JOHN MARCH PART IV

LVIII.

TOGETHER AGAIN

March did not put up at the most famous and palatial hotel; it was full. He went to another much smaller and quieter, and equally expensive. When he had taken supper he walked the dazzling streets till midnight, filled with the strangeness of the place and the greater strangeness of his being there, and with numberless fugitive reflections upon the day just gone, the life behind it, and the life before, but totally without those shaped and ordered trains of thought which no one has except in books.

Sometimes tenderly, sometimes bitterly, Fannie came to mind, in emotions rather than memories, and as if she were someone whom he should never see again. Once it occurred to him that these ghost walkings of thought and feelings about her must be very much like one's thoughts of a limb shattered in some disaster and lately cut off by a surgeon. The simile was not pleasant, but he did not see why he should want a pleasant one. Only by an effort could he realize she was still of this world, and that by and by they would be back in Suez again, meeting casually, habitually, and in a much more commonplace and uninteresting way than ever they had done in the past. He shuddered, then he sighed, and then he said ahem! and gave himself the look of a man of affairs. On men who stared at him he retorted with a frown of austere inquiry, not aware that they were merely noticing how handsome he was.

For a time he silently went through minute recapitulations of his recent colloquies with Miss Garnet, who seemed already surprisingly far away; much farther than any railroad speed could at all account for. He wished she were "further!"—for he could quote five different remarks of his own uttered to her that very day, which he saw plainly enough, *now*, nobody but a perfect fool could have made.

"Oh! Great Scott! What did possess me to drag her into my confidence?"

He "wondered if mesmerism had anything"—but rejected that explanation with disdain and dismissed the subject. And then this strange thing happened: He was standing looking into a show-window made gorgeous with hot-house flowers, when a very low voice close at hand moaned, "O Lord, no! I simply made an ass of myself," and when he turned sharply around no one was anywhere near.

He returned to his room and went to bed and to sleep wishing "to gracious" he might see her once more and once only, simply to show her that he had nothing more to confide—to her or any similar soft-smiling she!—The s's are his.

He did not rise early next morning. And in this he was wise. Rejoice, oh, young man, in your project, but know that old men, without projects, hearing will not hear—until they have seen their mail and their cashier; the early worm rarely catches the bird. John had just learned this in Pulaski City.

At breakfast he was again startled by a low voice very close to him. It was Mr. Fair.

"Mr. March, why not come over and sit with us?"

The ladies bowed from a table on the far side of the room. Mrs. Fair seemed as handsome as ever; while Miss Garnet!—well! If she was winsome and beautiful yesterday, with that silly, facing-both-ways traveling cap she had worn, what could a reverent young man do here and now but gasp his admiration under his breath as he followed his senior toward them?

Even in the lively conversation which followed he found time to think it strange that she had never seemed to him half so lovely in Suez; was it his over-sight? Maybe not, for in Suez she had never in life been half so happy. Mrs. Fair could see this with her eyes shut, and poor Barbara could see that she saw it by the way she shut her eyes. But John, of course, was blind enough, and presently concluded that the wonder of this crescent loveliness was the old, old wonder of the opening rose. Meanwhile the talk flowed on.

"And by that time," said John, "you'd missed your connection. I might have guessed it. Now you'll take—but you've hardly got time——"

No, Mrs. Fair was feeling rather travel weary; this was Saturday; they would pass Sunday here and start refreshed on Monday.

In the crowded elevator, when March was gone, Barbara heard Mrs. Fair say to her husband,

"You must know men here whom it would be good for him to see; why don't you offer to——" Mrs. Fair ceased and there was no response, except that Barbara said, behind her smiling lips,

"It's because he's in bad hands, and still I have not warned him!"

March did not see them again that day. In the evening, two men, friends, sitting in the hotel's rotunda, were conjecturing who yonder guest might be to whose inquiries the clerk was so promptly attentive.

"He's a Southerner, that's plain; and a gentleman, that's just as certain."

"Yes, if he were not both he would not be so perfectly at home in exactly the right clothes and yet look as if he had spent most of his life in swimming."

"He hasn't got exactly the right overcoat; it's too light and thin."

"No, but that's the crowning proof that he's a Southerner." It was John.

They hearkened to the clerk. "He's just gone to the theatre, Mr. March, he and both ladies. He was asking for you. I think he wanted you to go."

"I reckon not," said John, abstractedly, and in his fancy saw Miss Garnet explaining to her friends, with a restrained smile, that in Suez to join the church was to abjure the theatre. But another clerk spoke:

"Mr. March, did you—here's a note for you."

The clerk knew it was from Miss Garnet, and was chagrined to see John, after once reading it, dreamily tear it up and drop it to the floor. Still it increased his respect for the young millionaire—Mr. March, that is. It was as if he had lighted his cigar with a ten-dollar bill.

John wrote his answer upstairs, taking a good deal of time and pains to give it an air of dash and haste, and accepting, with cordial thanks, Mr. and Mrs. Fair's cordial invitation to go with them (and Miss Garnet, writing at their request) next day to church. Which in its right time he did.

On his way back to the hotel with Miss Garnet after service, John was nothing less than pained—though he took care not to let her know it—to find how far astray she was as to some of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. For fear she might find out his distress, he took his midday meal alone. And indeed, Miss Garnet may have had her suspicions, for over their ice-cream and coffee she said amusedly to Mrs. Fair, and evidently in reference to him,

"I am afraid it was only the slightness of our acquaintance that kept him from being pos-i-tive-ly pet-u-lent."

She seemed amused, I say, but an hour or so later, in her own room, she called herself a goose and somebody else another, and glancing at the mirror, caught two tears attempting to escape. She drove them back with a vigorous stamp of the foot and proceeded to dress for a cold afternoon walk among the quieted wonders of a resting city, without the Fairs, but not wholly alone.

LIX.

THIS TIME SHE WARNS HIM

As Miss Garnet and her escort started forth upon this walk, I think you would have been tempted to confirm the verdict of two men who, meeting and passing them, concluded that the escort was wasting valuable time when they heard him say,

"It did startle me to hear how lightly you regard what you call a memorized religion."

But this mood soon passed. A gentleman and lady, presently overtaking them, heard her confess, "I know I don't know as much as I think I do; I only wish I knew as much as I don't." Whereat her escort laughed admiringly, and during the whole subsequent two hours of their promenade scarcely any observer noticed the slightness of their acquaintance.

Across the fields around Suez their conversation would have been sprightly enough, I warrant. But as here they saw around them one and another amazing triumph of industry and art, they grew earnest, spoke exaltedly of this great age, and marvelled at the tangle of chances that had thrown them here together. John called it, pensively, a most happy fortune for himself, but Barbara in reply only invited his attention to the beauty of the street vista behind them.

Half a square farther on he came out of a brown study.

"Miss Barb"—It was the first time he had ever said that, and though she lifted her glance in sober inquiry, the music of it ran through all her veins.

"—Miss Barb, isn't it astonishing, the speed with which acquaintance can grow, under favorable conditions?"

"Is it?"

"Oh, well, no, it isn't. Only that's not its usual way."

"Isn't the usual way the best?"

"Oh—usually—yes! But there's nothing usual about this meeting of ours. Miss Barb, my finding you and your friendship is as if I'd been lost at midnight in a trackless forest and had all at once found a road. I only wish"—he gnawed his lip—"I only wish these three last days had come to me years ago. You might have saved me some big mistakes."

"No," Barbara softly replied, "I'm afraid not."

"I only mean as a sister might influence an older brother; cheering—helping—warning."

"Warning!" murmured Barbara, with drooping head and slower step. "You don't know what an evil gift of untimely silence I've got. If I've failed all my life long as a daughter, in just what you're supposing of me——"

"O come, now, Miss——"

"Don't stop me! Why, Mr. March"—she looked up, and as she brushed back a hair from her ear John thought her hand shook; but when she smiled he concluded he had been mistaken—"I've been wanting these whole three days to warn you of something which, since it concerns your fortunes, concerns nearly everyone I know, and especially my father. Is it meddlesome for me to be solicitous about your ambitions and plans for Widewood, Mr. March?"

"Now, Miss Garnet! You know I'd consider it an honor and a delight—Miss Barb. What do you want to warn me against? Mind, I don't say I'll take your warning; but I'll prize the friendship that——"

"I owe it to my father."

"Oh, yes, yes! I don't mean to claim—aha! I thought that tolling was for fire! Here comes one of the engines!—Better take my arm a minute—I—I think you'd better—till the whirlwind passes."

She took it, and before they reached a crossing on whose far side she had promised herself to relinquish it, another engine rushed by. This time they stood aside under an arch with her hand resting comfortably in his elbow. It still rested there when they had resumed their walk, only stirring self-reproachfully when John incautiously remarked the street's restored quietness.

Barbara was silent. When they had gone some distance farther John asked,

"Have I forfeited your solicitude? Will you not warn me, after all?" He looked at her and she looked at him, twice, but speech would not come; her lips only parted, broke into a baffled smile, and were grave again.

"I suppose, of course, it's against measures, not men, as they say, isn't it?"

"It's against men," said Barbara.

"That surprises me," replied John, with a puzzled smile.

"Why, Mr. March, you can't suppose, do you, that your high ambitions and purposes——"

"Oh, they're not mine; they're my father's. The details and execution are mine——"

"But, anyhow, you share them; you've said so. You don't suppose your associates——"

"What; share them the same way I do? Why, no, Miss Barb; it wouldn't be fair to expect that, would it? And yet, in a certain way, on a lower plane—from a simply commercial standpoint—they do. I don't include your father with them! I only wish I could reflect the spirit of my father's wishes and hopes as perfectly as he does."

"Mr. March, don't men sometimes go into such enterprises as yours simply to plunder and ruin those that go in honestly with them?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. You see, in this case——"

"Mr. March——"

"Yes, Miss Barb——"

"I believe certain men are in your company with that intention."

"But you don't know it, do you? Else you would naturally tell your father instead of me. You only——" He hesitated,

"I only see it."

"Oh—oh! have you no other evidence—only an intuition?"

"Yes, I have other evidence."

"Ah!" laughed John. "You've got higher cards, have you?"

Her eyes softly brightened in response to his. The next instant the hand in his arm awoke, but lay very still, as four men passed, solemnly raised their silk hats to March, and disappeared around a corner. They were the commercial travelers!

Her hand left his arm to brush something from her opposite shoulder, and did not return, but hid somewhere in her wrap, tingling with a little anguish all its own, in the realization that discovery is almost the only road to repentance. At the same time it could hear, so to speak, its owner telling, with something between a timorous courage and a calm diffidence, how, in Suez, she had drawn out a business man, unnamed, but well approved and quite disinterested, to say that she might tell Mr. March that, in his conviction, unless he got rid of certain persons—etc.

"I can tell you who it was, if you care to know. He said I might."

"No," said John, thoughtfully. "Never mind." And they heard their own footsteps for full two minutes. Then he said, "Miss Barb, suppose he is disinterested and sincere. Say he were my best friend. The thing's a simple matter of arithmetic. So long as your father and Jeff-Jack and I hang together there are not enough votes in the company to do anything we don't want done. I admit we've given some comparative strangers a strong foothold; but your father trusts them, and, if need be, can watch them. Does anybody know men better than Jeff-Jack does? But he knew just what we were doing when he consented to take charge of the three counties' interests; however, I admit that doesn't prove anything, Miss Barb, I know who said what you've told me, and I esteem and honor and love him as much as you do—wait, please. O smile ahead, if you like, only let me finish. You know we must take some risks, and while I thank him—and you, too, even if you do speak merely for your father's sake—I tell you the best moves a man ever makes are those he makes against the warnings of his friends! 'Try not the pass, the old man said,' don't you know?"

"This wasn't an old man."

"Wasn't it General Halliday?"

"No, sir, it was the younger Mr. Fair."

"Henry Fair," said John very quietly. He slackened his pace. He did not believe Fair cared that much for him; but it was easy to suppose he might seize so good a chance to say a word for Miss Garnet's own sake.

"Miss Barb, I don't doubt he thinks what he says. I see now why he failed to subscribe to our stock, after coming so far entirely, or almost entirely, to do it. He little knows how he disappointed me. I didn't want his capital, Miss Barb, half as much as his fellowship in a beautiful enterprise."

"He was as much disappointed as you, Mr. March; I happen to know it."

John looked at his informant; but her head was down once more.

"Well," he said, cheerily, "I'll just have to wait till—till I—till I've shown"—a beggar child was annoying him—"shown Fair and all of them that I'm not so green as I——" He felt for a coin, stood still, and turned red. "Miss—Miss Barb——" A smile widened over his face, and he burst into a laugh that grew till the tears came.

