciatively at her cleverness in withdrawing her late avowal of disapproval.

They talked then on other things, Virgie confessing reluctantly to her correspondence with Harvey, knowing so well Martin's propensities for news-spreading, though unashamed to have her friends know of it if from a reliable source. Brandt came in, and, seeing the garments in the kitchen, hastened to learn who his callers might be. He greeted Martin with happy dignity and Gyp with a fatherly kiss, removing his coat, which Virgie insisted on taking, talking cheerily to them during the operation.

"How are you, Martin?" he said, as he drew Gyp between his knees and held his cold fingers against her cheek.

"Middlin'," she replied. "H' ar' you?"

"Never better," he laughed. "To what circumstance are we indebted for this welcome visit?" he asked, as Virgie came and sat on the floor beside him, resting her arm on his knee.

"Landy went up t' Uncle Nace's an' jest dropped us out here," she said, attempting to be humorous, but not quite succeeding, as she was always more or less confused in his presence, his language being at times incomprehensible—his sentences complex.

"Up to Tipman's, is it? I hope that he will get back there again this spring."

"Oh! he'll get back all right," she said confidently. "It's jest th' terms thet their hagglin' over."

"So that is the trouble. They should be able to ar-

range that," he said, turning Gyp around and lifting her to his other knee, opposite Virgie.

"What!" he said suddenly, looking from the pin the child had at her throat down into his daughter's face, then back again, and becoming appallingly agitated.

"What, father?" Virgie asked excitedly.

"Where did you find it, you minx?" he said, unclasping the pin and looking at it reverently.

"Me? I didn't find it," she said, but he gave no heed to her words in his completely absorbed examination.

"It was your mother's last trinket," he said finally, in a qualm of tender emotion, without raising his eyes. "I thought that I had hidden it securely."

Gyp looked from the pair to her mother, fearful and almost moved to tears. Martin was suddenly speechless and consumed with a dread lest he should call forth an explanation from the child.

He lifted his head at last and a forgiving smile was spreading over his face. He would chide them gently, if at all, for their sacrilege, for his heart was tender now, influenced by the token.

Virgie repeated timidly: "I did not find it, father!"

"Where then—how, tell me; how came this baby by it?" he asked in pained agitation.

Virgie turned toward Martin helplessly, and her father followed her gaze for enlightenment.

She sat under their scrutiny with ill-concealed resolutions passing through her mind. She could not lie outright in her daughter's presence, and to tell the truth might provoke him to a surprised confession of

the donor's present whereabouts or condition. Her mind was sorely perplexed.

"Come, Martin, tell me?" he said, impatiently.

"*He* gave it to her," she answered shortly, endeavoring to warn him ; but, too agitated to discern the hidden meaning, he would be persistent.

"Who did?" he asked.

"Why, the man Brother Bennie spoke about," Gyp supplied quickly, feeling that she had now the solution of one of her own troublesome problems.

Martin frowned down her elation instantly.

Virgie remembered then the two instances in which the baby-boy had insisted on his having seen a mysterious man leave the pin with his mother.

"Why need there be any mystery about it, Martin? If you will I know you can explain how you come to have it. Surely it is not as bad as it looks?" Virgie said.

Mrs. George was frightened by these kind words, that held an imputation of guilt, and the tears came to her eyes all too readily. Gyp, in sympathy, began a dolorous wailing. Brandt grew stern and half-suspicious.

"It—was—Snellins," she finally confessed, breaking down completely.

"What ! Snellins?" he asked, his composure shattered into fear, pity and sorrow. "That must have been the beginning of the end," he concluded, retrospectively—unconsciously.

Virgie was alert at his first words, eager at the last ones, looking from one to the other in open-eyed won-

der, feeling the bond of understanding that existed between the two.

"Ben, father! Where is he—do you know?" she asked, seeking his eyes. "Ah! you do know. I see that you do, and Martin does also. Why do you keep it from me? So he is in trouble? Tell me—you *must* tell me!"

He laid his hand gently on her head, looking the refusal into her eyes that he could not speak; then he turned slowly away from her pained humiliation on finding herself an alien to the secret.

Later he endeavored to restore good cheer, infusing as best he could, while himself under the weight of sadness, a little of the thoughts commonplace. His guests responded quite readily, relieved at his newer and less stern attitude. But Virgie could scarcely bring herself to the revival of easy conversation with that mystery still dragging after her thoughts.

In the evening she left them to their own ways. They watched her withdraw, filled with regret and alarm lest their further discourse would be heavy without her, and their fears were amply realized.

Her appearance the next morning was watched for eagerly by both father and visitors, and she relieved them instantly on the commencement of her talk. Her words had the hard ring of gold; yet they were gold in warmth of color. It was as if she were coining the atmosphere into words, each one bright and valuable, even though a hard resolve sounded through them. The night, alone—un-trusted with a secret that she could not fathom—was indeed hard, but the day that

followed was infinitely harder, though she held to her resolve and filled it for those about her with a part of the radiance that symbolized her calmer, more natural self.

When Landy came for his loved ones they greeted him with all the joy of unburdened hearts, reviewing their pleasures for his happiness ; crying their farewells merrily, leaving so filled with radiant elation that they missed entirely a thought of the sorrow they had innocently planted to grow and throb long after they were gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

Virgie's last letter relieved its recipient of all the qualms he had previously felt. The refreshing innocence that ran through all her expressions ; the wonderment, the sympathy and the lack of blaze discussion in even the most trivial things had at first led him to partial disbelief. The continuance, though, of her simple style, soon carried him over the doubting point, and, as he caught the true, fundamental matter from which her thoughts emanated, he became happy with the discovery that he had unwittingly made. To have shared with his friends the pleasure of her freshness would have been his greatest delight, but there were two things that caused him to forego this pleasure. First, he knew that a partial quotation from the correspondence would have taxed their credulity and lessened their belief in his own sanity, but to substantiate the truth would necessitate a complete exposure of her letters, and this he could not conscientiously do. What delight it was, then, when she sought a nearer relation with her cousins and begged his services as a medium ! It presented at once the opportunity for a free discussion of her own personality, with all the use of her letters that he could have desired for substantiation of his

claims. He sought the first opportunity that presented itself. Nay, better. He made an opportunity at once to have the society of the Misses Brandt, and, with that opportunity, introduced early in the conversation the subject that filled him with pride and elation.

"I have, without a doubt, found your cousin!" he said, suppressing as best he could the warmth of pride that was forcing him to a conclusion that he would rather have prolonged.

"Indeed?" said the elder young lady suavely. "My dear Frank, you are not going in for genealogy? It's already done to death, you know," she ended with more animation.

"Well no; hardly that," he replied, laughing. "But, honest; this is deeply interesting. I thought you might care!"

"Don't mind her," the younger woman said, with a small show of pique; "but tell us about her. Has she the family characteristics?"

"Yes, a bit proud; but humble to the last degree," he replied, with covert sarcasm for Barbara, the elder.

"Works, I suppose?" Barbara retaliated.

"Barbara, you *are* the worst!" Norma laughed, while Frank smiled good-humoredly.

"Come, my dear, if you are going with me!" Mrs. Brandt said to her eldest daughter, as she came into the room unceremoniously. Then, discovering Harvey—"How do you do, Mr. Harvey? I did not know that we had company."

"Do take Barbara away quick, mamma ; she's wretched !" Norma put in before Frank could respond, and, as the two laughingly passed from the room, she resumed : "Now—is your Indiana girl really our cousin?"

"I sincerely believe her to be," Frank asserted rather stiffly, chilled by the sister's treatment of the subject.

"You believe she is? I thought you were more positive. Come—don't pay any attention to Barbara ; you should be used to her by this time. Tell me of our cousin?"

"I thought that I had lots to tell," Frank replied to her coaxing, "but it has sort of oozed. Never mind, though ; Miss Virgie is your cousin, and she has become deeply interested in you. She wants me to tell her all about all of you. Have you any news to send?"

"What a sweet name—Virgie !" she answered evasively, and Frank revived all of his former interest at once.

"And a much sweeter girl !" he replied. "She knows almost nothing, yet she seems to know almost everything !"

"A paradox," Norma smiled.

"I mean she is—or—I don't know how to say it ; yet she is—well, anyway, she has all the simplicity of innocence, while everyone who knows her gets some learning from her good-heartedness. She lives where people know how to live. Not rapid like we do, but taking all there is out of every day instead of pulling up time and throwing it away just to get to some busi-

ness climax or social climax, as we are all the time doing."

"I know—I know," Norma said, impatiently. "No preaching on the 'pace that kills,' but stick to the original text."

"Well," he said, drawing a letter from his pocket, "perhaps this will give you an insight into her character." And he read an extract that covered Virgie's opinion of Annapolis.

"How delightfully interesting! Such a view to take! That girl is impossible—there never lived such an inconsistency."

"How inconsistent?" he asked, contentedly.

"Why innocent, of course; yet with the wisdom that discerns the fallacies of war even beyond our statesmen's perceptions."

"There you are!" he said, triumphantly. "There is my paradox. Everything she says has that odd association of things opposite in it, showing how strange she is."

"But tell me—has she traveled?"

"Not fifty miles away from her home."

"Never been to college?"

"Never."

"Nor seen the world? Certainly not, as you say she has not traveled. How does she do it?" she asked, perplexed.

"She is natural," he replied summingly.

"What a dear she must be! Read me some more—but wait," she said quickly. "You said that she is nat-

ural. I would say that she is unusual. How do you reconcile the two?"

"To be natural is to be unusual, isn't it?" he smilingly asked.

"Why you are absurd—inconsistent!"

"No, I am not," he replied confidently. "I can reason it out for you very readily. Now listen!" and he moved forward, sitting on the edge of his chair.

"I am listening. Oh! wise man, you were ever a logician, and logic proves anything. Go on!"

"You seek to disconcert me, for you scent defeat," he said, laughing. "But I will have my say. Tell me—where would one derive naturalness but from nature? You grant that?" he asked, as she poised her lips in good-humored stubbornness. "Well, then, we people see nature so little that it affects us not at all, and we are far from natural, which makes that virtue unusual among us. We only ape each other. That's what all of us are—just apes."

"If you please," she said, in suppressed mirth, "you may count me out of your reasoning hereafter. If you must make confessions—well—" And after the pause they both laughed heartily. "You have made your point though, I guess, so please tell me more of Virgie or read something more."

Frank was an ordinary man, inasmuch as he was invariably self-convinced by his own logic. Norma had left an opening for the continuance of his reasoning by her careless assertion of "I guess" at the end of acknowledging defeat. He pondered over it a second,

then struck an argumentative attitude, and was about to resume when she broke in :

"I am convinced. Why continue? You are very natural anyway, because you have all the usual back-country verbosity, and you are an old ape ; so am I an ape. We are all apes ! Now let the matter go and tell me some of the things I want to know. Doesn't she care to come out into the world? Doesn't she want to travel and see things? Isn't she tired of her limited surroundings?"

"I hardly know," he replied, as he scanned several sheets of Virgie's letters, which he had just brought to light. "Listen to this!" he said, his face becoming suddenly animated :

"I can scarcely understand or comprehend so many people as you write of being together, living within touch of each other, where they neighbor as our townspeople do here in Ashville."

"She is always writing about cities and people," Frank interpolated, in partial explanation, continuing with growing pride :

"What a number of people everybody must have to remember ! I should think it would be awfully inconvenient. But, then, people must congregate for self-advancement. My own narrow surroundings have taught me that ; and yet, when I think of it, no one here has advanced much—I mean like you seem to have learned things. Of course everybody is better and more gentle. I would not have you think me dissatisfied with my people—not for the world ! There is poor, old, good-natured Uncle 'Si,' who is doing nearly all of Aunt Faribee's work around the hotel because she is sick again. He is better and gentler for having talked to and been with lots of people, but that, some way, is not the kind of being better off that I mean. You seemed to know about

everything, and I suppose all city people are that way ; maybe not so much, but nobody seems to know those things here. You are different. Parson Kent is most like you of anybody here, though he has changed. I really believe sometimes that I am growing dissatisfied because your standard is too high for the others. I shall have to be careful, or else I will find myself longing for city people and city life. Wouldn't that be ungrateful of me?"

"What do you think of my standard now?" Frank asked, with ill-concealed pride, as he re-folded the letter.

Norma's lips parted, but she did not speak. She raised her handkerchief from her lap and drew the edge slowly through her fingers. The admiration that the letter expressed carried a more true meaning to her previously unsuspecting heart than it had to his, and the shock, on fathoming her cousin's unspoken confession, was near to being unconquerable. Keen, womanly perception took her through the half-evident individual admiration in Virgie's words, and back of them she found an innocence, sweet, yet all the more hurtful to herself—for she could have resented boldness or even rivalry ; but, with her cousin, all unaware of the glorious happiness or poignant grief to which she was leading herself, Norman could not find in these seconds so small a morsel of comfort as resentment.

Virgie had exalted this one man above her home, her life and her own townsmen. This in itself would have been significant to any woman who might make deductions from indications. Norma's own admiration and love had gone where her cousin's were surely going ; so to her the words but poorly covered their author's unconscious position, and she jealously

guessed the end quite some time before Harvey had finished reading. He had read the lines through a dozen times to himself ; at first with a surprised pride that had since never quite left him, although his position from her standpoint became later ludicrous and wholly untenable even in his own mind. Norma derived from them much more than his happy vanity allowed him to. No other construction could have made the real facts more clear to her. The word-grouping was only a network or pattern woven and interwoven with guileless patchery, and through it the growing tumult shone with rare glint.

"What do I think of your standard?" she repeated after a pause, her tone so suppressed that the words seemed only the vibration of his own.

"Oh, I say now, Norma, don't take it that way ! You know it was only a little silliness that I indulged myself. Any other fellow might have taken her the same way. There is novelty in it for both of us. I liked the country novelty and she the city ; that's all there is in it. Of course she put me on a pinnacle, but—well, this is just what I feared. I have never said anything about it to anyone, for the reason that they would think me a fool possibly ; and that is what you think," he said earnestly, as she raised her eyes and looked into his half angrily. "Oh ! I know," he resumed, with a resentful though unassured forcefulness, "that's what you think. There was a time when I took all the praise and favorable comparisons with a foolish satisfaction, and who wouldn't? She is wise enough to give her arguments strength. But that time has

gone now, and I have come to be sensible about it. I like the correspondence best now because of her piquant sentences ; because of its freshness ; because of her unusualness ; and, with my vanity gone, I felt that I might tell you of it all because she is your cousin. I thought you would understand—you usually *do* understand, Norma. She always wanted to know about—”

“ Listen !” she said quietly, for she was calmer now. “ Do you know what you are saying?”

“ I was explaining,” he said, apologetically.

“ Then explain no further,” she said, and he waited for her to resume. “ Your explanation is as transparent,” she commenced coldly, “ as are Virgie’s letters. Oh ! the poor stupidity of men,” and she tossed her head angrily.

“ Thanks !” he said, with a sarcastic smile.

“ I am not playing with words,” she retorted angrily. “ Men are stupid, careless—contemptibly so !”

He gazed at her fixedly—surprisedly. She laid her hands in her lap, pressing them hotly together, and returned his gaze fearlessly because of her rising anger : “ You are given power to lead, the right to lead, and in your stupid self-glorification you step into by-ways hugging your petty vanity. You have loved your friend’s letters because they flattered you. You have smiled over them, gloried in them and lived with them because of this pleasure that they gave you. Did you ever think of what she may have derived from it all? Did you ever reflect on the consequences of this admiration that she has expressed? Perhaps you have

deluded yourself with the thought that it is only environment—your environment—that has given her so unusual an opinion of you. Yes ; therein lies your stupidity. I should hate you !” she said passionately, “ I should hate you with all the strength of bitter disappointment if it were different ! But you are a man, only a stupid man, not to have seen aught save your own pleasure.”

“ What do you mean ?” he asked, too moved by her violent attack to feel anger or resentment—only mystified by her many words and startled by her ferocity.

“ I mean,” she said, and her voice sank to the softness of tender sympathy ; “ I mean that my cousin is beginning to love you, and you—you—only love yourself, which should bring you shame for your blind selfishness.”

