

A YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

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TO MARGERY

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A YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

“Soyez tranquilles, mesdames.... Je suis un jeune homme pressé.... Mais modeste.”—Labiche.

AT ten minutes before five in the evening the office doors of the Florida and Key West Railway Company flew open, and a young man emerged in a hurry.

Suit-case in one hand, umbrella in the other, he sped along the corridor to the elevator-shaft, arriving in time to catch a glimpse of the lighted roof of the cage sliding into depths below.

“Down!” he shouted; but the glimmering cage disappeared, descending until darkness enveloped it.

Then the young man jammed his hat on his head, seized the suit-case and umbrella, and galloped down the steps. The spiral marble staircase echoed his clattering flight; scrub-women heard him coming and fled; he leaped a pail of water and a mop; several old gentlemen flattened themselves against the wall to give him room; and a blond young person with pencils in her hair lisped “Gee!” as he whizzed past and plunged through the storm-doors, which swung back, closing behind him with a hollow thwack.

Outside in the darkness, gray with whirling snowflakes, he saw the wet lamps of cabs shining, and he darted along the line of hansoms and coupés in frantic search for his own.

“Oh, there you are!” he panted, flinging his suit-case up to a snow-covered driver. “Do your best now; we’re late!” And he leaped into the dark coupé, slammed the door, and sank back on the cushions, turning up the collar of his heavy overcoat.

There was a young lady in the farther corner of the cab, buried to her nose in a fur coat. At intervals she shivered and pressed a fluffy muff against her face. A glimmer from the sleet-smear’d lamps fell across her knees.

Down-town flew the cab, swaying around icy corners, bumping over car-tracks, lurching, rattling, jouncing, while its silent occupants, huddled in separate corners, brooded moodily at their respective windows.

Snow blotted the glass, melting and running down; and over the watery panes yellow light from shop windows played fantastically, distorting vision.

Presently the young man pulled out his watch, fumbled for a match-box, struck a light, and groaned as he read the time.

At the sound of the match striking, the young lady turned her head. Then, as the bright flame illuminated the young man’s face, she sat bolt upright, dropping the muff to her lap with a cry of dismay.

He looked up at her. The match burned his fingers; he dropped it and hurriedly lighted another; and the flickering radiance brightened upon the face of a girl whom he had never before laid eyes on.

“Good heavens!” he said. “Where’s my sister?”

The young lady was startled, but resolute. “You have made a dreadful mistake,” she said; “you are in the wrong cab—”

The match went out; there came a brief moment of darkness, then the cab turned a corner, and the ghostly light of electric lamps played over them in quivering succession.

“Will you please stop this cab?” she said, unsteadily. “You have mistaken my cab for yours. I was expecting my brother.”

Stunned, he made no movement to obey. A sudden thrill of fear passed through her.

“I must ask you to stop this cab,” she faltered.

The idiotic blankness of his expression changed to acute alarm.

“Stop this cab?” he cried. “Nothing on earth can induce me to stop this cab!”

“You must!” she insisted, controlling her voice. “You must stop it at once!”

“How can I?” he asked, excitedly; “I’m late now; I haven’t one second to spare!”

“Do you refuse to leave this cab?”

“I beg that you will compose yourself—”

“Will you go?” she insisted.

A jounce sent them flying towards each other; they collided and recoiled, regarding one another in breathless indignation.

“This is simply hideous!” said the young lady, seizing the door-handle.

“Please don’t open that door!” he said. She tried to wrench it open; the handle stuck—or perhaps the strength had left her wrist. But it was not courage that failed, for she faced him, head held high, and—

“You coward!” she said.

Over his face a deep flush burned—and it was a good face, too—youthfully wilful, perhaps, with a firm, clean-cut chin and pleasant eyes.

“If I were a coward,” he said, “I’d stop this cab and get out. I never faced anything that frightened me half as much as you do!”

She looked him straight in the eyes, one hand twisting at the knob.

“Don’t you suppose that this mistake of mine is as humiliating and unwelcome to me as it is to you?” he said. “If you stop this cab it will ruin somebody’s life. Not mine—if it were my own life, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Her hand, still clasping the silver knob, suddenly fell limp.

“You say that you are in a hurry?” she asked, with dry lips.

“A desperate hurry,” he replied.

“So am I,” she said, bitterly; “and, thanks to your stupidity, I must make the journey without my brother!”

There was a silence, then she turned towards him again:

“Where do you imagine this cab is going?”

“It’s going to Cortlandt Street—isn’t it?” Suddenly the recollection came to him that it was her cab, and that he had only told the driver to drive fast.

The color left his face as he pressed it to the sleet-shot window. Fitful flickers of light, snow, darkness—that was all he could see.

He turned a haggard countenance on her; he was at her mercy. But there was nothing vindictive in her.

“I also am going to Cortlandt Street; you need not be alarmed,” she said.

The color came back to his cheeks. "I suppose," he ventured, "that you are trying to catch the Eden Limited, as I am."

"Yes," she said, coldly; "my brother—" An expression of utter horror came into her face. "What on earth shall I do?" she cried; "my brother has my ticket and my purse!"

A lunge and a bounce sent them into momentary collision; a flare of light from a ferry lantern flashed in their faces; the cab stopped and a porter jerked open the door, crying:

"Eden Limited? You'd better hurry, lady. They're closin' the gates now."

They sprang out into the storm, she refusing his guiding arm.

"What am I to do?" she said, desperately. "I *must* go on that train, and I haven't a penny."

"It's all right; you'll take my sister's ticket," he said, hurriedly paying the cabman.

A porter seized their two valises from the box and dashed towards the ferry-house; they followed to the turnstile, where the tickets were clipped.

"Now we've got to run!" he said. And off they sped, slipped through the closing gates, and ran for the gang-plank, where their porter stood making frantic signs for them to hasten. It was a close connection, but they made it, to the unfeigned amusement of the passengers on deck.

"Sa-ay!" drawled a ferry-hand, giving an extra twist to the wheel as the chains came clanking in, "she puts the bunch on the blink f'r a looker. Hey?"

"Plenty," said his comrade; adding, after a moment's weary deliberation, "She's his tootsy-wootsy sure. B. and G."

The two young people, who had caught the boat at the last second, stood together, muffled to the eyes, breathing rapidly. She was casting tragic glances astern, where, somewhere behind the smother of snow, New York city lay; he, certain at last of his train, stood beside her, attempting to collect his thoughts and arrange them in some sort of logical sequence.

But the harder he thought, the more illogical the entire episode appeared. How on earth had he ever come to enter a stranger's cab and drive with a stranger half a mile before either discovered the situation? And what blind luck had sent the cab to the destination he also was bound for—and not a second to spare, either?

He looked at her furtively; she stood by the rail, her fur coat white with snow.

"The poor little thing!" he thought. And he said: "You need not worry about your section, you know. I have my sister's ticket for you."

After a moment's gloomy retrospection he added: "When your brother arrives to knock my head off I'm going to let him do it."

She made no comment.

“I don’t suppose,” he said, “that you ever could pardon what I have done.”

“No,” she said, “I never could.”

A brief interval passed, disturbed by the hooting of a siren.

“If you had stopped the cab when I asked you to—” she began.

“If I had,” he said, “neither you nor I could have caught this train.”

“If you had not entered my cab, I should have been here at this moment with my brother,” she said. “Now I am here with you—penniless!”

He looked at her miserably, but she was relentless.

“It is the cold selfishness of the incident that shocks me,” she said; “it is not the blunder that offended me—” She stopped short to give him a chance to defend himself; but he did not. “And now,” she added, “you have reduced me to the necessity of—borrowing money—”

“Only a ticket,” he muttered.

But she was not appeased, and her silence was no solace to him.

After a few minutes he said: “It’s horribly cold out here; would you not care to go into the cabin?”

She shook her head, and her cheeks grew hot, for she had heard the observations of the ferrymen as the boat left. She would freeze in obscurity rather than face a lighted cabin full of people. She looked at the porter who was carrying their valises, and the dreadful idea seized her that he, too, thought them bride and groom.

Furious, half frightened, utterly wretched, she dared not even look at the man whose unheard-of stupidity had inflicted such humiliation upon her.

Tears were close to her eyes; she swallowed, set her head high, and turned her burning cheeks to the pelting snow.

Oh, he should rue it some day! When, how, where, she did not trouble to think; but he should rue it, and his punishment should leave a memory ineffaceable. Pondering on his future tribulation, sternly immersed in visions of justice, his voice startled her:

“The boat is in. Please keep close to me.”

Bump! creak—cre—ak! bump! Then came the clank of wheel and chain, and the crowded cabin, and pressing throngs which crushed her close to his shoulder; and, “Please take my arm,” he said; “I can protect you better so.”

A long, covered way, swarming with people, a glimpse of a street and whirling snowflakes, an iron fence pierced by gates where gilt-and-blue officials stood, saying, monotonously:

“Tickets! Please show your tickets. This way for the Palmetto Special. The Eden Limited on track number three.”

“Would you mind holding my umbrella a moment?” he asked.

She took it.

He produced the two tickets and they passed the gate, following a porter who carried their luggage.

Presently their porter climbed the steps of a sleeping-car. She followed and sat down beside her valise, resting her elbow on the polished window-sill, and her flushed cheek on her hand.

He passed her and continued on towards the end of the car, where she saw him engage in animated conversation with several officials. The officials shook¹¹ their heads, and, after a while, he came slowly back to where she sat.

“I tried to exchange into another car,” he said. “It cannot be done.”

“Why do you wish to?” she asked, calmly.

“I suppose you would—would rather I did,” he said. “I’ll stay in the smoker all I can.”

She made no comment. He stood staring gloomily at the floor.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he said, at last. “I’m not quite as selfish as you think. My—my younger brother is in a lot of trouble—down at St. Augustine. I couldn’t have saved him if I hadn’t caught this train.... I know you can’t forgive me; so I’ll say—so I’ll ask permission to say good-bye.”

“Don’t—please don’t go,” she said, faintly.

He wheeled towards her again.

“How on earth am I to dine if you go away?” she asked. “I’ve a thousand miles to go, and I’ve simply got to dine.”

“What a stupid brute I am!” he said, between his teeth. “I try to be decent, but I can’t. I’ll do anything in the world to spare you—indeed I will. Tell me, would you prefer to dine alone—”

“Hush! people are listening,” she said, in a low voice. “It’s bad enough to be taken for bride and groom, but if people in this car think we’ve quarrelled I—I simply cannot endure it.”

“Who took us for—that?” he whispered, fiercely.

“Those people behind you; don’t look! I heard that horrid little boy say, ‘B. and G.!’ and others heard it. I—I think you had better sit down here a moment.”

He sat down.

“The question is,” she said, with heightened color, “whether it is less embarrassing for us to be civil to each other or to avoid each other. Everybody has seen the porter bring in our luggage; everybody supposes we are at least on friendly terms. If I go alone to the dining-car, and you go alone, gossip will begin. I’m miserable enough now—my position is false enough now. I—I cannot stand being stared at for thirty-six hours—”

“If you say so, I’ll spread the rumor that you’re my sister,” he suggested, anxiously. “Shall I?”

Even she perceived the fatal futility of that suggestion.

“But when you take off your glove everybody will know we’re not B. and G.,” he insisted.

She hesitated; a delicate flush crept over her face; then she nervously stripped the glove from her left hand and extended it. A plain gold ring encircled the third finger. “What shall I do?” she whispered. “I can’t get it off. I’ve tried, but I can’t.”

“Does it belong there?” he asked, seriously.

“You mean, am I married? No, no,” she said, impatiently; “it’s my grandmother’s wedding-ring. I was just trying it on this morning—this morning of all mornings! Think of it!”

She looked anxiously at her white fingers, then at him.

“What do you think?” she asked, naïvely; “I’ve tried soap and cold-cream, but it won’t come off.”

“Well,” he said, with a forced laugh, “Fate appears to be personally conducting this tour, and it’s probably all right—” He hesitated. “Perhaps it’s better than to wear no ring—”

“Why?” she asked, innocently. “Oh! perhaps it’s better, after all, to be mistaken for B. and G. than for a pair of unchaperoned creatures. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes,” he said, vaguely.

There came a gentle jolt, a faint grinding sound, a vibration increasing. Lighted lanterns, red and green, glided past their window.

“We’ve started,” he said.

Then a negro porter came jauntily down the aisle, saying something in a low voice to everybody as he passed. And when he came to them he smiled encouragement and made an extra bow, murmuring, “First call for dinner, if you please, madam.”

They were the centre of discreet attention in the dining-car; and neither the ring on her wedding-finger nor their bearing and attitude towards each other were needed to confirm the general conviction.

He tried to do all he could to make it easy for her, but he didn't know how, or he never would have ordered rice pudding with a confidence that set their own negro waiter grinning from ear to ear.

She bit her red lips and looked out of the window; but the window, blackened by night and quicksilvered by the snow, was only a mirror for a very lovely and distressed face.

Indeed, she was charming in her supposed rôle; their fellow-passengers' criticisms were exceedingly favorable. Even the young imp who had pronounced them B. and G. with infantile unreserve appeared to be impressed by her fresh, young beauty; and an old clergyman across the aisle beamed on them at intervals, and every beam was a benediction.

As for them, embarrassment and depression were at first masked under a polite gayety; but the excitement of the drama gained on them; appearances were to be kept up in the rôles of a comedy absolutely forced upon them; and that brought exhilaration.

From mental self-absolution they ventured on mentally absolving each other. Fate had done it! Their consciences were free. Their situation was a challenge in itself, and to accept it must mean to conquer.

Stirring two lumps of sugar into his cup of coffee, he looked up suddenly, to find her gray eyes meeting his across the table. They smiled like friends.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked.

"I was thinking that perhaps you had forgiven me," he said, hopefully.

"I have"—she frowned a little—"I *think* I have."

"And—you do not think me a coward?"

"No," she said, watching him, chin propped on her linked fingers.

He laughed gratefully.

"As a matter of cold fact," he observed, "if we had met anywhere in town—under other circumstances—there is no reason that I can see why we shouldn't have become excellent friends."

"No reason at all," she said, thoughtfully.

"And that reminds me," he went on, dropping his voice and leaning across the table, "I'm going to send back a telegram to my sister, and I fancy you may wish to send one to your wandering brother."

"I suppose I'd better," she said. An involuntary shiver passed over her. "He's probably frantic," she added.

"Probably," he admitted.

“My father and mother are in Europe,” she observed. “I hope my brother hasn’t cabled them.”

“I think we’d better get those telegrams off,” he said, motioning the waiter to bring the blanks and find pen and ink.

They waited, gazing meditatively at each other. Presently he said:

“I’d like to tell you what it is that sends me flying down to Florida at an hour’s notice. I think some explanation is due you—if it wouldn’t bore you?”

“Tell me,” she said, quietly.

“Why, then, it’s that headlong idiot of a brother of mine,” he explained. “He’s going to try to marry a girl he has only known twenty-four hours—a girl we never heard of. And I’m on my way to stop it!—the young fool!—and I’ll stop it if I have to drag him home by the heels! Here’s the telegram we got late this afternoon—a regular bombshell.” He drew the yellow bit of paper from his breast-pocket, unfolded it, and read:

““St. Augustine, Florida.

““I am going to marry to-morrow the loveliest girl in the United States. Only met her yesterday. Love at first sight. You’ll all worship her! She’s eighteen, a New-Yorker, and her name is Marie Hetherford. Jim.””

He looked up angrily. “What do you think of that?” he demanded.

“Think?” she stammered—“think?” She dropped her hands helplessly, staring at him. “Marie Hetherford is my sister!” she said.

“Your—sister,” he repeated, after a long pause—“*your* sister!”

She pressed a white hand to her forehead, clearing her eyes with a gesture.

“Isn’t it too absurd!” she said, dreamily. “My sister sent us a telegram like yours. Our parents are abroad. So my brother and I threw some things into a trunk and—and started! Oh, did you *ever* hear of anything like this?”

“Your sister!” he repeated, dazed. “*My* brother and *your* sister. And I am on my way to stop it; and you are on your way to stop it—”

She began to laugh—not hysterically, but it was not a natural laugh.

“And,” he went on, “I’ve lost another sister in the shuffle, and you’ve lost another brother in the shuffle, and now there’s a double-shuffle danced by you and me—”

“Don’t. *Don’t!*” she said, faint from laughter.

“Yes, I will,” he said. “And I’ll say more! I’ll say that Destiny is taking exclusive charge of our two families, and it would not surprise me if *your* brother and *my* sister were driving around New York together at this moment looking for us!”

Their laughter infected the entire dining-car; every waiter snickered; the *enfant terrible* grinned; the aged minister of the Church of England beamed a rapid fire of benedictions on them.

But they had forgotten everybody except each other.

“From what I hear and from what I know personally of your family,” she said, “it seems to me that they never waste much time about anything.”

“We are rather in that way,” he admitted. “I have been in a hurry from the time you first met me—and you see what my brother is going to do.”

“Going to do? Are you going to let him?”

“Let him?” He looked steadily at her, and she returned the gaze as steadily. “Yes,” he said, “I’m going to let him. And if I tried to stop him I’d get my deserts. I think I know my brother Jim. And I fancy it would take more than his brother to drag him away from your sister.” He hesitated a moment. “Is she like—like you?”

“A year younger—yes, we are alike.... And you say that you are going to let him—marry her?”

“Yes—if you don’t mind.”

The challenge was in his eyes, and she accepted it.

“Is your brother Jim like you?”

“A year younger—yes.... May he marry her?”

She strove to speak easily, but to her consternation she choked, and the bright color dyed her face from neck to hair.

This must not be: she must answer him. To flinch now would be impossible—giving a double meaning and double understanding to a badinage light as air. Alas! *Il ne faut pas badiner avec l’amour!* Then she answered, saying too much in an effort to say a little with careless and becoming courage.

“If he is like you, he may marry her.... I am glad he is your brother.”

The answering fire burned in his face; she met his eyes, and twice her own fell before their message.

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, hot face between his hands; a careless attitude for others to observe, but a swift glance warned her what was coming—coming in a low, casual voice, checked at intervals as though he were swallowing.

“You are the most splendid girl I ever knew.” He dropped one hand and picked up a flower that had slipped from her finger-bowl. “You are the only person in the world who will not think me crazy for saying this. We’re a headlong race. Will you marry me?”

She bent her head thoughtfully, pressing her mouth to her clasped fingers. Her attitude was repose itself.

“Are you offended?” he asked, looking out of the window.

There was a slight negative motion of her head.

A party of assorted travellers rose from their table and passed them, smiling discreetly; the old minister across the aisle mused in his coffee-cup, caressing his shaven face with wrinkled fingers. The dining-car grew very still.

“It’s in the blood,” he said, under his breath; “my grandparents eloped; my father’s courtship lasted three days from the time he first met my mother—you see what my brother has done in twenty-four hours.... We do things more quickly in these days.... Please—*please* don’t look so unhappy!”

“I—I am not unhappy.... I am willing to—hear you. You were saying something about—about—”

“About love.”

“I—think so. Wait until those people pass!”

He waited, apparently hypnotized by the beauty of the car ceiling. Then: “Of course, if you were not going to be my sister-in-law to-morrow, I’d not go into family matters.”

“No, of course not,” she murmured.

So he gave her a brief outline of his own affairs, and she listened with bent head until there came the pause which was her own cue.

“Why do you tell me this?” she asked, innocently.

“It—it—why, because I love you.”