"What's the matter?" asked Barbara anxiously, yet laughing with him.

"Oh, I—I've let somebody pick my pockets. Yes, every cent's gone and my ticket to New York. I had no luck here yesterday, and I was going on to New York to-morrow." He laughed again, but ceased abruptly. "Good gracious, Miss Barb! my

watch!—my father's watch!" The broad smile on his lips could not hide the grief in his eyes.

LX.

A PERFECT UNDERSTANDING

As they resumed their way Barbara did most of the talking. She tried so hard to make his loss appear wholly attributable to her, that only the sweetness of her throat and chin and the slow smoothness of her words saved her from seeming illogical. She readily got his admission that the theft might have been done in that archway as the engine rushed by. Very good! And without her, she reasoned, he would not have stopped. "Or, if you had stopped," she softly droned, with her eyes on her steps, "you would have had——"

"Oh, now, what would I have had?"

"Your hands in your pockets."

"That's not my habit."

"Oh, Mr. March!"

"My d-ear Miss Barb! I should think I ought to know!"

"Yes, sir; that's why I tell you." They laughed in partnership.

Mr. March was entirely right, Barbara resumed, not to tell his mishap to the Fairs, or to anyone, anywhere, then or thereafter. "But you're cruel to me not to let me lend you enough to avoid the rev-e-la-tion." That was the utmost she would say. If he couldn't see that she would rather *lose*—not to say lend—every dollar she had, than have anyone know where her hand was when his pocket was picked, he might stay just as stupid as he was. She remained silent so long that John looked at her, but did not perceive that she was ready to cry. She wore a glad smile as she said:

"I've got more money with me than I ought to be carrying, anyhow."

"Why, Miss Barb, you oughtn't to do that; how does that happen?" He spoke with the air of one who had never in his life lost a cent by carelessness.

"It's not so very much," was her reply. "It's for my share of Rosemont. I sold it to pop-a."

"What! just now when the outlook for Rosemont—why, Miss Barb, I do believe you did it to keep clear of our land company, didn't you?"

"Mr. March, I wish you would let me lend you some of it, won't you?"

"No, I'll be—surprised if I do. Oh, Miss Barb, I thank you just the same; but my father, Miss Barb, gave it to me, as a canon of chivalry, never to make a money bargain with a lady that you can't make with a bank. If I'm not man enough to get out of this pinch without—oh, pshaw!"

In the hotel, at the head of the ladies' staircase, they stood alone.

"Good-by," said John, unwillingly. "I'll see you this evening, shan't I, when I come up to say good-by to your friends?"

Barbara said he would. They shook hands, each pair of eyes confessing to the other the superfluity of the ceremony.

"Good-by," said John again, as if he had not said it twice already.

"Good-by. Mr. March, if you want to give securities—as you would to a bank—I—I shouldn't want anything better than your mother's poems."

He glowed with gratitude and filial vanity, his big hand tightening on hers. "Oh, Miss Barb! no, no! But God bless you! I wonder if anyone else was ever so much like sunshine in a prison window! Good-by!" She felt her hand lifted by his; but, when she increased its weight the merest bit, he let it sink again and slide from his fingers.

He was gone, and a moment later she was with the Fairs, talking slowly, with soft smiles; but her head swam, she heard their pleasant questions remotely as through a wall, and could feel her pulse to her fingers and feet. He had almost kissed her hand. "The next time—the next time—sweet heaven send this poor hand strength to resist just enough and—and not too much." So raved the prayer locked in her heart, or so it would have raved had she dared give it the liberty even of unspoken words.

Meanwhile, John March lay on his bed with the back of his head in his hands.

"I've offended her! There was no mistaking that last look. This wouldn't have happened if she hadn't let her hand linger in mine. Oh, I wish to heaven girls were not so senselessly innocent and sisterly! Great Cæsar! I'd give five hundred dollars not to have drooled that drivel about being her brother! George! She

ought to know that only a fool or a scamp could make such an absurd proposal. I wonder if she still wants to lend me her money! I'd rather face a whole bank directorate with an overdrawn account than those Fairs this evening. I know exactly how they'll look. For it will be just like her to tell Mrs. Fair, who'll tell her husband, and they'll bury the thing right there with me under it, and 'Miss Garnet' will excuse herself on the plea of fatigue, and the conversation will drag, and I'll wish I had cut my throat in Pulaski City, and"—a steeple clock tolled the hour——"Oh, can it be that that's only six!"

At tea he missed them. Returning to his room, he had hardly got his hands under his head again, trying not to think of his financial embarrassments because it was Sunday, when a new idea brought him to his feet. Church! Evening service! Would she go? He had not asked her when she had intimated that the Fairs would not. In his selfish enjoyment of her society he had quite forgotten to care for her soul! He ought to go himself. And all the more ought she, for he was numbered among the saved now, and she was not. She *must* go. But how could she unless he should take her? His Christian duty was clear. He would write an offer of his services, and by her answer he would know how he stood in her regard.

Her reply was prompt, affirmative, confined to the subject. And yet, in some inexplicable way it conveyed the impression that she had never suspected him of the faintest intention to carry her hand to his lips.

The sermon was only so-so, but they enjoyed the singing; particularly their own. Both sang from one book, with much reserve, yet with such sweetly persuasive voices that those about them first listened and then added their own very best. The second tune was "Geer," and, with John's tenor going up every time Barbara's soprano came down, and *vice versa*, it was as lovely see-sawing as ever thrilled the heart of youth with pure and undefiled religion. They sang the last hymn to "Dennis." It was,

"Blest be the tie that bindsOur hearts in Christian love!"

and they gratefully accepted the support of four good, sturdy, bass voices behind them. But it was the words themselves, of the fourth and fifth stanzas, that inspired their richest yet softest tones, while the four basses behind them rather grew louder:

"When we asunder partIt gives us inward pain,But we shall still be joined in heartAnd hope to meet again.

"This glorious hope revivesOur courage by the way,While each in expectation livesAnd longs to see the day."

On the sidewalk the four basses again raised their four silk hats and vanished. They were the commercial travelers.

As the two worshippers returned toward their hotel, Barbara spoke glowingly of Mr. and Mrs. Fair; their perfect union; their beautiful companionship. John, in turn, ventured to tell of the unbounded esteem with which he had ever looked upon Barbara's mother. They dwelt, in tones of indulgent amusement, on the day, the hour, the scene, of John's first coming to the college, specially memorable to him as the occasion of his first real meeting of the Rose of Rosemont. Barbara said the day would always be bright to her as the one on which she first came into personal contact with Judge March. John spoke ardently of his father.

"And, by the bye, that day was the first on which I ever truly saw you."

"Or Johanna!" said Barbara. "Johanna's keeping Fannie Ravenel's new house. She's to stay with her till I get back." But John spoke again of Barbara's mother, asking permission to do so.

"Yes, certainly," murmured his companion. "In general I don't revere sacred things as I should," she continued, with her arm in her escort's, and "Blest be the tie"—still dragging in their adagio footsteps; "but my mother has all my life been so sacred to me—not that she was of the sort that they call otherworldly—I don't care for otherworldliness nearly as much as I should——"

"Don't you?" regretfully asked John; "that's one of my faults too."

"No; but I've always revered mom-a so deeply that except once or twice to Fannie, when Fannie spoke first, I've never talked about her." Yet Barbara went on telling of her mother from a full heart, her ears ravished by the music of John's interjected approvals. They talked again of his father also, and found sweet resemblances between the two dear ones. Only as they re-entered the hotel were both at once for a moment silent. Half way up the stairs, among the foliage plants of a landing ablaze with gas, they halted, while John, beginning,

"Two hearts that love the same fair things"—

recited one of his mother's shorter poems.

"Why, Mr. March!" His hearer's whisper only emphasized her sincere enthusiasm. "Did your mother—why, that's per-fect-ly beau-ti-ful!"

They parted, but soon met again in one of the parlors. Mrs. Fair came, too, but could not linger, having left Mr. Fair upstairs asleep on a lounge. She bade Barbara stay and hear all the manuscript poems Mr. March could be persuaded to read, and only regretted that her duty upstairs prevented her remaining herself.

"Good-by," she said to John. "Now, whenever you come to Boston, remember, you're to come directly to us."

John responded gratefully, and Barbara, as the two sat down upon a very small divan with the batch of manuscript between them, told him, in a melodious undertone, that she feared she couldn't stay long.

"What's that?" she asked, as he took up the first leaf to put it by.

"This? Oh, this is the poem I tried to recite to you on the stairs."

"Read it again," she said, not in her usual monotone, but with a soft eagerness of voice and eye quite new to him, and extremely stimulating. He felt an added exaltation when, at the close of the middle stanza, he saw her hands knit into each other and a gentle rapture shining through her drooping lashes; and at the end, when she sighed her admiration in only one or two half-formed words, twinkled her feet and bit her lip, his exaltation rose almost to inebriety. He could have sat there and read to her all night.

Yet that was the only poem she heard. The title of the next one, John said as he lifted it, was, "If I should love again;" but Barbara asked a dreamy question of a very general character; he replied, then asked one in turn; they discussed—she introducing the topic—the religious duty and practicability of making all one's life and each and every part of it good poetry, and the inner and outer conditions essential thereunto; and when two strange ladies came in and promptly went out again John glanced at the mantel-clock, exclaimed his surprise at the hour, and gathering up the manuscript, rose to say his parting word.

"Good-by." His hand-grasp was fervent.

"Good-by," replied the maiden.

"Miss Barb"—he kept her hand—"I want a word, and, honestly—I—don't know what it is! Doesn't good-by seem to you mighty weak, by itself?"

"Why, that depends. It's got plenty of po-ten-ti-al-i-ty if you give it its old sig-nif-i-ca-tion."

"Well, I do—every bit of it! Do you, Miss Barb—to me?"

She gave such answer with her steady eyes that her questioner's mind would have lost its balance had she not smiled so lightly.

"Still," he responded, "good-by is such unclaimed property that I want another word to sort o' fence it in, you know."

The maiden only looked more amused than before.

"I don't want it to mean too much, you understand," explained he. The hand in his grew heavier, but his grasp tightened on it. "Yet don't you think these last three days' companionship deserves a word of its own? Miss Barb, you've been—and in my memory you will be henceforth—a crystalline delight! The word's not mine, it's from one of my mother's sweetest things. Can't I say good-by, thou 'crystalline delight'?"

"Why, Mr. March," said Barbara, softly pulling at her hand. "I don't particularly like the implication that I'm per-fect-ly trans-par-ent."

"Now, Miss Barb! as if I—oh pshaw! Good-by." He lifted her hand. She made it very light. He held it well up, looking down on it fondly. "This," he said, "is the little friend that wanted to help me out of trouble. Good-by, little friend; I"—his lips approached it—"I love you."

It flashed from his hand like a bird from the nest. "No-o!" moaned its owner.

"Oh, Miss Gar—Miss Barb!" groaned John, "you've utterly misunderstood."

"No"—Barbara had not yet blushed, but now she crimsoned—"I've not misunderstood you. I simply don't like that way of saying——"

"I didn't mean——"

"I know it, Mr. March. I know perfectly well you don't expect ever to mean anything to anybody any more; you consider it a sheer im-pos-si-bil-i-ty. That's the keystone of our friendship."

John hemmed. "I wouldn't say impossibility; I'd say impracticability. It's an impracticability, Miss Barb, that's all. Why, every time I think of my dear sweet little mother——"

"Oh, Mr March, that's right! She *must* have your whole thought and care!"

"She shall have it, Miss Barb, at every cost! as completely as I know your father has and ought to have yours!" He took her hand. "Good-by! The understanding's perfect now, isn't it?"

"I think so—I hope so—yes, sir."

"Say, 'Yes, John.'"

"Oh, Mr. March, I can't say that."

"Why, then, it isn't perfect."

"Yes, it is."

"Well, then, Miss Garnet, with the perfect understanding that the understanding is perfect, I propose to bid this hand good-by in a fitting and adequate manner, and trust I shall not be inter—!—rupted! Good-by."

"Oh, Mr. March, I don't think that was either fair or right!" Her eyes glistened.

"Miss Barb, it wasn't! Oh, I see it now! It was a wretched mistake! Forgive me!"

Her eyes, staring up into his, filled to the brim. She waved him away and turned half aside. He backed to the door and paused.

"Miss Barb, one look! Oh, one look, just to show I'm not utterly unforgiven and cast out! I promise you it's all I'll ever ask—one look!"