“ Oh, that’s nonsense !” he replied, laughing nervously. But she only looked into his face, and he could not continue because of her hurt in finding him so undiscerning.

Frank essayed to laugh again in his sorry abjection, but her gaze restrained him, and his eyes turned toward the floor in embarrassment. She had solved for him convincingly, in one sentence, the cause of Virgie’s flattering admiration. Norma’s tones were too full of pity for her and condemnation for himself to leave a doubt as to the correctness of her conclusions. The words “ she loves me ” at first flushed him inwardly, but instant reaction came because of the steady gaze before him, and he became ashamed. He grasped the

arms of his chair, then relaxed the hold, and, raising his eyes to hers, he said timidly :

“ I did not know.”

Norma turned her head confusedly, for she gathered at once his complete innocence. She was ashamed to have made him confess his lack of love, and yet her heart beat with relieved joy. It was he now who gazed almost questioningly. She could not meet his eyes, and in total embarrassment she arose and went to the window, where she stood behind him. Frank watched her until she had passed, though he did not turn to follow her further, and when she was out of his range of vision he knit his brows perplexedly. Self-condemnation engaged his thoughts. Her actions tormented his contrition. As she passed his chair she passed from his reasoning, and Virgie alone filled his thoughts. In and out she came and went, through a winding mass of circumstances, entangling him more and more in the mesh of contemptible doings and sayings of mostly his, but partly her authorship, until he was humiliated bitterly.

“ Rank stupidity,” he mused. “ Anyone with half sense would have seen and understood. I wonder why I did not ! She saw, so why not I ?” he said, coming back to Norma. “ But women understand these things more readily than men ” came the thought, and his pulse quickened. His thoughts flew then. Stagnation and bitterness were gone on the instant. “ If women know, why do they know ? It must be sympathy. Could it follow that her quick perception can come from the sympathy of experience ?” he asked

himself in an elated hope. He moved slightly, but sank back again at once; then stiffened with a sudden resolve, firm in the belief that he must retrieve his position in Norma's favor just now, if ever; and he rose and walked to where she stood. Drawing the portieres together so as to hold them with one hand, he closed out the street. Norma offered no resistance, only permitting her hold to relax, and her arm hung loosely at her side.

"I know why you understood," he said positively, though his eager eyes belied the tone and implied a question.

Her eyes indicated that she did not grasp his meaning, as she pondered the words; but slowly his expression gave her the solution, and she turned quickly to leave. The first flush of understanding was not so fleet, however, but that he observed it, and, as quickly as she sought to cover its significance by flight, just so quickly did he grasp her with his disengaged arm, drawing her to him. She struggled feebly, and he was re-assured.

"If you are not quiet," he said, "I will have to let go of the portieres."

"You are mean," she replied, becoming at once passive.

"I don't feel so," he retorted joyously, and forgetting to further guard the window, he relinquished the portieres and, placing both arms about her, held her gently to him and kissed her repeatedly with tender reverence.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Whew!" "Doc" Murray ejaculated, as Kent rushed forward in surprise and drew him into the room. "I don't believe I ever see sech a 'tarnation ol' rouser ez this un is. I like t' got drifted under," he said breathlessly, as he unwound his yarn muffler from around his neck and shoulders and shook the snow out of it in a spray that filled the small entry hall.

"Sure you're not in the wrong house?" Kent asked. "Nobody sick here."

"I 'low I can make a call where they be nobody ailin' can't I?" "Doc" responded, seemingly aggrieved.

"Well, I should say you can," the parson replied, heartily. "Take off your duds and come in where it's warm. Who ever heard of 'Doc' Murray making a sociable call—and such a night? Here," he said, as they went into his study, "Doc" rubbing his hands together delightedly and Kent awakened to the full pleasure of hospitality; "here, take my chair and pull up to the logs. What a night it is! Looks like winter meant business, doesn't it?" Then, stirring the burning sticks into a ruddy bed of coals, he tossed a few chips onto the fire, where they burst into a cheerful blaze.

In the interim he had continued, various rounds of approving exclamation, his guest looking on in a delicious sense of warming comfort, making no effort to respond other than with an increasing smile. Kent laid a log across the andirons and then resumed the one-sided conversation. "I suppose that I am to ask no questions, but I am glad—mightily glad that you have come, even if I do not know to what I am indebted for the call. I was more than lonesome before you came—lonesome is no name for it. I felt like a station agent up somewhere in a little Dakota two-store town once said he felt. It was just this kind of a night, snowing in chunks, and Boreas seeming to have nine heads blowing from all directions at once. No. 38 had gone by two hours or more, and there was nothing due for another two hours, and that only a freight that would probably be late. He said that he wished something would happen."

"And did it?" "Doc" asked, expecting a story.

"Yes. He heard his instrument tick. Rushing to the table he responded eagerly. 'No. 39 lost—in—the—storm,' came the message. 'If she—reaches you—report here.' That was all that happened."

"But didn't No. 39 reach him?" asked "Doc."

"No ; and he sat all night listening to the storm," Kent laughed.

"What kind o' story do you call that?" "Doc" said, disappointedly. But, with renewed animation, he continued : "They've been some good stories come from up in that country. I wuz up there in my young days fer a right long spell, but I couldn't stay. It wan't my

kind o' country. Th' on'y trees I ever see all th' time I wuz there wuz the double-trees on 'prairie schoon-ers.' That's right!" he chuckled, as Kent laughed. "They've not enough trees in th' whole country to cover a small-sized Fourth of July pic-nic. Speakin' o' pic-nics, did I ever tell y' o' th' Centre Pole pic-nic we had about five year ago?"

"I don't believe you ever did. This is good pic-nic weather, though," Kent laughed. "Have a cigar and tell me about it?"

"Well, Centre Pole, you know," "Doc" began, but paused to puff up his freshly-lighted weed, as he rolled it in his mouth like a sweet morsel that it was; "Centre Pole is about thirty mile due east from here. Called Centre Pole 'cause it wuz the middle o' th' population o' th' United States then, though I think the stake's gone further west now. 'Milt' Craig wuz down t' read the 'Declaration,' an', as everybody hereabouts had heerd him, nobody'd go, so I felt 'at I had to. We driv' over on th' third an' come back on th' fifth, an' set me ef I ever want a-nother sech trip!"

"What happened?" Royal asked, deeply interested.

"It wan't what happened; it wuz what didn't happen. Didn't you ever hear about it?" he asked, seeming reluctant to believe his auditor entirely ignorant.

"I assure you I have not," Kent responded quickly, eagerly.

"Well, they wan't no pic-nic 't tall; but 'Milt' done th' oration fer my benefit alone, an' when we got back I thought I never would hear th' last o' it."

"Then you—" Kent began, but broke into a laugh that was greatly aggravated by "Doc's" woeful look.

"Yes, I driv' thirty mile t' hear 'Milt' Craig. That's one time I wished 'at somethin' had happened," "Doc" said, joining his host with a thunderous "Ha, ha!" that shook his mighty frame.

They both settled finally to thinking attitudes. Kent still wore a smile at the realization of "Doc's" clever return story, and he moved his seat toward the fire with a quick hitch. Leaning forward, his chair tilted to its front legs, he sat balancing himself, with the poker clasped in both hands, bouncing it up and down in an accompaniment to his thoughts.

"Doc" slipped down in the big easy chair, a little back of Kent, and, with his legs crossed on a level with his chin, he completed his comfort by placing his elbows on the chair-arms, lightly touching his fingertips before his face in an inverted V, while he contemplated the parson, with secret, pleasurable anticipation playing over his features.

"Have you heard what they're talkin' about over t' th' store lately?" "Doc" finally asked, with careful slowness.

"This isn't another 'nothing happened' story?" Kent inquired.

"It may be," "Doc" replied, "but I don't hardly 'low it is. They've decided t' build a new church fer y' in the spring."

"What?" the parson said quickly. Turning he scrutinized "Doc's" face joyously. "You don't mean it!"

"That's what I called fer," was the laconic reply. "I 'lowed nobody else 'd tell y', so I thought I would. Yep, that's th' talk, an' set me, I b'lieve they're in earnest, too !"

"Well, that is good news," Kent replied radiantly. "Only—only—"

"On'y what?" "Doc" asked.

"Only I don't think they ought to do it," he went on seriously. "I believe that we can get along without it another year. The old one has done this long, why not a little longer?"

"But I thought you wuz th' one 't wanted it," "Doc" said, in surprise.

"So I was; but that was some time ago. Things have changed since then—changed with me anyway. I have learned to love the old one best—far better than I could a new and finer one. There is room enough in the old one yet. Don't you think so?" he asked anxiously.

"They do say you're changed," "Doc" replied, ignoring the question. "I hadn't noticed it none; but, now you speak, I b'lieve y' air someways different. What's up—you've changed yer mind?"

"I didn't know then all I do now," Kent replied readily. "I wanted to be big and do big things, but I am beginning to understand my surroundings better. To be honest, I would hate to see the old church go, for one thing; and then, I don't believe my congregation can afford another now. You see I know better what to expect now. I know what the people have not, and I didn't know that before."

"But, ef they want to be generous, let 'em. I'm older'n you be, an' ef you're wise you'll get all y' can when they're willin' t' do it. Take my advice on that."

"You know better than that, 'Doc,'" Kent replied, calling his visitor to account. "How much have you ever taken from them? Tell me now, how much?"

"I didn't know any better; but that's no reason fer you t' be foolish," the old man replied apologetically.

"Just as I thought," said Kent, triumphantly. "You know yourself, that it would be more than they should undertake, if you will only admit it. See the hundreds of places where you have forgotten or ignored your chances for personal gain to save someone else. This little world is well adapted to the cultivation of generosity—all the rest of the world is too, I presume; but here we get nearer to our chances. Nowhere can we go without seeing some one between us and the horizon who is needy and—and, well, they build no new church if I can help it," he ended emphatically.

"Set me!" "Doc" replied meditatively, surprised into a heretofore unknown admiration. "I've thought many's th' time o' th' fool I be, but I'm gettin' too well along t' change my ways now. An' so you're a-goin' t' fergit your ownself jest fer them as won't appreciate?"

Kent made no response, only looking straight before him into the fire, and after a short pause "Doc" took up the voicing of his thoughts in this retrospective turn:

"I wuz sayin' thet they don't appreciate, but mebbe I'm wrong. What I've done has been what I wanted

t' do, an' I 'low 'a man ought t' be satisfied with that. Ef he ain't he certainly don't know what he's livin' fer. After all, th' thing about it is t' know when you've really done what y' wanted t' do. Sometimes I git t' thinkin' how I might 'a been rich sommers else, er famous an' great—then 's when I don't know what my blessin's is. Fer ef I wan't happy an' content it would'nt be no use. An' I don't b'lieve I ever could be thet way less'n I knowed ever'body an' ever'body knowed me. You take people now, special' children," he said, turning toward Kent a benevolent smile; "they ain't one hereabouts but'll say: 'Howdy, "Doc!"' er 'H'ar y', "Doc!"' ever' time they see me jest 's if I wan't a day older'n they be. That alone's worth workin' a lifetime fer, an' I 'low," he concluded, with a contented sigh, as he lay back in the cushions, "thet thet's more worth than anythin' else I could a-set out t' do."

"I only hope that I can do as well," Kent replied dubiously, deeply impressed by the older man's philosophy and the sweet contentment he seemed to find in so small a thing as the faith and confidence of the children about him.

"You're startin' right, anyway," "Doc" said, approvingly. He had been feeling the pulse of his people figuratively as well as professionally. Kent's growing favor pleased his benign heart, and at once attracted him to the younger man. He had found the object of his interest worthy the changing temperament. Under the false sympathy which he had at first expressed for selfish, personal gain, Kent stood with-

out wavering. He had had the strength for resistance of "Doc's" test, as well as the insight to reveal his better understanding of the inquisition. This at first surprised the older man, but at once produced a respect that invited his confidence. It was the beginning of a friendship—a friendship that would benefit Kent with a stimulus for his self-uplifting.

"I didn't 'low you sensed th' idee of our folks around here," he resumed. "They're not like folks mostly is other places. They's some things they don't take in right quick—but set me! They're quick 'nough t' see when a man's on their side; an' when they do see it they's your friend quicker'n a cat kin climb a fence."

"I am beginning to realize it," Kent replied. "The news you have brought of their intentions makes the fact more evident. I have only commenced to see my mistakes," he went on more seriously; "but, if the small change I have made in myself finds a reflection in them, and so soon, I believe that I can agree with you most heartily about their quickness to recognize and reward effort. Though I must say that their manner of showing appreciation is entirely unmerited. It certainly is a good place to be in when one does right."

"Well, I guess I've had my visit out," "Doc" finally said, grunting as he was arising from his chair reluctantly. "I'm gettin' t' be a regular ole woman, carryin' news about th' way I hev been lately."

"So long as it was such good news you need not find fault with yourself," Kent replied, laughing. "But what's the need of your going? The night is young yet."

"Yes, I know ; but my time's never my own. I feel like I've been stealin' now," "Doc" said, resignedly. "Some time I'll be too old t' get about—then I kin set around all th' time, an' nobody t' bother."

"That time will never come. You never will be too old to be active !"

"Mebbe you think not, an' mebbe y're right. Anyway, it ain't come yit," he said, laughing and moving toward the door.

"Wait. Let me get your things," Kent said quickly, as he pressed "Doc" back and went for the coat, cap and muffler himself. When he returned he helped his guest don the outer garments before the fire, meantime talking light-heartedly.

"Oh ! I'll be all right," "Doc" replied to Kent's solicitous precautioning. "Set me ! I've seen a hundred worse storms 'n this, an' I'm still ploddin' aroun' yit." "'Night !" he said, as he set his head into the storm and floundered away over the unbroken path.

"Good night !" Kent called, looking after him a moment. He closed the door then, and, after re-adjusting the strip of carpet along the bottom crack to keep the snow from driving in, he returned to the study and threw himself into the chair where his guest had sat.

From the first position he had taken he did not move. The sunlight of love played over his thoughts and warmed them to fanciful conceptions. His people were become appreciative and he was radiant with joy. Not that he cared for the reward. No ; not that. For

he had decided that their intended gift must not be made. But the consciousness of their appreciation was the thing that caused his head to reel with joy. He became giddy under the growing spell. In his mind he thanked them extravagantly, and hugged the pleasure of humble gratitude close to him. It had been a hard struggle—the mastery of false pride and false notions of his own importance ; but he was succeeding. The people testified to that by their changed attitude toward him, so he loved the people. His mind became diseased with foolish fancies, that were as the pepper and salt of hot condiments, and he stumbled on, amazed that he had not sooner found the way.

Looking back through the few months that were gone he came to thoughts of her who had first helped him to the right way, and he was at once rational. He opened his eyes slowly and, gazing before him, a greater sense of joy—a more tender gratitude came over him, while he was now keenly alive to its deepest influence. “She must soon know,” he thought. “Will it change her contempt for me? Surely her sympathy must come back to the work, if it never does to me. Ah ! if she would only care again as she used to,” he ended, his face illuminated with the hope. He leaned forward with his chin in his hands, becoming again absorbed in fancies that the fire made real. For an hour he sat thus, never moving save to blink his sleepless eyes. Martin stepped into the hall and pulled his curtains aside. With a start he turned toward her, scarcely comprehending her presence.

"There is somebody knocking," she said, with suppressed excitement. "Didn't you hear 'em? They've been there this five minutes gone!"

"Somebody—knocking?" Kent repeated, adding quickly, "Let them in, Martin ; let them in."

She first slipped the bolt and drew the door only wide enough to permit her to see without. Then, satisfying her fears, she held it wide ajar, and "Doc" Murray stepped in.

"Parson here?" he asked excitedly.

Martin nodded toward the study. Kent, recognizing his voice, crossed the room, and they met in the doorway.

"I've come t' get Martin," "Doc" said. "She must get ready t' go with me at once. Now bundle up good, Martin," he said authoritatively to the surprised Mrs. George, who went to prepare herself for the trip in the cold without further questioning.