On common ground once more, she prepared for battle, but to her consternation she found the battle already ended and an enemy calmly preparing for her surrender.

“But when—when do you propose to—to do this?” she asked, in an unsteady voice.

“Now,” he said, firmly.

“Now? Marry me at once?”

“I love you enough to wait a million years—but I won’t. I always expected to fall in love; I’ve rather fancied it would come like this when it came; and I swore I’d never let the chance slip by. We’re a headlong family—but a singularly loyal one. We love but once in our lifetime; and when we love we know it.”

“Do you think that this is that one time?”

“There is no doubt left in me.”

“Then”—she covered her face with her hands, leaning heavily on the table—“then what on earth are we to do?”

“Promise each other to love.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I do promise, forever. Do you?”

She looked up, pale as a ghost. “Yes,” she said.

“Then—please say it,” he whispered.

Some people rose and left the car. She sat apparently buried in colorless reverie. Twice her voice failed her; he bent nearer; and—

“I love you,” she said.

PILGRIM

I

THE servants had gathered in the front hall to inspect the new arrival—cook, kitchen-maid, butler, flanked on the right by parlor-maids, on the left by a footman and a small buttons.

The new arrival was a snow-white bull-terrier, alert, ardent, quivering in expectation of a welcome among these strangers, madly wagging his whiplike tail in passionate silence.

When the mistress of the house at last came down the great stone stairway, the servants fell back in a semi-circle, leaving her face to face with the white bull-terrier.

“So *that* is the dog!” she said, in faint astonishment. A respectful murmur of assent corroborated her conclusion.

The dog’s eyes met hers; she turned to the servants with a perplexed gesture.

“Is the brougham at the door?” asked the young mistress of the house.

The footman signified that it was.

“Then tell Phelan to come here at once.”

Phelan, the coachman, arrived, large, rosy, freshly shaven, admirably correct.

“Phelan,” said the young mistress, “look at that dog.”

The coachman promptly fixed his eyes on the wagging bull-terrier. In spite of his decorous gravity a smile of distinct pleasure slowly spread over his square, pink face until it became a subdued simper.

“Is that a well-bred dog, Phelan?” demanded the young mistress.

“It is, ma’am,” replied Phelan, promptly.

“Very well bred?”

“Very, ma’am.”

“Dangerous?”

“In a fight, ma’am.” Stifled enthusiasm swelled the veins in the coachman’s forehead. Triumphant pæans of praise for the bull-terrier trembled upon his lips; but he stood rigid, correct, a martyr to his perfect training.

“Say what you wish to say, Phelan,” prompted the young mistress, with a hasty glance at the dog.

“Thanky, ma’am.... The bull is the finest I ever laid eyes on.... He hasn’t a blemish, ma’am; and the three years of him doubled will leave him three years to his prime, ma’am.... And there’s never another bull, nor a screw-tail, nor cross, be it mastiff or fox or whippet, ma’am, that can loose the holt o’ thim twin jaws.... Beg pardon, ma’am, I know the dog.”

“You mean that you have seen that dog before?”

“Yes, ma’am; he won his class from a pup at the Garden. That is ‘His Highness,’ ma’am, Mr. Langham’s champion three-year.”

She had already stooped to caress the silent, eager dog—timidly, because she had never before owned a dog—but at the mention of his master’s name she drew back sharply and stood erect.

“Never fear, ma’am,” said the coachman, eagerly; “he won’t bite, ma’am—”

“Mr. Langham’s dog?” she repeated, coldly; and then, without another glance at either the dog or the coachman, she turned to the front door; buttons swung it wide with infantile dignity; a moment later she was in her brougham, with Phelan on the box and the rigid footman expectant at the window.

II

Seated in a corner of her brougham, she saw the world pass on flashing wheels along the asphalt; she saw the April sunshine slanting across brown-stone mansions and the glass-fronted façades of shops; ... she looked without seeing.

So Langham had sent her his dog! In the first year of her widowhood she had first met Langham; she was then twenty-one. In the second year of her widowhood Langham had offered himself, and, with the declaration on his lips, had seen the utter hopelessness of his offer. They had not met since then. And now, in the third year of her widowhood, he offered her his dog!

She had at first intended to keep the dog. Knowing nothing of animals, discouraged from all sporting fads by a husband who himself was devoted to animals dedicated to sport, she had quietly acquiesced in her husband's dictum that "horse-women and dog-women made a man ill!"—and so dismissed any idea she might have entertained towards the harboring of the four-footed.

A miserable consciousness smote her: why had she allowed the memory of her husband to fade so amazingly in these last two months of early spring? Of late, when she wished to fix her thoughts upon her late husband and to conjure his face before her closed eyes, she found that the mental apparition came with more and more difficulty.

Sitting in a corner of her brougham, the sharp rhythm of her horses' hoofs tuning her thoughts, she quietly endeavored to raise that cherished mental spectre, but could not, until by hazard she remembered the portrait of her husband hanging in the smoking-room.

But instantly she strove to put that away; the portrait was by Sargent, a portrait she had always disliked, because the great painter had painted an expression into her husband's face which she had never seen there. An aged and unbearable aunt of hers had declared that Sargent painted beneath the surface; she resented the suggestion, because what she read beneath the surface of her husband's portrait sent hot blood into her face.

Thinking of these things, she saw the spring sunshine gilding the gray branches of the park trees. Here and there elms spread tinted with green; chestnuts and maples were already in the full glory of new leaves; the leafless twisted tangles of wistaria hung thick with scented purple bloom; everywhere the scarlet blossoms of the Japanese quince glowed on naked shrubs, bedded in green lawns.

Her husband had loved the country.... There was one spot in the world which he had loved above all others—the Sagamore Angling Club. She had never been there. But she meant to go. Probably to-morrow.... And before she went she must send that dog back to Langham.

At the cathedral she signalled to stop, and sent the brougham back, saying she would walk home. And the first man she met was Langham.

III

There was nothing extraordinary in it. His club was there on the corner, and it was exactly his hour for the club.

"It is so very fortunate ... for me," he said. "I did want to see you.... I am going north to-morrow."

"Of course it's about the dog," she said, pleasantly.

He laughed. "I am so glad that you will accept him—"

"But I can't," she said; ... "and thank you so much for asking me."

For a moment his expression touched her, but she could not permit expressions of men's faces to arouse her compunction, so she turned her eyes resolutely ahead towards the spire of the marble church.

He walked beside her in silence.

"I also am going north to-morrow," she said, politely.

He did not answer.

Every day since her widowhood, every day for three years, she had decided to make that pilgrimage ... some time. And now, crossing Union Square on that lovely afternoon late in April, she knew that the time had come. Not that there was any reason for haste. ... At the vague thought her brown eyes rested a moment on the tall young man beside her....

Yes ... she would go ... to-morrow.

A vender of violets shuffled up beside them; Langham picked up a dewy bundle of blossoms, and their perfume seemed to saturate the air till it tasted on the tongue.

She shook her head. "No, no, please; the fragrance is too heavy."...

"Won't you accept them?" he inquired, bluntly.

Again she shook her head; there was indecision in the smile, assent in the gesture. However, he perceived neither.

She took a short step forward. The wind whipped the fountain jet, and a fanlike cloud of spray drifted off across the asphalt. Then they moved on together.

Presently she said, quietly, "I believe I will carry a bunch of those violets;" and she waited for him to go back through the fountain spray, find the peddler, and rummage among the perfumed heaps in the basket. "Because," she added, cheerfully, as he returned with the flowers, "I am going to the East Tenth Street Mission, and I meant to take some flowers, anyway."

"If you would keep that cluster and let me send the whole basket to your mission—" he began.

But she had already started on across the wet pavement.

"I did not know you were going to give my flowers to those cripples," he said, keeping pace with her.

"Do you mind?" she asked, but she had not meant to say that, and she walked a little more quickly to escape the quick reply.

"I want to ask you something," he said, after a moment's brisk walking. "I wish—if you don't mind—I wish you would walk around the square with me—just once—"

"Certainly not," she said; "and now you will say good-bye—because you are going away, you say." She had stopped at the Fourth Avenue edge of the square. "So good-bye, and thank you for the beautiful dog, and for the violets."

"But you won't keep the dog, and you won't keep the violets," he said; "and, besides, if you are going north—"

"Good-bye," she repeated, smiling.

"—besides," he went on, "I would like to know where you are going."

"That," she said, "is what I do not wish to tell you—or anybody."

There was a brief silence; the charm of her bent head distracted him.

"If you won't go," she said, with caprice, "I will walk once around the square with you, but it is the silliest thing I have ever done in my entire life."

"Why won't you keep the bull-terrier?" he asked, humbly.

"Because I'm going north—for one reason."

"Couldn't you take His Highness?"

"No—that is, I could, but—I can't explain—he would distract me."

"Shall I take him back, then?"

"Why?" she demanded, surprised.

"I—only I thought if you did not care for him—" he stammered. "You see, I love the dog."

She bit her lip and bent her eyes on the ground. Again he quickened his pace to keep step with her.

"You see," he said, searching about for the right phrase, "I wanted you to have something that I could venture to offer you—er—something not valuable—er—I mean not—er—"

"Your dog is a very valuable champion; everybody knows that," she said, carelessly.

"Oh yes—he's a corker in his line; out of Empress by Ameer, you know—"

"I might manage ... to keep him ... for a while," she observed, without enthusiasm. "At all events, I shall tie my violets to his collar."

He watched her; the roar of Broadway died out in his ears; in hers it grew, increasing, louder, louder. A dim scene rose unbidden before her eyes—the high gloom of a cathedral, the great

organ's first unsteady throbbing—her wedding-march! No, not that; for while she stood, coldly transfixed in centred self-absorption, she seemed to see a shapeless mass of wreaths piled in the twilight of an altar—the dreadful pomp and panoply and circumstance of death—

She raised her eyes to the man beside her; her whole being vibrated with the menace of a dirge, and in the roar of traffic around her she divined the imprisoned thunder of the organ pealing for her dead.

She turned her head sharply towards the west.

“What is it?” he asked, in the voice of a man who needs no answer to his question.

She kept her head steadily turned. Through Fifteenth Street the sun poured a red light that deepened as the mist rose from the docks. She heard the river whistles blowing; an electric light broke out through the bay haze.

It was true she was thinking of her husband—thinking of him almost desperately, distressed that already he should have become to her nothing more vital than a memory.

Unconscious of the man beside her, she stood there in the red glow, straining eyes and memory to focus both on a past that receded and seemed to dwindle to a point of utter vacancy.

Then her husband's face grew out of vacancy, so real, so living, that she started—to find herself walking slowly past the fountain with Langham at her side.

After a moment she said: “Now we have walked all around the square. Now I am going to walk home; ... and thank you ... for my walk, ... which was probably as wholesome a performance as I could have indulged in—and quite unconventional enough, even for you.”

They faced about and traversed the square, crossed Broadway in silence, passed through the kindling shadows of the long cross-street, and turned into Fifth Avenue.

“You are very silent,” she said, sorry at once that she had said it, uncertain as to the trend his speech might follow, and withal curious.

“It was only about that dog,” he said.

She wondered if it was exactly that, and decided it was not. It was not. He was thinking of her husband as he had known him—only by sight and by report. He remembered the florid gentleman perfectly; he had often seen him tooling his four; he had seen him at the traps in Monte Carlo, dividing with the best shot in Italy; he had seen him riding to hounds a few days before that fatal run of the Shadowbrook Hunt, where he had taken his last fence. Once, too, he had seen him at the Sagamore Angling Club up state.

“When are you going?” he said, suddenly.

“To-morrow.”

“I am not to know where?”

“Why should you?” and then, a little quickly: “No, no. It is a pilgrimage.”

“When you return—” he began, but she shook her head.

“No, ... no. I do not know where I may be.”

In the April twilight the electric lamps along the avenue snapped alight. The air rang with the metallic chatter of sparrows.

They mounted the steps of her house; she turned and swept the dim avenue with a casual glance.

“So you, too, are going north?” she asked, pleasantly.

“Yes—to-night.”

She gave him her hand. She felt the pressure of his hand on her gloved fingers after he had gone, although their hands had scarcely touched at all.

And so she went into the dimly lighted house, through the drawing-room, which was quite dark, into the music-room beyond; and there she sat down upon a chair by the piano—a little gilded chair that revolved as she pushed herself idly, now to the right, now to the left.

Yes, ... after all, she would go; ... she would make that pilgrimage to the spot on earth her husband loved best of all—the sweet waters of the Sagamore, where his beloved club lodge stood, and whither, for a month every year, he had repaired with some old friends to renew a bachelor’s love for angling.

She had never accompanied him on these trips; she instinctively divined a man’s desire for a ramble among old haunts with old friends, freed for a brief space from the happy burdens of domesticity.

The lodge on the Sagamore was now her shrine; there she would rest and think of him, follow his footsteps to his best-loved haunts, wander along the rivers where he had wandered, dream by the streams where he had dreamed.

She had married her husband out of awe, sheer awe for his wonderful personality. And he was wonderful; faultless in everything—though not so faultless as to be in bad taste, she often told herself. His *entourage* also was faultless; and the general faultlessness of everything had made her married life very perfect.

As she sat thinking in the darkened music-room, something stirred in the hallway outside. She raised her eyes; the white bull-terrier stood in the lighted doorway, looking in at her.

A perfectly incomprehensible and resistless rush of loneliness swept her to her feet; in a moment she was down on the floor again, on her silken knees, her arms around the dog, her head pressed tightly to his head.

“Oh,” she said, choking, “I must go to-morrow—I must—I must.... And here are the violets; ... I will tie them to your collar.... Hold still!... He loves you; ... but you shall not have

them—do you hear?... No, no, ... for I shall wear them, ... for I like their odor; ... and, anyway, ... I am going away.”...

IV

The next day she began her pilgrimage; and His Highness went with her; and a maid from the British Isles.

She had telegraphed to the Sagamore Club for rooms, to make sure, but that was unnecessary, because there were at the moment only three members of the club at the lodge.

Now although she herself could scarcely be considered a member of the Sagamore Angling Club, she still controlled her husband's shares in the concern, and she was duly and impressively welcomed by the steward. Two of the three members domiciled there came up to pay their respects when she alighted from the muddy buckboard sent to the railway to meet her; they were her husband's old friends, Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent, white-haired, purple-faced, well-groomed gentlemen in the early fifties. The third member was out in the rain fishing somewhere down-stream.

“New man here, madam—a good fellow, but a bad rod—eh, Brent?”

“Bad rod,” repeated Major Brent, wagging his fat head. “Uses ferrules to a six-ounce rod. *We* splice—eh, Colonel?”

“Certainly,” said the Colonel.

She stood by the open fire in the centre of the hallway, holding her shapely hands out towards the blaze, while her maid relieved her of the wet rain-coat.

“Splice what, Colonel Hyssop, if you please?” she inquired, smiling.

“Splice our rods, madam—no creaky joints and ferrules for old hands like Major Brent and me, ma'am. Do you throw a fly?”

“Oh no,” she said, with a faint smile. “I—I do nothing.”

“Except to remain the handsomest woman in the five boroughs!” said the Major, with a futile attempt to bend at the waist—utterly unsuccessful, yet impressive.

She dropped him a courtesy, then took the glass of sherry that the steward brought and sipped it, meditative eyes on the blazing logs. Presently she held out the empty wine-glass; the steward took it on his heavy silver salver; she raised her eyes. A half-length portrait of her husband stared at her from over the mantel, lighted an infernal red in the fire-glow.

A catch in her throat, a momentary twitch of the lips, then she gazed calmly up into the familiar face.

Under the frame of the picture was written his full hyphenated name; following that she read:

President and Founder
of
The Sagamore Angling Club
1880–1901

Major Brent and Colonel Hyssop observed her in decorously suppressed sympathy.

“I did not know he was president,” she said, after a moment; “he never told me that.”

“Those who knew him best understood his rare modesty,” said Major Brent. “I knew him, madam; I honored him; I honor his memory.”

“He was not only president and founder,” observed Colonel Hyssop, “but he owned three-quarters of the stock.”

“Are the shares valuable?” she asked. “I have them; I should be glad to give them to the club, Colonel Hyssop—in his memory.”

“Good gad! madam,” said the Colonel, “the shares are worth five thousand apiece!”

“I am the happier to give them—if the club will accept,” she said, flushing, embarrassed, fearful of posing as a Lady Bountiful before anybody. She added, hastily, “You must direct me in the matter, Colonel Hyssop; we can talk of it later.”

Again she looked up into her husband’s face over the mantel.

Her bull-terrier came trotting into the hall, his polished nails and padded feet beating a patter across the hardwood floor.

“I shall dine in my own rooms this evening,” she said, smiling vaguely at the approaching dog.

“We hoped to welcome you to the club table,” cried the Major.

“There are only the Major and myself,” added the Colonel, with courteous entreaty.

“And the other—the new man,” corrected the Major, with a wry face.

“Oh yes—the bad rod. What’s his name?”

“Langham,” said the Major.

The English maid came down to conduct her mistress to her rooms; the two gentlemen bowed as their build permitted; the bull-terrier trotted behind his mistress up the polished stairs. Presently a door closed above.

“Devilish fine woman,” said Major Brent.

Colonel Hyssop went to a mirror and examined himself with close attention.

“Good gad!” he said, irritably, “how thin my hair is!”

“Thin!” said Major Brent, with an unpleasant laugh; “thin as the hair on a Mexican poodle.”

“You infernal ass!” hissed the Colonel, and waddled off to dress for dinner. At the door he paused. “Better have no hair than a complexion like a violet!”

“What’s that?” cried the Major.

The Colonel slammed the door.

Up-stairs the bull-terrier lay on a rug watching his mistress with tireless eyes. The maid brought tea, bread and butter, and trout fried crisp, for her mistress desired nothing else.

Left alone, she leaned back, sipping her tea, listening to the million tiny voices of the night. The stillness of the country made her nervous after the clatter of town. Nervous? Was it the tranquil stillness of the night outside that stirred that growing apprehension in her breast till, of a sudden, her heart began a deadened throbbing?

Langham here? What was he doing here? He must have arrived this morning. So that was where he was going when he said he was going north!

After all, in what did it concern her? She had not run away from town to avoid him, ... indeed not, ... her pilgrimage was her own affair. And Langham would very quickly divine her pious impulse in coming here.... And he would doubtless respect her for it.... Perhaps have the subtle tact to pack up his traps and leave.... But probably not.... She knew a little about Langham, ... an obstinate and typical man, ... doubtless selfish to the core, ... cheerfully, naïvely selfish....

She raised her troubled eyes. Over the door was printed in gilt letters:

The President’s Suite.

Tears filled her eyes; truly they were kindly and thoughtful, these old friends of her husband.

And all night long she slept in the room of her late husband, the president of the Sagamore Angling Club, and dreamed till daybreak of ... Langham.

V

Langham, clad in tweeds from head to foot, sat on the edge of his bed.

He had been sitting there since daybreak, and the expression on his ornamental face had varied between the blank and the idiotic. That the only woman in the world had miraculously appeared at Sagamore Lodge he had heard from Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent at dinner the evening before.

That she already knew of his presence there he could not doubt. That she did not desire his presence he was fearsomely persuaded.

Clearly he must go—not at once, of course, to leave behind him a possibility for gossip at his abrupt departure. From the tongues of infants and well-fed club-men, good Lord deliver us!

He must go. Meanwhile he could easily avoid her.