"Good-by," she murmured, but could not trust herself to move.

He stifled a moan. She gave a start of pain. He thought it meant impatience. She took an instant more for self-command and then lifted a smile. Too late, he was gone!

LXI.

A SICK MAN AND A SICK HORSE

"Thank you, no," said Miss Garnet at the door of Mrs. Fair's room, refusing to enter. "I rapped only to say good-night."

To the question whether she had heard all the poems read she replied, "Not all," with so sweet an irony in her grave smile that Mrs. Fair wanted to tell her she looked like the starlight. But words are clumsy, and the admirer satisfied herself with a kiss on the girl's temple. "Good-night," she said; "dream of me."

Several times next day, as the three travelers wound their swift course through the mountains of Pennsylvania, Mrs. Fair observed Barbara sink her book to her lap and with an abstracted gaze on the landscape softly touch the back of her right hand with the fingers of her left. It puzzled her at first, but by and by—

"Poor boy!" she said to herself, in that inmost heart where no true woman ever takes anyone into council, "and both of you Southerners! If that's all you got, and you had to steal that, you're both of you better than I'd have been."

When about noon she saw her husband's eyes fixed on Barbara, sitting four seats away, she asked, with a sparkle: "Thinking of Mr. March?"

"Yes, I've guessed why he's stayed behind."

"Have you? That's quick work—for a man."

"It looks to-day as if he were out of the game, doesn't it?"

The lady mused. This time the husband twinkled:

"If he is, my dear, whom should we congratulate: all three or which two?"

"I don't know yet, my love. Wait. Wait till we've tried her in Boston."

At this hour John March was imperatively engrossed by an unforseen discovery. Tossing on his bed the night before, he had decided not to telegraph to Suez for money until he had searched all the hotels for some one from Dixie who would exclaim, "Why, with the greatest pleasure," or words to that effect. In the morning he was up betimes and off on this errand, asking himself why he had not done it the evening before, but concluding he must have foreborne out of respect for the Sabbath.

At the first hotel his search had no reward. But in the second he found a Pulaski City man, whose acquaintance he had never previously prized, yet from whom he now hid four-fifths of his surprised delight and still betrayed enough to flatter the fellow dizzy. John took him back to his own hotel for breakfast, made sure he had only to ask a loan to get it, and let him go at last, unable to get the request through his own teeth.

He went to a third hotel, but found only strangers. Then he went to a fourth, explored its rotunda in vain, turned three or four leaves of its register, and was giving a farewell glance to the back page, when he started with surprise.

"I see," he said to the clerk, "I see you have—will you kindly look this way a moment? Are these persons still with you?"

"They are, sir," said the clerk, gazing absently beyond him, and took March's card. "Front! I'll have to send it to the lady, sir; Colonel Ravenel's sick. What? Oh, well, sir, if *you* think pneumonia's slight—Yes, sir, that's what he's got." He was turning away contemptuously, but John said:

"Oh!—eh—one moment more, if you please."

"Well, sir, what is it?" The man gave his ear instead of his eye; but he gave both eyes, as John giving both his, asked deferentially:

"Do you own all the hotels in this town, sir, or are you merely a clerk of this one?"

The card went, and a bell-boy presently led the way to Fannie's door. It stood unlatched. The boy pushed it ajar, and John met only his frowning image reflected full length in the mirror-front of a folding-bed, until a door opened softly from the adjoining room and closed again, and Fannie, pale and vigil worn, but with ecstasy in her black eyes, murmured:

"Oh, John March, I never knew I could be quite so glad to see you!"

She pressed his hand rapturously between her two, dropped it playfully, and saw that there had come between them a nearness and a farness different from any that had ever been. John felt the same thing, but did not guess that this was why her smile was grateful and yet had a pang in it. There was a self-oblivious kindness in his murmur as he refused a seat.

"No, I mustn't keep you a moment. Only tell me what I can do for you."

She explained that she would have to go back into the sick-room and return again, as the physician was in there, and Jeff-Jack was unaware, and ought probably to be kept unaware, of any other visitor's presence.

John said he would wait and hear the doctor's pronouncements and her commands. When she came the second time this person appeared with her. Beyond a soft introduction there were only a few words, and the two men went away together. As Fannie returned and bent cheerily over the bridegroom's bed, she was totally surprised by his feeble, bright-eyed request.

"When John March comes back with the medicine I want to see him."

The man to whom Fannie had introduced John was of a sort much newer to him than to travelers generally—a typical physician-in-ordinary to a hotel. He wore a dark-blue overcoat abundantly braided and frogged; his sheared mustaches were dyed black, and his diamond scarf-pin, a pendant, was chained to his shirt. As they drove to a favorite apothecary's some distance away, John told why he had come North, and the doctor said he had a cousin living at the hotel who had capital, and happened just then to be looking for investments. It would be no trouble at all to drive Mr. March back from the apothecary's and make him acquainted with Mr. Bulger. Was Mr. March fond of horses? Good! Bulger owned the fastest span in the city, and drove them every morning at ten.

In fact, before they quite reached the hotel again they came upon the capitalist, ribbons in hand, just leaving a public stable behind such a pair of trotters that John exclaimed at sight of them and accepted with alacrity a seat by his side. As

for the medicine, the physician himself took it to Mrs. Ravenel, explained that John would be along in an hour or two, and said, "Yes, the patient could see Mr. March briefly, but must talk as little as possible."

Four or five times during the next seven or eight hours the sick man's eyes compelled Fannie to say: "I don't know why he doesn't come." And at evening with an open note in her hand, a smile on her lips, and a new loneliness in her heart, she announced: "He says he will be here early in the morning."

Mr. Bulger was large, heavy, and clean-shaven, as became a capitalist; but his overcoat was buff, with a wide trimming of fur, and his yellow hair was parted in the back and perfumed. March did not mind this, but he was truly sorry to notice, very quickly, that his companion's knowledge of horses was mostly a newspaper knowledge. While Mr. Bulger quoted turf records, John said to himself:

"Wonder how far he'll drive before he sees his nigh horse is sick."

But very soon the owner of the team remarked: "The mare seems droopy."

"Yes, Mr. Bulger," replied John, almost explosively, "she's going to be a very sick animal before you can get her back to the stable, if you ever get her back at all. If we don't do the right thing right off, you'll lose her. I wouldn't stop them, sir. My conscience! don't let her stand here, or she'll be so stiff, directly, you can't make her go!"

"Yes, I guess you're right," said Bulger, moving on. "If I can just get her home and out of harness and let her lie down——"

"If you do, sir, she'll never get up again."

"By Jo'!" exclaimed the owner of the horse. "I don't want that!" He looked grimly on the gentle sufferer. "See her," he presently said; "why, I never saw anything get sick so fast. Why, Mr. March, I'm afraid she's going to die right here! Half an hour ago I wouldn't 'a' sold that mare for two thousand dollars! Mr. March, if you can save her you may have all the doctors you want, and I'll pay you a hundred dollars yourself as quick as I'd pay you one!"

"Give me the reins," was John's response. "Where's the very nearest good stable?"

There was one not far away. He turned and soon reached it. As they stopped in its door the beautiful creature in his care was trembling in all her flesh, and dripping sweat from every pore. The ready grooms helped him unharness.

"I'll send for a doctor, shan't I?" said Bulger, twice, before John heard him.

"Yes, if you know a real one; but I'll have everything done before he gets here. Here, you, fetch a blanket. Somebody bring me some fine salt—oh, a double handful—a tumblerful—to rub her back with—only be quick!"

In a moment the harness had given place to halter and blanket, and the weak invalid stiffly followed John's firm leading over the sawdust.

Three hours later Bulger said, "She's a good deal better, ain't she?" and when March smiled fondly on her and replied that he "should say so," her owner suggested luncheon.

"No," said John, "you go and eat; I shan't leave her till she's well. She mustn't lie down, and I can't trust anyone to keep her from doing it."

Two or three times more Bulger went and came again, and the lamps were being lighted in the streets when at last John remarked,

"Well, sir, you can harness her up now and drive her home. Nice gyirl! Nice gyirl! Did you think us was gwine to let you curl up and die out yond' in the street? No, missie, no! you nice ole gyirl, doggone yo' sweet soul, no!"

"Mr. March," said Bulger, "I said I'd pay you a hundred dollars if you'd cure her, didn't I? Well, here's my check for half of it, and if you just say the word I'll make another for the other half."

John pushed away the proffering hand with a pleased laugh. "I can't take pay for doctoring a horse, sir, but I will ask a favor of you—in fact, I'll ask two; and the first is, Come and have dinner with me, will you?"

And when John called on Fannie the next morning, Mr. Bulger had taken a train for Suez, expecting to return in three days subscriber for all the land company's stock left untaken through the prudence of the younger Fair. John had treated himself to a handsome new pocketbook.

LXII.

RAVENEL THINKS HE MUST

"So you'll be leaving us at once!" said Fannie, as the two sat by Ravenel's bed.

"No, not till Mr. Bulger gets back. I can be up to my neck in work till then on the colonization side of the business." They bent to hear the bridegroom's words:

"Wish you wouldn't go East till Friday evening, and then go with us."

"Why Jeff-Jack Ravenel," exclaimed Fannie, with a careworn laugh, "what are you talking about?"

"Not much fun for John," was the languishing reply, "but big favor to us."

"But, my goodness!" said the bride, "the doctor won't even let you get up."

"Got to," responded the smiling invalid. "Got to be in Washington next Sunday."

"That's simply ridiculous," laughed Fannie, with a pretty toss, and sauntered into the next room, closing the door between. The sick man's smile increased:

"She's going in there to cry," he softly drawled.

"You can't go, Ravenel," said March. "Why, it'll kill you, like as not."

"Got to go, John. Politics."

"Oh, the other fellows can work it without you."

"Yes," replied the smiling lips, "that's why I've got to be there."

The subject was dropped. That was Tuesday morning. John called twice a clay until Thursday evening. Each time he came Fannie seemed more and more wan and blighted, though never less courageous.

"She'll be sick herself if she doesn't hire a nurse and get some rest," said the doctor to John; but her idea of a hired nurse was Southern, and she would not hear of it. John was not feeling too honest these days. On the evening of Thursday he came nerved up to mention Miss Garnet, whom, as a theme, he had wholly avoided whenever Fannie had spoken of her. But the moment he met Fannie, in the outer room, he was so cut to the heart to see how her bridal beauty had wasted with her strength that he could only beg her to lie down an hour, two, three, half the night, the whole of it, while he would watch and tend in her place. He would take it unkindly if she did not.

"Oh, John," she laughingly replied, "you forget!" He faintly frowned.

"Yes, Miss Fannie, I try to." He did not add that he had procured assistance.

Her response was a gleam of loving approval. John noticed seven or eight minute spots on her face and recognized for the first time in his life that they were freckles.

"John, did the doctor tell you it was my fault that Jeff-Jack got this sickness?"

"No, and I shouldn't have believed it if he had."

"Thank you, John"—her lifted eyes filled—"thank you; but it was; it was my fault, and nobody shall watch him in my place." It would have made a difference to several besides herself, had she known that the doctor on both his last two visits had forgotten to say that no one need any longer sit up all night.

John called again Friday morning. School himself as best he could, still an energy in his mien showed there was news from Suez.

"What is it, old man," asked the slow-voiced invalid, "have they made the new slate?"

"Yes, and the bill's passed empowering the three counties to levy the tax and take the stock. Oh, Garnet's a wheel-horse, yes, sir-ee!—and Gamble and Bulger are a team! Bulger isn't coming back for a while at all; they've made him secretary."

A perceptible shade came over Ravenel's face, although he smiled as he said,

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Have they made you vice-president?"

"Yea, they have! I no more expected such a thing—I knew Gamble, of course, would be president and Champion treasurer; but—Well, they say I can push things better as vice-president, and I reckon that's so;" said John, and ceased without adding that his salary was continued and that Bulger would draw none.

"Where does Major Garnet come in?" asked Fannie.

"Oh, he still declines any appointment whatever, but he's made up another company; a construction company to take our contracts. Proudfit's president. It's not strongly officered; but, as Garnet says, better have men we can dictate to than men who might try to dictate to us. And besides, except Crickwater, they're all Suez men. Mattox is treasurer; Pettigrew's secretary."

Fannie wanted to say that Proudfit had no means except his wife's, but was still because a small rosy spot on either cheek-bone of the invalid was beginning to betray the intensity of his thought. She would have motioned to John to tell no more, if she could have done so unseen by Ravenel. However, the bridegroom himself turned the theme.