"Doc" stepped over to the fire, rubbing his hands briskly. Kent ventured no remark at his sudden return.

"They'd been lookin' fer me ever'where," "Doc" said finally, "never thinkin' I wuz here."

"What has happened?" Kent asked.

"George Brandt's dead," he replied quietly.

Kent stood stunned and staring at the speaker.

"Happened about two this artemnoon. Henderson's boy Ray come aroun' thet way from Elder Blossom's 'bout five an' stopped in t' get warm. Then he rushes here an' gives out th' news. Ever'body's wild !

They wuz all a-lookin' fer me. But I can't do no good," he ended in a heart-broken tone.

"I'll go with you," Kent burst forth excitedly.

"Now, they be no use o' thet," "Doc" said soothingly. "Martin an' me'll go do what we can an' stay with th' girl to-night, an' ef y' want t' come out with th' others to-morra—why, that'll do. But they be no use, ez I say, o' your goin' to-night."

"But—" Kent began.

"I know. You can come out to-morra. Here's Martin now, all ready, so we'd better be a-goin'."

Landy went as far as the sleigh to tuck his wife in, and Kent stood in the door watching, the wind flickering the flame of the lamp he was holding, which gave him no chance to see them clearly. They were gone, and Landy had returned almost to the door before he knew.

"Terrible!" said Landy, when they were inside. He had gotten the news at the last moment, before the sleigh left.

Kent made no reply, but returned to his study stricken with grief that had no outlet because he was stunned with its newness. The fire had burned low, but he gave it no heed. He leaned with one elbow on the high mantel shelf, and Landy, standing in the doorway, awaited some observation. But, soon realizing that the parson was beyond talking, or being talked to, he dropped the curtains silently into place, closed the door back of them gently and tiptoed down the hall.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Landy George, now semi-elevated by his association with respectability, was contented, happy and ambitious to maintain his standing, where only a few months ago, and in all time previous, his whole life was the life of unsettled, unappreciated, unambitious slouching about over the face of the earth. Born somewhere North, he had somehow gotten into the South, and the Southern languor had gotten into him, holding him a willing victim. He grew careless, and his indifference was rebuked. He became rebellious, and the punishment was ostracism from the sociability of the lowest of the lowest. His antagonism to the world was a constant bid for men's hatred, and he received his full share and more. Bitterness overtook him, but he knew not his faults until he stood alone from the acquaintances he had made. Then he moved away from them. The change was an impressive relief. A week and he had moved again. He found that strangers were dearer to him. The knowledge of their indifference released his thoughts from self-analysis, and he became more content to move on and on until he realized that he had been accepted into the fraternity of tramphood. He was stunned, then, at

this awakening. His pride rebelled at the thought of his situation. Hated by everyone who knew him, destined to find that regard with any other man who might later find him out, he was hopelessly beyond gaining a permanency anywhere. Resentment against those who had treated him with scorn had developed his pride abnormally, and he now found himself helpless and undecided at the mouth of the two channels that lay before him, each as uninviting as two narrow back alleys in the night might be. He made no decision then, but drifted in the line of events, circumstance dictating always his movements.

Into Louisville and out again he moved within a day. Over the great railroad bridge that crosses the Ohio river he started with only a benumbed perception of his surroundings. He stopped aimlessly and leaned against the guard-rail and watched a boat far below him churn slowly up the current of muddy water, her stern-wheel lifting glassy ribbons that broke into spray when the wheel had ended their flection.

"She's a Cincinnati packet," said a boy that had stopped beside him.

Landy gave no evidence of having heard except to turn and move on impatiently. The boy trudged at his heels, stepping deftly from tie to tie with the perfection of practice, and when they were over resumed his advances with friendly persistence.

"We're in Indiana now," he said, much as if he were glad to have made the change.

Landy looked down upon him with an outward indifference, though the ingenuous assumption of ac-

quaintance stirred him into partial interest, while the news also compelled him to resume a little mental vigor.

"Yep, we're in Indianna," the boy reiterated.

"What d'y' think I care?" Landy brought himself to say, and, while it was scarcely the most amiable way of accepting his overture of friendship, the boy seemed quite satisfied. Having recognized instinctively his companion's social standing, and being of the same calling, he was content with the reply as expressed, for incivility was the finest mark for distinguishing his kind; and Landy was at once uncivil and ugly in mind.

"We're out'n th' South now," the boy said, again bidding for a closer acquaintance, though his assertion was more respectful than his previous ventures had been.

For an instant Landy was startled by his words, but for an instant only. His dulled intellect could not accept all at once the full joy of a new-born opportunity. But from the dying spark of that tiny hope a warmer fire grew up, and at each successive expansion of its blaze his mind unlimbered until he had grasped the importance of this change, and his eyes were kindled with ambition.

The boy walked silently by his side until they had reached the end of the railroad yards. Then he stopped.

"So long!" he said cheerily.

"Ah, come on!" Landy replied, and the boy again took up his place.

"Where y' goin'?" the boy asked, after a time, but received no reply.

Landy knew not himself, much as he should have liked to have known. In nowise suppressed the boy began to whistle, and they stepped the little suburban sidewalk behind them at a merry pace.

Into the busy town they went, the boy perfectly content in his new companion ; Landy moved by his infectious good spirits. Stepping into a store, and leaving the boy outside, he demanded work. All the determination of his new resolve was in his voice, giving it an offensive inflection, and an immediate refusal rewarded him. The boy looked into his face inquiringly when he came out, but asked no questions, only dropping into his stride and resuming his improvised tune. After Landy's third attempt the boy ventured :

"Say! 'Tain't no use grubbin' this town. It's hoboed t' a frizzle." Adding sagely, "I know. I been here before !"

"Who's hoboing?" Landy replied quickly, sullenly. "I'm a-lookin' fer a job !"

"Not wo'k !" the boy ejaculated in surprise, drawing a long breath that afterward came out sharply between his teeth. "Say—" he began ; but Landy turned into a feed-store, ignoring the balance of his speech, and he resolutely followed.

"Are you strong?" the man asked, in reply to Landy's query.

"You don't know him er y' wouldn't ax," the boy responded quickly, while his companion stood dumb-founded.

"Well, that's pretty good," the feed man laughed. "Do team-work I suppose?"

"Yep!" replied the boy.

"You'll do," the man said promptly. "You're working right now, so get your coats off!" To which they both responded with alacrity.

This marked the turning point in Landy's existence, and from then on his spirits, his interest in the things about him, and his future path took an upward turn. The companionship of the boy drew off much of the surliness that had grown within him. The work gave him no time for misconceptions or the imbibing of wrong impressions, and he was becoming duly happy. The boy worked three days, and innocently lent his buoyancy for the three evenings of those days to revive Landy. Then the habit of roving, the spirit of discontent, took hold upon him, and his companion awakened next morning to find him gone. All the day Landy waited—now hopeful, now despondent—and that night he did not sleep. Tossing about on the folding cot that had been allotted to him, he made the poor bed squeak from his restlessness.

When the week was over he too left and went out into the country, where he soon found other work. From town jobs to country jobs, and back again, he wandered unceasingly, yet no one place seemed to fill his needs or claim his whole attention. He drifted into acquaintances, but was long before he permitted men to gain his friendship.

In town he came to know first laborers, and later jail-guards and attendants—those who worked at the

State institution nearby. In the country he fell in with farm hands, and their hearty, rough, good fellowship won him more than his town acquaintances had done. But he was soon back again, deeply surrounded by an atmosphere of brisk, city-bred knowledge, no matter how low, that was revivifying, and in the lives of his friends he lived, for he knew no other deeds than theirs—no other events than those their conversation developed, and their interests became his interests.

Of the laws he came to have the greatest respect ; with crime he became disgusted. The State's criminal history was constantly before him, and from his narrowed view he found the State a wicked one indeed. But, aside from all this, there was a deeper impression made upon him by the constant allusion to the mentally deranged charges with which some of his friends were spending their working hours. A morbid curiosity compelled him to listen with eagerness to all that he could hear, and in the times when the keepers were silent, or seemed barren of further episode, he incited them to talk, an influence to which they gladly yielded. Thus he learned much that was later of great benefit.

After a year of work along or near the Ohio river he grew restless and wandered north still farther into Indiana. Near Ashville he found more work, but when the season had ended he would have started again his journeying, with no definite destination, had not the good-will and friendship of the place awakened a respect hitherto unknown to him. Then there was the Widow Martin—good, generous and sympathetic

—bidding for his friendship through her kindly interest. The friendship of men had hitherto been a rare blessing with him, but the friendship of a woman had never occurred to him as being within the range of possibilities. She seemed the embodiment of all that was kindness, and he was suspicious ; but when he allowed at last his confidence to respond it was the beginning of a reverence that was at once love of the—to him—near ideal. He became readily her adorer without ever having known the intermediate stage of friendship that most men in his sphere have usually enjoyed. There was no telling by what Martin was attracted to him. It may have been his imperturbable silence that attracted her loquacity, or his stoic seriousness, indicating unusual wisdom for one of her equals, that invited her efforts to extract him from himself ; but, whatever it was, she became deeply interested and found a happy pride in doing with him that which others could not do. The sequel came by natural stages to her, and the end, quite in contrast to Landy's emotions, seemed not unusual or startling. She accepted and married him much as she would have performed any of her daily doings, because circumstances had clearly pointed the way to her in each advancement. Landy was joyous, buoyant and sentimental. Martin was calm, self-contained and full of plans for using his elated state to his own betterment, as she realized that he was to be pliant under the influence of his love for her. Her connection brought him into the household of Kent, and this step seemed to him to be the zenith of all that he could ever have desired. When

he looked back his present position awed him, for out of all the good things that he had ever known as great a confidence had never been given him. This, then, was more than any hope would ever have pictured, and to-day he felt almost as insecure in the parsonage as the day he first took up his abode there. With care and scrupulous pains he watched Kent's and his wife's desires, and followed them religiously. Kent soon learned of his gratitude and faithfulness, and by degrees, as his own time was consumed by the cares that Virgie had relinquished, he gave Landy the custodianship of Snellins.

Early in his experience Landy found his pity becoming secondary to his interest in the charge, and when Kent finally permitted him the freedom of the demented man's quarters he was overjoyed. In the evenings, when Martin was busy with domestic affairs, and the parson with things literary, he slipped away to converse with Snellins. He learned to disregard the patient's ailment, and from short sentences he soon took to long ones, and eventually talked by the hour to him just as though he were in the enjoyment of all his faculties. Once Kent found him in the swing of a long argument on the advantages of working early and late in the summer to prepare for winter.

Snellins sat in his chair radiant and seemingly filled with delight. His hands fitted over his knees much as Landy's were, and Lady sat directly in front of him talking earnestly.

"I say—men must work sometimes, Snellins, *Snellins*. Did you get that, Snellins?" he said, each time

repeating the name sharply. "And it 'd better be summer than winter. Eh! Snellins, *Snellins*. Did you get that, Snellins?" Then he laughed quietly, though his face showed no trace of mirth—only a hard determination, drawing his eyes into contracted points that searched those of his companion.

Snellins laughed, seemingly impelled to it by the sounds forced upon him, though a shade of reluctance was in his voice.

Kent stood astounded at the revelation; then stepped forward eagerly.

"Whatever induced you to try that?" he asked, admiringly.

Landy arose quickly in much confusion, though the strain of intense application still contracted his features.

"I've heard th' keepers tell about it," he replied, apologetically.

"And have you made him know you or understand you?" Kent asked.

"No-o," Landy replied sorrowfully. "Only kin make him laugh."

As the days became colder they were forced to bring Snellins up to the living floor, and in the change the little household had the greatest fear lest by chance their secret might be discovered. Every precaution was taken to prevent surprises. Landy watched and guarded with redoubled care. His time eventually was given to no other work, and in these hours, through the long nights and short days, he labored unceasingly with his charge. Snellins grew physically

perfect, becoming round-faced, vigorous and hearty through Landy's ministering. For a long period covering many weeks they had all despaired, as he grew much weaker and refrained entirely from speech because of his weakness. They worried for him and for themselves, as they knew not how right or how wrong they were in keeping him in private bondage. But the time came when his improvement was marked by more flesh and a heartier appetite, and they were overjoyed. Later he laughed and afterward took up his earlier lamentations of "Poor Snell" with a lustiness that discarded all of its old dolorousness. Then it was that Landy became jubilant. He chose a set of words that he used repeatedly in a vain effort to impress them upon Snell's mind. Failure upon failure rewarded him, though they never discouraged. He went on and on, with a growing interest despite the fact of there being no signs to warrant it, until the experiment became a desire, and the desire his whole ambition.

The evening that "Doc" Murray drove away with Martin Landy was but little disturbed by his wife's departure. He had been deeply occupied, and there seemed some slight chance for a successful issue. The news of George Brandt's death impressed him only for the moment; then left at once to give room to his feverish hopes. Kent was distressed beyond expression, and Landy cared not, though out of his supreme respect for the parson he hesitated long enough with him to speak one word of condolence. As he stood awaiting a reply a thought, inspired by Kent's dejection, electrified him into quick action, and after he had

tiptoed down the hall he stopped to listen, fearful lest the parson might follow him ; then moved on again hurriedly into Snellins' room.

Pulling a chair directly in front of Snell he assumed his customary attitude and began to laugh sharply. It was the only thing that would attract the patient's attention. Snellins responded with his parrot-like reproduction and ended with "Poor Snell !"

Landy began then with his usual sentence, repeating and re-repeating the few words until he had centralized his whole will upon the object he sought. Then, with sudden force and an intensity of application that thrilled and startled even his own pulse to a rapid beating, he said :

"George Brandt's dead, Snellins. Snellins, George Brandt's dead !"

It was as if he were holding to the other man's mind, so sharply did he peer into his eyes, conveying by concentrated effort through both senses—of sight and hearing—his word of mouth.

Snellins sat upright, attempting to avoid his eyes, while a struggle far deeper than the one of fascination with which he was battling spread over his usually stolid face, and Landy, seeing his vantage, pressed closer with fierce persistency. Snellins drew himself up to his fullest height, but could not take his eyes from those before him. His hands twitched and his face worked convulsively. Landy pressed still closer. Their faces almost touched. Snellins' lips moved just a little, yet Landy held to his gaze. Still again he essayed to speak, though no sound came. Then, joy of

joys ! The words, almost unintelligible, were spoken—"Poor Virgie !" he said ; and Landy, released from the strain under which he had labored, was nearly frantic with joy. He patted Snell approvingly on the shoulder. He danced with delight and laughed unrestrainedly. Snell joined in and laughed mirthlessly an echo to his outburst, and said again : "Poor Virgie !"

"Good fer you !" Landy replied happily. "You're comin' round, my boy. You're comin' round sure. Well, well, well !" he went on, as he stopped before Snell and looked into his face approvingly. "Needn't drop yer eyes, y' ought not t' be ashamed. Ef y' knew how happy you've made me you'd be happy too. Well, well, well ! Now there be somethin' worth livin' fer, old boy. We'll have th' kinks outen you in no time, mark my word !" he said affectionately, shaking his big finger positively before Snell's face. "I didn't listen t' all thet talk about *insane* people down there on the Ohio fer nothin'," he soliloquized. "I've wisht many's th' time sence I knowed you thet I'd listened with my ears wider open then I did, but 'Susan Ann, man t' man, I think I've got th' idee.' Thet's po'try, Snell, good po'try. You'll be up t' sayin' them things fust thing *you* know." With a slow change he gradually talked his happiness out, and the events of the evening came back to his previously overcrowded mind. He thought of his wife's long, uncomfortable trip ; of the bitter cold without, and shuddered imaginatively in sympathy for her. He felt that he saw her arrive safely ; then he transferred his thoughts to the

grieving one and he said : " Poor Virgie—poor Brandt !"

Snell echoed again : " Poor Virgie !" His lips moved, but he said no more.

Landy stood over him and, laying his hand on Snell's shoulders, said :

" You'll have wuss things 'an that to say when you know what's happened," and sighed sympathetically.

CHAPTER XIX.