And as he sat there, savoring all the pent-up bitterness poured out for him by destiny, there came a patter of padded feet in the hallway, the scrape of nails, a sniff at the door-sill, a whine, a frantic scratching. He leaned forward and opened the door. His Highness landed on the bed with one hysterical yelp and fell upon Langham, paw and muzzle.

When their affection had been temporarily satiated, the dog lay down on the bed, eyes riveted on his late master, and the man went over to his desk, drew a sheet of club paper towards him, found a pen, and wrote:

“Of course it is an unhappy coincidence, and I will go when I can do so decently—to-morrow morning. Meanwhile I shall be away all day fishing the West Branch, and shall return too late to dine at the club table.

“I wish you a happy sojourn here—”

This he reread and scratched out.

“I am glad you kept His Highness.”

This he also scratched out.

After a while he signed his name to the note, sealed it, and stepped into the hallway.

At the farther end of the passage the door of her room was ajar; a sunlit-scarlet curtain hung inside.

“Come here!” said Langham to the dog.

His Highness came with a single leap.

“Take it to ... her,” said the man, under his breath. Then he turned sharply, picked up rod and creel, and descended the stairs.

Meanwhile His Highness entered his mistress’s chamber, with a polite scratch as a “by your leave!” and trotted up to her, holding out the note in his pink mouth.

She looked at the dog in astonishment. Then the handwriting on the envelope caught her eye.

As she did not offer to touch the missive, His Highness presently sat down and crowded up against her knees. Then he laid the letter in her lap.

Her expression became inscrutable as she picked up the letter; while she was reading it there was color in her cheeks; after she had read it there was less.

“I see no necessity,” she said to His Highness—“I see no necessity for his going. I think I ought to tell him so.... He overestimates the importance of a matter which does not concern him.... He is sublimely self-conscious, ... a typical man. And if he presumes to believe that the hazard of our encounter is of the slightest moment ... to me ...”

The dog dropped his head in her lap.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that!” she said, almost sharply, but there was a dry catch in her throat when she spoke, and she laid one fair hand on the head of His Highness.

A few moments later she went down-stairs to the great hall, where she found Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent just finishing their morning cocktails.

When they could at last comprehend that she never began her breakfast with a cocktail, they conducted her solemnly to the breakfast-room, seated her with *empressement*, and the coffee was served.

It was a delicious, old-fashioned, country breakfast—crisp trout, bacon, eggs, and mounds of fragrant flapjacks.

“Langham’s gone off to the West Branch; left duty’s compliments and all that sort of thing for you,” observed the Colonel, testing his coffee with an air.

His Highness, who had sniffed the bacon, got up on a chair where he could sit and view the table. Moisture gathered on his jet-black nose; he licked his jowl.

“You poor darling!” cried his mistress, rising impulsively, with her plate in her hand. She set the plate on the floor. It was cleaned with a snap, then carefully polished.

“You are fond of your dog, madam,” said the Major, much interested.

“He’s a fine one,” added the Colonel. “Gad! I took him for Langham’s champion at first.”

She bent her head over the dog’s plate.

Later she walked to the porch, followed by His Highness.

A lovely little path invited them on—a path made springy by trodden leaves; and the dog and his mistress strolled forth among clumps of hazel and silver-birches, past ranks of alders and Indian-willows, on across log bridges spanning tiny threads of streams which poured into the stony river.

The unceasing chorus of the birds freshened like wind in her ears. Spring echoes sounded from blue distances; the solemn congress of the forest trees in session murmured of summers past and summers to come.

How could her soul sink in the presence of the young world’s uplifting?

Her dog came back and looked up into her eyes. With a cry, which was half laughter, she raced with him along the path, scattering the wild birds into flight from bush and thicket.

Breathless, rosy, she halted at the river's shallow edge.

Flung full length on the grass, she dipped her white fingers in the river, and dropped wind-flowers on the ripples to watch them dance away.

She listened to the world around her; it had much to say to her if she would only believe it. But she forced her mind back to her husband and lay brooding.

An old man in leggings and corduroys came stumping along the path; His Highness heard him coming and turned his keen head. Then he went and stood in front of his mistress, calm, inquisitive, dangerous.

"Mornin', miss," said the keeper; "I guess you must be one of our folks."

"I am staying at the club-house," she said, smiling, and sitting up on the grass.

"I'm old Peter, one o' the guards," he said. "Fine mornin', miss, but a leetle bright for the fish—though I ain't denyin' that a small dark fly'd raise 'em; no'm. If I was sot on ketchin' a mess o' fish, I guess a hare's-ear would do the business; yes'm. I jest passed Mr. Langham down to the forks, and I seed he was a-chuckin' a hare's-ear; an' he riz 'em, too; yes'm."

"How long have you been a keeper here?" she asked.

"How long, 'm? Waal, I was the fustest guard they had; yes'm. I live down here a piece. They bought my water rights; yes'm. An' they give me the job. The president he sez to me, 'Peter,' he sez, jest like that—'Peter, you was raised here; you know all them brooks an' rivers like a mink; you stay right here an' watch 'em, an' I'll do the squar' by ye,' he sez, jest like that. An' he done it; yes'm."

"So you knew the president, then?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Knew him?—*him*? Yes'm."

The old man laughed a hollow, toothless laugh, and squinted out across the dazzling river.

"Knew him twenty year, I did. A good man, and fair at that. Why, I've seen him a-settin' jest where you're settin' this minute—seen him a hundred times a-settin' there."

"Fishing?" she said, in an awed voice.

"Sometimes. Sometimes he was a-drinkin' out o' that silver pocket-pistol o' his'n. He got drunk a lot up here; but he didn't drink alone; no'm. There wasn't a stingy hair in his head; he—"

"Do you mean the president?" she said, incredulously, almost angrily.

"Him? Yes'm. Him an' Colonel Hyssop an' Major Brent; they had good times in them days."

"You knew the president *before* his marriage," she observed, coldly.

“Him? He wasn’t never married, miss!” said the old man, scornfully.

“Are you sure?” she asked, with a troubled smile.

“Sure? Yes’m. Why, the last time he was up here, three year come July Fourth, I seen him a-kissin’ an’ a-huggin’ of old man Dawson’s darter—”

She was on her feet in a flash. The old man stood there smiling his senile smile and squinting out across the water, absorbed in his garrulous reminiscence.

“Yes’m; all the folks down to the village was fond o’ the president, he was that jolly and free, an’ no stuck-up city airs; no’m; jest free and easy, an’ a-sparkin’ the gals with the best o’ them—”

The old man laughed and crossed his arms under the barrel of his shot-gun.

“Folks said he might o’ married old man Dawson’s darter if he’d lived. I dun’no’. I guess it was all fun. But I hear the gal took on awful when they told her he was dead; yes’m.”

VI

Towards evening Langham waded across the river, drew in his dripping line, put up his rod, and counted and weighed his fish. Then, lighting a pipe, he reslung the heavy creel across his back and started up the darkening path. From his dripping tweeds the water oozed; his shoes wheezed and slopped at every step; he was tired, soaked, successful—but happy? Possibly.

It was dark when the lighted windows of the lodge twinkled across the hill; he struck out over the meadow, head bent, smoking furiously.

On the steps of the club-house Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent greeted him with the affected heartiness of men who disliked his angling methods; the steward brought out a pan; the fish were uncreeled, reweighed, measured, and entered on the club book.

“Finest creel this year, sir,” said the steward, admiringly.

The Major grew purple; the Colonel carefully remeasured the largest fish.

“Twenty-one inches, steward!” he said. “Wasn’t my big fish of last Thursday twenty-two?”

“Nineteen, sir,” said the steward, promptly.

“Then it shrank like the devil!” said the Colonel. “By gad! it must have shrunk in the creel!”

But Langham was in no mood to savor his triumph. He climbed the stairs wearily, leaving little puddles of water on each step, slopped down the hallway, entered his room, and sank into a chair, too weary, too sad even to think.

Presently he lighted his lamp. He dressed with his usual attention to detail, and touched the electric button above his bed.

“I’m going to-morrow morning,” he said to the servant who came; “return in an hour and pack my traps.”

Langham sat down. He had no inclination for dinner. With his chin propped on his clinched hands he sat there thinking. A sound fell on his ear, the closing of a door at the end of the hall, the padded pattering of a dog’s feet, a scratching, a whine.

He opened his door; the bull-terrier trotted in and stood before him in silence. His Highness held in his mouth a letter.

Langham took the note with hands that shook. He could scarcely steady them to open the envelope; he could scarcely see to read the line:

“Why are you going away?”

He rose, made his way to his desk like a blind man, and wrote,

“Because I love you.”

His Highness bore the missive away.

For an hour he sat there in the lamp-lit room. The servant came to pack up for him, but he sent the man back, saying that he *might* change his mind. Then he resumed his waiting, his head buried in his hands. At last, when he could endure the silence no longer, he rose and walked the floor, backward, forward, pausing breathless to listen for the patter of the dog’s feet in the hall. But no sound came; he stole to the door and listened, then stepped into the hall. The light still burned in her room, streaming out through the transom.

She would never send another message to him by His Highness; he understood that now. How he cursed himself for his momentary delusion! how he scorned himself for reading anything but friendly kindness in her message! how he burned with self-contempt for his raw, brutal reply, crude as the blurted offer of a yokel!

That settled the matter. If he had any decency left, he must never offend her eyes again. How could he have hoped? How could he have done it? Here, too!—here in this place so sanctified to her by associations—here, whither she had come upon her pious pilgrimage—here, where at least he might have left her to her dead!

Suddenly, as he stood there, her door opened. She saw him standing there. For a full minute they faced each other. Presently His Highness emerged from behind his mistress and trotted out into the hall.

Behind His Highness came his mistress, slowly, more slowly. The dog carefully held a letter between his teeth, and when Langham saw it he sprang forward eagerly.

“No, no!” she said. “I did not mean—I cannot—I cannot— Give me back the letter!”

He had the letter in his hand; her hand fell over it; the color surged into her face and neck. The letter dropped from her yielding hand; the thrill from their interlocked fingers made her

faint, and she swayed forward towards him, so close that their lips touched, then clung, crushed in their first kiss....

Meanwhile His Highness picked up the letter and stood politely waiting.

THE SHINING BAND

I

BEFORE the members of the Sagamore Fish and Game Association had erected their handsome club-house, and before they had begun to purchase those thousands of acres of forest, mountain, and stream which now belonged to them, a speculative lumberman with no capital, named O'Hara, built the white house across the river on a few acres of inherited property, settled himself comfortably with his wife and child, and prepared to acquire all the timber in sight at a few dollars an acre ... on credit. For thus, thought he, is the beginning of all millionaires.

So certain was O'Hara of ultimately cornering the standing timber that he took his time about it, never dreaming that a rival might disturb him in the wilderness of Sagamore County.

He began in the woodland which he had inherited, which ran for a mile on either side of the river. This he leisurely cut, hired a few river drivers, ran a few logs to Foxville, and made money.

Now he was ready to extend business on a greater scale; but when he came to open negotiations with the score or more of landholders, he found himself in the alarming position of a bidder against an unknown but clever rival, who watched, waited, and quietly forestalled his every movement.

It took a long time for O'Hara to discover that he was fighting a combination of fifteen wealthy gentlemen from New York. Finally, when the Sagamore Club, limited to fifteen, had completed operations, O'Hara suddenly perceived that he was bottled up in the strip of worthless land which he had inherited, surrounded by thousands of acres of preserved property—outwitted, powerless, completely hemmed in. And that, too, with the best log-driving water betwixt Foxville and Canada washing the very door-sill of his own home.

At first he naturally offered to sell, but the club's small offer enraged him, and he swore that he would never sell them an inch of his land. He watched the new club-house which was slowly taking shape under the trowels of masons and the mallets of carpenters; and his wrath grew as grew the house.

The man's nature began to change; an inextinguishable hatred for these people took possession of him, became his mania, his existence.

His wife died; he sent his child to a convent school in Canada and remained to watch. He did the club what damage he could, posting his property, and as much of the river as he controlled. But he could not legally prevent fishermen from wading the stream and fishing; so he filled the waters with sawdust, logs, barbed-wire, brambles, and brush, choking it so that no living creature, except perhaps a mink, could catch a fish in it.

The club protested, and then offered to buy the land on O'Hara's own terms. O'Hara cursed them and built a dam without a fishway, and sat beside it nights with a loaded shot-gun.

He still had a few dollars left; he wanted millions to crush these rich men who had come here to mock him and take the bread out of his mouth for their summer's sport.

He had a shrewd young friend in New York, named Amasa Munn. Through this man, O'Hara began to speculate in every wild-cat scheme that squalled aloud for public support; and between Munn and the wild-cats his little fortune spread its wings of gold and soared away, leaving him a wreck on his wrecked land.

But he could still find strength to watch the spite dam with his shot-gun. One day a better scheme came into his unbalanced brain; he broke the dam and sent for Munn. Between them they laid a plan to ruin forever the trout-fishing in the Sagamore; and Munn, taking the last of O'Hara's money as a bribe, actually secured several barrels full of live pickerel, and shipped them to the nearest station on the Sagamore and Inland Railway.

But here the club watchers caught Munn, and held him and his fish for the game-wardens. The penalty for introducing trout-destroying pickerel into waters inhabited by trout was a heavy fine. Munn was guilty only in intent, but the club keepers swore falsely, and Peyster Sprowl, a lawyer and also the new president of the Sagamore Club, pushed the case; and Munn went to jail, having no money left to purge his sentence.

O'Hara, wild with rage, wrote, threatening Sprowl.

Then Sprowl did a vindictive and therefore foolish thing: he swore out a warrant for O'Hara's arrest, charging him with blackmail.

The case was tried in Foxville, and O'Hara was acquitted. But a chance word or two during the testimony frightened the club and gave O'Hara the opportunity of his life. He went to New York and scraped up enough money for his purpose, which was to search the titles of the lands controlled by the Sagamore Club.

He worked secretly, grubbing, saving, starving; he ferreted out the original grants covering nine-tenths of Sagamore County; he disinterred the O'Hara patent of 1760; and then he began to understand that his title to the entire Sagamore Club property was worth the services, on spec, of any first-class Centre Street shyster.

The club got wind of this and appointed Peyster Sprowl, in his capacity of lawyer and president of the club, to find out how much of a claim O'Hara really had. The club also placed the emergency fund of one hundred thousand dollars at Sprowl's command with *carte-blanche* orders to arrest a suit and satisfy any claim that could not be beaten by money and talent.

Now it took Sprowl a very short time to discover that O'Hara's claim was probably valid enough to oust the club from three-quarters of its present holdings.

He tried to see O'Hara, but the lumberman refused to be interviewed, and promptly began proceedings. He also made his will; for he was a sick man. Then he became a sicker man, and suspended proceedings and sent for his little daughter.

Before she arrived he called Munn in, gave him a packet of papers, and made him burn them before his eyes. "They're the papers in my case," he said. "I'm dying; I've fought too hard. I don't want my child to fight when I'm dead. And there's nothing in my claim, anyway." This was a lie, and Munn suspected it.

When the child, Eileen, arrived, O'Hara was nearly dead, but he gathered sufficient strength to shove a locked steel box towards his daughter and tell her to keep it from Munn, and keep it locked until she found an honest man in the world.

The next morning O'Hara appeared to be much better. His friend Munn came to see him; also came Peyster Sprowl in some alarm, on the matter of the proceedings threatened. But O'Hara turned his back on them both and calmly closed his eyes and ears to their presence.

Munn went out of the room, but laid his large, thin ear against the door. Sprowl worried O'Hara for an hour, but, getting no reply from the man in the bed, withdrew at last with considerable violence.

O'Hara, however, had fooled them both: he had been dead all the while.

The day after the funeral, Sprowl came back to look for O'Hara's daughter; and as he peeped into the door of the squalid flat he saw a thin, yellow-eyed young man, with a bony face, all furry in promise of future whiskers, rummaging through O'Hara's effects. This young gentleman was Munn.

In a dark corner of the disordered room sat the child, Eileen, a white, shadowy elf of six, reading in the Book of Common Prayer.

Sprowl entered the room; Munn looked up, then coolly continued to rummage.

Sprowl first addressed himself to the child, in a heavy, patronizing voice:

"It's too dark to read there in that corner, young one. Take your book out into the hall."

"I can see better to read in the dark," said the child, lifting her great, dark-blue eyes.

"Go out into the hall," said Sprowl, sharply.

The child shrank back, and went, taking her little jacket in one hand, her battered travelling-satchel in the other.

If the two men could have known that the steel box was in that satchel this story might never have been told. But it never entered their heads that the pallid little waif had sense enough to conceal a button to her own profit.

“Munn,” said Sprowl, lighting a cigar, “what is there in this business?”

“I’ll tell you when I’m done,” observed Munn, coolly.

Sprowl sat down on the bed where O’Hara had died, cocked the cigar up in his mouth, and blew smoke, musingly, at the ceiling.

Munn found nothing—not a scrap of paper, not a line. This staggered him, but he did not intend that Sprowl should know it.

“Found what you want?” asked Sprowl, comfortably.

“Yes,” replied Munn.

“Belong to the kid?”

“Yes; I’m her guardian.”

The men measured each other in silence for a minute.

“What will you take to keep quiet?” asked Sprowl. “I’ll give you a thousand dollars.”

“I want five thousand,” said Munn, firmly.

“I’ll double it for the papers,” said Sprowl.

Munn waited. “There’s not a paper left,” he said; “O’Hara made me burn ’em.”

“Twenty thousand for the papers,” said Sprowl, calmly.

“My God, Mr. Sprowl!” growled Munn, white and sweating with anguish. “I’d give them to you for half that if I had them. Can’t you believe me? I saw O’Hara burn them.”

“What were you rummaging for, then?” demanded Sprowl.

“For anything—to get a hold on you,” said Munn, sullenly.

“Blackmail?”

Munn was silent.

“Oh,” said Sprowl, lazily. “I think I’ll be going, then—”

Munn barred his exit, choking with anger.

“You give me five thousand dollars, or I’ll stir ’em up to look into your titles!” he snarled.

Sprowl regarded him with contempt; then another idea struck him, an idea that turned his fat face first to ashes, then to fire.

A month later Sprowl returned to the Sagamore Club, triumphant, good-humored, and exceedingly contented. But he had, he explained, only succeeded in saving the club at the cost of the entire emergency fund—one hundred thousand dollars—which, after all, was a drop in the bucket to the remaining fourteen members.

The victory would have been complete if Sprowl had also been able to purchase the square mile of land lately occupied by O'Hara. But this belonged to O'Hara's daughter, and the child flatly refused to part with it.

"You'll have to wait for the little slut to change her mind," observed Munn to Sprowl. And, as there was nothing else to do, Sprowl and the club waited.

Trouble appeared to be over for the Sagamore Club. Munn disappeared; the daughter was not to be found; the long-coveted land remained tenantless.

Of course, the Sagamore Club encountered the petty difficulties and annoyances to which similar clubs are sooner or later subjected; disputes with neighboring land-owners were gradually adjusted; troubles arising from poachers, dishonest keepers, and night guards had been, and continued to be, settled without harshness or rancor; minks, otters, herons, kingfishers, and other undesirable intruders were kept within limits by the guns of the watchers, although by no means exterminated; and the wealthy club was steadily but unostentatiously making vast additions to its splendid tracts of forest, hill, and river land.