"Are you going down there before you go East?"

"No, Garnet and Bulger both urge me to go straight on. I'm mighty sorry I can't wait till you're well enough to go; but——"

On the pallid face in the pillow came the gentlest of smiles. Its fair, thin hand held toward Fannie a bunch of small keys, and their owner said,

"I wish, while you're getting your fare and berth tickets, you'd get two of each for us, John, will you?" He still smilingly held out the keys.

Fannie sat still. She tried to smile but turned very pale. "Jeff-Jack," she gasped, "you can't go. I beg you, don't try. I beg you, Jeff-Jack."

"Got to, Fannie." He sat up in the bed. John thrust a pillow behind him.

"Well, I—" her bloodless lips twitched painfully—"I can't let you go. The doctor says he mustn't, John."

Ravenel smiled on. "Got to, Fannie. Come, take these and get John my pocketbook."

Fannie rose. "No, I tell you the solemn truth, even if you could go, I can't. I shouldn't get there alive. You certainly wouldn't—" she tried to speak playfully—"leave me behind, would you?"

"Have to, Fannie. State interest—simply imperative. Leave you plenty money." He gave the keys a little shake. Her eyes burned through him, but he smiled on.

She took the keys. As she passed through the door between the two rooms she supported herself against the jamb. John rose hurriedly, but stood dumb. In a few seconds she returned. As she neared him she seemed to trip on the carpet, staggered, fell, and would have struck the floor at full length but for John's quick arms. For an instant he held her whole slight weight. Her brow had fallen upon his shoulder. But quickly she lifted it and with one wild look into his face moaned, "No," and pushed herself from him into a rocking-chair.

The pocketbook lay on the floor. He would have handed it to her, but she motioned for him to give it to her husband. Ravenel drew from it three bank-notes, saying, as he passed them to John—"Better engage two berths, but buy only one ticket. Then we can either——"

March, busy with his own pocketbook, made a sign that he understood. His fingers trembled, but when he lifted his eyes from them there was a solemn calm in his face and his jaws were set like steel. He handed back one of the notes, and with it something else which was neither coin nor currency.

"Does this mean——" quietly began Ravenel.

"Yes," said John, "I sell you my ticket. I shan't leave town till Miss Fannie's fit to travel."

"Why, John!" For a single instant the sick man reddened. In the next he had recovered his old serenity. "Why that's powerful kind of you."

"Oh, no," said March, with a boyish smile to Fannie, who was rising to move to a lounge, "it's a mighty old——" He was going to say "debt," but before Ravenel could more than catch his breath or John start half a step forward she had struck the lounge like a flail.

March sprang to her, snatched up a glass of water, and seeing Ravenel's hand on the bell-pull at the bed's head cried, "Ring for the maid, why don't you? She's fainted away."

"Keep cool, old man," said the bridegroom, with his quiet gaze on Fannie. Her eyes opened, and he withdrew his hand.

At seven that evening Ravenel, sitting in his sleeping-car seat, gave March his hand for good-by.

"Yes," said John, "and if the nurse I've got her isn't tip-top—George! I'll find one that is!"

"I'll trust you for that, John."

But John frowned. "What right have you got to trust me this way at all?"

"Because, old man, this time you're in love with another girl."

"No, sir! No, sir!" said March, backing away as the train began to move. "Don't you fool yourself with *that* notion."

"I shan't," drawled the departing traveler.

LXIII.

LETTERS AND TELEGRAMS

No one ever undertook to argue anything with Ravenel unless invited to do so, and very few ever got such an invitation. Fannie had not intended to be left behind. Out of her new care of him she had made her first and last effort to bend his will to hers, and even while she burned under the grief and shame of his treatment she would have gone with him at his beckon though death threatened her at every step.

At any rate so she felt as she came out of her faint and bravely resumed her care of him, retaining it even when the doctor declared she had a fever and ought to be in bed. But she felt also that Jeff-Jack knew he had only to beckon; and when he did not do so, either by hand or tone, she saved herself the idle torture of asking him to take a sick bride on a journey from which a sick bride could not deter him.

Yet she made one mistake, when she took at its face value the equal absence of fondness and resentment with which the bridegroom had behaved throughout. It was easy enough to read John March's deep indignation under the surface of his courteous silences; but neither she nor John guessed that the bridegroom's only reason for not being vexed with both of them was that he was not of the sort to let himself be vexed. Each had disappointed him seriously; Fannie by setting up domestic love and felicity as a purpose instead of an appliance, squandering her care and strength in a short-sighted devotion to his physical needs, and showing herself unfit to co-operate with him in the things for which he thought it no great matter to risk his life; and John by failing so utterly to discern the true situation in Suez that the only thing to do with him was to let him alone until time and hard luck might season him to better uses than anyone could make of him yet.

If Ravenel were going to allow himself the luxury of either vexation or chagrin, he had far more profound occasion in quite another person. Probably never before in their acquaintance had he been so displeased with Garnet. Some hours before he rose to dress for the train he had filled out two telegraph blanks. The contents of the first he read to Fannie and with her approval sent it to her father by wire. It read:

"Have been sick. Much better now. Fannie tired out, nursing. Wants Johanna. Send her in care Southern Express Company.

R."

He did not read to her the second missive. But when he had made it ready—for the mail, not the telegraph,—getting her to address it in one of her envelopes and seal it with her own new seal, he said, with a pensive smile that made him very handsome, "Garnet will think it's from a woman—till he opens it."

It read as follows:

"Your Construction Company smells. *Courier* mum—but firm—money all got to stay in Three Counties, no matter who's on top. Last man one Yank too many. *Courier* may have to combine with Halliday.

"Yours to count on, J. J."

John did not see Fannie that evening on his return from the station. He only received at second hand her request to call in the morning. She had gone to bed and taken her medicine, and was resting quietly, said the nurse. But when John asked if the patient was asleep, the nurse confessed she hardly thought so. She might have told how, listening kindly at the patient's door, she had heard her turn in bed and moan, "Oh, God! why can't I die?" But she had often heard such questions asked by persons with only a headache. And besides, there is always the question, To whom to to tell things. Where did this most winning young man stand? The only fact quite clear either to her, the clerks, bell-boys or chambermaids, was that when he stood in front of the bridegroom he completely hid him from view.

Though lost to sight, however, Fannie was still a tender care in the memory of John March—if we may adapt one of his mother's gracefulest verses. He went to his hotel fairly oppressed with the conviction that for Fannie's own sake it was his duty to drop a few brief lines to Barbara Garnet—ahem! Mr. March's throat was absolutely sound, but sometimes, when he wasn't watching, it would clear itself that way. To forestall any rumor that might reach Miss Garnet from Suez, it was but right to send her such a truthfully garbled account of the Ravenels and himself that she would see at a glance how perfectly natural, proper and insignificant it was for him to be lingering in a strange city with a sick bride whom he had once hoped to marry, the bridegroom being sick also and several hundred miles away. At the same time this would give him opportunity to explain away the still mortifying awkwardness of his last parting with Miss Garnet—without, however, really alluding to it. No use trying to explain a thing of that sort at all unless you can explain it without alluding to it.

He was ready, early in the evening, to begin; but lost some time trying to decide whether to open with Miss Garnet, or My Dear Miss Garnet, or Dear Miss Garnet, or My Dear Miss Barbara, or My Dear Miss Barb, or Dear Miss Barb, or just Dear Friend as you would to an ordinary acquaintance. He tried every form, but each in turn looked simply and dreadfully impossible, and at length he went on with the letter, leaving the terms of his salutation to the inspiration of the last moment. It was long after midnight when he finished. The night sky was inviting, and the post-office near by; he mailed the letter there instead of trusting the hotel. And then he stood by the mute slot that had swallowed it, and because he could not get it back for amendment called himself by as large a collection of flaming and freezing invectives as ever a Southern gentleman—"member in good standing of any Evangelical church"—poured upon himself in the privacy of his own counsels. He returned to his hotel, but was back again at sunrise smiling his best into a hand hole, requesting so-and-so and so-and-so, while he pencilled and submitted examples of his hand-writing. To which a voice within replied,

"Oh, yes, the watchman; but the watchman told you wrong. I tell you again, that mail's gone."

"How long has—? However!—Oh, that's all right, sir; I only wanted—ahem!" The applicant moved away chewing his lip. What he had "only wanted" was to change the form of his letter's salutation. In the street it came to him that by telegraphing the post-master at the other end of the route he could—"Oh, thunder! Let it go!" He had begun it, "Dear Miss Barb."

And so it went its way, while he went his—on a business of whose pure unselfishness it is to be feared he was a trifle proud—I mean, to see how Mrs. Ravenel was and ask what more he could do for her. He was kindly received by a sweet little woman of thirty or so, who lived in a small high room of the hotel, taught vocal music in an academy, and had nothing to do on Saturdays and Sundays—this was Saturday. Through the doctor, who was her doctor, too, she had found access to Fannie's bedside and even into her grateful regard. Her soft, well-trained voice was of the kind that rests the sick and weary. The nurse, she said, was getting a little sleep on the lounge in Mrs. Ravenel's room. "Satisfactory?" Yes, admirable every way, and already as fond of Mrs. Ravenel as she herself.

"Isn't she lovely?" she exclaimed in melodious undertone, and hardly gave Mr. March time for a very dignified yes. "When she sat up in her pillows half an hour ago, with her breakfast, so delicate and tempting, lying before her forgotten, and she looking *so* frail and yet *so* pretty, with that look in her eyes as if she had been seeing ghosts all night, she seemed to me as though she'd just finished one life and begun another. How long has she had that look, Mr. March? I noticed it the morning she arrived, though it wasn't anything like so plain as it is now. But it only makes her more interesting and poetical. If I were a man—hmph!—I'd wish I were Colonel Ravenel, that's all! No, I don't know that I should, either; but if I were not, I'm afraid I should give him trouble." John thought she watched him an instant there, but—

"Mr. March," she went on, "I wish you could hear the beautiful, tender, winning way in which she boasts of her husband. She's as proud of him for going and leaving her as she is of you for staying! Fact is, *I* can't tell which of you she's proudest of." She gave her listener a fascinated smile, with which he showed himself at such a loss to know what to do that she liked him still better than before.

"Mrs. Ravenel asked me to tell you how grateful she is. But she also——"

A bell-boy interrupted with two telegrams, both addressed to Fannie.

"She also what?" asked John, mantling.

"Mr. March, do you suppose either of these is bad news?"

"No, ma'am, one's probably from Suez to say the black girl's coming, and the other's from her husband; but if it were not good news, he was to send it to me."

She took the telegrams in and was soon with him again. "Oh, Mr. March, they're just as you said! Mrs. Ravenel says tell you she's better—which is true—and to thank you once more, but to say that she can't any longer—" the little musician poured upon him her most loving beams—"let you make the sacrifice you're——"

John solemnly smiled. "Why, she hasn't *been* letting me. She never asked me to stay and she needn't ask me to go. I gave my word to *him*, and I shall keep it—to myself." His manner grew more playful. "That's what you'd do, wouldn't you, if you were a man?"

But at that moment his hearer was not fancying herself a man; she was only wishing she were a younger woman. A gleam of the wish may have got into her look as she gave him her hand at parting, for somehow he began to have a sort of honey-sickness against femmine interests and plainly felt his land company's business crowding upon his conscience.

LXIV.

JUDICIOUS JOHANNA

One thing that gives play for sentiment concerning a three hours' belated railway train is the unapologetic majesty with which at last it rolls into a terminal station.

There had been rain-storms and freshets down in Dixie, and a subdued anxiety showed itself on Johanna's face as she stepped down from the crowded platform; but she shone with glad astonishment when she found John March taking her forgotten satchel from her hands and her checks from the express messenger.

A great many people looked at them, once for curiosity and again for pleasure; for she was almost as flattering a representative of her class as he of his, and in meeting each other they seemed happy enough to have been twins. The hotel's conveyance was an old-fashioned stage-coach, but very new and blue. It made her dumb with delight to see the owner-like serenity with which Mr. March

passed her into it and by and by out of it into the gorgeous hotel. But to double the dose of some drugs reverses their effect, and her supper, served in the ladies' ordinary and by a white man-servant, actually brought her to herself. As she began to eat—blissfully, for only a yard or so away sat Mr. March smilingly holding back a hundred inquiries—she managed, herself, to ask a question or two. She grew pensive when told of Miss Fannie's sickness and of the bridegroom's being compelled to go to Washington, but revived in reporting favorably upon the health of Mrs. March, whom, she said, she had seen at a fair given by both the Suez churches to raise money to repair the graveyard fence—"on account o' de hawgs breakin' in so awfm."