Ashville spent less than a day under the shock of its loss. Virgie and Virgie's future became the whole topic of conversation ere another sun had set, and the consideration shown in every man's or woman's desire to do something for her was the greatest evidence of their love. As the days went by, and no change was made, each household became more hopeful of its chances to secure her. Martin remained a firm companion through all the ordeal, but when the week had ended and all was over Virgie was made to see how near impossible it would be for her to return to her lonely home to live in solitude. She accepted the fact with an agonizing, last struggle against her desires. Her home seemed to be going from her forever. That she could make arrangements for companions and return to it in the spring seemed not to impress her at all. Beyond the fact that she was leaving, her grief-dimmed vision could not go, and it was with a terrible struggle that she yielded. Next to her own home no thought of other abode than Dole's place occurred to her. The only solace she could give herself was the kindness she would find there, and, while she was rebelling against the change, she was also struggling

between these two—her home and Aunt Faribee. Thus it was that she began and lived out her deepest mourning within the walls of the hostelry.

The winter days dragged with almost interminable slowness, and after her first grief she watched them from her room, alone, dry-eyed and calm. Those who called obtained a moment of sweet gratitude and then prompt dismissal. Her mind was inscrutable. Ashville, sympathetic, became at last curious to discover the reason of her calm and quiet grief. That her father's death should be the heaviest blow of all sorrows that could have reached her they well knew, but, though they were in one mind in this, they were widely divided as to why she should show outwardly so little sign of suffering.

"Si" was questioned and cross-questioned, yet he could only shake his head solemnly, significantly. Aunt Faribee made more effort to explain.

"I know she's takin' it right hard, God bless her. Mebbe she don't show it, but she be," she said loyally, though her words held no more information than her husband's silence did.

Ashville was feverishly interested. Visitors became so numerous that Virgie begged not to see them, and "Si," respecting her wishes, became a diplomat in guarding her. Then they turned to the parson as a last resort, trusting to his intelligence to understand, and hoping that through him they might learn enough to re-assure themselves of her state of mind.

Kent had not been to call on her since she came in to the hotel. Twice he had seen her at the window—

once when she ran away quickly on perceiving him pass, and again, when she had acknowledged his salute distractedly. Her position had caused him the deepest anxiety. The fact of her being alone was sufficient cause for him to reason that he must not force himself upon her. He knew of the bewilderment of her friends and of their inability to fathom her condition. That their sympathy was well meant he accepted without debate, but that it was coarse and rough he also knew, and it hurt him that he could in no way help to soften her suffering or console her grief. A week he watched and listened silently to all that came from that strange chamber—a hope growing within him that a change might occur. Still another week and another went by, but things remained the same. As Ashville became more puzzled Kent came to understand. Intuitively he gathered from the things he heard that she was suffering, not as the world is used to sorrow, but quite alone. Hers was a living coal burning within, away from all the balm of sympathy or of love. No words or caress could reach her grief and assuage because she could not reach it herself. It lay too deep, and, if it were not yet evident in her face, it was none the less there. Kent felt that the time must come when her strength would yield. It was marvelous, though, through these terrible days. He listened eagerly until the suspense was overwhelming for the final news to come. That it would come he knew. It was not a question with him of *how* he knew. He simply lived in a torment of fear lest the outbreak should delay until her sustaining

powers were gone, and then—"what then?" he asked himself.

Oh ! how eagerly he listened and waited to hear that she had succumbed to her grief and buried her face in lamenting relief. The nights were too long—a hundred times too long—for in them he could learn nothing of her. The days found him about where he was nearest in touch with those likely to know.

It was more than a month that she remained thus at the hotel, and he found himself so pressed by his desire to go to her that he feared his self-restraint would soon weaken under the continued requests of her friends that he should go. As their urgings grew his strength waned. A subterfuge occurred to him, and he prevailed upon "Doc" Murray to go. The experiment, however, was only wasted, and he was at last forced against his will to make the call.

Taking yet another half day, after his decision had been made, to prepare himself for the visit, he rehearsed those things that he had best say to make the time less uncomfortable for her and, if possible have it prove of some benefit.

When he did go to see her "Si" showed him to the front room on the second floor with all of the solemn regard Kent's call inspired in him. Virgie sat beside the centre-table as the men entered the room, her arm over an album that lay with its clasp turned from her. She had been loosening and refastening it slowly as she awaited their coming, and when they approached her only change was a discontinuance of this nervous toying. She was still outwardly calm though evi-

dently defiant. "Si" opened his lips as though he would speak, but closed them again and withdrew awkwardly, leaving the door partially open behind him. Kent bowed seriously, and paused under the restraint of her questioning, suspicious gaze. She did not rise to greet him, neither did she speak, only acknowledging his arrival with the slightest bow as she regarded him closely.

"Am I unwelcome?" he asked, venturing no further toward her than he had already gone.

"You may come in," she said quietly, dropping her eyes and resuming the fumbling of the album clasp.

"I have not come of my own will," he said, apologetically.

"Why, then, have you come at all?" she asked, with some resentment.

"It was not that I have not wanted to come," he replied quickly. "Not that. But I would not force myself upon you until they compelled me to."

"Quite like your old self," she responded with a sigh.

"Don't—please don't, Virgie," he said, pleadingly. "I have not used that excuse to ease my path to your good-will; I have rather tried to show you that of my own volition I would never have come. I am merely the agent of your friends and mine, seeking to influence you to receive their well-meant kindnesses. All Ashville is grieving for you to know that you are suffering, and suffering alone, and you will not let them show their love. You will not accept their sympathy or let them lighten your burden. Have you forgotten

all that they once were to you and all that you are to them?"

Through the obstinate determination behind which she had fortified herself her perception penetrated to the things that he was saying and gathered new traits that she had never known him to possess. His independence, his apparent disregard for her opinion of himself—both of these surprised her out of her first determination, and, while she made no reply, she listened attentively.

"The time is going by," he resumed argumentatively, on observing that she intended not to answer. "The time is going by in which they might have reasonably expected you to seclude yourself, and yet you are getting farther from them instead of coming back. Your ways are yours to do with as you please. No one realizes that more than I, and far be it from me to attempt to induce you to do other than that which is best. Knowing your right to do as your inclination dictates, I have respected it, but Ashville—our simple Ashville friends—they know not what to make of your self-estrangement. Each individual rebuff that you have given has been taken home to them all. You owe them more than this. Ah! I see you know that you do," he said condemningly, as she turned her head impatiently from him.

"You do not understand," she said, and there was an unusual hardness in her voice.

"I do not," he repeated solemnly; "nor does anyone else."

"And if you did, what then?"

"It might relieve us and you," he replied.

"You have changed much," she said, as she surveyed him calmly, and he frowned at the implied compliment. There was a pause then, but soon she continued: "Once you were all for Royal Kent, but now you are for your friends first, then me, and yourself not at all. Would you have come if they had not made you?" she asked quietly.

"Why?" he questioned in turn, too surprised for the instant to answer.

"Would you?" she repeated.

"No, I would not," he said, much disconcerted, and Virgie became very thoughtful.

He watched her with a growing conviction of his preconceived solution of her actions. She was steeling herself against her grief by constantly building about it all of the bitterness and resentment against people and events that she could lay hold upon. Her happy life had been a love-filled life. In sorrow she could derive no comfort from the well-springs of those other days. Each happy incident marked too sharp a contrast; each love was an added pang, and she would not think of them because of their hurtfulness. This, then, was the inflicting upon herself other sorrows to cover the one she would most care to forget, and, innocent as she had hitherto been to seeing things in a sear light, she was becoming rapidly adept in nourishing the seed of bitterness.

Kent watched her pityingly, his deep regard for her self-imposed suffering almost forcing him to withdraw. He was scrutinizing her face carefully for some

sign of relenting, all of the tender compassion and love he held for her being evident in his own, when she turned quickly and met his eyes.

"Why don't you go?" she asked waveringly.

"Because I cannot," he replied passionately.

They heard Dole's heavy tread on the uncarpeted stairway, and Kent, anticipating an interruption, stepped over and closed the door.

"Now listen!" he said, coming to where she sat, and standing over her he talked feverishly. Virgie bowed her head, and with a deathlike whiteness upon her face invited, yea, craved his bitter words of denunciation, for the fire within her had consumed all her own, and she was thirsting for others that differed from the mellow, sweet tones of her previous callers.

"Listen to me, Virgie. I must tell you of yourself. I must tell you of the things I see that you cannot see," he said. "You would have it that I think of our friends first and then of you. You know better than this, and it is only with your words that you reverse the two. It is of you first—you always—that not only myself, but all Ashville is thinking, and for our regard we are receiving the cultivated ugliness of a once beautiful mind. Is it unreasonable of your people—your people and mine—to expect now, when sorrow has come to you, that they may share it? In the old days, when there was naught but sunshine for you, the darkness of sadness came to them from time to time in their turns, shutting out all of the gold and blue of the heavens. In those days you were everywhere, and everything that was good and bright came with you.

You lifted their sorrows, and the radiance of your sweet heart shone through their trials and withered them with its good and cheering warmth. To-day, yesterday—for many days and weeks you have been bearing a sorrow that is changing you. Your friends suffer for you, but they cannot suffer with you because you will not let them. Think of what their tender love for you means to them. It was a God-given grace that led you into their affections ; it is a bad side of yourself, hitherto unknown, that is leading you out of them."

"I do not want to lose their love," she said, deeply moved.

"No, but you would wound them and turn them away from you though. I cannot understand what it is that makes you do it. Do you think that you can do that and retain their love?" he asked.

"But I did not mean to do that," she replied, sorrowfully.

"And yet you have done that and nothing else. Are you blind? Is your heart turned to stone that you cannot see and feel these things?" he asked, impatiently. "What strange motive was it that caused you to wish yourself so completely alone in your sorrow? No matter what it was, you have near reached the fulfillment of your desires. Do you realize," he said, impressively, "that you are alone, utterly, solely alone, and all the world has about turned from you?"

"Oh ! not that," she said, looking up into his face wistfully, as tears sprang to her eyes at the thought of her isolation.

Kent saw instantly that the flood-gates of her long-restrained grief were breaking, and he held to his untrue statement with fixed resolve. Looking full in her eyes he echoed her words impressively. "Just that," he said, and then went on, while she lowered her head again and began to cry softly.

"The love that they have given you merits a better return than the mean one you have given, Virgie. You have been cruel to their kindnesses, ugly to their sympathy and hateful to their love. Think! think—not as you have been thinking—of yourself alone, but of them and yourself! And then you must humble your head at their very feet, for you have proven yourself unworthy, utterly unworthy. In this you have indeed grievously sinned. For shame, Virgie; for shame! You should bury your face and weep for a deeper sin than ever you were permitted to know.

Relentlessly he had continued, while her sobs had grown deeper and more pitiable. Even though the pain at sight of her tears was choking his voice, and he must frequently clear his throat of its excited huskiness, he went on laboriously shaming her. To break the spell of her stony, unfeeling condition had cost him the pangs of bitterest suffering. To attain his object, with the remedy he thought best for her, he had had to wield an implement of denunciation as painful to him in its construction as his honest conscience could make it. It was doubly hurtful. In wielding it he had cut himself more deeply because it was hurting her. Her tears were as salt upon his open wounds, and he writhed inwardly under their smarting; and yet he bore the pain as stoically as she had earlier borne her

own self-inflicted bitterness, and would not yield himself for his own relief because her outburst must result beneficially for her. He sacrificed her for her ultimate good. He sacrificed himself for—he knew not what. It was not a time in which he could think of himself, therefore he had gone on and attained his end in view without a faltering thought.

“I am going,” he said, very low, taking up his hat from the table beside her.

She made no sign of having heard him, only crying quietly, her sobs swaying her whole frame as they racked every fibre of her being, and with a last backward glance he withdrew.

She heard the door close gently after him, and with the sound she was overwhelmed by a sudden loneliness. Her heart felt isolated from the world. Her mind fancied the ranks of her hitherto friends breaking and falling away from her, their footsteps chiming hollowly with those of Kent. When she could hear him no longer she checked her sobs and listened. All about her was absolute quiet. In the full glare of midday light she was overcome by the horror of a complete loneliness, physical and imaginative; and she stood erect for an instant, agonized in mind, broken in spirit, her hold on life struggling to support her; but the long strain had been too much. Slowly swaying she gave one last, inarticulate gasp as she would have called for aid, then sank to the floor and consciousness left her.

For many moments she lay where she had fallen; no one had come to find her. Half dazed she found

herself, prostrate. She would have risen, but her strength refused the dictates of her uncertain will, and she moved not so much as an arm. Quietly then and slowly her consciousness returned, and with it came all of the broken-hearted understanding of her terrible grief. She moved her arm under her face and cried with the bitterness of her whole torn heart. Her tears were first a balm, but her weakness permitted not their ceasing ; and from the tears of sorrow she came to those of frantic uncontrol, that grew momentarily fiercer.

Aunt Faribee came into the room at dusk and would have left again, surprised at not finding her, had not a sob caught her ear. In quick alarm she ran to the prostrate girl, stooping and lifting her head into her lap.

"My little lamb," she said soothingly, to which only a low moan responded. Lifting Virgie into her chair she hastened to the doorway and called "Si," the excitement in her voice bringing a ready response from all the men in the office, "Doc" Murray among the rest.

"She must be got t' bed at once," "Doc" said compassionately, adding in explanation : "She's exhausted herself. Th' long strain was too much t' stand this un, an' now she's jest collapsed nacherally. She'll want care now, Aunt Faribee," he said, "an' mighty good care. Get her t' bed an' I'll be back quick 's I can get t' Orrig's an' back. Mind y'—good care is what she'll need!" he ended, in earnest caution, as he hastened away, all the others following silently.

CHAPTER XX.

For many weeks, after the breaking of her long resistance against the outward signs of grief, Virgie lay passive. Too weak to be moved, too broken in physical and mental strength to admit of vigorous treatment, she hovered between days of lucidity and dream-land. In the days just succeeding the outburst occasioned by Kent's rigorous invectives she wept unrestrainedly. No words of kindness, no consoling reached her—not even the great care that "Doc" gave her modified in the least her lamenting. The flood that had so long been checked by her unusual strength, once freed, needed to run itself out, and the kind ministering of her friends could no more help her check its torrent than she could help herself. But, after this outburst had spent itself in the days and nights of constant weeping, she was in the greatest need of their tender care. Her strength was gone, together with all her recuperative energy, and she sank rapidly into a state of passive invalidity.

Ashville mourned her condition with tenderest awe, never quite sure of its own mind—whether or not to condemn the parson, and withal, too occupied at the beginning with the bulletins of her condition to decide

the question by discussion. However, in the time that dragged along by weary days until the days had become weeks, they became more used to her sad condition. Startling rumors had found a beginning from time to time, saying that the worst had come, but the frequency of these had taught them incredulity; and after long waiting they began to accept her condition as a temporary fixture, and in the interval they took up more attentively Kent's part in it, giving his actions a more thorough airing.

Winter was breaking. The frost coming out of the ground in the few hours of midday left a sticky clay that clung to boots and wagon-wheels with ugly persistency until night came again and froze it over with a thin crust. It was the ugliest part of all the year. The warmth that penetrated to the earth at short intervals was but the taste of the good things to come; then the poor, tired humanity of the little community were sent back into the cold again, of which they were already so weary. It was the period of inactivity—too early to begin any of the coming season's work, yet late enough to barely cover them with the fringe of sweet promise, which, when withdrawn, left a feeling of impatient, sullen unrest. Ashville was in no humor to be charitable now. Tired by their long, enforced rest, her people were moved with an unusual activity, and entered into a discussion of the parson in ill-humored diversion.

Orrig was very busy one evening with some articles of merchandise just teamed over from the city and left on the platform that ran along the back of all four

stores. He did not see anyone enter from the front. As he put his head through the doorway, to call to the apprentice that he might carry in the smaller packages, he discovered Lem Henderson, and was much surprised.

"Hello, Lem! Anythin' y' want?" he asked.

"No, not's I know of," the old man answered.

"Then y' better have a look around," Orrig laughed. "Say, Lem! Tell th' boy t' come out here."