After a decent interval the Sagamore Club made cautious inquiries concerning the property of the late O'Hara, only to learn that the land had been claimed by Munn, and that taxes were paid on it by that individual.

For fifteen years the O'Hara house remained tenantless; anglers from the club fished freely through the mile of river; the name of Munn had been forgotten save by the club's treasurer, secretary, and president, Peyster Sprowl.

However, the members of the club never forgot that in the centre of their magnificent domain lay a square mile which did not belong to them; and they longed to possess it as better people than they have coveted treasures not laid up on earth.

The relations existing between the members of the Sagamore Club continued harmonious in as far as their social intercourse and the general acquisitive policy of the club was concerned.

There existed, of course, that tacit mutual derision based upon individual sporting methods, individual preferences, obstinate theories concerning the choice of rods, reels, lines, and the killing properties of favorite trout-flies.

Major Brent and Colonel Hyssop continued to nag and sneer at each other all day long, yet they remained as mutually dependent upon each other as David and Jonathan. For thirty years the old gentlemen had angled in company, and gathered inspiration out of the same books, the same surroundings, the same flask.

They were the only guests at the club-house that wet May in 1900, although Peyster Sprowl was expected in June, and young Dr. Lansing had wired that he might arrive any day.

An evening rain-storm was drenching the leaded panes in the smoking-room; Colonel Hyssop drummed accompaniment on the windows and smoked sulkily, looking across the river towards the O'Hara house, just visible through the pelting downpour.

"Irritates me every time I see it," he said.

"Some day," observed Major Brent, comfortably, "I'm going to astonish you all."

"How?" demanded the Colonel, tersely.

The Major examined the end of his cigarette with a cunning smile.

"It isn't for sale, is it?" asked the Colonel. "Don't try to be mysterious; it irritates me."

Major Brent savored his cigarette leisurely.

"Can you keep a secret?" he inquired.

The Colonel intimated profanely that he could.

"Well, then," said the Major, in calm triumph, "there's a tax sale on to-morrow at Foxville."

"Not the O'Hara place?" asked the Colonel, excited.

The Major winked. "I'll fix it," he said, with a patronizing squint at his empty glass.

But he did not "fix it" exactly as he intended; the taxes on the O'Hara place were being paid at that very moment.

He found it out next day, when he drove over to Foxville; he also learned that the Rev. Amasa Munn, Prophet of the Shining Band Community, had paid the taxes and was preparing to quit Maine and re-establish his colony of fanatics on the O'Hara land, in the very centre and heart of the wealthiest and most rigidly exclusive country club in America.

That night the frightened Major telegraphed to Munnville, Maine, an offer to buy the O'Hara place at double its real value. The business-like message ended: "Wire reply at my expense."

The next morning an incoherent reply came by wire, at the Major's expense, refusing to sell, and quoting several passages of Scripture at Western Union rates per word.

The operator at the station counted the words carefully, and collected eight dollars and fourteen⁶¹ cents from the Major, whose fury deprived him of speech.

Colonel Hyssop awaited his comrade at the club-house, nervously pacing the long veranda, gnawing his cigar. "Hello!" he called out, as Major Brent waddled up. "Have you bought the O'Hara place for us?"

The Major made no attempt to reply; he panted violently at the Colonel, then began to run about, taking little, short, distracted steps.

“Made a mess of it?” inquired the Colonel, with a badly concealed sneer.

He eyed the Major in deepening displeasure. “If you get any redder in the face you’ll blow up,” he said, coldly; “and I don’t propose to have you spatter me.”

“He—he’s an impudent swindler!” hissed the Major, convulsively.

The Colonel sniffed: “I expected it. What of it? After all, there’s nobody on the farm to annoy us, is there?”

“Wait!” groaned the Major—“wait!” and he toddled into the hall and fell on a chair, beating space with his pudgy hands.

When the Colonel at length learned the nature of the threatened calamity, he utterly refused to credit it.

“Rubbish!” he said, calmly—“rubbish! my dear fellow; this man Munn is holding out for more money, d’ye see? Rubbish! rubbish! It’s blackmail, d’ye see?”

“Do you think so?” faltered the Major, hopefully. “It isn’t possible that they mean to come, is it? Fancy all those fanatics shouting about under our windows—”

“Rubbish!” said the Colonel, calmly. “I’ll write to the fellow myself.”

All through that rainy month of May the two old cronies had the club-house to themselves; they slopped about together, fishing cheek by jowl as they had fished for thirty years; at night they sat late over their toddy, and disputed and bickered and wagged their fingers at each other, and went to bed with the perfect gravity of gentlemen who could hold their own with any toddy ever brewed.

No reply came to the Colonel, but that did not discourage him.

“They are playing a waiting game,” he said, sagely. “This man Munn has bought the land from O’Hara’s daughter for a song, and he means to bleed us. I’ll write to Sprowl; he’ll fix things.”

Early in June Dr. Lansing and his young kinsman, De Witt Coursay, arrived at the club-house. They, also, were of the opinion that Munn’s object was to squeeze the club by threats.

The second week in June, Peyster Sprowl, Master of Fox-hounds, Shadowbrook, appeared with his wife, the celebrated beauty, Agatha Sprowl, *née* Van Guilder.

Sprowl, now immensely large and fat, had few cares in life beyond an anxious apprehension concerning the durability of his own digestion. However, he was still able to make a midnight mouthful of a Welsh rarebit on a hot mince-pie, and wash it down with a quart of champagne, and so the world went very well with him, even if it wobbled a trifle for his handsome wife.

“She’s lovely enough,” said Colonel Hyssop, gallantly, “to set every star in heaven wabbling.” To which the bull-necked Major assented with an ever-hopeless attempt to bend at the waistband.

Meanwhile the Rev. Amasa Munn and his flock, the Shining Band, arrived at Foxville in six farm wagons, singing "Roll, Jordan!"

Of their arrival Sprowl was totally unconscious, the Colonel having forgotten to inform him of the threatened invasion.

II

The members of the Sagamore Club heard the news next morning at a late breakfast. Major Brent, who had been fishing early up-stream, bore the news, and delivered it in an incoherent bellow.

"What d'ye mean by that?" demanded Colonel Hyssop, setting down his cocktail with unsteady fingers.

"Mean?" roared the Major; "I mean that Munn and a lot o' women are sitting on the river-bank and singing 'Home Again'!"

The news jarred everybody, but the effect of it upon the president, Peyster Sprowl, appeared to be out of all proportion to its gravity. That gentleman's face was white as death; and the Major noticed it.

"You'll have to rid us of this mob," said the Major, slowly.

Sprowl lifted his heavy, overfed face from his plate. "I'll attend to it," he said, hoarsely, and swallowed a pint of claret.

"I think it is amusing," said Agatha Sprowl, looking across the table at Coursay.

"Amusing, madam!" burst out the Major. "They'll be doing their laundry in our river next!"

"Soapsuds in my favorite pools!" bawled the Colonel. "Damme if I'll permit it!"

"Sprowl ought to settle them," said Lansing, good-naturedly. "It may cost us a few thousands, but Sprowl will do the work this time as he did it before."

Sprowl choked in his claret, turned a vivid beef-color, and wiped his chin. His appetite was ruined. He hoped the ruin would stop there.

"What harm will they do?" asked Coursay, seriously—"beyond the soapsuds?"

"They'll fish, they'll throw tin cans in the water, they'll keep us awake with their fanatical powwows—confound it, haven't I seen that sort of thing?" said the Major, passionately. "Yes, I have, at nigger camp-meetings! And these people beat the niggers at that sort of thing!"

"Leave 'em to me," repeated Peyster Sprowl, thickly, and began on another chop from force of habit.

“About fifteen years ago,” said the Colonel, “there was some talk about our title. You fixed that, didn’t you, Sprowl?”

“Yes,” said Sprowl, with parched lips.

“Of course,” muttered the Major; “it cost us a cool hundred thousand to perfect our title. Thank God it’s settled.”

Sprowl’s immense body turned perfectly cold; he buried his face in his glass and drained it. Then the shrimp-color returned to his neck and ears, and deepened to scarlet. When the earth ceased reeling before his apoplectic eyes, he looked around, furtively. Again the scene in O’Hara’s death-chamber came to him; the threat of Munn, who had got wind of the true situation, and the bribing of Munn to silence.

But the club had given Sprowl one hundred thousand dollars to perfect its title; and Sprowl had reported the title perfect, all proceedings ended, and the payment of one hundred thousand dollars to Amasa Munn, as guardian of the child of O’Hara, in full payment for the O’Hara claims to the club property.

Sprowl’s coolness began to return. If five thousand dollars had stopped Munn’s mouth once, it might stop it again. Besides, how could Munn know that Sprowl had kept for his own uses ninety-five thousand dollars of his club’s money, and had founded upon it the House of Sprowl of many millions? He was quite cool now—a trifle anxious to know what Munn meant to ask for, but confident that his millions were a buckler and a shield to the honored name of Sprowl.

“I’ll see this fellow, Munn, after breakfast,” he said, lighting an expensive cigar.

“I’ll go with you,” volunteered Lansing, casually, strolling out towards the veranda.

“No, no!” called out Sprowl; “you’ll only hamper me.” But Lansing did not hear him outside in the sunshine.

Agatha Sprowl laid one fair, heavily ringed hand on the table and pushed her chair back. The Major gallantly waddled to withdraw her chair; she rose with a gesture of thanks, and a glance which shot the Major through and through—a wound he never could accustom himself to receive with stoicism.

Mrs. Sprowl turned carelessly away, followed by her two Great Danes—a superb trio, woman and dogs beautifully⁶⁶ built and groomed, and expensive enough to please even such an amateur as Peyster Sprowl, M.F.H.

“Gad, Sprowl!” sputtered the Major, “your wife grows handsomer every minute—and you grow fatter.”

Sprowl, midway in a glass of claret, said: “This simple backwoods régime is what she and I need.”

Agatha Sprowl was certainly handsome, but the Major's eyesight was none of the best. She had not been growing younger; there were lines; also a discreet employment of tints on a very silky skin, which was not quite as fresh as it had once been.

Dr. Lansing, strolling on the veranda with his pipe, met her and her big dogs turning the corner in full sunlight. Coursay was with her, his eager, flushed face close to hers; but he fell back when he saw his kinsman Lansing, and presently retired to the lawn to unreel and dry out a couple of wet silk lines.

Agatha Sprowl sat down on the veranda railing, exchanging a gay smile across the lawn with Coursay; then her dark eyes met Lansing's steel-gray ones.

"Good-morning, once more," she said, mockingly.

He returned her greeting, and began to change his mist leader for a white one.

"Will you kindly let Jack Coursay alone?" she said, in a low voice.

"No," he replied, in the same tone.

"Are you serious?" she asked, as though the idea amused her.

"Of course," he replied, pleasantly.

"Is it true that you came here because he came?" she inquired, with faint sarcasm in her eyes.

"Yes," he answered, with perfect good-nature. "You see he's my own kin; you see I'm the old-fashioned sort—a perfect fool, Mrs. Sprowl."

There was a silence; he unwound the glistening leader; she flicked at shadows with her dog-whip; the Great Danes yawned and laid their heavy heads against her knees.

"Then you *are* a fool," she concluded, serenely.

He was young enough to redden.

Three years ago she had thought it time to marry somebody, if she ever intended to marry at all; so she threw over half a dozen young fellows like Coursay, and married Sprowl. For two years her beauty, audacity, and imprudence kept a metropolis and two capitals in food for scandal. And now for a year gossip was coupling her name with Coursay's.

"I warned you at Palm Beach that I'd stop this," said Lansing, looking directly into her eyes. "You see, I know his mother."

"Stop what?" she asked, coolly.

He went on: "Jack is a curiously decent boy; he views his danger without panic, but with considerable surprise. But nobody can tell what he may do. As for me, I'm indifferent, liberal, and reasonable in my views of ... other people's conduct. But Jack is not one of those 'other people,' you see."

“And *I* am?” she suggested, serenely.

“Exactly; I’m not your keeper.”

“So you confine your attention to Jack and the Decalogue?”

“As for the Commandments,” observed Lansing, “any ass can shatter them with his hind heels, so why should he? If he *must* be an ass, let him be an original ass—not a cur.”

“A cur,” repeated Agatha Sprowl, unsteadily.

“An *affaire de cœur* with a married woman is an affair *do cur*,” said Lansing, calmly—“Gallicize it as you wish, make it smart and fashionable as you can. I told you I was old-fashioned.... And I mean it, madam.”

The leader had eluded him; he uncoiled it again; she mechanically took it between her delicate fingers and held it steady while he measured and shortened it by six inches.

“Do you think,” she said, between her teeth, “that it is your mission to padlock me to *that*—in there?”

Lansing turned, following her eyes. She was looking at her husband.

“No,” replied Lansing, serenely; “but I shall see that you don’t transfer the padlock to ... *that*, out *there*”—glancing at Coursay on the lawn.

“Try it,” she breathed, and let go of the leader, which flew up in silvery crinkles, the cast of brightly colored flies dancing in the sunshine.

“Oh, let him alone,” said Lansing, wearily; “all the men in Manhattan are drivelling about you. Let him go; he’s a sorry trophy—and there’s no natural treachery in him; ... it’s not in our blood; ... it’s too cheap for us, and we can’t help saying so when we’re in our right minds.”

There was a little color left in her face when she stood up, her hands resting on the spiked collars of her dogs. “The trouble with you,” she said, smiling adorably, “is your innate delicacy.”

“I know I am brutal,” he said, grimly; “let him alone.”

She gave him a pretty salutation, crossed the lawn, passed her husband, who had just ridden up on a powerful⁶⁹ sorrel, and called brightly to Coursay: “Take me fishing, Jack, or I’ll yawn my head off my shoulders.”

Before Lansing could recover his wits the audacious beauty had stepped into the canoe at the edge of the lawn, and young Coursay, eager and radiant, gave a flourish to his paddle, and drove it into the glittering water.

If Sprowl found anything disturbing to his peace of mind in the proceeding, he did not betray it. He sat hunched up on his big sorrel, eyes fixed on the distant clearing, where the white gable-end of O'Hara's house rose among the trees.

Suddenly he wheeled his mount and galloped off up the river road; the sun glowed on his broad back, and struck fire on his spurs, then horse and rider were gone into the green shadows of the woods.

To play spy was not included in Lansing's duties as he understood them. He gave one disgusted glance after the canoe, shrugged, set fire to the tobacco in his pipe, and started slowly along the river towards O'Hara's with a vague idea of lending counsel, aid, and countenance to his president during the expected interview with Munn.

At the turn of the road he met Major Brent and old Peter, the head-keeper. The latter stood polishing the barrels of his shot-gun with a red bandanna; the Major was fuming and wagging his head.

"Doctor!" he called out, when Lansing appeared; "Peter says they raised the devil down at O'Hara's last night! This can't go on, d'ye see! No, by Heaven!"

"What were they doing, Peter?" asked Lansing, coming up to where the old man stood.

"Them Shinin' Banders? Waal, sir, they was kinder rigged out in white night-gounds—robes o' Jordan they call 'em—an' they had rubbed some kind o' shiny stuff—like matches—all over these there night-gounds, an' then they sang a spell, an' then they all sot down on the edge o' the river."

"Is that all?" asked Lansing, laughing.

"Wait!" growled the Major.

"Waal," continued old Peter, "the shinin' stuff on them night-gounds was that bright that I seen the fishes swimmin' round kinder dazed like. 'Gosh!' sez I to m'self, it's like a Jack a-drawnin' them trout—yaas'r. So I hollers out, 'Here! You Shinin' Band folk, you air a-drawin' the trout. Quit it!' sez I, ha'sh an' pert-like. Then that there Munn, the Prophet, he up an' hollers, 'Hark how the heathen rage!' he hollers. An' with that, blamed if he didn't sling a big net into the river, an' all them Shinin' Banders ketched holt an' they drawed it clean up-stream. 'Quit that!' I hollers, 'it's agin the game laws!' But the Prophet he hollers back, 'Hark how the heathen rage!' Then they drawed that there net out, an' it were full o' trout, big an' little—"

"Great Heaven!" roared the Major, black in the face.

"I think," said Lansing, quietly, "that I'll walk down to O'Hara's and reason with our friend Munn. Sprowl may want a man to help him in this matter."

III

When Sprowl galloped his sorrel mare across the bridge and up to the O'Hara house, he saw a man and a young girl seated on the grass of the river-bank, under the shade of an enormous elm.

Sprowl dismounted heavily, and led his horse towards the couple under the elm. He recognized Munn in the thin, long-haired, full-bearded man who rose to face him; and he dropped the bridle from his hand, freeing the sorrel mare.

The two men regarded each other in silence; the mare strayed leisurely up-stream, cropping the fresh grass; the young girl turned her head towards Sprowl with a curious movement, as though listening, rather than looking.

"Mr. Munn, I believe," said Sprowl, in a low voice.

"The Reverend Amasa Munn," corrected the Prophet, quietly. "You are Peyster Sprowl."

Sprowl turned and looked full at the girl on the grass. The shadow of her big straw hat fell across her eyes; she faced him intently.

Sprowl glanced at his mare, whistled, and turned squarely on his heel, walking slowly along the river-bank. The sorrel followed like a dog; presently Munn stood up and deliberately stalked off after Sprowl, rejoining that gentleman a few rods down the river-bank.

"Well," said Sprowl, turning suddenly on Munn, "what are you doing here?"

From his lank height Munn's eyes were nevertheless scarcely level with the eyes of the burly president.

"I'm here," said Munn, "to sell the land."

"I thought so," said Sprowl, curtly. "How much?"

Munn picked a buttercup and bit off the stem. With the blossom between his teeth he surveyed the sky, the river, the forest, and then the features of Sprowl.

"How much?" asked Sprowl, impatiently.

Munn named a sum that staggered Sprowl, but Munn could perceive no tremor in the fat, blank face before him.

"And if we refuse?" suggested Sprowl.

Munn only looked at him.

Sprowl repeated the question.

"Well," observed Munn, stroking his beard reflectively, "there's that matter of the title."

This time Sprowl went white to his fat ears. Munn merely glanced at him, then looked at the river.

“I will buy the title this time,” said Sprowl, hoarsely.

“You can’t,” said Munn.

A terrible shock struck through Sprowl; he saw through a mist; he laid his hand on a tree-trunk for support, mechanically facing Munn all the while.

“Can’t!” he repeated, with dry lips.

“No, you can’t buy it.”

“Why?”

“O’Hara’s daughter has it.”

“But—she will sell! Won’t she sell? Where is she?” burst out Sprowl.

“She won’t sell,” said Munn, studying the ghastly face of the president.

“You can make her sell,” said Sprowl. “What is your price?”

“I can’t make her sell the title to your club property,” said Munn. “She’ll sell this land here. Take it or leave it.”

“If I take it—will *you* leave?” asked Sprowl, hoarsely.

Munn smiled, then nodded.

“And will that shut your mouth, you dirty scoundrel?” said Sprowl, gripping his riding-crop till his fat fingernails turned white.

“It will shut *my* mouth,” said Munn, still with his fixed smile.

“How much extra to keep this matter of the title quiet—as long as I live?”

“As long as you live?” repeated Munn, surprised.

“Yes, I don’t care a damn what they say of me after I’m dead,” snarled Sprowl.

Munn watched him for a moment, plucked another buttercup, pondered, smoothed out his rich, brown, silky beard, and finally mentioned a second sum.