"And you say everybody was there, eh?" indolently responded John, as he resharpened his lead-pencil. "Even including Professor Pettigrew?"

"No, seh, I observe he not 'mongs' de comp'ny, 'caze yo' maw's Jane, she call my notice to dat."

"I wonder how my mother likes Jane. Do you know?"

Johanna showed a pretty embarrassment. "Jane say yo' maw like her. She say yo' maw like her 'caze she always done tole yo' maw ev'thing what happm when yo' maw not at home. Seh? Oh, no, seh," the speaker's bashfulness increased, "'tis on'y Jane say dat; same time she call my notice to de absence o' Pufesso' Pedigree—yass, seh."

John gave himself a heartier manner. "I reckon, Johanna, you'd be rather amazed to hear that I traveled nearly all the way from Pulaski City with yo' young missie and stayed at the same hotel here with her and her friends a whole Saturday and Sunday, wouldn't you?"

Johanna's modest smile glittered across her face as she slowly replied, "No-o, seh, I cayn't 'zac'ly fine myseff ama-aze', 'caze Miss Barb done wrote about it in her letteh."

"Psheh!" said John, playing incredulous, "you ain't got air letter from Miss Barb."

The girl was flattered to ecstasy. "Yass, seh, I is," she said; but her soft laugh meant also that something in the way he faltered on the dear nickname made her heart leap.

"Now, Johanna," murmured John, looking more roguishly than he knew from under his long lashes, "you' a-foolin' me. If you had a letter you'd be monst'ous proud to show it. All you've got is a line or two saying, 'Send me my shawl,' or something o' that sort."

Johanna glanced up with injured surprise and then tittered, "Miss Barb wear a shawl—fo' de Lawd's sa-ake! Why, Mr. March, evm you knows betteh'n dat, seh." Her glow of happiness stayed while she drew forth a letter and laid it by her cup of coffee.

"Oh!"—the sceptic tossed his head—"seein's believin'; but I can't see so far off."

Johanna could hardly speak for grinning. "Dass heh letteh, seh, writ de ve'y same night what she tell you good-by."

"She wrote it"—John's heart came into his mouth—"that same night?"

"Dass what it saay, seh. D'ain't nothin' so ve'y private in it; ef yo' anteress encline you to read it, why——"

"Thank you," said the convert as his long arm took the prize.

There were three full sheets of it. He found himself mentioned again and again, but covertly drew his breath through his clenched teeth to see how necessary he had made himself to every page of her narrative and how utterly he was left out when not so needed. "She'll not get the same chance again," he thought as he finished.

"Johanna, have you—never mind, I was——" And he began to read it again.

Sitting thus absorbed, he was to the meek-minded girl before him as strong and fine a masculine nature as she had ever knowingly come near. But his intelligence was only masculine at last—a young man's intelligence. She kept her eyes in her plate; yet she had no trouble to see, perfectly, that her confidence was not ill-advised—a confidence that between the letter's lines he would totally fail to read what she had read.

One thing was disappointing. As often as read to her, the letter had seemed to sparkle and overflow with sweet humor and exquisite wit to that degree that she had to smother her laughter from beginning to end. Mr. March was finishing it a second time and had not smiled. Twice or thrice he had almost frowned. Yet as he pushed its open pages across the table he said ever so pleasantly,

"That's a mighty nice letter, Johanna; who's going to answer it for you?"

"Hit done answ'ed, seh. I ans' it same night it come. My fatheh writ de answeh; yass, seh, Unc' Leviticus."

"Oh, yes. Well, you couldn't 'a' chosen better—Oh! Miss Barb says here"—Mr. March gathered up the sheets again—"'write me all you hear about the land company.' That's just so's to know how her father gets on, I reckon, ain't it?" He

became so occupied with the letter that the girl did not have to reply. He was again reading it through. This time he repeatedly smiled, and as he folded it and gave it up he said once more,

"Yes, it's a nice letter. Does Miss Barb know where to mail the next one to you?"

"I ain't had no chaynce to sen' her word, seh."

"Why, that's a pity! You ought to do that at once, Johanna, and let her know you've got here safe and well—if only for her sake! I'll do it for you to-night, if you'd like me to."

Johanna thankfully assented.

Mr. March did not ponder, this time, as to what the opening phrase of the letter should be; and as he sealed the "hurried note" he did so with the air of a man who is confident he has made no mistake. It began, "Dear Miss Barb."

LXV.

THE ENEMY IN THE REAR

A new week came in with animating spring weather. On Monday Fannie sat up, and on Tuesday, when John called, her own smile surprised him at the door, while Johanna's reflected it in the background.

He felt himself taken at a disadvantage. His unready replies to her lively promptings turned aimlessly here and there; his thoughts could neither lead nor follow them. The wine of her pretty dissembling went to his head; while the signs of chastening in her fair face joined strangely with her sprightliness in an obscure pathetic harmony that moved his heartstrings as he had felt youthfully sure they were never to be moved again. His late anger against Ravenel came back, and with it, to his surprise, the old tenderness for her, warmed by the anger and without the bitterness of its old chagrin. He found himself reminded of his letters to Johanna's distant mistress, but instantly decided that the two matters had nothing to do with each other, and gave himself rich comfort in this visible and only half specious fulfilment of his youth's long dream. The daily protection and care of this girl, her welcome, winsome gayeties and thanks, were his, his! with no one near to claim a division of shares and only honor to keep account with. His words were stumbling over these unconfessed distractions when she startled him by saying,

"I've telegraphed Jeff-Jack that I can travel."

His response was half-resentful. "Did the doctor say you might?"

She gave her tone a shade of mimicry. "Yes, sir, the doctor said I might." But she changed it to add, "You'll soon be free, John; it's a matter of only two or three hours." Her playfulness faded into a smile of gratefulest affection. Johanna, who was passing into the next room, could not see it, but she easily guessed it by the slight disconcertion which showed through the smile he gave back.

He dropped his eyes pensively. "To be free isn't everything."

"It is for you just now, John, mighty nearly. You've got a great work before you, and——"

"Oh, yes, so I've heard." He laughed apologetically and rose to go.

"You don't need to be reminded as badly as you used to," said Fannie, retaining his hand and looking into his face with open admiration. "You'll start East to-day, won't you?"

"That depends."

"Now, John, it doesn't do any such thing. It mustn't!"

"I'll let you know later," said John, freeing his grasp. The pressure of her little hand had got into his pulse. He hurried away.

"She's right," he pondered, as he walked down the populous street, beset by a vague discomfort, "it mustn't depend. Besides, she's pretty sure not to stay here. It wouldn't be Jeff-Jack's way to come back; he'll wire to her to come to him at once. Reckon I'll decide now to go on that Washington express this evening. I can't afford to let my movements depend on F-Fannie's—hem! Heaven knows I've taxed the company's patience enough already."

He told the regretful clerks at his hotel that this was his farewell day with them, and tried to feel that he had thus burned the last bridge between himself and indiscretion. He only succeeded in feeling as you and I—and Garnet—used to feel when we had told our purpose to others and fibbed to ourselves about the motive. But Garnet had got far beyond that, understand.

So Vice-President March went to the day's activities paying parting calls from one private office to another in the interest of Widewood's industrial colonization. He bought his railroad ticket—returnable in case any unforeseen——

"Oh, that's all right, President March: yes, sir; good-day, sir."

At his hotel shortly after noon he found a note. He guessed at its contents. "She takes the same train I do." He forced himself to frown at the amusing yet agreeable accident. But his guess was faulty; the note read:

"I return immediately to Suez, where Jeff-Jack will arrive by the end of the week."

And thereupon John had another feeling known to us all—the dull shame with which we find that fate has defrauded us for our own good. However, he hurried to Fannie and put himself into her service with a gay imperiousness delightful to both and apparently amusing to the busy Johanna. By and by the music-teacher helped also, making Fannie keep her rocking-chair, and, as Mr. March came and went, dropped little melodious, regretful things to him privately about his own departure. Once she said that nothing gave her so much happiness as answering pleasant letters; but John only wondered why women so often talk obviously without any aim whatever!

"Well," at length he said to Fannie, "I'll go now and get myself off. Your train starts from the same station mine does; I'll say good-by there."

He packed his valise and hand-bag, and had given them to the porter, when he received a letter.

"My George!" was his dismayed whisper to himself, "a duelist couldn't be prompter." He walked to the door, gazing at the superscription. "It feels like my letter sent back. Ah, well! that's just what it ought to be. Confound the women, all; I wonder how it feels for a man just to mind his own business and let them"—he rent the envelope—"mind—theirs!"

He read the missive as he rode to the station. It wasn't very long, and it did seem to him a bit too formal; and yet it was so gravely sweet that he had to smooth the happiness off his face repeatedly, and finally stole a private laugh behind the hand that twisted his small mustache, as he fondly sighed.

"Doggone your considerate little soul, you're just a hundred ton nicer and better than your father or anybody else is ever going to deserve!" But he read on:

"For you remember, do you not? that I was free to speak of yours and papa's ambitions and plans for Widewood? And so I enclose a page or two of a letter just received from our Johanna at home, because it states things about Colonel Proudfit's new construction company which Cornelius seems to have told your mother's black girl, Jane. They may be pure inventions; but if so, they must be his, not hers, although I should never have thought he would be so reckless as to tell such things to such a person——" Etc.

John unfolded the fragments of Johanna's letter with a condescending smile which began to fade before he had read five lines. A chill ran down his back, and then an angry flush mounted to his brow.

There is a kind of man—Mr. Leggett was such a one, Samson was another—who will tell his own most valuable or dangerous secrets to any woman on whose conquest he is bent, if she only knows how to bid for them. And there are "Delijahs" who will break any confidence and risk any fortune, nay, their own lives, to show a rival she has been eclipsed. There are also women, even girls, who are of such pure eyes they cannot discern obliquity anywhere. And there are others just as pure—the lily's own heart isn't purer—who, nevertheless—but why waste time or type. In short, Johanna first, and then Barbara, had seen how easily Daphne Jane's tittle-tattle might be serious news to John March; which it certainly was if the dark cloud on his face was a true sign.

He found Fannie on her train and well cared for by Johanna and the music-teacher. In the silence which promptly followed his greeting, these two moved aside and Fannie murmured eagerly,

"What on earth's the matter?—Yes, there is, John; something's wrong; what is it? I saw you slip a letter into your pocket at the door. What does it mean?"

"Why, Fannie—it means I've got to go straight back to Suez."

She made a rapturous gesture. "And you're going on this train?" she whispered.

"No."

"Now, why not? John, you're foolish!—or else you think I am. You mustn't! You must go on this train. John, I—I want you to." She smiled up at his troubled gaze.

"Johanna," he said, and beckoned the maid a step aside. "Miss Barb has sent me that part of your letter to her that tells about the construction company."

"Yaas, seh," murmured Johanna. Her heart throbbed.

"You say, there, that Cornelius says its officers are mere tools in the power of men who have put them there; that Gamble's behind Crickwater, Bulger's behind Mattox, and he, Leggett, is behind Pettigrew—yes—don't interrupt, there isn't time—and that Colonel Proudfit got the money to buy stock enough to elect himself president, by persuading his wife to mortgage everything she has got. Yes; but you don't tell who Cornelius says is behind Colonel Proudfit. Didn't he say?"

"Please, seh, Mr. March, ef Majo'——"

"That's all, Johanna, I'm much obliged to you. It may be, you know, that there isn't a word of truth in the whole thing; but in any case you'll never—No, that's right." He turned to Fannie. "I must change my ticket and check; I'm going with you."

LXVI.

WARM HEARTS, HOT WORDS, COOL FRIENDS

About that same hour the next day John stepped off the train at Suez and turned to let Fannie down; but a pair of uplifted arms came between the two, and Launcelot Halliday, with the back of his velvet coat close to the young man's face, said, "I'll take care of my daughter, John; you can look after any business of your own that may need you."

"Why, Pop!" exclaimed Fannie. The color flushed up to her brows. John gazed at him in haughty silence.

"Come on, Johanna," said the old General, heartily. "Good-by, John. When can I see you in your office?"

"Whenever I'm there, and not too busy!" replied March as he strode away.

"We'll go to the old house for to-night, Johanna," said Fannie, and did not speak again until she began to draw off her gloves in her father's parlor. Her face was white, her dark eyes wide; but her voice was slow and kind.

"Yes, Johanna, go along to my room. I'll be there directly." She shut the door and folded her gloves, smiling like a swordsman rolling up his sleeves.