"Ain't in hyurr," Lem said, laconically, as he turned his head and looked about him slowly, as if the apprentice might be in hiding somewhere near at hand.

"Dern thet—Say, Lem! Th' bucket o' Golden Twist's come 'at you wuz a-lookin' fer."

"Well, fetch her in," the old man responded, his face lighted with delicious anticipation.

"You jest wait," Orrig replied, smiling to himself as he continued checking over the few newly-arrived parcels with a carefulness that added much importance to himself.

"Th' Golden Twist's come," Lem repeated to Doles, when that gentleman later stepped in for a plaster for his wife, although he seemed in no particular hurry to have his wants filled, and gladly accepted Henderson's news, permitting it to divert him entirely for the time being.

"No?" he replied, in questioning undertone.

"Yep; Orrig jest told me. Out back there now," he said, motioning toward the back with his head importantly.

Doles cared nothing for the arrival of Lem's favorite, though he stepped back to the rear platform with much expectancy, showing thereby his anticipation of something as much desired as had been the Golden Twist. Orrig looked up at him, with an annoyance expressed in his face and gestures, and asked :

"Anythin' y' want, 'Si'?"

"Hev they come?" Doles asked in turn, ignoring the first question.

"What? Hev what come?" Orrig asked impatiently, in assumed ignorance.

"Th' seeds," "Si" answered disturbed, looking about over the goods, though discreetly venturing no further than the door.

"Ain't seen 'em yet," Orrig replied. "But can't y' wait till I get through checkin'?"

"Certain'," "Si" replied good-naturedly. Then half in apology : "Faribee's in a sight of a hurry. Pestered me nigh t' death."

"Well, she has," he reiterated smiling, as Orrig turned and looked at him doubtingly.

"What's th' matter with that Twist?" Lem called in a cracked voice.

"What Twist? What y' talkin' about?" asked Weller, as he and "Milt" Craig came in, just in time to hear Lem's impatient query.

"Th' Golden Twist's come," Lem replied happily.

"That's good ; I wuz about out," Weller said, adding as "Si" approached : "Hullo, Si ! What y' got?"

"Flower seed," Doles replied beamingly.

"Well, open 'er up an' we'll see what's new this year?" said Craig.

"Better wait till Orrig comes in ; he won't be long. Ef th' boy wuz on'y here he'd be done sooner. Wonder where the boy is? He's mad ez blazes out thur," "Si" said, motioning in the direction of the back door, meantime looking about for the boy.

"Bark's wuss'n his bite," Lem observed.

"Wonder ef they's anythin' new in garden stuff?" mused Weller, as he moved the long flat box on the floor with his foot so that he could read the label right side up. "Right smart o' big-named flowers, but don't 'pear t' be nothin' else," he said finally.

"There. Tag !" screamed the apprentice, coming through the front door just back of "Doc," and "Doc," much out of breath, sank onto a sack of soft stuff tagged "Timethy," laughing between catches in his breathing.

"Hyurr, boy !" yelled Orrig from the rear. "Whur y' b'n?" And, without waiting for an answer, "Ef yer done foolishin' y' kin get some o' this stuff inside afore it freezes."

"Bring yer hatchet in an' open ther seed box?" said "Si," impatiently.

"What's all th' hurry?" asked Orrig, coming in with that tool, but making the most of the occasion by complying reluctantly. Prying the lid up carefully he withdrew each nail with painful slowness and placed them, heads together, in a little pile on the floor beside him. The men all stood or sat close by and watched

his progress eagerly. When the nails had all been extracted Orrig raised the lid slowly, disclosing a variegated lithograph on its reverse side. The important manner in which he did this heightened the effect, and he was rewarded with admiring "Ohs !" from all about him. Then from the top he removed a large colored poster, covered with faithful copies of each flower in full bloom. An impossibly smooth young lady was smiling meekly from their bower. Orrig was obliged to rise to his feet to open the picture its full length, "Doc" taking hold of one edge gingerly to aid him.

"Better ever' year, ain't it?" "Si" observed, but was met with no response. "Thur's thet what-y'-call-it?" he resumed. "Thet's what Faribee tried t' raise last year an' got on'y that," and, with both hands, he indicated first a gorgeous cluster of roses, then a century plant in bloom on a Southern lawn.

"But them kind on'y bloom once in a hundred year," Lem said quickly.

"That's all right," "Si" responded, choking with his joke. "Hern ain't come outen th' seed yet !" After which he burst forth unrestrainedly, and "Doc" Murray laughed himself into a fit of coughing.

"You kin gimme a sack o' them rose seeds," "Si" said to Orrig, when he had regained his power of speech. "We'll see what we kin do this year again."

"Not tel I've counted th' box," Orrig replied ; then, for fear he might be persuaded out of this stand, said quickly : "I'm a-goin' t' open th' pail o' 'Flake' fer Lem now, ef thet boy ever gits it in hyurr."

"Wife at prayer-meetin'?" asked "Doc" of Weller.

"Yep," Weller replied shortly. "Say, Lem! How's th' exzemy gettin' on?"

"Middlein'—Middlein'," Henderson replied, hitching himself around from watching the door, with a new interest, and that interest an opportunity to voice his suffering.

"I git a mite o' warmth into me these days around noon time now, so it ain't sech a botherence."

"I wouldn't get too het up," "Doc" advised gratis.

"Oh, I ain't! It's more likely weather now, so I'm particlar."

"'Doc'—'Doc' Murray!" came an excited female voice from the door. All of the men turned quickly. "Doc" responded to the call at once, and, closing the door after him, followed the young lady up the street.

"Your girl, wan't it, 'Milt'?" asked Weller.

"She come from over t' th' hotel, where she's he'pin' nurse Virgie," Craig replied quietly. "It ain't nothin' up t' my house."

"I'd go over ef it'd do any good," "Si" soliloquized. Then, in explanation, he said: "They won't let me near her; I ain't seen her fer two weeks."

"I hear'n 'at she wuz bad again," Weller added, to strengthen "Si's" apology.

"An' most nobody but 'Doc' knows how bad either," said "Si."

Lem shook his head sadly.

"Faribee t' prayer-meetin'?" Weller asked of "Si."

"Si" nodded his head affirmatively, as he appeared unusually serious. He knew that he could be of no assistance at the hotel. In fact, he was at all times

more in the way than helpful, yet he felt somewhat guilty not to return there when there was some chance of his being needed.

Weller seemed moved to an equal seriousness by his silent answer, but continued bluntly :

"Wife wanted me to go, but I wan't minded thet way."

"What's ketched you so suddint? Thought it wuz you ez wuz fer th' new church here a month back," said Orrig, with apparent innocence, as he continued his work.

"Well, ef nobody'll say it I will, though they's plenty thet's been thinkin' like I hev here of late : Passifyin' is more in a preacher's line, it strikes me, than brow-beatin' is. Thet's why I won't go !" Weller replied sullenly, turning and looking at Lem, who kept his eyes glued to the stove-pipe damper, though he crossed his legs, thereby indicating his uneasiness.

"They's no need o' putting it so strong," "Si" said quietly, a lack of positive defence being evident in his tone.

"Puttin' it strong? Y' can't put it too strong !" Weller retorted.

"Mebbe y' can't an' mebbe y' can," "Si" replied. "Fac's gits twisted sometimes, y' know, an' I think that's what they air in this case. Now I know."

"What do y' know?" Weller broke in heatedly. "That's the question. Mebbe ef you'd tell us all you know things 'd be wuss 'an they air? Ef there's airy a thing 'at you can say why don't you say it? Nobody's hinderin' y' as I can see. That's jest it," he said, turn-

ing toward the group, "nobody'll say a word ; all jest sit around an' think. I know what y' think all right, an' I know what I think too an' it's the same thing as you—that's what it is, on'y you won't none o' you up an' say it !"

"They ain't no use gettin' too riled," said Orrig venturesomely.

"I ain't riled, leastwise no rileder than I hev been," Weller replied explainingly, and turning his remarks upon the storekeeper. "What ef it was your daughter, er Craig's here—think you wouldn't have nothin' t' say? You'd be riled, too, I'm a-thinkin', an' ef you wan't here y'd want ever'body else to be fer y'."

"But mebbe he ain't done no harm," "Si" ventured pacifyingly.

"I don't 'low he hev now," Weller answered sarcastically. "What d' y' call harm? Drivin' her near crazy with grief, an' that ain't harm? Puttin' her to bed so she needs "Doc" and all the women ever' minute ! That ain't no harm neither, is it?" he asked explosively. Then, at the height of his anger, he put another awful question to "Si," which made him blanch with horror, and caused Lem to tremble in fear.

"What ef he'd a-killed her—would y' a-called that harm?"

"Si" paused for an instant to reply, but for an instant only, his face darkening as he looked steadily into that of Weller's. Lem moved still more uneasily, and Craig, rising precipitately, caused Orrig to move quickly toward the group. "Si" remained seated,

with an undisturbed gaze that Weller returned sullenly.

"You're wrong, Weller!" he said, when the spell of their looks had been weakened by "Milt" regaining his seat, and Weller let his eyes move slowly to the floor, back to "Si's," then to the floor again, as he awkwardly turned his hand over on his knee.

"Mebbe I did say it too strong," he replied, and "Si," too amiable to retain his own anger, spoke up at once.

"I know," he said, "You wan't satisfied with the way things wuz goin', and y' thought mebbe the rest of us didn't see all thet you see; but we hev, an' we've thought about it ez much ez you, on'y we wan't minded t' talk about it 'cause we might be wrong. I 'low I know ez much about this thing ez anybody, an' that's *nothin'*; so thet's what's held me to the idee thet th' time t' arg'y about it ain't come yit."

"But there's th' evidence before y', ain't it?" Weller asked, with a lingering persistence.

"Evidence ain't all in yit," "Si" replied sagely.

"You fellers better go t' law," said Orrig jocularly, hoping to inject new humor into the breach as he moved away.

"It ain't between me an' 'Si,'" Weller replied, in an appeal to Orrig, that evidenced his friendly feeling toward his former antagonist.

"No it 'tain't 'tween us nor nobody else," "Si" said, with a positiveness that completely subdued Weller.

"How about th' Golden Twist?" Lem asked diplomatically, and all accepted the diversion gladly, Orrig

displaying greater alacrity in opening the pail than had graced his previous movements.

"Say, Mr. Orrig!" the boy began, when voices were heard outside the front door, and Orrig raised his hand warningly. There were a few muffled words, then a woman's voice broke in upon them as the door opened, and Mrs. Weller entered, while the parson held it ajar for her to pass.

"Thank you!" she was saying. "If Sam's here I'm all right. But come on in. You can walk our way a piece soon's I get some things."

Weller held his breath and his heart stopped in alarm as they awaited the reply.

"I will just come in and see if he is here; but I must hurry up to the hotel then!"

She agreed half-happily, half-sadly.

"Sam here?" Mrs. Weller began, when she discovered the group about the store. "Oh, yes; there you are!" and, turning to the parson, she concluded, "All right now; much a-blighed."

"Hello, boy!" Kent said, placing his hand on the grinning apprentice's shoulder. "Hello, 'Si' and Lem!" And, stepping so that he could see all the others, he saluted them by a wave of his disengaged hand.

"Si" arose and came hurriedly to where he stood, though covering his action by a careless motion.

"Harr y'?" he asked, grasping Kent's hand and giving it an unusual squeeze that immediately attracted his more close attention. Then, under his breath, with

startling inflection, "Si" said, "Th' hotel !" and nodded in its direction.

Kent's face contracted slightly in alarm, but, quickly recovering, he bade them all good-night and hastened away.

Mrs. Weller "visited" with "Milt" and "Si." Her husband was silent. Orrig busied himself with her small commissions.

"How's your exzemy, Lem?" she asked considerately, finally turning her attention to the old man.

"Middelin' since the weather warmed up ; it's eased a bit now, so I'm feelin' better !" he replied in great pleasure.

"Hear you've got a inkebator—never see one. How's it work?" "Milt" asked all in a breath.

"I've jest set it. Don't know yet," Mrs. Weller replied proudly ; "but ef we get all th' circilar says we will me an' Sam'll be chicken-rich afore summer !" she laughed, and Weller smiled in doubtful amiability.

They had talked thus socially for about an hour when "Doc" Murray entered, his face radiant, and his benevolent eyes sparkling with a happy light.

"Fill that !" he said triumphantly, as he handed Orrig a small phial from his case. His voice quivered with suppressed emotion. Turning to the hushed group, who were smiling in sympathy, their faces eager in silent questioning, he spoke slowly with suppressed emotion. "The change has come," he said. "Our darling is resting now. The nervous spell is broken. She will recover !"

"Bless God!" responded Mrs. Weller, who was a Methodist, fervently, and each of the men breathed an "amen."

"It was the parson who did it!" "Doc" added exultantly. "He broke the spell weeks ago—that's what saved her, and I am free to say now that it wuz him that did it."

"Don't y' 'low she'd a-been all right without that?" Weller asked in repentant surprise.

"It wuz him thet did it," "Doc" reiterated firmly, as he placed his phial within his grip again and started to leave.

Weller turned to "Si." As their eyes met a quick flash of understanding passed between them. "Si" conveyed complete forgiveness; Weller, absolute repentance.

"Si" linked his arm in "Doc's" as they moved up the street, and when they reached the hotel volunteered his services.

"Not now, 'Si;' I wouldn't go up now. She's sleepin', an' he's there, all broke up. Better wait till morning," "Doc" said.

CHAPTER XXI.

When Kent left Orrig's that night he followed out, with fearful uncertainty, "Si's" meagre suggestion and went at once to the hotel.

Once in the office his fears were allayed by the absolute quiet and lack of excitement about the place. He paced up and down the small room impatiently awaiting the landlord's arrival, feeling confident that "Si" would shortly follow him.

The time moved but slowly, and he felt that he had been there hours when "Doc" happened down the stairs and discovered him. Their conversation was brief, but of the happiest sort on "Doc's" side, while Kent mostly listened. Fearful lest he might intrude Kent held against "Doc's" urging until his every doubt had been dispelled, then followed softly up to the little bed-chamber. Close to the bed he came. Millie Craig looked at him in surprise, then turned away and followed "Doc." When they were gone Virgie's eyes slowly opened, and, as he gazed into them with all the intensity of longing compassion, she smiled wanly, half-happily. His faculties rebelled against the gentle inference. His head became dizzy with the confusing truth of her sweet capitulation and his long-borne

resignation. Self-condemning, self-tortured, he had believed himself outside the possibility of her graciousness. It was cruel delusion—a trick of her weakness that led her to invite him back to the deliciousness of her friendship ! He was wild with restraint, while his heart expanded painfully, conspiring to delude him further. He was torn with emotion that cautioned him to be honorable, yet urged him to accept the change.

In the instant that he hesitated she moved her hand feebly toward him from where it lay on the coverlet, and in the greatest of ecstatic joys he placed his own over it, kneeling beside her. Slowly she closed her eyes again. He did not move, in fear lest she show some impatience with his grasp, and he held to the little emaciated fingers with tenderest firmness ; but as the moments sped he breathed suppressedly ; her respirations grew more regular, more deep. Then she slept. Oh, the beauty of it ! It was true, true ! The temporary hopefulness became a more assured fact. Her friendship had come again. Kent opened his eyes wildly as he looked into her sweetly-calm face. Gazing long he drank the precious truth with all the goodness, all the pleasure that this dearest of earthly things could give to him ; and when “Doc” came again he found him yet on his knees, contemplating her features—all the joy he felt and longed to express shining radiantly in his face.

Admiring and believing in Kent’s new sincerity and new manliness, “Doc” felt the need of giving to the young man the support of his own firm position, and in the bulletin of the last happy change he linked the

circumstance of Kent's splendid achievement. That Virgie had passed the last crisis of her long, uncertain tenure to life, and was now in the pathetic beginning of surety, was, it would seem, happiness enough to cause her friends the greatest ecstasy ; but to have added to this the news of her renewed friendship for Kent, and "Doc's" own statement that it was almost entirely due to the parson that her life had been spared, seemed beyond belief. A short calm succeeded the heralding of this doubly good news. Unrestrained admiration followed quickly, its impetuous generalness indicating the willingness that had long laid dormant because of the doubting. Little of the things that were said reached Kent's hearing. That a change had come he knew. The continued warmth of his reception wherever he went conveyed that to him, but he did *not* know for how much of this he was indebted to "Doc," who had, with astute care, admitted the people to the close understanding of their parson that he possessed, and so long as Kent did not know "Doc" enjoyed his part the better.