Sprowl drew a check-book from the breast-pocket of his coat, and filled in two checks with a fountain pen. These he held up before Munn’s snapping, yellowish eyes.

“This blackmail,” said Sprowl, thickly, “is paid now for the last time. If you come after me again you come to your death, for I’ll smash your skull in with one blow, and take my chances to prove insanity. And I’ve enough money to prove it.”

Munn waited.

“I’ll buy you this last time,” continued Sprowl, recovering his self-command. “Now, you tell me where O’Hara’s child is, and how you are going to prevent her from ever pressing that suit which he dropped.”

“O’Hara’s daughter is here. I control her,” said Munn, quietly.

“You mean she’s one of your infernal flock?” demanded Sprowl.

“One of the Shining Band,” said Munn, with a trace of a whine in his voice.

“Where are the papers in that proceeding, then? You said O’Hara burned them, you liar!”

“She has them in a box in her bedroom,” replied Munn.

“Does she know what they mean?” asked Sprowl, aghast.

“No—but I do,” replied Munn, with his ominous smile.

“How do you know she does not understand their meaning?”

“Because,” replied Munn, laughing, “she can’t read.”

Sprowl did not believe him, but he was at his mercy. He stood with his heavy head hanging, pondering a moment, then whistled his sorrel. The mare came to him and laid her dusty nose on his shoulder.

“You see these checks?” he said.

Munn assented.

“You get them when you put those papers in my hands. Understand? And when you bring me the deed of this cursed property here—house and all.”

“A week from to-day,” said Munn; his voice shook in spite of him. Few men can face sudden wealth with a yawn.

“And after that—” began Sprowl, and glared at Munn with such a fury that the Prophet hastily stepped backward and raised a nervous hand to his beard.

“It’s a square deal,” he said; and Sprowl knew that he meant it, at least for the present.

The president mounted heavily, and sought his bridle and stirrups.

"I'll meet you here in a week from to-day, hour for hour; I'll give you twenty-four hours after that to pack up and move, bag and baggage."

"Done," said Munn.

"Then get out of my way, you filthy beast!" growled Sprowl, swinging his horse and driving the spurs in.

Munn fell back with a cry; the horse plunged past, brushing him, tearing out across the pasture, over the bridge, and far down the stony road Munn heard the galloping. He had been close to death; he did not quite know whether Sprowl had meant murder or whether it was carelessness or his own fault that the horse had not struck him and ground him into the sod.

However it was, he conceived a new respect for Sprowl, and promised himself that if he ever was obliged to call again upon Sprowl for financial assistance he would do it through a telephone.

A dozen women, dressed alike in a rather pretty gray uniform, were singing up by the house; he looked at them with a sneer, then walked back along the river to where the young girl still sat under the elm.

"I want to talk to you," he said, abruptly, "and I don't want any more refusals or reasons or sentiments. I want to see the papers in that steel box."

She turned towards him in that quaint, hesitating, listening attitude.

"The Lord," he said, more cheerfully, "has put it into my head that we must journey once more. I've had a prayerful wrestle out yonder, and I see light. The Lord tells me to sell this land to the strangers without the gates, and I'm going to sell it to the glory of God."

"How can you sell it?" said the girl, quietly.

"Isn't all our holdings in common?" demanded Munn, sharply.

"You know that I am not one of you," said the girl.

"Yes, you are," said Munn; "you don't want to be because the light has been denied you, but I've sealed you and sanctified you to the Shining Band, and you just can't help being one of us. Besides," he continued, with an ugly smile, "I'm your legal guardian."

This was a lie; but she did not know it.

"So I want to see those papers," he added.

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, legal matters; I've got to examine 'em or I can't sell this land."

"Father told me not to open the box until ... I found an ... honest man," she said, steadily.

Munn glared at her. She had caught him in a lie years ago; she never forgot it.

“Where’s the key?” he demanded.

She was silent.

“I’ll give you till supper-time to find that key,” said Munn, confidently, and walked on towards the house.

But before he had fairly emerged from the shadow of the elm he met Lansing face to face, and the young man halted him with a pleasant greeting, asking if he were not the Reverend Doctor Munn.

“That’s my name,” said Munn, briefly.

“I was looking for Mr. Sprowl; I thought to meet him here; we were to speak to you about the netting of trout in the river,” said Lansing, good-humoredly.

Munn regarded him in sulky silence.

“It won’t do,” continued Lansing, smiling; “if you net trout you’ll have the wardens after you.”

“Oh! and I suppose you’ll furnish the information,” sneered Munn.

“I certainly will,” replied Lansing.

Munn had retraced his steps towards the river. As the men passed before Eileen O’Hara, Lansing raised his cap. She did not return his salute; she looked towards the spot where he and Munn had halted, and her face bore that quaint, listening expression, almost pitifully sweet, as though she were deaf.

“Peter, our head-keeper, saw you netting trout in that pool last night,” said Lansing.

Munn examined the water and muttered that the Bible gave him his authority for that sort of fishing.

“He’s a fake,” thought Lansing, in sudden disgust. Involuntarily he glanced around at the girl under the elm. The beauty of her pale face startled him. Surely innocence looked out of those dark-blue eyes, fixed on him under the shadow of her straw hat. He noted that she also wore the silvery-gray uniform of the elect. He turned his eyes towards the house, where a dozen women, old and young, were sitting out under the tree, sewing and singing peacefully. The burden of their song came sweetly across the pasture; a golden robin, high in the elm’s feathery tip, warbled incessant accompaniment to the breeze and the flowing of water and the far song of the women.

“We don’t mean to annoy you,” said Lansing, quietly; “I for one believe that we shall find you and your community the best of courteous neighbors.”

Munn looked at him with his cunning, amber-yellow eyes and stroked his beard.

“What do you want, anyway?” he said.

“I’ll tell you what I want,” said Lansing, sharply; “I want you and your people to observe the game laws.”

“Keep your shirt on, young man,” said Munn, coarsely, and turned on his heel. Before he had taken the second step Lansing laid his hand on his shoulder and spun him around, his grip tightening like a vise.

“What y’ doing?” snarled Munn, shrinking and squirming, terrified by the violent grasp, the pain of which almost sickened him.

Lansing looked at him, then shoved him out of his path, and carefully rinsed his hands in the stream. Then he laughed and turned around, but Munn was making rapid time towards the house, where the gray-clad women sat singing under the neglected apple-trees. The young man’s eyes fell on the girl under the elm; she was apparently watching his every movement from those dark-blue eyes under the straw hat.

He took off his cap and went to her, and told her politely how amiable had been his intentions, and how stringent the game laws were, and begged her to believe that he intended no discourtesy to her community when he warned them against the wholesale destruction of the trout.

He had a pleasant, low voice, very attractive to women; she smiled and listened, offering no comment.

“And I want to assure you,” he ended, “that we at the club will always respect your boundaries as we know you will respect ours. I fear one of our keepers was needlessly rude last night—from his own account. He’s an old man; he supposes that all people know the game laws.”

Lansing paused; she bent her head a trifle. After a silence he started on, saying, “Good-morning,” very pleasantly.

“I wish you would sit down and talk to me,” said the girl, without raising her head.

Lansing was too astonished to reply; she turned her head partly towards him as though listening. Something in the girl’s attitude arrested his attention; he involuntarily dropped on one knee to see her face. It was in shadow.

“I want to tell you who I am,” she said, without looking at him. “I am Eily O’Hara.”

Lansing received the communication with perfect gravity. “Your father owned this land?” he asked.

“Yes; I own it now, ... I think.”

He was silent, curious, amused.

“I think I do,” she repeated; “I have never seen my father’s will.”

“Doubtless your lawyer has it,” he suggested.

“No; I have it. It is in a steel box; I have the key hanging around my neck inside my clothes. I have never opened the box.”

“But why do you not open the box?” asked Lansing, smiling.

She hesitated; color crept into her cheeks. “I have waited,” she said; “I was alone; my father said—that—that—” She stammered; the rich flush deepened to her neck.

Lansing, completely nonplussed, sat watching the wonderful beauty of that young face.

“My father told me to open it only when I found an honest man in the world,” she said, slowly.

The undertone of pathos in her voice drove the smile from Lansing’s lips.

“Have you found the world so dishonest?” he asked, seriously.

“I don’t know; I came from Notre Dame de Sainte Croix last year. Mr. Munn was my guardian; ... said he was; ... I suppose he is.”

Lansing looked at her in sympathy.

“I am not one of the community,” she said. “I only stay because I have no other home but this. I have no money, ... at least I know of none that is mine.” Lansing was silent and attentive.

“I—I heard your voice; ... I wanted to speak to you—to hear you speak to me,” she said. A new timidity came into her tone; she raised her head. “I—somehow when you spoke—I felt that you—you were honest.” She stammered again, but Lansing’s cool voice brought her out of her difficulty and painful shyness.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“I’m Dr. Lansing,” he said.

“Will you open my steel box and read my papers for me?” she inquired, innocently.

“I will—if you wish,” he said, impulsively; “if you think it wise. But I think you had better read the papers for yourself.”

“Why, I can’t read,” she said, apparently surprised that he should not know it.

“You mean that you were not taught to read in your convent school?” he asked, incredulously.

A curious little sound escaped her lips; she raised both slender hands and unpinned her hat. Then she turned her head to his.

The deep-blue beauty of her eyes thrilled him; then he started and leaned forward, closer, closer to her exquisite face.

“My child,” he cried, softly, “my poor child!” And she smiled and fingered the straw hat in her lap.

“Will you read my father’s papers for me?” she said.

“Yes—yes—if you wish. Yes, indeed!” After a moment he said: “How long have you been blind?”

IV

That evening, at dusk, Lansing came into the club, and went directly to his room. He carried a small, shabby satchel; and when he had locked his door he opened the satchel and drew from it a flat steel box.

For half an hour he sat by his open window in the quiet starlight, considering the box, turning it over and over in his hands. At length he opened his trunk, placed the box inside, locked the trunk, and noiselessly left the room.

He encountered Coursay in the hall, and started to pass him with an abstracted nod, then changed his mind and slipped his arm through the arm of his young kinsman.

“Thought you meant to cut me,” said Coursay, half laughing, half in earnest.

“Why?” Lansing stopped short; then, “Oh, because you played the fool with Agatha in the canoe? You two will find yourselves in a crankier craft than that if you don’t look sharp.”

“You have an ugly way of putting it,” began Coursay. But Lansing scowled and said:

“Jack, I want advice; I’m troubled, old chap. Come into my room while I dress for dinner. Don’t shy and stand on your hind-legs; it’s not about Agatha Sprowl; it’s about me, and I’m in trouble.”

The appeal flattered and touched Coursay, who had never expected that he, a weak and spineless back-slider, could possibly be of aid or comfort to his self-sufficient and celebrated cousin, Dr. Lansing.

They entered Lansing’s rooms; Coursay helped himself to some cognac, and smoked, waiting for Lansing to emerge from his dressing-room.

Presently, bathed, shaved, and in his shirt-sleeves, Lansing came in, tying his tie, a cigarette unlighted between his teeth.

“Jack,” he said, “give me advice, not as a self-centred, cautious, and orderly citizen of Manhattan, but as a young man whose heart leads his head every time! I want that sort of advice; and I can’t give it to myself.”

“Do you mean it?” demanded Coursay, incredulously.

“By Heaven, I do!” returned Lansing, biting his words short, as the snap of a whip.

He turned his back to the mirror, lighted his cigarette, took one puff, threw it into the grate. Then he told Coursay what had occurred between him and the young girl under the elm, reciting the facts minutely and exactly as they occurred.

“I have the box in my trunk yonder,” he went on; “the poor little thing managed to slip out while Munn was in the barn; I was waiting for her in the road.”

After a moment Coursay asked if the girl was stone blind.

“No,” said Lansing; “she can distinguish light from darkness; she can even make out form—in the dark; but a strong light completely blinds her.”

“Can you help her?” asked Coursay, with quick pity.

Lansing did not answer the question, but went on: “It’s been coming on—this blindness—since her fifth year; she could always see to read better in dark corners than in a full light. For the last two years she has not been able to see; and she’s only twenty, Jack—only twenty.”

“Can’t you help her?” repeated Coursay, a painful catch in his throat.

“I haven’t examined her,” said Lansing, curtly.

“But—but you are an expert in that sort of thing,” protested his cousin; “isn’t this in your line?”

“Yes; I sat and talked to her half an hour and did not know she was blind. She has a pair of magnificent deep-blue eyes; nobody, talking to her, could suspect such a thing. Still—her eyes were shaded by her hat.”

“What kind of blindness is it?” asked Coursay, in a shocked voice.

“I think I know,” said Lansing. “I think there can be little doubt that she has a rather unusual form of lamellar cataract.”

“Curable?” motioned Coursay.

“I haven’t examined her; how could I— But—I’m going to do it.”

“And if you operate?” asked Coursay, hopefully.

“Operate? Yes—yes, of course. It is needling, you know, with probability of repetition. We expect absorption to do the work for us—bar accidents and other things.”

“When will you operate?” inquired Coursay.

Lansing broke out, harshly: “God knows! That swindler, Munn, keeps her a prisoner. Doctors long ago urged her to submit to an operation; Munn refused, and he and his deluded women have been treating her by prayer for years—the miserable mountebank!”

“You mean that he won’t let you try to help her?”

“I mean just exactly that, Jack.”

Coursay got up with his clinched hands swinging and his eager face red as a pippin. “Why, then,” he said, “we’ll go and get her! Come on; I can’t sit here and let such things happen!”

Lansing laughed the laugh of a school-boy bent on deviltry.

“Good old Jack! That’s the sort of advice I wanted,” he said, affectionately. “We may see our names in the morning papers for this; but who cares? We may be arrested for a few unimportant and absurd things—but who cares? Munn will probably sue us; who cares? At any rate, we’re reasonably certain of a double-leaded column in the yellow press; but do you give a tinker’s damn?”

“Not one!” said Coursay, calmly.

Then they went down to dinner.

Sprowl, being unwell, dined in his own rooms; Agatha Sprowl was more witty and brilliant and charming than ever; but Coursay did not join her on the veranda that evening, and she sat for two hours enduring the platitudes of Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent, and planning serious troubles for Lansing, to whose interference she attributed Coursay’s non-appearance.

But Coursay and Lansing had other business in hand that night. Fortune, too, favored them when they arrived at the O’Hara house; for there, leaning on the decaying gate, stood Eileen O’Hara, her face raised to the sky as though seeking in the soft star radiance which fell upon her lids a celestial balm for her sightless eyes.

She was alone; she heard Lansing’s step, and knew it, too. From within the house came the deadened sound of women’s voices singing:

“Light of the earth and sky, Unbind mine eyes, Lest I in darkness lie While my soul dies.
Blind, at Thy feet I fall, All blindly kneel, Fainting, Thy name I call; Touch me and heal!”

In the throbbing hush of the starlight a whippoorwill called three times; the breeze rose in the forest; a little wind came fragrantly, puff on puff, along the road, stirring the silvery dust.

She laid one slim hand in Lansing’s; steadily and noiselessly they traversed the dew-wet meadow, crossed the river by the second bridge, and so came to the dark club-house under the trees.

There was nobody visible except the steward when they entered the hall.

“Two rooms and a bath, John,” said Lansing, quietly; and followed the steward up the stairs, guiding his blind charge.

The rooms were on the north angle; Lansing and Coursay inspected them carefully, gave the steward proper direction, and dismissed him.

“Get me a telegram blank,” said Lansing. Coursay brought one. His cousin pencilled a despatch, and the young man took it and left the room.

The girl was sitting on the bed, silent, intent, following Lansing with her sightless eyes.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, pleasantly.

“Yes, ... oh, yes, with all my heart!”

He steadied his voice. “I think I can help you—I am sure I can. I have sent to New York for Dr. Courtney Thayer.”

He drew a long breath; her beauty almost unnerved him. “Thayer will operate; he’s the best of all. Are you afraid?”

She lifted one hand and held it out, hesitating. He took it.

“No, not afraid,” she said.

“You are wise; there is no need for fear. All will come right, my child.”

She listened intently.

“It is necessary in such operations that the patient should, above all, be cheerful and—and happy—”

“Oh, yes, ... and I am happy! Truly! truly!” she breathed.

“—and brave, and patient, and obedient—and—” His voice trembled a trifle. “You must lie very still,” he ended, hastily.

“Will you be here?”

“Yes—yes, of course!”

“Then I will lie very still.”

He left her curled up in an easy-chair, smiling at him with blind eyes; he scarcely found his way down-stairs for all his eyesight. He stumbled to the grill-room door, felt for the knob, and flung it open.

A flood of yellow light struck him like a blow; through the smoke he saw the wine-flushed faces of Colonel Hyssop and Major Brent staring at him.

“Gad, Lansing!” said the Major, “you’re white and shaky as a ninety-nine-cent toy lamb. Come in and have a drink, m’boy!”

“I wanted to say,” said Lansing, “that I have a patient in 5 and 6. It’s an emergency case; I’ve wired for Courtney Thayer. I wish to ask the privilege and courtesy of the club for my patient. It’s unusual; it’s intrusive. Absolute and urgent necessity is my plea.”

The two old gentlemen appeared startled, but they hastily assured Lansing that his request would be honored; and Lansing went away to pace the veranda until Coursay returned from the telegraph station.

In the grill-room Major Brent’s pop eyes were fixed on the Colonel in inflamed inquiry.

“Damme!” snapped the Colonel, “does that young man take this club for a hospital?”

“He’ll be washing bandages in the river next; he’ll poison the trout with his antiseptic stuffs!” suggested the Major, shuddering.

“The club’s going to the dogs!” said the Colonel, with a hearty oath.

But he did not know how near to the dogs the club already was.

V

It is perfectly true that the club and the dogs were uncomfortably close together. A week later the crisis came when Munn, in a violent rage, accused Sprowl of spiriting away his ward, Eileen O’Hara. But when Sprowl at last comprehended that the girl and the papers had really disappeared, he turned like a maddened pig on Munn, tore the signed checks to shreds before his eyes, and cursed him steadily as long as he remained within hearing.

As for Munn, his game appeared to be up. He hurried to New York, and spent a month or two attempting to find some trace of his ward, then his money gave out. He returned to his community and wrote a cringing letter to Sprowl, begging him to buy the O’Hara land for next to nothing, and risk the legality of the transfer. To which Sprowl paid no attention. A week later Munn and the Shining Band left for Munnville, Maine.

It was vaguely understood at the club that Lansing had a patient in 5 and 6.

“Probably a rich woman whom he can’t afford to lose,” suggested Sprowl, with a sneer; “but I’m cursed if I can see why he should turn this club into a drug-shop to make money in!” And the Colonel and the Major agreed that it was indecent in the extreme.

To his face, of course, Sprowl, the Colonel, and the Major treated Lansing with perfect respect; but the faint odor of antiseptics from rooms 5 and 6 made them madder and madder every time they noticed it.

Meanwhile young Coursay had a free bridle; Lansing was never around to interfere, and he drove and rode and fished and strolled with Agatha Sprowl until neither he nor the shameless beauty knew whether they were standing on their heads or their heels. To be in love was a new sensation to Agatha Sprowl; to believe himself in love was nothing new to Coursay, but the flavor never palled.

What they might have done—what, perhaps, they had already decided to do—nobody but they knew. The chances are that they would have bolted if they had not run smack into that rigid sentinel who guards the pathway of life. The sentinel is called Fate. And it came about in the following manner:

Dr. Courtney Thayer arrived one cool day early in October; Lansing met him with a quiet smile, and, together, these eminent gentlemen entered rooms 5 and 6.