"Pop, I've owed you a-many an explanation that I've never paid. You never owed me one in your life till now; but"—her eyes flashed—"you owe it this time to the roots of your hair."

"Fan, that's a mighty poor beginning for the explanation I expect from you."

His tone was one of forbearance, but before he could finish she was as red as a flower. "I belong to my husband! When I've anything to explain I'll explain to him."

"Fannie Halliday——"

"Ravenel, if you please, sir."

He smiled severely. "Have a chair, Mrs. Ravenel. Fan, you're married to a man who never asks an explanation."

The two gazed upon each other in silence. His accustomed belief in her and her ardent love for him were already stealing back into their hearts. Nevertheless——

"O, sir!" she exclaimed, "tell me something I don't know! Yes! But I'm married to a man who waits for things to explain themselves."

"Or till they're past all explanation, Fan."

"Yes, sir; yes! But more! I'm married to a man who knows that nothing can explain conduct but conduct. That's the kind of explanation you still owe me, Pop, till you pay it to John March."

"Well, then," he replied with new warmth, "I'll owe it a long time. If he ever again shows his carelessness of conventional——"

Fannie laid a pale hand on her father's arm. "It wasn't his. He showed carefulness enough; I overruled it. It was his duty to come, Pop; and I had let him neglect duty for me long enough."

The General started. "Why, Fan." But when he looked into her sad eyes his soul melted. She smiled with her face close to his.

"Pop, you never meddled in my affairs before. Don't you reckon I'll manage this one all right."

"Why, yes, Fan. I was only anxious about you because——"

"Never mind your becauses, dear. Just say you'll make it all right with John."

"Go to bed, Fannie; go to bed; John and I will take care of ourselves."

When the General reached his office the next day the forenoon was well advanced. He was still there when at midday John March entered.

"John, howdy? Have a chair."

"Thank you, sir." But the young man continued to stand.

"Oh, take a seat, John; you can get up again if what I say doesn't suit you."

The speaker came from his desk, took a chair and pushed another to his visitor.

"John, I had a short talk with Fannie last night, and a long one again this morning. If my manner to you last evening impugned your motives, I owe you an apology."

"That's all I want to hear, General," said John, accepting the old soldier's hand.

"Yes, my boy; but it's not all I want to say. Fannie tells me you've been taking some business risks, so to speak, for her sake." John scowled. "Now, John, when she asked you to come home on her train she knew that was to her a social risk, and she took it for your sake in return. Not improper? I don't say it was. It was worse than improper, John; it was romantic! The gay half of Suez will never forget it, and the grim half will never forgive it! Oh, it was quite proper and praiseworthy if Pussie and Susie would just not misconstrue it, as they certainly will. Only a few months ago, you know, you were making it almost public that you would still maintain your highly poetical line of conduct and sentiment toward Fan after she should be married."

"General Halliday, I——"

"Let me finish, John. We didn't run you out of town, did we?"

March smiled a strong sarcasm and shook his head. The General went on.

"No, sir, we took you good-naturedly and trusted to your sober second thought. Well, Fan's scarcely ten days married, Jeff-Jack's a thousand miles away, and here you come full of good intentions, hell's pavement, you know—O John, the more I think of it the more amazed I am at all three of you. I don't blame Jeff-Jack for leaving Fan as he did——"

"'As he did'! By George! General Halliday, that's all I do blame him for!"

"Why, do you mean—But never mind; that's probably none of my business; I don't see how you could ever think it was any of yours. Oh, now, please keep your seat! No, at least, I don't blame him merely for leaving her; a politician's a soldier; he can't stop to comfort the sick. But he should have declined your offer to stay with her, in *italics*, John, and sent for me!"

"Sent for—Oh, imagine him! Besides, General Halliday, Jeff-Jack knew my offer was to myself; not to him at all, sir! But he saw another thing—about me—as plainly as I did; yes, plainer!"

"I could do that myself, John. What was it—this time?"

"He saw my sober second thought had come!"

"H—, I wish I had his eyes! Did he say so? Wha'd he say?"

"He said what wasn't true."

The old warrior smiled satirically. "What was it?"

"'Ever mind what it was! I'm talked out."

"My dear fellow, so am I! John, honestly, I thank you for the—pardon me—the unusual patience with which you've taken my hard words." The speaker gripped his hearer's knee. "And you really think you've finished your first great campaign of mistakes—eh?"

"Yes!" They rose, laughing. "Yes, and I've every reason to hope it's my last." The General proposed drinks, but John hadn't time, and they only swapped cigars.

"I hear you leave us again this evening," said the General.

"No; they'd like me to go, but I'm—I'm very tired and anyhow——"

"You're wha-at? Tired! Why, John—O no, you don't mean tired, you mean insa-ane! Why, sir, that's going straight back on everything you've been saying! John, we're not going to stand this." The General grew red.

"Whom do you mean by 'we,' General?" Both men were forgetting to smoke.

"Everybody, sir! everybody in Suez with whom you have any relations? Why, look at it yourself! For a week running you neglect your own interests and your company's business to do—what? Just what you'd do if you were still under an infatuation which you've openly confessed for years!"

"But which, General Halliday, I tell you again——"

"Telling won't do, sir, when doing tells another story. Here are your directors astonished and vexed at you for coming back with not a word as to why you've come. O, how do I know it? It's the talk o' the town! They bid you go back to the field of work you chose yourself, and you tell *them*—business men—financiers—that you're 'tired and anyhow——' By Jupiter! John March——"

"General, stop! I'll manage my own business my own way, sir! It's no choice of mine to speak so to you, General Halliday, but I swear I'll not widen my confidences—no, nor modify my comings and goings—to provide against the looks of things. It's the culpable who are careful, sir."

"Yes—yes—and 'the simple pass on and are punished.' I don't ask you to widen your confidences to include me, John."

"Shan't widen them to include anyone, under pressure, General. But it's a pity when you know so much about these things, you don't know more."

"I do, John. I know that when Jeff-Jack left here he left his proxy—at your solicitation—with John Wesley Garnet!"

"Which, he gave me to understand, was just what he intended to do, anyhow."

"O, gave you to understand, of course! But it wasn't, John. Jeff-Jack's still got too many uses for Garnet, to cross him without a good excuse. But he knows what Gamble's influence is, and a different request from you would have put his proxy in safer hands. He would have saved you, John, if you hadn't yourself rushed in and spoken for Garnet."

"And why should you assume that Garnet's holding the proxy has made——"

"Oh, bah! Why, John, d'ye reckon I don't see that he and Bulger have gone over to Gamble, and are out-voting you—hauling you in hand over fist? It's written in large letters and hung up where all Susie can read it—except yourself!"

"Where?"

"In your face. And now you're staying here to stare at a lost game. O, John, for your own sake, get away! Clear out to-night! You can at least hide your helplessness. If you will, I'll call you back as soon as you can gain anything by coming. Yes, and I'll turn in and fight these fellows for you in the meantime!"

"Thank you, General, but you're mistaken; the game *isn't* lost. The moment Jeff-Jack and I——"

"Ah! John, the moment's gone! Ask yourself! Will Jeff-Jack ever join the forlorn hope of a man who won't dance to his fiddle? *His* self-sacrifices are not that sort."

"And yet that's the very sacrifice you think I ought to let you make for me!"

"By Joe! sir, it wouldn't be a sacrifice! If it will just get you out of town it will suit me perfectly!"

"Then, sir, you'll not be suited! I'm going to stay here and see what my enemies are up to; and if they're up to what I think they are, I'll break their backs if I have to do it single-handed and alone! Good-day, sir."

"Good-day, John; that's the way you'll have to do it, sir."

"Devil take him," added the General as he found himself alone, "*he's* crossed the bar. It's his heart that's safe. O, Fan, my poor child!"

LXVII.

PROBLEM: IS AN UNCONFIRMED DISTRUST NECESSARILY A DEAD ASSET?

John went away heavy and bitter. Yet he remembered, this time, to take more care of his facial expression. He met Shotwell and Proudfit coming out of the best saloon. They stopped him, complimented his clothes and his legs, asked a question or two of genuine interest, poked him in the waistband, and regretted not meeting him sooner. Proudfit suggested, with the proper anathema, to go back and take a *re*-invigorator with Vice-President March. But the pleasant Shotwell said:

"You forget, Colonel, that ow a-able young friend belongs to Gideon's ba-and, now, seh."

Proudfit made a vague gesture of acknowledgment. "And anyhow"—his tongue thickened and his head waggled playfully—"anyhow, Shot, a ladies' man's just *got* to keep his breath sweet, ain't he?"

Shotwell looked as though the rolling earth had struck something. March paled, but he took the Captain's cigar to light his own as he remarked:

"I don't get the meaning of that expression as clear as I wish you'd make it, Colonel."

Shotwell pretended to burst with merriment. "Why, neither does the Colonel! That was only a sort o' glittering generality to hide his emba'assment—haw, haw, haw!"

Proudfit smiled modestly. "Shot, you're right again! He's right again, John. It was only one o' my grittlin' gen—my grilterin' geren—aw! Shot, hush yo' fuss! you confu-use me!"

John was laughing before he knew it. "Gentlemen, I've got to get along home. I slept at Tom Hersey's hotel last night, and haven't seen my mother yet. O—eh—Captain——"

Shotwell left Proudfit and walked away with March. Persons rarely asked advice of the ever-amiable Captain; they went by him to Charley Champion, whom he reverenced as well as loved. And so he was thoroughly pleased when John actually let Champion pass them and asked him, in confidence, what he thought of Proudfit's construction company.

"Well, of co'se, John, you know how fah Proudfit is fum being an a-able man; and so does he. He's evm fool enough to think he can sharpen his wits with whiskey, which *you* know, March, that if that was so I'd myself be as sharp as a ra-azor. But *I* don't suspicion but what everything's clean and square—Oh, I wouldn't swear nobody does; you know, yo'self, what double-ba'lled fools some men ah. I reckon just about everybody likes the arrangement, though; faw whetheh one company aw the otheh, aw both, make money, the money sta-ays. Yes, of co'se, we know he owes it to Garnet's influence, but I suspicion Garnet done as he did mo' to gratify Miz Proudfit's ambitions than fum any notion o' they being big money in it faw anybody; you know how fawnd Garnet's always been of both of 'em, you know. Oh, no, whateveh the thing is, it's square! You might know that by Pettigrew bein' its seccata'y; faw to eh is *human*—which Pettigrew *ain't*."

John mounted a horse and started for Widewood. He had to stop and shake hands with Parson Tombs over his front palings, and make an honest effort to feel annoyed by the old man's laughter-laden compliments on his energy, enterprise, and perspicacity. At the Halliday cottage he saw Fannie clipping roses from the porch trellis for Martha Salter, who stood by. She waved her hand.

"John March, I do believe you were going to gallop right a-past us without stopping!" said Fannie, as he tardily wheeled and rode slowly up to the low gate.

He answered awkwardly, and when she gave him a rose, looked across at Miss Salter, whose gravity increased his discomfort. A dash up the slope beyond the Academy was a partial relief only while it lasted, and at the top, where his horse dropped into a trot, he lifted the flower as if to toss it over the hedge, but faltered, bent forward, and stuck it into the animal's head-stall. As he straightened up he found himself in the company of a tall rider going his way, whom he had passed on the slope—the president of Suez University.

"I believe you're not often overtaken, once you're in the saddle, Mr. March."

John "reckoned that was so," and said that as he came up the hill he had been so busy thinking, that he had not recognized the quiet gray man in time to salute him. The poverty-chastened gentleman had "seen how it was," and began to speak of the great changes impending over Widewood and in Suez, principally due, he insisted with a very agreeable dignity, to Mr. March's courageous and untiring perseverance.

"It's true you couldn't have succeeded without some support from such resolute and catholic spirits as Major Garnet and President Gamble; but when I lately spoke to them they said emphatically that, in comparison with you, they had done nothing; and Mr. Leggett, who was present, confirmed them and included

himself. He had brought them to me to urge me to take a few shares which were for the moment available. The holder, I believe, was the lady who teaches French here in the Academy, Mademoiselle Eglantine; yes. I have no money to invest, however, and Mr. Leggett tells me she has changed her mind again and will keep the stock, which I am sure is wise. The Construction Company?—I think it an excellent idea; admirable! I mustn't detain you, Mr. March, though I have a request to make. Possibly you know that our more advanced students gather for an hour or so once a week in what we've named our Social Hall, for various forms of profitable entertainment? Now and then we have the good fortune to have some man of mark address us informally, and if you, Mr. March, would do so, there's no one else in this region whom our young people would be so pleased to hear."