Events moved quickly now for Kent. He counted away the days, then the weeks, as he yearned for the time when she should be well and strong again. The plans for the new church had reached a settlement. The little community, in supposed secrecy from their parson, worked over them with the greatest interest, and when the details were all arranged they laid before him their proposition. That was a happy hour. Kent accepted their offering with delight, though he was near dumb from the gratitude which surged within

him. Afterwards he thought, "Oh! if I could but have thanked them," and his silence in that time came back to worry his after-thought, though the committee said that they never saw anybody so "took in" as he was, and were satisfied as to his feelings. What he did say was that, though he was grateful, he thought that the time for a new church had not quite come, but that he would take up their plans and, after considering them, give the committee his approval and suggestions later. In the one word "later" he found refuge, for he had decided that to him it signified a time very remote from the present season, and it served the purpose well. In it the committee found no cause for displeasure, and in this then, too, they were satisfied.

Spring came quickly, and with its revivifying influence Virgie's strength returned. It was a delightful morning—that first morning that "Doc" gave his permission for her to sit up. Aunt Faribee and Millie were at once equalized in years by their motherly delight over her change. Solicitous and happy they watched her with great enjoyment. "Si" came up, half-bashful and unintrusive, smiling joyously to see her there before the window, serene and smiling contentedly. Kent also came to see her, and, while he talked restrainedly with Aunt Faribee and Millie mostly, Virgie's eyes were animated with a splendid enjoyment, and a flush suffused her wan cheeks whenever he addressed himself to her. This first visit was of necessity short, for "Doc," with precautionous solicitousness, curtailed the patient's recreation to a meagre half hour; but, as her strength returned, his caution re-

laxed, and for many days they were left together in uninterrupted sweet communion.

It was the fourth of a series of very warm days when he came over to the hotel one afternoon. He had been reluctant to give up the reveries of dreamy heaviness that were claiming him even for so great a pleasure as that of being with her. Laziness, drowsiness and invitations to slumber were in the atmosphere. Everywhere about them new green was draping nature, and the warmth that stimulated her only enervated those who were under the spell. He shook off with effort the seductive influence of it all, and, as he became more fixed in his purpose, wandered slowly toward the hotel, living in the present deliciousness of changing surroundings, with only dull anticipation of the coming hours.

Virgie saw him from the window and smiled happily, though in the long interval of waiting for him to come upstairs to her room she partly forgot his arrival, occupying her thoughts with the red-tipped maple-tree buds that hung so as to partly screen her window. Kent stopped and talked with "Si" for a time, sitting on the door-step beside the landlord, who was taking a sun-bath, deep-seated in an old chair with rickety frame of bark-covered rusticity.

"Lazy weather, ain't it?" "Si" observed, after a long pause that had followed their greeting. Kent did not reply, and, after another interval, the host ventured again: "It's a early season. Why, I can remember when we didn't git this kind o' weather 'till early in

June ; but, great snakes ! that's two-month yet. I don't care though ; I like it better this way."

"The winters are shorter than they used to be," Kent observed.

"Your right they air, but they suits me the shorter they gits," "Si" said positively, and Kent smiled languidly, while another pause followed.

"Ain't y' goin' up ? She's all alone," "Si" said after a time, and Kent arose and climbed the stairs quietly. Standing in the open doorway he leaned against the casement and watched Virgie. She was entirely unconscious of his presence, seemingly having forgotten to watch for him. Absorbed with her own reflections her face changed its studious expression frequently as he stood there, and Kent's moved in sympathy, being equally unconscious of its workings.

"Why so serious?" he asked quietly. "Have you come back to serious things so soon?" She turned her head calmly and smiled at him, undisturbed by his question, for she had expected him.

"I thought that you had forgotten to come up," she replied, "so I occupied my time with little debates within my head."

"You looked as if you were worrying. Is it good for you to have such debates?" he asked.

"Oh ! I was not seriously troubled," she laughed. "Not so bad as that. I have not the energy to inflict myself with very weighty things to-day. It is too deliciously warm."

"If not serious, then I may share the thought with you?" he suggested.

"Certainly. Come over here by the window and I will show you," she said, interestedly, and when he was close by her side she asked: "If that bud can come out and reach the form it has in four or five days—you see it begins to show already the shape it will be in summer, why does it not—now listen closely—why does it not keep on growing at its present rate as the weather becomes warmer?"

Kent looked from her to the buds hanging almost within the window, then back into her face again, and, as she was evidently deeply in earnest, he smiled perplexedly, and said: "Surely you don't mean to ask me that seriously?"

"Indeed I do," she replied. "You wanted to know of what I was thinking—now answer the question yourself. Perhaps it will show you why I was serious."

"But," he protested, "it does grow larger in summer."

"Of course it does; I already knew that. But it has grown an inch in four days, say; and it will take it six months to grow two inches more. That is the problem. Why does it not continue to grow as rapidly?"

"Too much for me," he replied, looking at her in wondering admiration. "But, tell me, what made you think of it?"

"I presume that it must have been because I had nothing else with which to occupy my mind," she replied. "Can't you give me something better with which to replace it? What is the news? Tell me something. What have the folks over to your house

decided to do? Martin tells me that Uncle Tipman wants Landy to come back and work for him; of course she doesn't want him to go. She said that she did not. Are you going to let him?"

"That would be news indeed," Kent smiled. "It would be news to me to know what he intended doing." Then he added more seriously, "I should dislike very much to have him go, perhaps as much as Martin would; but I fear that I am helpless in the matter."

"Why are you? Is there nothing else that you can get for him, or have you tried?"

"Tried—tried? I have tried everything that I could think of, but there seems to be no place else for him. I would do willingly all that I might be able to do for Landy, yet the outlook is anything but bright for my helping him."

"Naturally you feel interested in him after his having been with you all winter," she said thoughtfully, as she endeavored to find some suggestion.

"There is more than his having lived with me these few months to have caused me to wish him well," Kent said slowly, as, with his back toward her, he stood looking out of the window.

"On Martin's account?" Virgie asked.

"That, and still more," he replied. Then added quickly, "Landy has done me a favor beyond the power of most men to do, and he has my everlasting gratitude for it."

"Can you tell me what it is?" she asked innocently, with great interest, and, since he still remained with his back toward her and did not reply, she continued,

while she watched him earnestly, "I do not want you to answer if you cannot do so willingly."

"I would like to, best in the world," he said, "but—"

"You need not seek excuses," she said quickly; "I did not mean to intrude on your confidence. I did not, honestly."

"It is not an intrusion. Perhaps it is right that you should know," Kent said; then hesitatingly went on. "I want to tell you. It is due Landy that you should know; but the best way to tell you, that's it, that's what makes me halt so."

Virgie remained silent and waited that he might shape his sentences to suit his own fancy. He gazed abstractedly from the window for a seemingly interminable time, then turned and faced her, while he leaned with his back against the wall.

"I do not want to shock you unnecessarily, and that is what makes it so difficult for me to commence. If you will prepare yourself for a pleasant surprise, first, it will make my words easier. I remember so well your complete mystification some few months ago over the departure of one man named Snellins that I hesitate in one breath to inform you that I am about to clear the circumstances of all its mystery. Yet such is the case."

"Then he is back?" she asked excitedly.

"Now there it is! Calm yourself or I shall not tell you," he said, with determination.

"But tell me—tell me?" she said. "Please don't delay so. Tell me, is he back?"

"He is here," he said. "He is here in Ashville. The fact is, he has never been away."

"And Landy?" she asked, surprised at the information. "What is Landy's connection with it?"

"Simply this. That Snellins was a very ill man when we took him in, and Landy has restored him to complete health and strength. That is Landy's connection with it."

"I don't understand," she said, with a puzzled expression; "you are so vague. Tell me more?"

"There is nothing more that I can tell," he replied evasively. "Landy has proven himself Snellins' friend when Snellins needed friendship most; that is all. Yet it is the thing that makes me wish to befriend Landy now. It is causing me to solicit your friendship for him."

"He is a dear," she said. "I shall love him for his goodness. And Martin—did she, too, have a part in it?"

"She certainly did," he replied.

"Isn't it funny," she said, "no one has ever said anything of it to me, not even Martin?"

"No one but Martin knew, and she was cautioned against speaking of it; so you must not hold her accountable."

"But I will. I shall scold the old dear dreadfully and make her or Landy, or you, or somebody bring Snell to me at once. Where is he, still at your house?"

Kent nodded affirmatively.

"Umm!" she mused audibly. "I don't think that you have been a bit nice to me. Now that is how I feel

about it, if you would like to know !” and Kent laughed light-heartedly. Resuming she said, “How wonderful that you had been able to keep this so secret ! Did—did he know?” she asked, referring to her father for the first time since his death, and her voice caught on the pronoun, as she feared Kent would not understand. Again Kent nodded in the affirmative. “Then I am simply overwhelmed at your long and successful secrecy from me ! Was it that you thought me unworthy of your confidence—or—or” And again her words halted as she became confused. “Or did you not wish me to come to him?”

“You came to the parsonage when Bennie was ill,” he said, simply.

“I do not understand at all. Tell me ; tell your reasons, for you must have had them?”

“I thought that the telling you my goodness, would affect you beyond further inquiry, but, since it has not, I am unprepared for your question. I must, however, refuse to be catechised further,” he said, with assumed gayety, that was at once transparent and futile ; and, realizing this, continued : “Candidly, I ought not to tell you. Please let that suffice, and some day you will learn the rest ; but just now it is best that you should not know.”

Virgie looked at him in astonishment. This unmovable firmness was so unlike the old days, when he had ever a ready answer to all her questions. It was a phase for which she was unprepared. Then, too, he had given an explanation of his stand to the limit of his possibilities without subterfuge or quibbling. This was

a surprise to her, for through his changes she had not known the gradual raise from insincerity to frankness, and, coming upon the latter in its forceful, unmovable position, her usual attitude of assurance with him found itself balked and rebounding.

"I suppose that I must be satisfied," she said finally. Her curiosity was in nowise allayed, yet she was secretly pleased with his evidence of strength.

"For the present at least," he supplemented quietly. "All that I have told you, though, should be enough news for one day at least, shouldn't it?"

She shook her head negatively with a pretty smile, and he was forced to laugh at the persistency conveyed.

"Well, it is all that you will get anyway," he said, to which she poised her lips and shrugged her shoulders with an assumption of indifference that meant that she was not the least satisfied.

Kent smiled approvingly at her sweet childishness, and led the conversation to trivial things. Martin came in later, interrupting their desultory talk with fussy solicitousness. The young people were visibly disturbed by her advent, since their moods had settled naturally into spiritless yet blissful quietude. Their conversation had come to broken pauses between unenlivening platitudes. The sense of sweet companionship had served for enough enjoyment, and it was this that the innocent Martin had so effectually disturbed; but Martin did not know, nor did their partial indifference serve to enlighten her. With customary importance she assumed at once the head of the conversation, and permitted her garrulousness full

sway. Virgie, ever considerate, loaned first a kind consideration, and later her whole interest ; but the parson could not bring himself out of the late mood, and eventually, as Martin indicated her permanency, he withdrew with just the least resentment expressed in his tones at his departure.

"What has Landy decided to do, Martin?" Virgie asked seriously, breaking in upon her running comments.

"Goin' back t' Nance Tipman's, I 'low," she replied dejectedly, at once becoming grave and turning silent.

"I have been thinking," Virgie began. Then said, "If you will pull me back out of the sun please, dear?" Afterwards resuming, "There, thank you! I have been thinking that, if it were not for your leaving *him* alone there, that you and Landy and Gyp might come out to my house when I am stronger." She hesitated for an instant, then began again rapidly without the hesitancy that had punctuated her former words. "I shall need someone, and Landy is just the one that I should like best, if you could go with him. There is all the place to care for, and it will need a man, and the housework will be more than I can do just yet. Oh, if you could come, Martin, how splendid it would be for all of us! This warm air and sunshine makes me wild to be back with my garden and chickens and things ; and you, Martin—how you would enjoy it! Everything your own way, you know ; that is, until I become strong enough to boss about," she laughed happily. "Landy would be better off with us than

anywhere else he could go. It would be so nice for all of us—except—except him,” she ended.

Martin sniffled with emotion that was so mixed by joy, gratitude, anticipated happiness and regret at leaving Kent that she knew not why she was tearful. The future seemed to have opened to her all of its greatest blessings, and she could have distilled just now their sweetest essence but for the one fact of having to gain this happiest of arrangements for most of those dear to her at the expense of the parson, who held in her heart quite as large a place as any of the others.

“I’d hate t’ leave the parson,” she said.

“I would hate to have you,” Virgie replied. “But with all of you staying there now it would be too much of a burden, Landy and you and Gyp, as well as Ben.”

“Snellins!” Martin ejaculated in great surprise. “How did you know?” she asked.

“He told me,” Virgie answered quietly.

“The parson told you? My land! I didn’t ’low he would,” she said, with strange feelings of released constraint and glad opportunity. “Did he say he was right enough to be about soon?”

“He said that Landy had about cured him,” Virgie replied.

“So he did, partly. Got him so’s he’s knowin’ again,” she said proudly. “But, ef it wan’t for the parson, I want t’ tell y’ there’d never been the chance,” she ended in double loyalty.

“Knowin’?” Virgie asked innocently.

"Yes mum, knowin'. He's got so 'at he knows all of us at the house, an' mostly those 'at goes by outside, though we does have t' keep him out o' sight from them fer a spell yit. That's what the parson says ; so's nobody'll guess that he's ever been outen his mind."

"Was he so bad as that?" Virgie asked, deeply moved.

"Yes, an' almost worse," Martin replied, giving her voice all the inflections of awfulness possible, and filled with delight at being permitted to talk about him.

"There wuz a time we thought he'd be took down ; he got so low. It wuz a sight o' work t' keep him from sickness. But we done it."

"And, then, he was not sick?" Virgie questioned further, in great surprise.

"No, of course not. We never let him get—not sick. Yet he—was—out—of——"

"Oh ! Martin, surely Ben was not—he did not—" And then she stopped, struck dumb with horror at the possibility that occurred by reason of the only evident conclusion.

"No—not crazy," Martin replied in quick alarm, fearing that she might have made an error. The parson said, "Not crazy ; only what he called demented."

Virgie sat motionless, her eyes closed, her face ashen. Martin, now truly alarmed, drew closer, but stood without touching her. "I thought you knowed," she said tremulously in weak apology.

"I did know, but not that," Virgie replied, her voice so low and suppressed with horror that Martin scarcely caught her words. After a time she opened her eyes

and, with an effort at self-control, said : " He told me that Ben had been ill, and I naturally thought of bodily illness. Tell me more, Martin ; tell me all?" she ended feverishly, as she nerved herself for the details.

" I've told y' all now," Martin replied insecurely. " He wuz the one 'at found Snell when his trouble 'd come, an' he took him home an' took keer of him. Afterwards he let Landy he'p, an' Landy's got him t' knowin' again. That's all, 'cept 'at Snell's a'most as right ez he ever wuz, an' jest because the parson's been so wonderful kind."

Becoming more encouraged by Virgie's growing interest and animation she talked on, and on and on, with graphic enthusiasm until nearly all of the details of that trying time had been narrated. When she had talked herself out her listener's face was all aglow from gratitude and admiration for those who had been so kind. Martin lost none of the evident change, and the happiness infected her to the point of jubilant triumph, Kent's part profiting greatly by her enthusiasm. But when the time came for her to leave Virgie was without words to express the sweet contentment and joy that glowed within her. It was too like an unreal thing to admit of description. Revelations in the present hour were rushing over her with confusing goodness. The past seemed full of misjudgments of her own, and out of the lovely truths she had just learned she found examples for measuring the other and more sinister mysteries and perplexities. Her mind and heart were chaos. She would think, she would rejudge—she would take a new and better measurement of past

events. Therefore, she let Martin go with but an abstracted "Good bye!" And when Aunt Faribee came with her lunch she was still thinking dreamily, covering old unhappinesses with gentle imaginings.