A few moments later Courtney Thayer came out, laughing, followed by Lansing, who also appeared to be a prey to mirth.

“She’s charming—she’s perfectly charming!” said Courtney Thayer. “Where the deuce do these Yankee convent people get that elusive Continental flavor? Her father must have been a gentleman.”

“He was an Irish lumberman,” said Lansing. After a moment he added: “So you won’t come back, doctor?”

“No, it’s not necessary; you know that. I’ve an operation to-morrow in Manhattan; I must get back to town. Wish I could stay and shoot grouse with you, but I can’t.”

“Come up for the fall flight of woodcock; I’ll wire you when it’s on,” urged Lansing.

“Perhaps; good-bye.”

Lansing took his outstretched hand in both of his. “There is no use in my trying to tell you what you have done for me, doctor,” he said.

Thayer regarded him keenly. “Thought I did it for *her*,” he remarked.

Instantly Lansing’s face turned red-hot. Thayer clasped the young man’s hands and shook them till they ached.

“You’re all right, my boy—you’re all right!” he said, heartily; and was gone down the stairs, two at a jump—a rather lively proceeding for the famous and dignified Courtney Thayer.

Lansing turned and entered rooms 5 and 6. His patient was standing by the curtained window. “Do you want to know your fate?” he asked, lightly.

She turned and looked at him out of her lovely eyes; the quaint, listening expression in her face still remained, but she *saw* him, this time.

“Am I well?” she asked, calmly.

“Yes; ... perfectly.”

She sat down by the window, her slender hands folded, her eyes on him.

“And now,” she asked, “what am I to do?”

He understood, and bent his head. He had an answer ready, trembling on his lips; but a horror of presuming on her gratitude kept him silent.

“Am I to go back ... to *him*?” she said, faintly.

“God forbid!” he blurted out. With all his keen eyesight, how could he fail to see the adoration in her eyes, on her mute lips’ quivering curve, in every line of her body? But the brutality of asking for that which her gratitude might not withhold froze him. It was no use; he could not speak.

“Then—what? Tell me; I will do it,” she said, in a desolate voice. “Of course I cannot stay here now.”

Something in his haggard face set her heart beating heavily; then for a moment her heart seemed to stop. She covered her eyes with a swift gesture.

“Is it pain?” he asked, quickly. “Let me see your eyes!” Her hands covered them. He came to her; she stood up, and he drew her fingers from her eyes and looked into them steadily. But what he saw there he alone knows; for he bent closer, shaking in every limb; and both her arms crept to his shoulders and her clasped hands tightened around his neck.

Which was doubtless an involuntary muscular affection incident on successful operations for lamellar or zonular cataract.

That day they opened the steel box. She understood little of what he read to her; presently he stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence and remained staring, reading on and on in absorbed silence.

Content, serene, numbed with her happiness, she watched him sleepily.

He muttered under his breath: “Sprowl! What a fool! What a cheap fool! And yet not one among us even suspected him of *that*!”

After a long time he looked up at the girl, blankly at first, and with a grimace of disgust. “You see,” he said, and gave a curious laugh—“you see that—that *you* own all this land of ours—as far as I can make out.”

After a long explanation she partly understood, and laughed outright, a clear child’s laugh without a trace of that sad undertone he knew so well.

“But we are not going to take it away from your club—are we?” she asked.

“No,” he said; “let the club have the land—*your* land! What do we care? We will never come here again!” He sat a moment, thinking, then sprang up. “We will go to New York to-morrow,” he said; “and I’ll just step out and say good-bye to Sprowl—I think he and his wife are also going to-morrow; I think they’re going to Europe, *to live*! I’m sure they are; and that they will never come back.”

And, curiously enough, that is exactly what they did; and they are there yet. And their establishment in the American colony is the headquarters for all nobility in exile, including the chivalrous Orleans.

Which is one sort of justice—the Lansing sort; and, anyway, Coursay survived and married an actress a year later. And the club still remains in undisturbed possession of Eileen Lansing's land; and Major Brent is now its president.

As for Munn, he has permanently retired to Munnville, Maine, where, it is reported, he has cured several worthy and wealthy people by the simple process of prayer.

ONE MAN IN A MILLION

I

“

Do you desire me to marry him?” asked Miss Castle, quietly.

“Let me finish,” said her uncle. “Jane,” he added, turning on his sister, “if you could avoid sneezing for a few moments, I should be indebted to you.”

Miss Jane Garcide, a sallow lady of forty, who suffered with colds all winter and hay-fever all summer, meekly left the room.

Miss Castle herself leaned on the piano, tearing the pink petals from a half-withered rose, while her guardian, the Hon. John Garcide, finished what he had to say and pulled out his cigar-case with decision.

“I have only to add,” he said, “that James J. Crawford is one man in a million.”

Her youthful adoration of Garcide had changed within a few years to a sweet-tempered indifference. He was aware of this; he was anxious to learn whether the change had also affected her inherited passion for truthfulness.

“Do you remember a promise you once made?” he inquired, lighting his cigar with care.

“Yes,” she said, calmly.

“When was it?”

“On my tenth birthday.”

He looked out of the heavily curtained window.

“Of course you could not be held to such a promise,” he remarked.

“There is no need to *hold* me to it,” she answered, flushing up.

Her delicate sense of honor amused him; he lay back in his arm-chair, enjoying his cigar.

“It is curious,” he said, “that you cannot recall meeting Mr. Crawford last winter.”

“A girl has an opportunity to forget hundreds of faces after her first season,” she said.

There was another pause; then Garcide went on: “I am going to ask you to marry him.”

Her face paled a trifle; she bent her head in acquiescence. Garcide smiled. It had always been that way with the Castles. Their word, once given, ended all matters. And now Garcide was gratified to learn the value of a promise made by a child of ten.

“I wonder,” said Garcide, plaintively, “why you never open your heart to me, Hilda?”

“I wonder, too,” she said; “my father did.”

Garcide turned his flushed face to the window.

Years before, when the firm of Garcide & Castle went to pieces, Peter Castle stood by the wreck to the end, patching it with his last dollar. But the wreck broke up, and he drifted piteously with the débris until a kindly current carried him into the last harbor of all—the port of human derelicts.

Garcide, however, contrived to cling to some valuable flotsam and paddle into calm water, and anchor.

After a few years he built a handsome house above Fiftieth Street; after a few more years he built a new wing for Saint Berold’s Hospital; and after a few more years he did other things equally edifying, but which, if mentioned, might identify him.

Church work had always interested him. As a speculation in moral obligation, he adopted Peter Castle’s orphan, who turned to him in a passion of gratitude and blind devotion. And as she bade fair to rival her dead mother in beauty, and as rich men marry beauty when it is in the market, the Hon. John Garcide decided to control the child’s future. A promise at ten years is quickly made, but he had never forgotten it, and she could not forget.

And now Garcide needed her as he needed mercy from Ophir Steel, which was slowly crushing his own steel syndicate to powder.

The struggle between Steel Plank and James J. Crawford’s Ophir Steel is historical. The pure love of fighting was in Crawford; he fought Garcide to a standstill and then kicked him, filling Garcide with a mixture of terror and painful admiration.

But sheer luck caught at Garcide’s coat-tails and hung there. Crawford, prowling in the purlieu of society, had seen Miss Castle.

The next day Crawford came into Garcide's office and accepted a chair with such a humble and uneasy smile that Garcide mistook his conciliatory demeanor and attempted to bully him. But when he found out what Crawford wanted, he nearly fainted in an attempt to conceal his astonishment and delight.

"Do you think I'd buy you off with an innocent child?" he said, lashing himself into a good imitation of an insulted gentleman.

Crawford looked out of the window, then rose and walked towards the door.

"Do you think you can bribe me?" shouted Garcide after him. Crawford hesitated.

"Come back here," said Garcide, firmly; "I want you to explain yourself."

"I can't," muttered Crawford.

"Well—try, anyway," said Garcide, more amiably.

And now this was the result of that explanation, at least one of the results; and Miss Castle had promised to wed a gentleman in Ophir Steel named Crawford, at the convenience of the Hon. John Garcide.

The early morning sunshine fell across the rugs in the music-room, filling the gloom with golden lights. It touched a strand of hair on Miss Castle's bent head.

"You'll like him," said Garcide, guiltily.

Her hand hung heavily on the piano keys.

"You have no other man in mind?" he asked.

"No, ... no man."

Garcide chewed the end of his cigar.

"Crawford's a bashful man. Don't make it hard for him," he said.

She swung around on the gilded music-stool, one white hand lying among the ivory keys.

"I shall spare us both," she said; "I shall tell him that it is settled."

Garcide rose; she received his caress with composure. He made another grateful peck at her chin.

"Why don't you take a quiet week or two in the country?" he suggested, cheerfully, "Go up to the Sagamore Club; Jane will go with you. You can have the whole place to yourselves. You always liked nature and—er—all that, eh?"

"Oh yes," she said, indifferently.

That afternoon the Hon. John Garcide sent a messenger to James J. Crawford with the following letter:

“My dear Crawford,—Your manly and straightforward request for permission to address my ward, Miss Castle, has profoundly touched me.

“I have considered the matter, I may say earnestly considered it.

“Honor and the sacred duties of guardianship forbid that I should interfere in any way with my dear child’s happiness if she desires to place it in your keeping. On the other hand, honor and decency prevent me from attempting to influence her to any decision which might prove acceptable to myself.

“I can therefore only grant you the permission you desire to address my ward. The rest lies with a propitious Providence.

“Cordially yours, John Garcide.

“P.S.—My sister, Miss Garcide, and Miss Castle are going to the Sagamore Club to-night. I’ll take you up there whenever you can get away.”

To which came answer by messenger:

“Hon. John Garcide:

“My dear Garcide,—Can’t go for two weeks. My fool nephew Jim is on his vacation, and I don’t know where he is prowling.
Hastily yours,
“James J. Crawford.

“P. S.—There’s a director’s meeting at three. Come down and we’ll settle all quarrels.”

To this the Hon. John Garcide telegraphed: “All right,” and hurriedly prepared to escort his sister and Miss Castle to the mid-day express for Sagamore Hills.

II

Miss Castle usually rose with the robins, when there were any in the neighborhood. There were plenty on the lawn around the Sagamore Club that dewy June morning, chirping, chirking, trilling, repeating their endless arias from tree and gate-post. And through the outcry of the robins, the dry cackle of the purple grackles, and the cat-bird’s whine floated earthward the melody of the golden orioles.

Miss Castle, fresh from the bath, breakfasted in her own rooms with an appetite that astonished her.

She was a wholesome, fresh-skinned girl, with a superb body, limbs a trifle heavy in the strict classical sense, straight-browed, blue-eyed, and very lovely and Greek.

Pensively she ate her toast, tossing a few crumbs at the robins; pensively she disposed of two eggs, a trout, and all the chocolate, and looked into the pitcher for more cream.

The swelling bird-music only intensified the deep, sweet country silence which brooded just beyond the lawn's wet limits; she saw the flat river tumbling in the sunlight; she saw the sky over all, its blue mystery untroubled by a cloud.

"I love all that," she said, dreamily, to her maid behind her. "Never mind my hair now; I want the wind to blow it."

The happy little winds of June, loitering among the lilacs, heard; and they came and blew her bright hair across her eyes, puff after puff of perfumed balm, and stirred the delicate stuff that clung to her, and she felt their caress on her bare feet.

"I mean to go and wade in that river," she said to her maid. "Dress me very quickly."

But when she was dressed the desire for childish things had passed away, and she raised her grave eyes to the reflected eyes in the mirror, studying them in silence.

"After all," she said, aloud, "I am young enough to have found happiness—if they had let me.... The sunshine is full of it, out-doors.... I could have found it.... I was not meant for men.... Still ... it is all in the future yet. I will learn not to be afraid."

She made a little effort to smile at herself in the mirror, but her courage could not carry her as far as that. So, with a quick, quaint gesture of adieu, she turned and walked rapidly out into the hallway.

Miss Garcide was in bed, sneezing patiently. "I won't be out for weeks," said the poor lady, "so you will have to amuse yourself alone."

Miss Castle kissed her and went away lightly down the polished stairs to the great hall.

The steward came up to wish her good-morning, and to place the resources of the club at her disposal.

"I don't know," she said, hesitating at the veranda door; "I think a sun-bath is all I care for. You may hang a hammock under the maples, if you will. I suppose," she added, "that I am quite alone at the club?"

"One gentleman arrived this morning," said the steward—"Mr. Crawford."

She looked back, poised lightly in the doorway through which the morning sunshine poured. All the color had left her face. "Mr. Crawford," she said, in a dull voice.

"He has gone out after trout," continued the steward, briskly; "he is a rare rod, ma'am, is Mr. Crawford. He caught the eight-pound fish—perhaps you noticed it on the panel in the billiard-room."

Miss Castle came into the hall again, and stepped over to the register. Under her signature, "Miss Castle and maid," she saw "J. Crawford, New York." The ink was still blue and faint.

She turned and walked out into the sunshine.

The future was no longer a gray, menacing future; it had become suddenly the terrifying present, and its shadow fell sharply around her in the sunshine.

Now all the courage of her race must be summoned, and must respond to the summons. The end of all was at hand; but when had a Castle ever flinched at the face of fate under any mask?

She raised her resolute head; her eyes matched the sky—clear, unclouded, fathomless.

In hours of deep distress the sound of her own voice had always helped her to endure; and now, as she walked across the lawn bareheaded, she told herself not to grieve over a just debt to be paid, not to quail because life held for her nothing of what she had dreamed.

If there was a tremor now and then in her low voice, none but the robins heard it; if she lay flung face downward in the grasses, under the screen of alders by the water, there was no one but the striped chipmunk to jeer and mock.

“Now listen, you silly girl,” she whispered; “he cannot take away the sky and the sunshine from you! He cannot blind and deafen you, silly! Cry if you must, you little coward!—you will marry him all the same.”

Suddenly sitting up, alert, she heard something singing. It was the river flowing close beside her.

She pushed away the screen of leaves and stretched out full length, looking down into the water.

A trout lay there; his eyes were shining with an opal tint, his scarlet spots blazed like jewels.

And as she lay there, her bright hair tumbled about her face, she heard, above the river’s monotone, a sharp, whiplike sound—swis-s-sh—and a silvery thread flashed out across her vision. It was a fishing-line and leader, and the fisherman who had cast it was standing fifty feet away up-stream, hip-deep in the sunlit water.

Swish! swish! and the long line flew back, straightened far behind him, and again lengthened out, the single yellow-and-gilt fly settling on the water just above the motionless trout, who simply backed off down-stream.

But there were further troubles for the optimistic angler; a tough alder stem, just under water, became entangled in the line; the fisherman gave a cautious jerk; the hook sank into the water-soaked wood, buried to the barb.

“Oh, the deuce!” said the fisherman, calmly.

Before she could realize what he was about, he had waded across the shallows and seized the alder branch. A dash of water showered her as he shook the hook free; she stood up with an involuntary gasp and met the astonished eyes of the fisherman.

He was a tall, sunburned young fellow, with powerful shoulders and an easy, free-limbed carriage; he was also soaking wet and streaked with mud.

“Upon my word,” he said, “I never saw you! Awf’lly sorry; hope I haven’t spoiled your sport—but I have. You were fishing, of course?”

“No, I was only looking,” she said. “Of course I’ve spoiled your sport.”

“Not at all,” he said, laughing; “that alder twig did for me.”

“But there was a trout lying there—I saw him; and the trout saw me, so of course he wouldn’t rise to your cast. And I’m exceedingly sorry,” she ended, smiling in spite of herself.

Her hair was badly rumped; she had been crying, and he could see it, but he had never looked upon such tear-stained, smiling, and dishevelled loveliness.

As he looked and marvelled, her smile died out; it came to her with a distinct shock that this water-logged specimen of sun-tanned manhood must be Crawford.

“*Are you?*” she said, scarcely aware that she spoke.

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

“Mr. Crawford?”

“Why, yes—and, of course, you are Miss Castle,” he replied, smiling easily. “I saw your name in the guest-book this morning. Awf’lly glad you came, Miss Castle; hope you’ll let me show you where the big fellows lie.”

“You mean the fish,” she said, with composure.

The shock of suddenly realizing that this man was the man she had to marry confused her; she made an effort to get things back into proper perspective, for the river was swimming before her eyes, and in her ears rang a strangely pleasant voice—Crawford’s—saying all sorts of good-humored things, which she heard but scarcely comprehended.

Instinctively she raised her hands to touch her disordered hair; she stood there naïvely twisting it into shape again, her eyes constantly reverting to the sun-tanned face before her.

“And I have the pleasure of knowing your guardian, Mr. Garcide, very slightly—in a business way,” he was saying, politely.

“Ophir Steel,” she said.

He laughed.

“Oh, we are making a great battle,” he said. “I’m only hoping we may come to an understanding with Mr. Garcide.”

“I thought you had already come to an understanding,” she observed, calmly.

“Have we? I hope so; I had not heard that,” he said, quickly. “How did you hear?”

Without warning she flushed scarlet to her neck; and she was as amazed as he at the surging color staining her white skin.

She could not endure that—she could not face him—so she bent her head a little in recognition of his presence and stepped past him, out along the river-bank.

He looked after her, wondering what he could have said.

She wondered, too, and her wonder grew that instead of self-pity, repugnance, and deep dread, she should feel such a divine relief from the terror that had possessed her.

Now at least she knew the worst. This was the man!

She strove to place him, to recall his face. She could not. All along she had pictured Crawford as an older man. And this broad-shouldered, tanned young fellow was Crawford, after all! Where could her eyes have been? How absurd that her indifference should have so utterly blinded her!

She stood a moment on the lawn, closing her eyes.

Oh, now she had no difficulty in recalling his face—in fact the difficulty was to shut it out, for it was before her eyes, open or shut—it was before her when she entered her bedroom and sank into a cushioned chair by the breezy window. And she took her burning cheeks in both hands and rested her elbows on her knees.

Truly terror had fled. It shamed her to find herself thanking God that her fate was to lie in the keeping of this young man. Yet it was natural, too, for the child had nigh died of horror, though the courage of the Castles had held her head high in the presence of the inevitable. And now suddenly into her gray and hopeless future, peopled by the phantoms of an old man, stepped a living, smiling young fellow, with gentle manners and honest speech, and a quick courtesy which there was no mistaking.

She had no mother—nobody to talk to—so she had long ago made a confidante of her own reflection in the looking-glass. And to the mirror she now went, meeting the reflected eyes shyly, yet smiling with friendly sympathy:

“Silly! to frighten yourself! It is all over now. He’s young and tall and sunburned. I don’t think he knows a great deal—but don’t be frightened, he is not a bit dreadful, ... only ... it is a pity, ... but I suppose he was in love with me, ... and, after all, it doesn’t matter, ... only I am ... sorry ... for him.... If he had only cared for a girl who could love him!... I don’t suppose I could, ... ever!... But I will be very kind to him, ... to make up.”

III

She saw him every day; she dined at the club table now.

Miss Garcide’s hay-fever increased with the ripening summer, and she lay in her room with all the windows closed, sneezing and reading Anthony Trollope.

When Miss Castle told her that Mr. Crawford was a guest at the club, Miss Garcide wept over her for an hour.

“I feel like weeping, too,” said Miss Castle, tremulously—“but not over myself.”