John thanked the president for the honor. If there was only something, anything, on which he was really qualified to speak—but——

"Mr. March, speak on the imperative need of organized effort harmoniously combined, for the accomplishment of almost all large undertakings! Or on the growing necessity men find to trust their interest in one another's hands! Oh! you can hardly be at a loss for a theme, I'm sure; but those are points which, it seems to me, our state of society here makes it especially needful to emphasize. Don't you think so, Mr. March?"

Mr. March thought so; ahem! There was a pause, and then they talked of the loveliness of the season. The temperature, they decided, must be about seventy-seven. And what a night the last one had been! Mr. March had attended a meeting of the land company's board, which did not adjourn until very late, but he simply had to take a long walk in the starlight afterward, and even when that was done he stayed up until an absurd hour writing a description of the glorious Southern night to a friend in New England who was still surrounded by frozen hills and streams.

"I hardly know an easier way to delight a New Englander's fancy at this time of year," said the gray president. "Or is your friend a Southern man?"

"Oh—eh—no, sir, she's a Southern girl. I—well, I had to write her on business, anyhow, and I just yielded to the impulse—wrote it, really, more to myself than——"

Mr. March dreamed a moment and presently spoke again.

"It's barely possible I shall have to leave town to-morrow or next day, sir; if I don't I'll try to meet your wish. Well, sir, good-day." He galloped on.

John had often before left Suez and crossed the old battle-field benumbed with consternation and galled with doubts of himself; but he had always breathed in new strength among the Widewood hills. Not so to-day. When once or twice he let his warm horse walk and his thought seek rest, the approbations of Proudfit and Shotwell, Parson Tombs, the president of Suez University, and such—Oh! they only filled him with gaspings. He tried to think what man of real weight there still was with whose efforts he might "harmoniously combine" his own; but he knew well enough there was not one who had not, seemingly through some error of his, drifted beyond his hail.

As the turnings of the mountain road led him from each familiar vista to the next, more and more grievously bore down upon his spirit the sacred charge which he had inherited along with this majestic forest. His father's presence and voice seemed with him again as at one point he halted a moment because it had been the father's habit to do so, and gazed far down and away upon Suez and off in the west where Rosemont's roof and grove lay in a flood of sunlight.

"Oh, son," he could almost hear the dear voice say again, as just there it had once said, "I do believe it's fah betteh to get cheated once in a while than to be afraid to trust those who're not afraid to trust us. Why, son, we wouldn't ever a-been father and son at all, only for the sweet trustfulness of yo' dear motheh. Think o' that, son; you an' me neveh bein' any relation to each otheh!"

The rider's bosom heaved. But the next moment he was hearkening. A distant strain of human mirth came softly from farther up in the wooded hills; one and no more, as if those who made it had descended from some swell of the land into one of its tangled hollows. He listened in vain. All he heard was that beloved long-lost voice saying once more in his lonely heart, "Make haste and grow, son." He put in the spur.

Down a long slope, up a sudden rise, over a level curve where a fox-squirrel leaped into the road and scampered along it; up again, down into a hollow, across the ridge beyond—so he was going, when voices sounded again, then hoofs and wheels, and flashing and darkling in the woodland's afternoon shadows came a party of four, two under hats, two under bonnets, drawn by Bulger's handsome trotters in Garnet's carryall. Garnet drove. Beside him sat Mrs. March luminous with satisfaction, and on the back seat with Bulger was a small thin woman whose flaxen hair was flattened in quince-seed waves on her pretty temples, and whom John knew slightly as Mrs. Gamble. Bulger and the ladies waved hands. Only Garnet's smile showed restraint.

In the board meeting of the night before, though surprise and annoyance at John's presence and attitude were obvious, only the Major and he had openly struck fire.

When Gamble, Garnet, and Bulger were left alone, Bulger, who had all along been silent, remarked to Garnet:

"I never drive with a whip. There's lots of horse in a young fellow like March, and I never blame a horse for not liking what he don't understand. I give him lump-sugar. If he's vicious, that's another thing; but when he's only nervous—Got a match, Gamble?—Thanks. Now, I'll tell you what let's do first thing to-morrow morning." And this, with one or two happy modifications suggested by Garnet and Gamble, was now being done.

LXVIII.

FAREWELL, WIDEWOOD

John was lost in a conflict of strong emotions. Sore beset, he forced them all aside for the moment and yielded only to a grateful wonder as he looked upon his pretty mother with her lap full of spring flowers. For the first time in their acquaintance her shapely ear was not waiting to receive, nor her refined lips to reject, his usual rough apologies. Her tone of resignation was almost playful as she said that the first news of his return had come to her through her present kind companions.

Mrs. Gamble put in that she had induced Mrs. March to join them, on their return from their mountain drive, by telling her that her son was so full of his work in his, her, and their common interest, that she could not expect him to come to her.

"And you all were bringing mother in to see me?" exclaimed John.

"Certing!" said blithe Mrs. Gamble, while Garnet faltered a smiling disclaimer, and the son wondered what hidden influence was making endurable to his mother the company of a woman who declared he would soon have this wilderness turned into a "frewtful garding." But as Mrs. Gamble turned from him and engaged Mrs. March's and Bulger's attention, Garnet gave him a beckoning nod, and as he came round, the Major leaned out and softly said, with a most amiable dignity:

"We were really looking for you, too. Don't you want, just for three or four hours, to forget last night's discord and come along with Sister March and us? We've got a pleasant surprise for her, and we'll enjoy it more, and so will she, if you take part in it."

"Why, Major Garnet—hm!—I can forget; I only can't recede, sir. But——"

"Better speak a little lower."

"Yes, sir. Where's mother going with you, sir? I suppose she knows that, of course?"

"O yes, she knows that. President Gamble and his wife have invited a few of us—the two Miss Kinsingtons, Mademoiselle, Brother and Sister Tombs, Proudfit, Sister Proudfit, Launcelot Halliday, and Fannie——"

"Professor Pettigrew?" asked John.

"No, just a few of us—to a sort of literary evening. But Sister March doesn't know that I've been asked to read a number of her poems; you'll be expected to recite others, and the evening will close with the announcement that we—that is, Mrs. Gamble, Bulger, and I—I'm afraid you'll think we've taken a great liberty in your absence, Brother March; I——"

"What have you been doing, Major Garnet?"

"Why, John, we've outrun your intended efforts and—partly by mail, partly by telegraph—the news only came this morning—we've found Sister March a publisher."

"Why, Major Garnet!" whispered John, with girlish tenderness. Tears sprang to his eyes.

"They're a new house, just starting," continued Garnet, "but they'll print the poems at once."

"In Boston or New York?" interrupted John.

"Pittsburg."

"But how did they decide, Major, without seeing the poems?"

"They didn't; Sister March loaned me some of her duplicates."

"I hope you got good terms, did you?"

"Excellent. Thirty-three and a third per cent. royalty after the first five thousand. Why, John, Dixie alone will want that many."

John "reckoned so" and backed his horse. Mrs. Gamble ratified the Major's invitation, and the horseman replied to the smiling four that he must go home for one or two matters, but would make haste to join them in Suez. As Garnet lifted the reins Mrs. March settled herself anew at his side with a sweet glance into his

face which disturbed her son, it seemed so fondly personal. But this disquietude quickly left him as he rode away, when he remembered the Major's daughter having lifted just such a look at himself, for whom, manifestly, she cared nothing, except in the most colorless way.

Daphne Jane, at Widewood, swinging on the garden-gate and cackling airily to a parting visitor, slipped to the ground as Widewood's master suddenly appeared, although just then the first light-hearted smile of that day broke upon his face. It was the parting visitor, also mounted, whose presence pleased him in a degree so unexpected even to himself that he promptly abated his first show of delight.

"Why, Johanna, you important adjunct! To what are we indebted for"—the tone grew vacant—"this—pleasure?" His gay look darkened to one of swift reflection and crushing inference. "Do—do you want to see me?" he blurted, and somewhere under her dark skin Johanna blushed. "No, of course you don't."

As he dismounted—"Jane," he said, "you no need to come in; finish your confab." Upstairs he tried to recall the errand that had brought him there, but Barbara's maid filled all his thought. He saw her from a window and silently addressed her.

"You're not yourself! You're your mistress and you know it! You're she, come all the way back from the land of snow to counsel me; and you're welcome. There's balm, at least, in a sweet woman's counsel, womanly given. Balm; ah, me! neither she nor I have any right—O! what am I looking for in this drawer?—No, I'll take just this word from her and then no more!" Down-stairs he paused an instant in passing his mother's portrait. "No, dear," he said, "we'll mix nothing else with our one good dream—Widewood filled with happy homes and this one, with just you and me in it, the happiest of them all!"

On the gate Daphne Jane still prattled, but after half a dozen false starts Johanna, for gentle shame's sake, had felt obliged to go. Her horse paced off briskly, and a less alert nature than Daphne Jane's would have fancied her soon far on her way. As John came forth again he saw no sign that his mother's maid, slowly walking toward the house with her eyes down, was not engaged in some pious self-examination, instead of listening down the mountain road with both ears. But she easily guessed he was doing the same thing.

"Well, Jane," he said as he loosed his bridle from the fence, "been writing something for Johanna?" and when she said, "Yass, seh," he knew the bashful lie was part of her complicity in a matter she did not understand, but only hoped it

was some rascality. A secret delight filled her bosom as he mounted and walked his horse out of sight. She stopped with lifted head and let her joy tell itself in a smiling whisper:

"Trott'n'!" She hearkened again; the smile widened; the voice rose: "Gallopin'!" Her eyes dilated merrily and she cried aloud:

"Ga-allopin', ga-allopin', lippetty-clip, down Zigzag Hill!" Her smile became a laugh, the laugh a song, the song a dance which joined the lightness of a butterfly with the grace of a girl whose mothers had never worn a staylace, and she ran with tossing arms and willowy undulations to kiss her image in Daphne's glass.

With a hundred or so of small stones rattling at his horse's heels John reached the foot of "Zigzag Hill," turned with the forest road once or twice more, noticed, by the tracks, that Johanna's horse was walking, and at another angle saw her just ahead timorously working her animal sidewise to the edge of the way.

"Johanna," he began as he dashed up—"O!—don't get scared—didn't you come out here in hopes to somehow let me know"—he took on a look of angry distress—"that the Suez folks are talking?"

The girl started and stammered, but the young man knitted his brows worse. "Umhm. That's all right." His horse leaped so that he had to look back to see her, as he added more kindly:

"I'm much obliged to you, Johanna—Good-by."

The face he had thus taken by surprise tried, too late, to smile away the signs that its owner was grieved and hurt. A few rods farther on John wheeled around and trotted back. Her pulse bounded with gratitude.

"Johanna, of course, if I stay here I shall keep entirely out of Mrs. Ravenel's sight, or——"

The girl made a despairing gesture that brought John's frown again.

"Why, what?" he asked with a perplexed smile.

"Law! Mr. Mahch, you cayn't all of a sudden do dat; dey'll on'y talk wuss."

"Well, Johanna—I'm not going to try it. I'm going to take the express train this evening." He started on, but checked up once more and faced around. "O—eh—Johanna, I'd rather you'd not speak of this, you understand. I natu'ly don't want Mrs. Ravenel to know why I go; but I'm even more particular about General Halliday. It's none o' his—hm! I say I don't want him to know. Well, good-by. O—eh—Johanna, have you no word—of course, you know, the North's a mighty

sizable place, and still it's just possible I might chance some day to meet up with—eh—eh—however, it's aft' all so utterly improbable, that, really—well, good-by!"

A while later Johanna stopped at that familiar point which overlooked the valley of the Swanee and the slopes about Rosemont. The sun had nearly set, but she realized her hope. Far down on the gray turnpike she saw the diminished figure of John March speeding townward across the battle-field. At the culvert he drew rein, faced about, and stood gazing upon Widewood's hills. She could but just be sure it was he, yet her tender spirit felt the swelling of his heart, and the tears rose in her eyes, that were not in his only because a man—mustn't.

While she wondered wistfully if he could see her, his arm went slowly up and waved a wide farewell to the scene. She snatched out her handkerchief, flaunted it, and saw him start gratefully at sight of her and reply with his own. Then he wheeled and sped on.

"Go," she cried, "go; and de Lawd be wid you, Mr. Jawn Mahch, Gen'lemun!—O Lawd, Lawd! Mr. Jawn Mahch, I wisht I knowed a nigger like you!"

LXIX.