CHAPTER XXII.

When the days had become permanently warm the whole community was in the happy humor of occupation. Snellins' return was but the wonder of an hour, as busy minds had little time to question his going or coming. His frequent departures or returns had long since ceased to provoke other than a desultory kind of comment, and they questioned not but that this had been one of his usual migrations. At first he felt insecure in his secret, but his suspicions were soon allayed by the treatment he received, and he slowly assumed a stronger manhood than he had ever displayed. His gratitude was unbounded for the care both Kent and Landy had given him. With the restoration of the money he had once secreted, and that Kent had carefully guarded for him, he became excessively happy. It was not long, however, with this small power at his command, until he cunningly devised plans for another trip. Permitting no one to share his confidence he awaited patiently an opportunity for successfully eluding those who had so recently had his care-taking. There were days when he felt the time had come, yet some unexpected obstacle presented itself, causing him to postpone his running away. Not until Virgie had

established her little household, taking Landy and Martin and Gyp, did the real opportunity occur. Martin had forgotten and left behind some small thing that Kent thought she might urgently need, and, expressing this belief in Snellins' presence, Snell at once grasped the possibility. With slyly-expressed desires that he might again visit the Brandt place, he prevailed upon the parson to allow him to be the messenger to Martin, and Kent, entirely unsuspecting, yet wholly reluctant, permitted him to go. After this two days elapsed ere Kent learned that Snellins had never arrived at the Brandt farm, when it was much too late to attempt to seek for him. Landy became alarmed to the extent of wild agitation. Kent set his lips firmly, but was calm. He swore Landy to secrecy, cautioning him against alarming the folks at his new home, and sent him away surprised and wondering.

The first cares of Virgie's home-coming had filled her thoughts amply and taken her out of herself for the time. She was too weak to work much, if any, but Landy and Martin needed instructing, and she was happily busied with directing them. Once, while in the spirit of unusual elation, she had thrown off her partial resentment toward Harvey owing to his never having answered her last letter, and set herself to tell him of the things that had transpired that he might, in turn, inform her relatives. On her father's death she dwelt at length, the tender reverence that hallowed her thoughts leading her to a composition of spiritualistic beauty. Of her own long illness she wrote but little, seeming rather resentful that she had ever been

so. Then, knowing he would be interested in Snellins, she filled the body of the letter about him, alternating between sympathy and humor because of their fruitless waiting, while Kent might have informed them had he not been so loyal to poor Snell. Ending she hinted at his long neglect, with an implied suggestion that he must explain his carelessness satisfactorily to be forgiven.

She was sitting one afternoon, some two weeks later, out in the yard far from the house, in a tiny arbor, most effectually shaded by the cherry-tree limbs that hung drooping. The air was heavily sweet from the blossoms all about and above her. Kent, making the rounds of his country-side calls, sought her out and found her there. She greeted him seriously, motioning him to a seat upon the grass, and to his look of inquiry tossed him the letter that had lain in her lap, meantime appearing utterly indifferent as to his progress with it.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he said in surprise, smiling benignly, and, as Virgie did not respond even so much as with a smile, he looked at her with quick suspicion, hurting him deeply. Controlling his voice as best he could he resumed: "They're married now—three days, according to this. Well—I wish them all happiness!"

"I do, too," Virgie said quickly. "But it seems so unfair; they might have let us know. He could not have cared much," she ended resentfully.

Kent laughed insecurely, hoping that her resentment was no deeper than her expressed opinion, yet fearful of the possibilities.

"It must have been a mean opinion that he held of his future kinsfolk—or else he was too absorbed by his future happiness, either of which are unpardonable. But you will forgive him? You forgive everybody."

Virgie turned and looked at him with sudden inquisitiveness, and, as he did not meet her gaze, responded: "I am not so sure about that. It will be a long wait, anyway, before he has my forgiveness. Laugh if you will, but I'm not always forgiving," she said, and as he gazed at her steadfastly she colored perceptibly.

"I was not laughing at that," he replied, part-seriously. "I only thought how fortunate he is to be so situated; that, now you are unforgiving, he has your cousin to console him, and later on—well, you know that your anger is short-lived."

"That is nothing to laugh at," she said good-humoredly.

"It is for me," Kent replied. "Not to laugh for ridicule, but for mirth and joy that it has been so, else——"

"Else we would still be at odds," she replied proudly.

"Just that," he said.

"But you deserve to be forgiven, and he never will," Virgie said, and, as he only smiled, she grew earnest. Beginning with the things about him that had first come to her learning, she talked with halting insecurity as if she were unsure of the correctness of her speaking her thoughts so freely to him. But once she had begun there was no going back, and she poured forth unstinted praise for his many good deeds.

"I have had a world of reasons for forgiving you,"

she said. "One of them was because I was wholly at fault." Here Kent looked at her in blank amazement. "And, had I not been, your goodnesses would have melted any ugly coldness out of me. You have been magnanimous and good, gentle and brave, and befriended us all when most we needed help. Listen!" she insisted, as he endeavored to check her by a gesture. The praise, however sweet, was causing him great embarrassment. "You told me that Ben had been ill. You did not say how much you had risked to reclaim him from everlasting night. You are surprised to learn that I know that; but even more has been told me. Landy, and Martin as well, have been dependent upon your bounty, and you would still have them so if I had not simply forced them to come out here. By either of these generous deeds you merit a friendship higher than mine and praise and love from all of us."

"Have you finished?" he asked, with assumed carelessness, sure that she had, because of her well-rounded last sentence, that sounded as if her speech had spent itself. He intended to continue in a self-disparaging vein when she had expressed herself as having ended.

"No; I have not!" she replied, much to his surprise, resuming at once a continuance for which he was entirely unprepared, and leaving his unspoken sentences still unexpressed. Then adding: "There is more, and it is of a personal nature. 'Doc' has told me of your premeditated attack upon my stubborn will that, in all probability, saved me from worse than what I did suffer."

"If this was all," he thought relievedly, "he could accept her words of thanks with partial grace." His changed expression was at once apparent to her, and, knowing its significance, she hesitated before resuming. Yet she was started now, and she might best let him know that she was acquainted with all that he had done for her ; so she continued, though it was under slight protest with herself.

"Royal Kent," she said slowly, "you have made me ashamed of myself—ashamed because you have grown better, while I have not even stood still—I have grown worse. These things of which I have spoken are not like your old self. They could not have come from you in those days. You know that as well as I do. More is the grandness of your changing. I do not ask forgiveness now for what happened then, for I was not wrong in what I did ; but I do regret the time that has gone between, since I would not or could not encourage and recognize you." The parson hung his head in confusion as she talked thus straightforwardly, desiring to interrupt, yet without the words to do so. "Then, to add the climax, you prevented them from taking my home from me while I was incapable of defending it."

Kent rose agitatedly at this.

"Please, stop !" he said pleadingly, as if the great humiliation that entirely hid the gratitude in her tones was hurting him.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, her voice wavering piteously. "Why was it you, when your kind-

nesses are such a reproach? Do you want me to always fear and hate you?"

With both hands upon her breast she breathed deeply. Her head hung forward slightly, and through the tears that had started in her eyes she looked steadfastly into his.

Kent's heart gave an impulsive bound as his eyes rested upon hers. From the depths of her innermost being she seemed calling for his pity and his love. He dropped his head upon his chest, partly in the consciousness that he must not again be led to err, but more for shame that, he had thought for the instant, to trade upon her gratitude.

"I am sorry," he said.

The words stung her as a sharp rebuke. "If your regret comes because of my words," she said, "then I am not sorry."

"But it will make our friendship harder."

"Indeed it will, if we let it," she replied, and in the latter words he found much comfort.

"How can I help it?" he asked. "Now that you know of them my past deeds will all have seemed to have tended toward one point, and in the future—that will be the hardest part—each word, each action, each sentence and all my life with you will seem to hang from those simple kindnesses. They will always supply a motive, obviously the fundamental idea of all that I may do. I wish—so earnestly wish that you had not known. Believe me, Virgie, I have been but working out an atonement—objectless, save for my own satisfaction, and as remote from a desire of command-

ing your friendship as it well could have been. How I wish that I could explain ! You will never understand until I can. I must clothe my acts of the near past and the future with a mystery that will not permit you to see the why of them. That I may not be too vague, and that, in the time to come you will not think me designing toward the end, you naturally would, I must tell you that I am striving to do things as I should do them wherever and whenever I can. You have said that I am changed, and to your words I find two sets of emotion responding. One is of unusual elation, and the other of amazement that the change did not come sooner. Away back in the time when I first came here I had an idea of reformation. It was an idea that impressed with its novelty—something to experiment with : a pastime, a diversion ; that was the beginning, and the idea was the inspiration of dejection, sorrow, humiliation—all of these. I did not intend that it should sink in too deeply. Exterior reformation would be sufficient and fill amply my sense of a just return for past misconduct.” Kent paused, his face lighting with a smile that was part self-pity and part contempt, as he so accurately reviewed his old self. It was the first time that he had given himself leave to analyze. Putting the past against the present he found the sharpest contrast readily, and, as Virgie followed his words, their underlying motive struggling for expression in her sympathetic face, he was spurred to the severest self-censure.

“ I don’t like to hear you speak that way,” she said, when he paused. “ You are unjust—you are not at all fair to yourself.”

"But those days are gone," he replied seriously. "And from them I learned ; therefore, they have given me much. Ashville is hardly the place, though—" he began. Then, as she smiled appreciatively, he hesitated.

"Not the place for what?" she asked.

"I was about to say that Ashville was hardly the place in which to practise deception ; but I scarcely mean that—it is too severe. What I wanted to say was that they are not to be deceived by mere pretense. Truth knows truth here with unerring certainty. Why, I tell you, Virgie, a man simply could not live two selves in this atmosphere of instinctive understanding. I found myself antagonizing myself and, in consequence, everybody else. The exterior reformation was a good beginning because it was in continual pride and vanity, consequently always fighting with the internal comfort of conceit, and that was the birth of conscience in me. But the placid self-satisfaction soon became broken into a tumult of reproaches. To appease it I had to do things—lots of them. Activity got hold on me, and there you are. It was all so natural that I marvel at it now. The things that I have done I simply had to do. Can you understand? You, or anyone else, it would probably have been the same," he ended, looking at her with an inquisitive expression that invited an affirmative reply ; but, since she remained silent, her face depicting no little disappointment over his last sentence, he resumed quickly : "Of course, not just exactly the same," he said, but stopped suddenly under her look of startled surprise. The words sounded de-

cidedly foolish at this juncture, coming as they did at the end of a deeply analytical thought. Unaware that he had read the trend of her thoughts he had unerringly apologized to her unspoken disappointment. Virgie was startled and confused, not knowing how clearly apparent she had made the disappointment that she felt. Kent's confusion was heightened by a sudden elation over the happy guess and its import. They had reached a crisis, and each was painfully silent.

She rather felt than saw his unwavering gaze, and, waiting for him to resume, she feared, yet hoped for his next words. Kent also was fearful for the outcome. Hoping against that fear, yet too cautious to precipitate them into another estrangement by declaring his desire at this the first opportunity.

Concluding that he was not to continue his advantage her embarrassment waned slowly, and looking up she smiled. Kent felt that the situation demanded something from him, and, unable to grasp at that instant another topic for conversation, said stumbly : "We are to be friends, aren't we?"

"Why should we not be?" she asked, with charming assurance, in return.

"I don't know," he replied happily, though dimly questioning himself whether or not he had done enough in asking only what he had. All through their talk he had been aware of the propitiousness of both their surroundings and her good humor. It was this consciousness that led them on to the climax of their self-hidden thoughts. He had not debated in his mind whether he would submit himself to so supreme

an assault upon his feelings. The end had come about as the influences of surroundings and inclinations had aided it. From above them came the sweetness and warmth of delicious blossoms and sun. About them were patches of variegated green. Where the light came through between the white, fluffy-banked trees the grass was opalescent and brown-green. Under the trees the shade stretched away to the orchard fence, making patches of blue-green that were beautifully flecked with the falling petals. Kent's happiness suddenly took a facetious bent. He reached above his head and shook the limb nearest to his grasp. The shower of loosened petals fell over both of them like gentle messages of pure happiness, and they laughed joyously out of the great ecstasy within their hearts.

"May care fall as lightly on your cousin and Harvey," Kent was saying, when Gyp came running from the house.

"Oh! Auntie Virgie," she began, picking up Virgie's hand from her lap and pulling excitedly. "Have you seen th' new bees 'at pa's got? Come quick! He's fixin' 'em."

Rising at once Virgie simulated as great an excitement as Gyp had shown, and all three went back to the edge of the berry bushes, where Landy, with cumbersome mittens and a face mask, was working earnestly.

"Where did you ever learn the bee business?" Kent asked of him in surprise.

Landy looked back over his shoulder at the group, smiled respectfully to Kent, but made no reply.

"There is the most resourceful man I ever knew," the parson observed admiringly. "He should have been made a general or placed at the head of some big business. His confidence is colossal. Feels himself equal to anything whether he knows anything about it or not. Better watch him or he will drive every bee you have off of the place!"

"Well, let him," Virgie laughed. "What's the use of having bees if you can't drive them?"

"Oh, ho!" Kent responded. "So that is the kind of acquaintance you two have gotten around to. Guess I had better reserve my remarks to myself and go! Well, he is worthy, anyway."

"You have already proven that," she replied, and continued talking of the new bee enthusiast as they walked to the front gate, while Gyp remained behind, a most earnest observer of her step-father's work.

Kent marched along the road with buoyant step. The love that he had so long refused the privilege of recognition grew in its new freedom of an hour to vigorous sturdiness. That he loved her he had long known, but from the time of their trouble he had not let himself think of it. The first love—the love that he had declared had been for months a shame and a regret. The new awakening pressed all recollection of that out of his thoughts, though, now, and he was supremely happy. He loved now as a good man should, and he was proud to feel that he might love her this way always. He became heated from the rapid walking, and the relief of removing his coat occurred to him. Then the question of propriety presented it-

self, and his coat came off almost at the thought. He was teaching himself to ignore silly yielding to questions of this sort, and as soon as they presented themselves just so soon did he disobey their demands upon his false pride. A farmer-boy passed by and grinned to see the parson coatless, but Kent caught the friendliness his smile contained, and was still more happy in his new, growing strength.

Through the main street coatless he went, vigorously punishing his pride for its better subjection. Orrig was sitting in front of the drug-store perusing the weekly paper when Kent came up.

"Anything new?" the parson asked, swinging his coat from one shoulder to the other.

"Ain't tuk up th' news yit," the druggist responded, resetting his reading glasses and looking up amiably. "I wuz jest readin' th' advertisements first. Oh! yes, they be some news," he added quickly. "I fergot when y' asked. They's a letter fer y' over t' th' post-office. I jest come from there."

"Thanks!" Kent replied delightedly, turning to go.

"Ain't very sociable now, air y'?" Orrig observed; but, taking up his paper again, he re-arranged his glasses, hitched his chair about a little and resumed reading.

Kent crossed the road and went straight to the post-office. John Carey wiped his hands free of the kerosene that he had been handling, as he saw the parson coming, and greeted him at the door with the letter extended. Kent received it with a start that awakened Carey's keenest curiosity, but, as he simply slipped it

into his pocket with an agitated "Thank you !" the postmaster's disappointment was deep. He returned to the lamps speculating greatly.