“Dot over hib?” inquired Miss Garcide.

“Yes, over him. He ought to marry a girl who could fall in love with him.”

Meanwhile Crawford was dining every evening with her at the great club table, telling her of the day’s sport, and how a black bear had come splashing across the shallows within a few rods of where he stood fishing, and how the deer had increased, and were even nibbling the succulent green stalks in the kitchen garden after nightfall.

During the day she found herself looking forward to his return and his jolly, spirited stories, always gay and humorous, and never tiresome, technical, nor conceited, although for three years he had held the club cup for the best fish taken on Sagamore water.

She took sun-baths in her hammock; she read novels; she spent hours in reverie, blue eyes skyward, arms under her head, swayed in her hammock by the delicious winds of a perfect June.

All her composure and common-sense had returned. She began to experience a certain feeling of responsibility for Crawford—a feeling almost maternal.

“He’s so amusingly shy about speaking,” she told Miss Garcide; “I suppose he’s anxious and bashful. I think I’ll tell him that it is all arranged. Besides, I promised Mr. Garcide to speak. I don’t see why I don’t; *I’m not a bit embarrassed.*”

But the days went shining by, and a new week dawned, and Miss Castle had not taken pity upon her tongue-tied lover.

“Oh, this is simply dreadful,” she argued with herself. “Besides, I want to know how soon the man expects to marry me. I’ve a few things to purchase, thank you, and if he thinks a trousseau is thrown together in a day, he’s a—a man!”

That evening she determined to fulfil her promise to Garcide as scrupulously as she kept all her promises.

She wore white at dinner, with a great bunch of wild iris that Crawford had brought her. Towards the end of the dinner she began to be frightened, but it was the instinct of the Castles to fight fear and overcome it.

“I’m going to walk down to the little foot-bridge,” she said, steadily, examining the coffee in her tiny cup; “and if you will stroll down with your pipe, I ... I will tell you something.”

“That will be very jolly,” he said. “There’s a full moon; I mean to have a try at a thumping big fish in the pool above.”

She nodded, and he rose and attended her to the door.

Then he lighted a cigar and called for a telegram blank.

This is what he wrote:

“James J. Crawford, New Broad Street, N.Y.:

“I am at the Sagamore. When do you want me to return?

“James H. Crawford.”

The servant took the bit of yellow paper. Crawford lay back smoking and thinking of trout and forests and blue skies and blue eyes that he should miss very, very soon.

Meanwhile the possessor of the blue eyes was standing on the little foot-bridge that crossed the water below the lawn.

A faint freshness came upward to her from the water, cooling her face. She looked down into that sparkling dusk which hangs over woodland rivers, and she saw the ripples, all silvered, flowing under the moon, and the wild-cherry blossoms trembling and quivering with the gray wings of moths.

“Surely,” she said, aloud—“surely there is something in the world besides men. I love this—all of it! I do indeed. I could find happiness here; I do not think I was made for men.”

For a long while she stood, bending down towards the water, her whole body saturated with the perfume from the fringed milkweed. Then she raised her delicate nose a trifle, sniffing at the air, which suddenly became faintly spiced with tobacco smoke.

Where did the smoke come from? She turned instinctively. On a rock up-stream stood young Crawford, smoking peacefully, and casting a white fly into the dusky water. Swish! the silk line whistled out into the dusk.

After a few moments’ casting, she saw him step ashore and saunter towards the bridge, where she was standing; then his step jarred the structure and he came up, cap in one hand, rod in the other.

“I thought perhaps you might like to try a cast,” he said, pleasantly. “There’s a good-sized fish in the pool above; I raised him twice. He’ll scale close to five pounds, I fancy.”

“Thank you,” said Miss Castle; “that is very generous of you, because you are deliberately sacrificing the club loving-cup if I catch that fish.”

He said, laughing: “I’ve held the cup before. Try it, Miss Castle; that is a five-pound fish, and the record this spring is four and a half.”

She took the rod; he went first and she held out her hand so that he could steady her across the stones and out into the dusk.

“My skirts are soaked with the dew, anyway,” she said. “I don’t mind a wetting.”

He unslung his landing-net and waited ready; she sent the line whirling into the darkness.

“To the right,” he said.

For ten minutes she stood there casting in silence. Once a splash in the shadows set his nerves quivering, but it was only a muskrat.

“By-the-way,” she said, quietly, over her shoulder, “I know why you and I have met here.”

And as Crawford said nothing she reeled in her line, and held out her hand to him as a signal that she wished to come ashore.

He aided her, taking the rod and guiding her carefully across the dusky stepping-stones to the bank.

She shook out her damp skirts, then raised her face, which had grown a trifle pale.

“I will marry you, Mr. Crawford,” she said, bravely,—“and I hope you will make me love you. Mr. Garcide wishes it.... I understand ... that you wish it. You must not feel embarrassed, ... nor let me feel embarrassed. Come and talk it over. Shall we?”

There was a rustic seat on the river-bank; she sat down in one corner.

His face was in shadow; he had dropped his rod and landing-net abruptly. And now he took an uncertain step towards her and sat down at her side.

“I want you to make me love you,” she said, frankly; “I hope you will; I shall do all I can to help you. But—unless I do—will you remember that?—I do *not* love you.” As he was silent, she went on: “Take me as a comrade; I will go where you wish. I am really a good comrade; I can do what men do. You shall see! It will be pleasant, I think.”

After a little while he spoke in a low voice which was not perfectly steady: “Miss Castle, I am going to tell you something which you must know. I do not believe that Mr. Garcide has authorized me to offer myself to you.”

“He told me that he desired it,” she said. “That is why he brought us together. And he also said,” she added, hastily, “that you were somewhat bashful. So I thought it best to make it easy for us both. I hope I have.”

Crawford sat motionless for a long while. At last he passed his hands over his eyes, leaning forward and looking into her face.

“I’ve simply got to be honest with you,” he said; “I know there is a mistake.”

“No, there is no mistake,” she said, bending her head and looking him in the eyes—“unless you have made the mistake—unless,” she said, quickly—“you do not want me.”

“Want you!” he stammered, catching fire of a sudden—“want you, you beautiful child! I love you if ever man loved on earth! Want you?” His hand fell heavily on hers, and closed. For an instant their palms lay close together; her heart almost stopped; then a swift flame flew to her face and she struggled to withdraw her fingers twisted in his.

“You must not do that,” she said, breathlessly. “I do not love you—I warned you!”

He said: “You *must* love me! Can’t you understand? You made me love you—you made me! Listen to me—it is all a mistake—but it is too late now. I did not dare even think of you—I have simply got to tell you the truth—I did not dare think of you—I must say it—and I can’t understand how I could ever have seen you and not loved you. But when you spoke—when I touched you—”

“Please, please,” she said, faintly, “let me go! It is not a mistake; I—I am glad that you love me; I will try to love you. I want to—I believe I can—”

“You *must*!”

“Yes, ... I will.... Please let me go!”

Breathless and crimson, she fell back into her corner, staring at him. He dropped his arm on the back of the rustic seat.

Presently he laughed uncertainly, and struck his forehead with his open hand.

“It’s a mistake,” he said; “and if it is a mistake, Heaven help the other man!”

She watched him with curious dismay. Never could she have believed that the touch of a man’s hand could thrill her; never had she imagined that the words of a man could set her heart leaping to meet his stammered vows. A new shame set her very limbs quaking as she strove to rise. The distress in her eyes, the new fear, the pitiful shyness, called to him for mercy.

For a miracle he understood the mute appeal, and he took her hand in his quietly and bade her good-night, saying he would stay and smoke awhile.

“Good-night,” she said; “I am really tired. I would rather you stayed here. Do you mind?”

“No,” he said.

“Then I shall go back alone.”

He watched her across the lawn. When she had gone half-way, she looked back and saw him standing there in the moonlight.

And that night, as her little silver hand-glass reflected her brilliant cheeks, she veiled her face in her bright hair and knelt down by her bedside.

But all she could say was, “I love him—truly I love him!” which was one kind of prayer, after all.

IV

A deep, sweet happiness awoke her ere the earliest robin chirped. Never since the first pink light touched Eden had such a rosy day dawned for any maid on earth.

She awoke in love; her enchanted eyes unclosed on a world she had never known.

Unashamed, she held out her arms to the waking world and spoke her lover's name aloud. Then the young blood leaped in her, and her eyes were like stars after a rain.

Oh, she must hasten now, for there was so little time to live in the world, and every second counted. Healthy of body, wholesome of soul, innocent and ardent in her new-born happiness, she could scarcely endure the rush of golden moments lost in an impetuous bath, in twisting up her bright hair, in the quick knotting of a ribbon, the click of a buckle on knee and shoe.

Then, as she slipped down the stairs into the darkened hall, trepidation seized her, for she heard his step.

He came swinging along the hallway; she stood still, trembling. He came up quickly and took her hands; she did not move; his arm encircled her waist; he lifted her head; it lay back on his shoulder, and her eyes met his.

"All day together," he was saying; and her soul leaped to meet his words, but she could not speak.

He held her at arms'-length, laughing, a little troubled.

"Mystery of mysteries," he said, under his breath; "there is some blessed Heaven-directed mistake in this. *Is there, sweetheart?*"

"No," she said.

"And if there was?"

"Can you ask?"

"Then come to breakfast, heart of my heart!—the moments are flying very swiftly, and there is only this day left—until to-morrow. Listen! I hear the steward moving like a gray rat in the pantry. Can we endure a steward in Eden?"

"Only during breakfast," she said, laughing. "I smell the wheaten flapjacks, and, oh, I am famished!"

There have been other breakfasts—Barmecide breakfasts compared with their first crust broken in love.

But they ate—oh, indeed, they ate everything before them, from flapjacks to the piles of little, crisp trout. And they might have called for more, but there came, on tiptoe, the steward, bowing, presenting a telegram on a tray of silver; and Crawford's heart stopped, and he stared at the bit of paper as though it concealed a coiled snake.

She, too, suddenly apprehensive, sat rigid, the smile dying out in her eyes; and when he finally took the envelope and tore it open, she shivered.

“Crawford, Sagamore Club:

“Ophir has consolidated with Steel Plank. You take charge of London office. Make arrangements to catch steamer leaving a week from to-morrow. Garcide and I will be at Sagamore to-night. James J. Crawford.”

He sat staring at the telegram; she, vaguely apprehensive for the safety of this new happiness of hers, clasped her hands tightly in her lap and waited.

“Any answer, sir?” asked the steward.

Crawford took the offered telegram blank and mechanically wrote:

“Instructions received. Will expect you and Garcide to-night. James Crawford.”

She sat, twisting her fingers on her knees, watching him in growing apprehension. The steward took the telegram.

Crawford looked at her with a ghastly smile.

They rose together, instinctively, and walked to the porch.

“Oh yes,” he said, under his breath, “such happiness was too perfect. Magic is magic—it never lasts.”

“What is it?” she asked, faintly.

He picked up his cap, which was lying on a chair.

“Let’s get away, somewhere,” he said. “Do you mind coming with me—alone?”

“No,” she said.

There was a canoe on the river-bank below the lawn. He took a paddle and setting-pole from the veranda wall, and they went down to the river, side by side.

Heedless of the protests of the scandalized belted kingfishers, they embarked on Sagamore Water.

The paddle flashed in the sunlight; the quick river caught the blade, the spray floated shoreward.

Late in the afternoon the canoe, heavily festooned with dripping water-lilies, moved like a shadow over the shining sands. The tall hemlocks walled the river with palisades unbroken; the calm water stretched away into the forest's sombre depths, barred here and there by dusty sunbeams.

Over them, in the highest depths of the unclouded blue, towered an eagle, suspended from mid-zenith. Under them the shadow of their craft swept the yellow gravel.

Knee to knee, vis-à-vis, wrapped to their souls in the enchantment of each other, sat the entranced voyagers. Their rods lay idle beside them; life was serious just then for people who stood on the threshold of separation.

"I simply shall depart this life if you go to-morrow," she said, looking at him.

The unfeigned misery in his face made her smile adorably, but she would not permit him to touch her.

"See to what you have brought me!" she said. "I'm utterly unable to live without you. And now what are you going to do with me?"

Her eyes were very tender. He caught her hand and kissed it, and laid it against his face.

"There is a way," he said.

"A way?"

"Shall I lead? Would you follow?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, amused.

"There is a way," he repeated. "That thread of a brook leads to it."

He pointed off to the westward, where through the forest a stream, scarcely wider than the canoe, flowed deep and silent between its mounds of moss.

He picked up the paddle and touched the blade to the water; the canoe swung westward.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

But the canoe was already in the narrow stream, and he was laughing recklessly, setting-pole poised to swing round the short turns.

"If we turned back now," she said, "it would be sunset before we reached the club."

"What do we care?" he laughed. "Look!"

Without warning, a yellow glory broke through the trees, and the canoe shot out into a vast, flat country, drenched with the rays of the sinking sun.

Blue woods belted the distance; all in front of them was deep, moist meadow-land, carpeted with thickets of wild iris, through which the stream wound in pools of gold.

The beauty of it held her speechless; the spell was upon him, too, and he sat motionless, the water dripping from his steel-tipped setting-pole in drops of fire.

There was a figure moving in the distant meadow; the sun glimmered on something that might have been a long reed quivering.

“An old friend fishing yonder,” he said, quietly; “I knew he would be there.” He touched her and pointed to the distant figure. “That is the parson of Foxville,” he said. “We will need him before we go to London.”

She looked across the purple fields of iris. Suddenly his meaning flashed out like a sunbeam.

“Do—do you wish—that—*now*?” she faltered.

He picked up the paddle; she caught his hand, trembling.

“No, no!”—she whispered, with bent head—“I cannot; don’t take me so—so quickly. Truly we must be mad to think of it.”

He held the paddle poised; after a while her hand slid from the blade and she looked up into his eyes. The canoe moved on.

“Oh, we are quite mad,” she said, unsteadily.

“I am glad we are,” he said.

The mellow dip! dip! of the paddle woke the drowsing red-winged blackbirds from the reeds; the gray snipe wheeled out across the marsh in flickering flight.

The aged parson of Foxville, intent on his bobbing cork, looked up in mild surprise to see a canoe, heavily hung with water-lilies, glide into his pool and swing shoreward.

The parson of Foxville was a very old man—almost too old to fish for trout.

Crawford led him a pace aside, leaving Miss Castle, somewhat frightened, knee-deep in the purple iris.

Then the old parson came toddling to her and took her hand, and peered at her with his aged eyes, saying, “You are quite mad, my child, and very lovely, and very, very young. So I think, after all, you would be much safer if you were married.”

Somebody encircled her waist; she turned and looked into the eyes of her lover, and still looking at him, she laid her hands in his.

A wedding amid the iris, all gray with the hovering, misty wings of moths—that was her fate—with the sky a canopy of fire above her, and the curlew calling through the kindling dusk, and the blue processional of the woods lining the corridors of the coming night.

And at last the aged parson kissed her and shook hands with her husband and shambled away across the meadows.

Slowly northward through the dusk stole the canoe once more, bearing the bride of an hour, her head on her husband's knees. The stars came out to watch them; a necklace of bubbles trailed in the paddle's wake, stringing away, twinkling in the starlight.

Slowly through the perfumed gloom they glided, her warm head on his knees, his eyes fixed on the vague water ahead.

A stag crashed through the reeds ashore; the June fawn stared with eyes like rubies in the dark.

Onward, onward, through the spell-bound forest; and at last the windows of the house glimmered, reflected in the water.

Garcide and Crawford awaited them on the veranda as they came up, rising in chilling silence, ignoring the offered hands of greeting.

"I've a word to say to you," snarled the Hon. John Garcide, in his ward's ear—"and another word for your fool of an aunt!"

She shrank back against her husband, amazed and hurt. "What do you mean?" she stammered; "we—we are married. Will you not speak to my—my husband?"

A silence, too awful to last, was broken by a hoarse laugh.

"You're all right, Jim," said the elder Crawford, slowly. "Ophir Steel won't slip through your fingers when I'm under the sod. Been married long, Jim?"

THE FIRE-WARDEN

I

“

AND of course what I buy is my own," continued Burleson, patiently. "No man here will question that, I suppose?"

For a moment there was silence in the cross-roads store; then a lank, mud-splashed native arose from behind the stove, shoving his scarred hands deep into the ragged pockets of his trousers.

“Young man,” he said, harshly, “there’s a few things you can’t buy; you may think you can buy ’em—you may pay for ’em, too—but they can’t be bought an’ sold. You thought you bought Grier’s tract; you thought you bought a lot o’ deer an’ birds an’ fish, several thousand acres in timber, and a dozen lakes. An’ you paid for ’em, too. But, sonny, you was took in; you paid for ’em, but you didn’t buy ’em, because Grier couldn’t sell God’s free critters. He fooled ye that time.”

“Is that the way you regard it, Santry?” asked Burleson. “Is that the way these people regard private property?”

“I guess it is,” replied the ragged man, resuming his seat on the flour-barrel. “I cal’late the Lord A’mighty fashioned His wild critters f’r to peramble round about, offerin’ a fair mark an’ no favor to them that’s smart enough to git ’em with buck, bird-shot, or bullet. Live wild critters ain’t for sale; they never was made to buy an’ sell. The spryest gits ’em—an’ that’s all about it, I guess, *Mister Burleson*.”

A hard-faced young man leaning against the counter, added significantly: “We talked some to Grier, an’ he sold out. He come here, too, just like you.”

The covert menace set two spots of color deepening in young Burleson’s lean cheeks; but he answered calmly:

“What a man believes to be his own he seldom abandons from fear of threats.”

“That’s kinder like our case,” observed old man Santry, chewing vigorously.

Another man leaned over and whispered to a neighbor, who turned a grim eye on Burleson without replying.

As for Burleson and his argument, a vicious circle had been completed, and there was little chance of an understanding; he saw that plainly, but, loath to admit it, turned towards old man Santry once more.

“If what has been common rumor is true,” he said, “Mr. Grier, from whom I bought the Spirit Lake tract, was rough in defending what he believed to be his own. I want to be decent; I desire to preserve the game and the timber, but not at the expense of human suffering. You know better than I do what has been the history of Fox Cross-roads. Twenty-five years ago your village was a large one; you had tanneries, lumber-mills, paper-mills—even a newspaper. To-day the timber is gone, and so has the town except for your homes—twenty houses, perhaps. Your soil is sand and slate, fit only for a new forest; the entire country is useless for farming, and it is the natural home of pine and oak, of the deer and partridge.”

He took one step nearer the silent circle around the stove. “I have offered to buy your rights; Grier hemmed you in on every side to force you out. I do not want to force you; I offer to buy your land at a fair appraisal. And your answer is to put a prohibitive price on the land.”

“Because,” observed old man Santry, “we’ve got you ketched. That’s business, I guess.”

Burleson flushed up. “Not business; blackmail, Santry.”

Another silence, then a man laughed: "Is that what they call it down to York, Mr. Burleson?"

"I think so."

"When a man wants to put up a skyscraper an' gits all but the key-lot, an' if the owner of the key-lot holds out for his price, do they call it blackmail?"

"No," said Burleson; "I think I spoke hastily."

Not a sound broke the stillness in the store. After a moment old man Santry opened his clasp-knife, leaned forward, and shaved off a thin slice from the cheese on the counter. This he ate, faded eyes fixed on space. Men all around him relaxed in their chairs, spat, recrossed their muddy boots, stretching and yawning. Plainly the conference had ended.