IN YANKEE LAND

It was still early May when Barbara Garnet had been six weeks in college. The institution stood in one of New England's oldest towns, a place of unfenced greenswards, among which the streets wound and loitered, hunting for historic gambrel-roofed houses, many of which had given room to other sorts less picturesque and homelike. In the same search great elms followed them down into river meadows or up among flowery hills, casting off their dainty blossoms, putting on their leaves, and waving majestic greetings to the sower as he strode across his stony fields.

Yet for all the sudden beauty of the land and season Miss Garnet was able to retain enough of her "nostalgia" to comfort her Southern conscience. She had arrived in March and caught Dame Nature in the midst of her spring cleaning, scolding her patient children; and at any rate her loyalty to Dixie forbade her to be quite satisfied with these tardy blandishments. Let the cold Connecticut turn as blue as heaven, by so much the more was it not the green Swanee? She had made more than one warm friendship among her fellow-students, but the well-

trimmed lamp of her home feeling waxed not dim. It only smoked a trifle even in Boston, that maze of allurements into which no Southerner of her father's generation ever sent his brother, no Southerness her sister, without some fear of apostasy.

Barbara had made three visits to that city, where Mrs. Fair, the ladies said, "did a great deal for her." Yet when Mrs. Fair said, with kind elation, "My dear, you have met Boston, and it is yours!" the smiling exile, as she put her hand into both hands of her hostess, remembered older friends and silently apologized to herself for having so lost her heart to this new one.

At that point came in one who was at least an older acquaintance—the son. Thoroughly as Barbara had always liked Henry Fair, he seemed to her to have saved his best attractiveness until now, and with a gentleness as masculine as it was refined, fitted into his beautiful home, his city, the whole environing country, indeed, and shone from them, in her enlivened fancy, like an ancestor's portrait from its frame. He came to take her to an exhibition of paintings, and thence to the railway station, where a fellow-student was to rejoin her for the trip back to college. Mrs. Fair had to attend a meeting of the society for something or other, of which she was president.

"These people make every minute count," wrote Barbara to Fannie; "and yet they're far from being always at work. I'm learning the art of recreation from them. Even the men have a knack for it that our Southern men know nothing about."

"You might endorse that 'Fair *versus* March,'" replied Ravenel to his wife, one evening, as he lingered a moment at tea. She had playfully shown him the passage as a timorous hint at better self-care; but he smilingly rose and went out. She kept a bright face, and as she sat alone re-reading the letter, said, laughingly, "Poor John!" and a full minute afterward, without knowing it, sighed.

This may have been due, in part at least, to the fact that Barbara's long but tardy letter was the first one Fannie had received from her. It told how a full correspondence between the writer's father and his fellow college president had made it perfectly comfortable for her to appear at the institution for the first time quite unescorted, having within the hour parted from Mr. and Mrs. Fair, who, though less than three hours' run from their own home, would have gone with her if she could have consented. She had known that the dormitories were full and that like many other students she would have to make her home with a private family, and had found it with three very lovable sisters, two spinsters and a widow, who turned out to be old friends—former intimates—of the Fairs. And now this intimacy had been revived; Mrs. Fair had already been to see them once,

although to do so she had come up from Boston alone. How she had gone back the letter did not say. Fannie felt the omission.

"I didn't think Barb would do me that way," she mused; and was no better pleased when she recalled a recent word of Jeff-Jack's: that few small things so sting a woman as to disappoint her fondness and her curiosity at the same time. Now with men—However! All Barbara had omitted was that Mrs. Fair had gone back with her son, who on his way homeward from a trip to New York had been "only too glad" to join her here, and spend two or three hours under spring skies and shingle roof with the three pleasant sisters.

This was in the third of those six weeks during which Barbara had been at college. About half of the two or three hours was spent in a stroll along the windings of a small woodland river. The widow and Mrs. Fair led the van, the two spinsters were the main body, and Henry and Barbara straggled in the rear stooping side by side among white and blue violets, making perilous ventures for cowslips and maple blossoms, and commercing in sweet word-lore and dainty likes and dislikes.

When the procession turned, the two stragglers took seats on a great bowlder round which the stream broke in rapids, Barbara gravely confessing to the spinsters, as they lingeringly passed, that she had never done so much walking in her life before as now and here in a place where an unprotected girl could hire four hacks for a dollar.

The widow and Mrs. Fair left the others behind. They had once been room-mates at school, and this walk brought back something of that old relation. They talked about the young man at their back, and paused to smile across the stream at some children in daring colors on a green hillside getting sprouts of dandelion.

"Do you think," asked the widow, "it's really been this serious with him all along?"

"Yes, I do. Henry's always been such a pattern of prudence and moderation that no one ever suspects the whole depth of his feelings. He realizes she's very young, and he may have held back until her mind—her whole nature—should ripen; although, like him, as you see, she's ripe beyond her years. But above all he's a dutiful son, and I believe he's simply been waiting till he could see her effect on us and ours on her. Tell me frankly, dear, how do you like her?"

The Yankee widow had bright black eyes and they twinkled with restrained enthusiasm as she murmured, "I hope she'll get him!"

"Ah!" Mrs. Fair smiled gratefully, made a pretty mouth and ended with a wise gesture and a dubious toss, as who should say, "I admit he's priceless, but I hope he may get her."

Whereupon the widow ventured one question more, and Mrs. Fair told her of John March. "Yes," she said at the end, "he happened to be in Boston for his company last Saturday when Miss Garnet was with us, and Henry brought him to the house. I wasn't half glad, though I like him, quite. He's a big, handsome, swinging fellow that everybody invites to everything. He makes good speeches before the clubs and flaunts his Southern politics just enough to please our Yankee fondness for being politely *sassed*."

"Why, dear, isn't that a rather good trait in us? It's zest for the overlooked fact, isn't it?"

"O!—it has its uses. It certainly furnishes a larger feeling of superiority to both sides at once than anything else I know of."

"You say Henry brought him to the house while Miss Garnet was with you——"

"Yes; and, my dear, I wish you might have seen those two Southerners meet! They didn't leave us any feeling of superiority then; at least *he* didn't. Except that they're both so Southern, they're not alike. She moved right in among us without the smallest misstep. He made a dozen delicious blunders. It was lovely to see how sweetly she and Henry helped him up and brushed him off, and the boyish manfulness with which he always took it. I couldn't tell, sometimes, which of the three to like best."

Those behind called them to hearken to the notes of a woodlark, and when Mrs. Fair asked her son the hour it was time to get to the station. Barbara would not say just when she could be in Boston again; but the classmate she liked best was a Boston girl, and by the time this college life had lasted six weeks her visits to the city had been three, as aforesaid. In every instance, with an unobtrusiveness all his own, Henry Fair had made her pleasure his business. On the second visit she had expected to meet Mr. March again—a matter wholly of his contriving—but had only got his telegram from New York at the last moment of her stay, stating that he was unavoidably detained by business, and leaving space for six words unused. The main purpose of her third visit had been to attend with Mrs. Fair a reception given by that lady's club. It had ended with dancing; but Mr. Fair had not danced to suit her and Mr. March had not danced at all, but had allowed himself to betray dejection, and had torn her dress. Back at college she had told the favorite classmate how she had chided Mr. March for certain trivial oversights and feared she had been severe; and when the classmate insisted she had not been nearly severe enough she said good-night and went to her room to

mend the torn dress; and as she sewed she gnawed her lip, wished she had never left Suez, and salted her needle with slow tears.

Thus ended the sixth week—stop! I was about to forget the thing for which I began the chapter—and, anyhow, this was not Saturday, it was Friday! While Barbara was so employed, John March, writing to Henry Fair from somewhere among the Rhode Island cotton-spinners, said:

"To-night I go to New York, where I have an important appointment to-morrow noon, but I can leave there Monday morning at five and be in Springfield at ten-twenty-five. If you will get there half an hour later by the train that leaves Boston at seven, I will telegraph the Springfield men to meet us in the bank at eleven. They assure me that if you confirm my answers to their questions they will do all I've asked. Please telegraph your reply, if favorable, to my New York address."

About three o'clock of Saturday March was relieved of much anxiety by receipt of Fair's telegram. It was a long time before Monday morning, but in a sudden elation he strapped his valise and said to the porter—"Grand Central Depot."

"Back to Boston again?"

"Not much! But I'm not going to get up at four o'clock Monday morning either."

In Boston that evening a servant of the Fairs told one of their familiar friends who happened to drop in, that Mr. Fair, senior, was in, but that Mr. Henry had gone to spend Sunday at some Connecticut River town, he was not sure which, but—near Springfield.

LXX.

ACROSS THE MEADOWS

Next morning, John March, for the first time in his life, saw and heard the bobolink.

"Ah! you turncoat scoundrel!" he laughed in a sort of fond dejection, "you've come North to be a lover too, have you? You were songless enough down South!"

But the quivering gallant went singing across the fields, too drunk with the joy of loving to notice accusers.

On the previous evening March had come up by rail some fifteen miles beyond the brisk inland city just mentioned and stopped at a certain "Mount"—no matter what—known to him only through casual allusions in one or two letters of—a friend. Here he had crossed a hand-ferry, climbed a noted hill, put up at its solitary mountain house—being tired of walls and pavements, as he had more than once needlessly explained—and at his chamber window sat looking down, until most of them had vanished, upon a cluster of soft lights on the other side of the valley, shining among the trees of the embowered town where one who now was never absent from his thoughts was at school.

The knowledge that he loved her was not of yesterday only. He could count its age in weeks and a fraction, beginning with the evening when "those two Southerners" had met in Mrs. Fair's drawing-room. Since then the dear trouble of it had ever been with him, deep, silent, dark—like this night on the mountain—shot with meteors of brief exultation, and starlighted with recollections of her every motion, glance, and word.

At sunrise, looking again, he saw the town's five or six spires, and heard one tell the hour and the college bell confirm it. Care was on his brow, but you could see it was a care that came of new freedom. He was again a lover, still tremorous with the wonder of unsought deliverance from his dungeon of not-loving. And now the stern yet inspiring necessity was not to let his delivering angel find it out; to be a lover, but not a suitor. Hence his presence up here instead of down in the town beyond the meadows and across the river. He would make it very plain to her and her friends that he had not come, ahead of his business appointment, to thrust himself upon her, but to get a breath of heaven's own air—being very tired of walls and pavements—and to—to discover the bobolink!

Of course, being so near, he should call. He must anyhow go to church, and if only he could keep himself from starting too early, there was no reason why he should not combine the two duties and make them one pleasure. Should he ride or drive? He ordered the concern's best saddle-horse, walked mournfully half round him, and said, "I reckon—I reckon I'll drive. Sorry to trouble you, but——"

"Put him in the shafts, Dave," said the stable-keeper, and then to the guest, "No trouble, sir; if a man doesn't feel safe in a saddle he'd better not monkey with it."

"I dare say," sedately responded John. "I suppose a man oughtn't to try to learn to ride without somebody to go along with him."

The boy had just finished harnessing the animal, when March started with a new thought. He steadied himself, turned away, drew something from his pocket,

consulted and returned it—it was neither a watch nor a weapon—and rejoining the stable-keeper said, with a sweet smile and a red face:

"See here, it's only three miles over there. If you'll let me change my mind——"

"You'll walk it—O all right! If you change your mind again you can let us know on your return."

John took a way that went by a bridge. It was longer than the other, by way of a ferry, but time, for the moment, was a burden and either way was beautiful. The Sabbath was all smiles. On the Hampshire hills and along the far meanderings of the Connecticut a hundred tints of perfect springtide beguiled the heart to forget that winter had ever been. Above a balmy warmth of sunshine and breeze in which the mellowed call of church-bells floated through the wide valley from one to another of half a dozen towns and villages, silvery clouds rolled and unrolled as if in stately play, swung, careened, and fell melting through the marvellous blue, or soared and sunk and soared again. Keeping his eyes much on such a heaven, our inexperienced walker thought little of close-fitting boots until he had to sit down, screened from the public road by a hillock, and, with a smile of amusement but hardly of complacency, smooth a cruel wrinkle from one of his very striped socks. Just then a buckboard rumbled by, filled with pretty girls, from the college, he guessed, driving over to that other college town, seven miles across the valley, where a noted Boston clergyman was to preach to-day; but the foot-passenger only made himself a bit smaller and chuckled at the lucky privacy of his position. As they got by he stole a peep at their well-dressed young backs, and the best dressed and shapeliest was Barbara Garnet's. The driver was Henry Fair. It was then that the bobolink, for the first time in his life, saw and heard John March.