Once within his study Kent broke the envelope with hasty excitement, then hesitated, as he stood and looked at the superscription. His face was a study of doubt, hope or dread, as his thoughts flew along the paths of old memories. Then he withdrew the contents from the envelope with a hand that trembled, and read :

"DEAR ROYAL :—My darling boy—yesterday, and all the months gone by, were black and filled with unhappiness because my boy was gone, and I knew not where. To-day my broken heart is happy and lighter than I have ever known it to be, because I know that you still live, and are well and happy and good. Why have you never let me know ? Why did you not permit me your confidence ? I do not ask this to scold you, for I am far too overjoyed to do that ; but, had you sent your messenger to me, my anxiety would have been lessened. I learned from your father that your friend has been here before, and that he already knew where you were, though his pride kept it secret from me. To-day he came again, and this time your father received him. I did not know that it was of you they were talking, and learned it only by partly overhearing what they said. When I pressed, and would not be refused, he put his arm about my waist in the dear old way, like before the trouble came, and said : 'Mother, I was preparing to surprise you. Mr. Snellins, here, brings good word of our boy !' Oh ! Royal, I was so happy ; and he was happy, too. He smiled upon your friend, and told him the good news that for weeks we have known, and your friend was overjoyed with us.

"Your father is completely reconciled and longs to give you his forgiveness, and ask yours in return. He had hoped to see you first and then surprise me, but, failing in this, he bade your friend take you the news in a letter that he gave him. But I cannot wait—I must reach you first, so that you may know all and be able to understand. First of all, we have found that you are truthful, and the others wrong. This was next to as great a joy to me as knowing that you are to return to us.

"I knew. I would not believe what they said against my boy. But your long-continued high spirits and ungovernable will had caused your father to misjudge you. You were both proud ; you were both wrong. Naturally he felt that you should be governed by his advice. Perhaps that advice was too severe ; perhaps you ignored it too much. Whatever it was, the long interval of silence was just the thing to make the end harder for both of you. It broke my heart to see you daily farther apart. When he found you on the porch that night and, in his anger, believing what he had heard, called you a disgrace ; and turning you away from home, and closing the door against you—I felt that I must die. But that is all gone now. The boys of your set have convinced him of their horrible joke upon you, and he will be happy, I know, to welcome you back again. And I—I love you ! Mother has always believed in you. Her heart is and always will be open for her boy, no matter what may come.

"Hoping that this will reach you, and that you will forgive us for our wrong, and write at once. And with all my love for my darling always.

Lovingly,

"MOTHER."

CHAPTER XXIII.

When Saturday came Snellins arrived well-nigh exhausted, but radiantly happy with his—to Kent—important and good news. He was three days late with the tidings. Even so, Kent received him with a warmth that modified his disappointment, and he shared the parson's joyousness with but little diminished satisfaction. On Sunday Kent was happily brilliant. The gladness in his heart was evident to everyone, as quite all his words were filled to overflowing with radiant expressiveness.

On Monday he answered at length both of his letters. Resentment over past wrongs had no place in his reply. It was all love and happiness and gratitude. He made no reference to the practical joke that his friends had perpetrated that night, when the serious outcome of having drugged him frightened them away, and they had left him on his own door-step to be discovered later by his horrified parents. Too much had already been said about it, and there could come no good of recalling by ever so slight a re-utterance of his innocence the circumstances in which his father's anger and his own resentment had come together, with the outcome of his having been turned away from home.

That they had found by themselves the true facts was deeply gratifying, but better still was his knowledge that he might return now, not only on an equal plane to the one he had held, but on a much more exalted one. In his letter he had said but little of his possible return, rather confining himself to the expression of sweet recollections of his old home, and intermingling the gentleness and beauties of his present surroundings with these, that his parents might understand from inference the ties he had lately formed, and how nearly impossible it would be to yield the new for the old. He yearned to be back again with the old and dear associations. He thought over and over again of the still life things that had made up his home. His own room, hallowed by boyish deeds in youthful advancements, when life, to his arrogance, seemed as simple as an open page, even though it be filled by fresh surprises—a paradox of young manhood—was again before him waiting for his occupancy. Frequent mental migrations, however, brought a consciousness of the impossibility of his ever using it again as he had once done, and after his letter had gone he sat himself down, with Harvey's once-spoken words recurring to him, "Why wish for the things once lived out, since one cannot have them back, and if we could they would not fit in with one's later ideas?" Kent pondered long over this thought.

That he could not give up his new associates he well knew. The church, the town, the country, all stepped on the scale of indecision and weighed down one side with unmistakable overweight. But, when he came

to place that positive, foregone conclusion of his mother's, wherein he only awaited an assurance of his father's good-will to cause him to return home, together with her love and his duty, against another and dearer tie, he was much in doubt as to where his future would be. He studied for two days and nights over the problem. It was constantly with him, yet as persistently refused to be solved. He grew tired—he was weary, and threw it off ; still it returned less pliant than before, and he would have given up in despair if he could.

“ I don't know what to do,” he mused one afternoon. He had just come from Henderson's, and was walking abstractedly along the road from town. “ If someone could only help me—if someone could only help—” Here he paused, his face lighting with the animation of a new thought. “ And why can't someone?” he asked himself hopefully. Then the hope slowly died away to doubt as he smiled irresolutely, though he quickened his steps for all that. The audacity and risk of asking aid where he had most naturally thought to do appalled him when he grasped the full import of what success or failure would mean. But it was a chance for the solution of his problem, and his feet showed not the hesitancy of his mind as they accelerated their speed out of all proportion. Borne on, unwilfully, he gave himself, without strong effort, against a habit he had long since suppressed, and the old way of going to her in his hours of perplexity asserted itself so irresistibly that he was glad to have it lead him on.

It was shortly after four o'clock. The door of the district school, setting back just off the point where the roads cross, was being closed by Miss Simms, who wore a wearied look on her careworn face. Kent doffed his hat. Miss Simms courtesied in a very flurried manner, and hurried away over the south road at right angles to his own direction.

Not far ahead of him four barefoot boys and one little girl leapt or ran as they played along the way, their superfluous energy working itself out with misapplied efforts toward homeward progress. Kent smiled over their antics, slowly but surely overtaking them. As he came up John Kinney gave to his sister Nellie the bucket that had contained their noonday meal, and almost as quickly little Charlie Schuffler gallantly relieved her of it. Kent smiled knowingly over the brother's sagacity, and Charlie carried two dinner-pails instead of one the balance of the way, keeping close to his infant charmer, as the group wove and interwove a pattern of footprints in the dust.

On the Brandt's side of the road the farm land was fenced by split-rails, and, as the party came within sight of the field, they saw Landy George far over near the grove following a plow—happy, even if occupied in monotonous labor. When within earshot the children called him over lustily, climbing upon the fence and waving their hats or buckets.

Virgie saw them through the kitchen side-door, and, taking down her sun-bonnet from its nail, cut across the corner of the field, making toward them slowly as she edged along close to the fence. Kent lifted Nellie

to the upper rail, where Virgie enclosed her in her loving arms, and, throwing back her own bonnet, she buried her face beneath that of the little girl. Nellie's brother stood throwing clods at the team that stood in calm, dozing attitudes, their heads hung low and their eyelids half-closed. Landy climbed the fence quickly, chasing the boy only a few feet ; then stopped and shook his fist at him, while he laughed happily.

"Where's Gyp, Miss Virgie?" Nellie asked in a sweet, little piping voice.

"Why, Gyp's sick to-day," Virgie answered interestedly ; then to Timothy David, whose folks had only come into the neighborhood in the spring, "How's your pa, Tim?"

"All right," Tim answered in great embarrassment, as he scraped one of his feet over the other, swinging from right to left and grinning deep creases into his freckled cheeks.

Kent had said nothing in the preliminary talk, though he seemed to enjoy what the others were saying. Landy re-climbed the fence and went back to the plow, the boys following gleefully, prevailing upon him to permit them to ride in turns after much feigned reluctance on Landy's part. Nellie watched their antics, her eyes dancing with excitement. She moved uneasily in Virgie's arms, then looked into her face appealingly, though out of consideration said no word.

"You want to go, too, don't you? Well, then, kiss me? There ! Now be careful you don't get hurt !" She lifted her down, caressed her curls with a last pat and let her run to Landy.

Kent came over to the fence, and leaning both arms, midway between the elbows and wrists, upon it, looked seriously after the fleeing curls and apron-strings.

"That is a happy time of life," he said.

Virgie had been leaning with her back toward him, but she turned quickly in surprise since she had not noticed his serious mood before.

"You speak as if you were a hundred years old," she said simply, though she was made uncomfortable by his words ; they seemed so out of tune with their surroundings. Kent did not reply, and, after watching the children in silence for another period, she turned upon him and said cheerily : "Say something. Why don't you talk? Say anything, only don't just stand there so serious."

"I feel as though all that I have to say is out of keeping with all of this happiness," he responded feebly, adding with more force : "I did have a good deal to say, but it is not the right time for it nor the right place. I have gotten back into the old way again, that is, of coming to you for advice. It is too serious to speak of now. This is not a time for seriousness, I'm afraid, so it may be better for me not to talk."

The mere suggestion of a return to his former way of seeking her advice filled her with an undefined delight. She could not conceal her feelings, and needs must turn her face away, though there was in her quiet tones a pleasantness that encouraged him to speak, as she asked :

"What is the trouble?"

"If you really do not mind my telling you," he replied, "I know of no better way to begin than by asking you to read these?" he said, handing her the two letters that he had just drawn from his pocket.

Virgie took them hesitatingly, finally opening that of his father, and read. Afterwards she read his mother's words, and tears sprang to her eyes. Kent was looking far away, toward Landy, down in the remotest corner of the field.

"How perfectly beautiful!" she said sadly, as she read aloud the signature on the last letter, "Your Mother." "Mother!" she repeated. "How you must love her!" They stood in silence for some moments; then she asked: "Is she little?"

"Yes," Kent laughed despite himself. "But, why?"

"And she's beautiful, and has big, loving eyes and sweet, tender ways. I know she has. I know just what she's like!"

"She's the best little mother in the world!" he added happily. "But—I don't know——" he hesitated, then went on feverishly: "I can't go back there now. I have thought it all out dozens of times. They want me and I want them. That's one way. But I want to stay here—where I have gotten on. I never did anywhere else, and I was afraid for so long that something or someone would turn up to bring the story of my old ways, and make me lose the little start I have gotten. I did not know what I would do if that happened. But the danger of it is gone now. I have a right to do and be what I am, and I would like more than any-

one can judge to know and enjoy for a while the freedom from that old fear.

"Then you will stay?" she asked quietly.

"I do not know," he replied, shaking his head dubiously, still looking far over the field.

Her wide-opened eyes expressed the sudden fear that pinched her heart, as she turned quickly, looking into his face with searching inquiry.

"It is true," he said, still calm, returning her gaze hopelessly. "I don't know what I shall do. If I don't go they will think me resentful of what they did. That would break her heart. Don't you see how things are there?"

"I believe I do," she replied. "But they ought not expect it of you now."

The rebellion in her words, while at first surprising and almost provoking him to a quick retort, gradually conveyed the sentiment that prompted them. In her eyes was yet that expression of pain, even though it was tempered by resentment against the claims of his parents; and Kent, grasping its full import, brightened at once, losing his hopelessness and scrutinizing her features eagerly.

"If you don't understand their end of it," he said, venturesomely, "you do this end? I wanted you to understand both fully, but, if you cannot you cannot, I suppose. At any rate, you know now how much of a weight has been lifted from me. I can talk of them, as I have never done, for one thing, and another is that I feel better for knowing myself not in the wrong."

"How better?" she asked simply.

"Better because I can have no scruples such as I have had against doing things."

"Have you had scruples?" she questioned, innocently surprised.

"I thought you knew that I had," he replied with great intensity. "Perhaps, though, the caution was all in my own mind, because you were unaware of any reason for it. Oh ! Virgie," he continued, "how I have struggled to keep from telling you for a second time of the love within my heart, and all because I would not offer you the possible chance of future disgrace and sorrow that might come of it !"

He said this much as he had uttered the preceding words, and for the instant neither seemed to realize its full significance, so earnestly were they analyzing this reasoning. Virgie was first to give evidence of its importance. She turned completely around, standing with her back toward him that he might not see her face.

"Do not tell me again by your silence that I have been mistaken in supposing that you knew," he said agitatedly. "Do not tell me that, Virgie ; for I am not come to you this time over-confident or arrogantly presumptuous. Far from it. I love you now, not as I loved you then, but with all my heart, and in the way you should be loved. My home and parents claim me, yet I cannot go. Ashville holds me and I would stay, yet I cannot without your love. Tell me, Virgie, what shall I do?"

She uttered no word, nor even moved. A cold dread lest this was a repetition of that other time crept slowly

to his heart. The fear that it might be so had made his words halting and unlovely. Blunt and arrogant they sounded in his own ears—why should they not be an offense to hers? He removed his foot from the fence and stood erect, his face distorted as if in physical pain. He moved uneasily. His throat was dry and husky, as his lips were dry. To speak again would be to shut out all hope and cast his life into its greatest sorrow, for the next words must be an abject apology for his double mistake and a farewell to her friendship forever.

“I—I am sorry to have hurt you,” he said, hesitatingly. Bitterness against himself occurred to him, but it was for a time so remote that no part of it was in his voice. He was wrestling with his soul. Fortitude bade him go, but the agony of her loss made him stay and speak, giving utterance to such words and passion as he had never dreamed away from her.

“You have taught me goodness,” he began. “All that is good—all that is pure. Was it God’s mission that I should be shown, then separated from your example? Must I say farewell after all these days of sunshine? Am I to be chastised——”

“Stop!” she said, turning and staring blankly at him in her fright. With an involuntary gesture her hand moved slightly toward him. Kent’s heart beat violently. He had caught the gesture, as he caught the terror in her eyes, and moved toward her. A great flood of burning shame suffused her cheeks, and her head fell forward humbly.

"Virgie," he said softly, as he laid his hand upon her arm. There was a note of questioning in his voice, but her head still bent low. "Virgie, my sweetheart!" he repeated, with suppressed joy, and, as she raised her radiant face, he caught the dear cheeks between his hands and pressed her forehead with his lips. "I love you—I love you, sweetheart!" he said. "You are my queen—my queen! Tell me, dear, do you really love me? Do you?" he asked.

"You wouldn't have done that if I'd had my bonnet on!" she said, drawing away from the fence and saucily adjusting that head-piece.

"Who cares for bonnets?" he replied, striking at once the tone she had used, in imitating irrelevancy.

"Well, you better care!" she said, in warning, as she looked about.

Landy and the children were gone. Far away and over the hills the sun's outward half-circle of waning light set the farm lands in a fan-background of red and gold. The quiet of evening was settling down. First disturbed by gentle sounds—the calling of mother cows or the chattering of birds—each announced its coming. Kent's great joy came under the influence of these serener things, and took a serious way of expressing itself.

"Come, let me walk back with you?" he said, taking down the bars. There is so much that I want to tell you. Let me have your hand to re-assure myself that I am not being misled by my own desires?"

Hand in hand they returned slowly along the road to her gate.

"I am asking myself, dear," he resumed, as she leaned against the gate-post. One of her hands held loosely her bonnet by its strings ; the other was tightly clasped in his own. "I am asking myself why it is that you should be the one to have taught me, first, the way, then supplied its reward? You have been the inspiration and the harmony of my soul !"

Suddenly his face lighted with a new inspiration, and became radiant with a great expectation.

"Twice I have told you of my love—a thousand times more do I hope to tell you. Just so long as you will listen I will voice the sweet memories that have made me love you, for they are a joy to utter. But sweeter still than this would be these words from you, sweetheart, 'I love you !' Tell me, dear one, tell me that you love me? You have not said so yet."

With rapturous hope he stood awaiting her response, yet as he spoke he placed his arm about her and drew her to him in a quick, passionate embrace.

She wound her fair arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his.

"I do love you !" she said.

The squeak of the old well-windlass came to them from back of the house, and when it was silent once more Martin's voice arose cheerily in pre-occupied monotony over supper preparations. Landy's "Soo-ee !" sent his little herd of stock into the sheds for the night, a door slammed, a clasp rattled, and all was still again.

"I know you do !" Kent replied, with deep emotion, and, after a pause, went on : "And you have answered the doubts, dear."

"What doubts?" she asked, scanning his face seriously.

"The doubts as to what I should do. Do you think, though, that I shall longer question where my future lies? My hunger for your sweetness urged me to stay, and, having it, I cannot go. My future is here, love ; here with you."