"I am sorry," said young Burleson; "I had hoped for a fair understanding."

Nobody answered.

He tucked his riding-crop under one arm and stood watching them, buttoning his tan gloves. Then with the butt of his crop he rubbed a dry spot of mud from his leather puttees, freed the incrustated spurs, and turned towards the door, pausing there to look back.

"I hate to leave it this way," he said, impulsively. "I want to live in peace with my neighbors. I mean to make no threats—but neither can I be moved by threats.... Perhaps time will aid us to come to a fair understanding; perhaps a better knowledge of one another. Although the shooting and fishing are restricted, my house is always open to my neighbors. You will be welcome when you come—"

The silence was profound as he hesitated, standing there before them in the sunshine of the doorway—a lean, well-built, faultless figure, an unconscious challenge to poverty, a terrible offence to their every instinct—the living embodiment of all that they hated most in all the world.

And so he went away with a brief "Good-morning," swung himself astride his horse, and cantered off, gathering bridle as he rode, sweeping at a gallop across the wooden bridge into the forest world beyond.

The September woods were dry—dry enough to catch fire. His troubled eyes swept the second growth as he drew bridle at a gate set in a fence eight feet high and entirely constructed of wire net interwoven with barbed wire, and heavily hedged with locust and buck-thorn.

He dismounted, unlocked the iron gate, led his horse through, refastened the gate, and walked on, his horse following as a trained dog follows at heel.

Through the still September sunshine ripened leaves drifted down through interlaced branches, and the whispering rustle of their fall filled the forest silence. The wood road, carpeted with brilliant leaves, wound through second growth, following the edge of a dark, swift stream, then swept westward among the pines, where the cushion of brown needles deadened every step, and where there was no sound save the rustle of a flock of rose-tinted

birds half buried in the feathery fronds of a white pine. Again the road curved eastward; skirting a cleft of slate rocks, through which the stream rushed with the sound of a wind-stirred woodland; and by this stream a man stood, loading a rusty fowling-piece.

Young Burleson had retained Grier's keepers, for obvious reasons; and already he knew them all by name. But this man was no keeper of his; and he walked straight up to him, bidding him a rather sharp good-morning, which was sullenly returned.

Then Burleson told him as pleasantly as he could that the land was preserved, that he could not tolerate armed trespassing, and that the keepers were charged to enforce the laws.

"It is better," he said, "to have a clear understanding at once. I think the law governing private property is clearly set forth on the signs along my boundary. This preserve is posted and patrolled; I have done all I could to guarantee public rights; I have not made any application to have the public road closed, and I am perfectly willing to keep it open for public convenience. But it is not right for anybody to carry a gun in these preserves; and if it continues I shall surely apply for permission to close the road."

"I guess you think you'll do a lot o' things," observed the man, stolidly.

"I think I will," returned Burleson, refusing to take offence at the insolence.

The man tossed his gun to his shoulder and slouched towards the boundary. Burleson watched him in silence until the fellow reached the netted wire fence, then he called out.

"There is a turnstile to the left."

But the native deliberately drew a hatchet from his belt, opened the wire netting with one heavy slash, and crawled through. Then wheeling in his tracks outside, he cursed Burleson and shook his gun at him, and finally slouched off towards Fox Cross-roads, leaving the master of the forest a trifle white and quivering under the cutting curb of self-control.

Presently his spasmodic grip on the riding-crop relaxed; he looked about him with a long, quiet breath, flicked a burr from his riding-breeches, and walked on, head lowered and jaw set. His horse followed at his heels.

A mile beyond he met a keeper demolishing a deadfall along the creek, and he summoned him with a good-humored greeting.

"Rolfe, we're headed for trouble, but it must not come—do you hear? I won't have it if it can be avoided—and it must be avoided. These poor devils that Grier hemmed in and warned off with his shot-gun patrol are looking for that same sort of thing from me. Petty annoyance shall not drive me into violence; I've made it plain to every keeper, every forester, every man who takes wages from me. If I can stand insolence from people I am sorry for, my employes can and must.... Who was that man I met below here?"

"Abe Storm, sir."

"What was he doing—building deadfalls?"

“Seven, sir. He had three muskrats, a mink, and a string of steel traps when I caught him—”

“Rolfe, you go to Abe Storm and tell him I give him leave to take muskrat and mink along Spirit Creek, and that I’ll allow him a quarter bounty on every unmarked pelt, and he may keep the pelts, too.”

The keeper looked blankly at the master: “Why—why, Mr. Burleson, he’s the dirtiest, meanest market hunter in the lot!”

“You do as I say, Rolfe,” said the master, amiably.

“Yes, sir—but—”

“Did you deliver my note to the fire-warden?”

“Yes, sir. The old man’s abed with miseries. He said he’d send his deputy at noon.”

Burleson laid his gloved hand on his horse’s saddle, looking sharply at the keeper.

“They tell me that Mr. Elliott has seen better fortune, Rolfe.”

“Yes, sir. When the Cross-roads went to pot, he went too. He owned a piece o’ land that was no good only for the timber. He’s like the rest o’ them, I guess—only he had more to lose—an’ he lost it same as all o’ them.”

Burleson drew out his watch, glanced at it, and then mounted.

“Try to make a friend of Abe Storm,” he said; “that is my policy, and you all know it. Help me to keep the peace, Rolfe. If I keep it, I don’t see how they’re going to break it.”

“Very well, sir. But it riles me to—”

“Nonsense! Now tell me where I’m to meet the fire-warden’s deputy. Oh! then I’ll jump him somewhere before long. And remember, Rolfe, that it’s no more pleasure for me to keep my temper than it is for anybody. But I’ve got to do it, and so have you. And, after all, it’s more fun to keep it than to let it loose.”

“Yes, sir,” said Rolfe, grinning like a dusty fox in July.

So Burleson rode on at a canter, presently slacking to a walk, arguing with himself in a low, calm voice:

“Poor devils—poor, half-starved devils! If I could afford to pay their prices I’d do it.... I’ll wink at anything short of destruction; I can’t let them cut the pine; I can’t let them clean out the grouse and deer and fish. As for law-suits, I simply won’t! There must be some decent way short of a shot-gun.”

He stretched out a hand and broke a flaming maple leaf from a branch in passing, drew it through his button-hole, thoughtful eyes searching the road ahead, which now ran out through long strips of swale bordered by saplings.

Presently a little breeze stirred the foliage of the white birches to a sea of tremulous gold; and at the same moment a rider appeared in the marsh beyond, galloping through the blanched swale-grass, which rose high as the horse's girth.

Young Burleson drew bridle; the slim youth who sat his saddle so easily must be the deputy of the sick fire-warden; this was the time and the place.

As the young rider galloped up, Burleson leaned forward, offering his hand with an easy, pleasant greeting. The hand was unnoticed, the greeting breathlessly returned; two grave, gray eyes met his, and Burleson found himself looking into the flushed face of a young girl.

When he realized this, he took off his cap, and she inclined her head, barely acknowledging his salute.

"I am Mr. Elliott's daughter," she said; "you are Mr. Burleson?"

Burleson had the honor of presenting himself, cap in hand.

"I am my father's deputy," said the girl, quietly, gathering her bridle and wheeling her horse. "I read your note. Have you reason to believe that an attempt has been made to fire the Owl Vlaie?"

There was a ring of business in her voice that struck him as amusingly delightful—and such a sweet, clear voice, too, untinged with the slightest taint of native accent.

"Yes," said Burleson, gravely, "I'm afraid that somebody tried to burn the vlaie. I think that a change in the wind alone saved us from a bad fire."

"Shall we ride over?" inquired the girl, moving forward with unconscious grace.

Burleson ranged his big horse alongside; she set her mount at a gallop, and away they went, wheeling into the swale, knee-deep in dry, silvery grasses, until the deputy fire-warden drew bridle with a side-flung caution: "Muskrats! Look out for a cropper!"

Now, at a walk, the horses moved forward side by side through the pale, glistening sea of grass stretching out on every side.

Over a hidden pond a huge heron stood guard, stiff and shapeless as a weather-beaten stake. Blackbirds with crimson-slashed shoulders rose in clouds from the reeds, only to settle again as they passed amid a ceaseless chorus of harsh protest. Once a pair of summer duck came speeding overhead, and Burleson, looking up, exclaimed:

"There's a bird I never shoot at. It's too beautiful."

The girl turned her head, serious gray eyes questioning his.

"Have you ever seen a wood-duck?—a drake? in full plumage?" he asked.

"Often—before Mr. Grier came."

Burleson fell silent, restless in his saddle, then said:

"I hope you will see many wood-duck now. My boats on Spirit Water are always at Mr. Elliott's disposal—and at yours."

She made the slightest sign of acknowledgment, but said nothing. Once or twice she rose upright, standing straight in her stirrups to scan the distance under a small, inverted hand. East and north the pine forest girdled the vale; west and south hardwood timber laced the sky-line with branches partly naked, and the pine's outposts of white birch and willow glimmered like mounds of crumpled gold along the edges of the sea of grass.

"There is the stream!" said Burleson, suddenly.

She saw it at the same moment, touched her mare with spurred heels, and lifted her clean over with a grace that set Burleson's nerves thrilling.

He followed, taking the water-jump without effort; and after a second's hesitation ventured to praise her horse.

"Yes," she said, indifferently, "The Witch is a good mare." After a silence, "My father desires to sell her."

"I know a dozen men who would jump at the chance," said the young fellow. "But"—he hesitated—"it is a shame to sell such a mare—"

The girl colored. "My father will never ride again," she said, quietly. "We should be very glad to sell her."

"But—the mare suits you so perfectly—"

She turned her head and looked at him gravely. "You must be aware, Mr. Burleson, that it is not choice with us," she said. There was nothing of bitterness in her voice; she leaned forward, patting the mare's chestnut neck for a moment, then swung back, sitting straight as a cavalryman in her saddle. "Of course," she said, smiling for the first time, "it will break my heart to sell The Witch, but"—she patted the mare again—"the mare won't grieve; it takes a dog to do that; but horses—well, I know horses enough to know that even The Witch won't grieve."

"That is a radical theory, Miss Elliott," said Burleson, amused. "What about the Arab and his loving steed?"

"That is not a legend for people who know horses," she replied, still smiling. "The love is all on our side. You know horses, Mr. Burleson. Is it not the truth—the naked truth, stripped of poetry and freed from tradition?"

"Why strip poetry from anything?" he asked, laughing.

She rode on in silence for a while, the bright smile fading from lips and eyes.

“Oh, you are quite right,” she said; “let us leave what romance there may be in the world. My horse loves me like a dog. I am very happy to believe it, Mr. Burleson.”

From the luminous shadow of her sombrero she looked out across the stretch of marsh, where from unseen pools the wild-duck were rising, disturbed by the sound of their approach. And now the snipe began to dart skyward from under their horses’ feet, filling the noon silence with their harsh “squak! squak!”

“It’s along here somewhere,” said Burleson, leaning forward in his saddle to scan the swale-grass. A moment later he said, “Look there, Miss Elliott!”

In the tall, blanched grasses a velvety black space marked the ashes of a fire, which had burned in a semi-circle, then westward to the water’s edge.

“You see,” he said, “it was started to sweep the vlaie to the pine timber. The wind changed, and held it until the fire was quenched at the shore.”

“I see,” she said.

He touched his horse, and they pressed forward along the bog’s edge.

“Here,” he pointed out, “they fired the grass again, you see, always counting on the west wind; and here again, and yonder too, and beyond that, Miss Elliott—in a dozen places they set the grass afire. If that wet east wind had not come up, nothing on earth could have saved a thousand acres of white pine—and I’m afraid to say how many deer and partridges and woodcock.... It was a savage bit of business, was it not, Miss Elliott?”

She sat her horse, silent, motionless, pretty head bent, studying the course of the fire in the swale. There was no mistaking the signs; a grass fire had been started, which, had the west wind held, must have become a brush fire, and then the most dreaded scourge of the north, a full-fledged forest-fire in tall timber. After a little while she raised her head and looked full at Burleson, then, without comment, she wheeled her mare eastward across the vlaie towards the pines.

“What do you make of it?” he asked, pushing his horse forward alongside of her mare.

“The signs are perfectly plain,” she said. “Whom do you suspect?”

He waited a moment, then shook his head.

“You suspect nobody?”

“I haven’t been here long enough. I don’t exactly know what to do about this. It is comparatively easy to settle cases of simple trespass or deer-shooting, but, to tell the truth, Miss Elliott, fire scares me. I don’t know how to meet this sort of thing.”

She was silent.

“So,” he added, “I sent for the fire-warden. I don’t know just what the warden’s duties may be.”

"I do," she said, quietly. Her mare struck solid ground; she sent her forward at a gallop, which broke into a dead run. Burleson came pounding along behind, amused, interested at this new caprice. She drew bridle at the edge of the birches, half turned in her saddle, bidding him follow with a gesture, and rode straight into the covert, now bending to avoid branches, now pushing intrusive limbs aside with both gloved hands.

Out of the low bush pines, heirs of the white birches' heritage, rabbits hopped away; sometimes a cock grouse, running like a rat, fled, crested head erect; twice twittering woodcock whirled upward, beating wings tangled for a moment in the birches, fluttering like great moths caught in a net.

And now they had waded through the silver-birches which fringed the pines as foam fringes a green sea; and before them towered the tall timber, illuminated by the sun.

In the transparent green shadows they drew bridle; she leaned forward, clearing the thick tendrils of hair from her forehead, and sat stock-still, intent, every exquisite line and contour in full relief against the pines.

At first he thought she was listening, nerves keyed to sense sounds inaudible to him. Then, as he sat, fascinated, scarcely breathing lest the enchantment break, leaving him alone in the forest with the memory of a dream, a faint aromatic odor seemed to grow in the air; not the close scent of the pines, but something less subtle.

"Smoke!" he said, aloud.

She touched her mare forward, riding into the wind, delicate nostrils dilated; and he followed over the soundless cushion of brown needles, down aisles flanked by pillared pines whose crests swam in the upper breezes, filling all the forest with harmony.

And here, deep in the splendid forest, there was fire,—at first nothing but a thin, serpentine trail of ashes through moss and bedded needles; then, scarcely six inches in width, a smouldering, sinuous path from which fine threads of smoke rose straight upward, vanishing in the woodland half-light.

He sprang from his horse and tore away a bed of green moss through which filaments of blue smoke stole; and deep in the forest mould, spreading like veins in an autumn leaf, fire ran underground, its almost invisible vapor curling up through lichens and the brown carpet of pine-needles.

At first, for it was so feeble a fire, scarcely alive, he strove to stamp it out, then to smother it with damp mould. But as he followed its wormlike course, always ahead he saw the thin, blue signals rising through living moss—everywhere the attenuated spirals creeping from the ground underfoot.

"I could summon every man in this town if necessary," she said; "I am empowered by law to do so; but—I shall not—yet. Where could we find a keeper—the nearest patrol?"

"Please follow me," he said, mounting his horse and wheeling eastward.

In a few moments they came to a foot-trail, and turned into it at a canter, skirting the Spirit Water, which stretched away between two mountains glittering in the sun.

“How many men can you get?” she called forward.

“I don’t know; there’s a gang of men terracing below the lodge—”

“Call them all; let every man bring a pick and shovel. There is a guard now!”

Burleson pulled up short and shouted, “Murphy!”

The patrol turned around.

“Get the men who are terracing the lodge. Bring picks, shovels, and axes, and meet me here. Run for it!”

The fire-warden’s horse walked up leisurely; the girl had relinquished the bridle and was guiding the mare with the slightest pressure of knee and heel. She sat at ease, head lowered, absently retying the ribbon on the hair at her neck. When it was adjusted to her satisfaction she passed a hat-pin through her sombrero, touched the bright, thick hair above her forehead, straightened out, stretching her legs in the stirrups. Then she drew off her right gauntlet, and very discreetly stifled the daintiest of yawns.

“You evidently don’t believe there is much danger,” said Burleson, with a smile which seemed to relieve the tension he had labored under.

“Yes, there is danger,” she said.

After a silence she added, “I think I hear your men coming.”

He listened in vain; he heard the wind above filtering through the pines; he heard the breathing of their horses, and his own heart-beats, too. Then very far away a sound broke out.

“What wonderful ears you have!” he said—not thinking of their beauty until his eye fell on their lovely contour. And as he gazed the little, clean-cut ear next to him turned pink, and its owner touched her mare forward—apparently in aimless caprice, for she circled and came straight back, meeting his gaze with her pure, fearless gray eyes.

There must have been something not only perfectly inoffensive, but also well-bred, in Burleson’s lean, bronzed face, for her own face softened into an amiable expression, and she wheeled the mare up beside his mount, confidently exposing the small ear again.

The men were coming; there could be no mistake this time. And there came Murphy, too, and Rolfe, with his great, swinging stride, gun on one shoulder, a bundle of axes on the other.

“This way,” said Burleson, briefly; but the fire-warden cut in ahead, cantering forward up the trail, nonchalantly breaking off a twig of aromatic black birch, as she rode, to place between her red lips.

Murphy, arriving in the lead, scanned the haze which hung along the living moss.

"Sure, it's a foolish fire, sorr," he muttered, "burrowing like a mole gone mad. Rest aisy, Misther Burleson; we'll scotch the divil that done this night's worruk!—bad cess to the dhirrty scut!"

"Never mind that, Murphy. Miss Elliott, are they to dig it out?"

She nodded.

The men, ranged in an uneven line, stood stupidly staring at the long vistas of haze. The slim fire-warden wheeled her mare to face them, speaking very quietly, explaining how deep to dig, how far a margin might be left in safety, how many men were to begin there, and at what distances apart.

Then she picked ten men and bade them follow her.

Burleson rode in the rear, motioning Rolfe to his stirrup.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I think, sir, that one of those damned Storms did it—"

"I mean, what do you think about the chances? Is it serious?"

"That young lady ahead knows better than I do. I've seen two of these here underground fires: one was easy killed; the other cleaned out three thousand acres."

Burleson nodded. "I think," he said, "that you had better go back to the lodge and get every spare man. Tell Rudolf to rig up a wagon and bring rations and water for the men. Put in something nice for Miss Elliott—see to that, Rolfe; do you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"And, Rolfe, bring feed for the horses—and see that there are a couple of men to watch the house and stables—" He broke out, bitterly, "It's a scoundrelly bit of work they've done!—" and instantly had himself under control again. "Better go at once, Rolfe, and caution the men to remain quiet under provocation if any trespassers come inside."

II

By afternoon they had not found the end of the underground fire. The live trail had been followed and the creeping terror exterminated for half a mile; yet, although two ditches had been dug to cut the fire off from farther progress, always ahead the haze hung motionless, stretching away westward through the pines.

Now a third trench was started—far enough forward this time, for there was no blue haze visible beyond the young hemlock growth.

The sweating men, stripped to their undershirts, swung pick and axe and drove home their heavy shovels. Burleson, his gray flannel shirt open at the throat, arms bared to the shoulder, worked steadily among his men; on a knoll above, the fire-warden sat cross-legged on the

pine-needles, her straight young back against a tree. On her knees were a plate and a napkin. She ate bits of cold partridge at intervals; at intervals she sipped a glass of claret and regarded Burleson dreamily.

To make certain, she had set a gang of men to clear the woods in a belt behind the third ditch; a young growth of hemlock was being sacrificed, and the forest rang with axe-strokes, the cries of men, the splintering crash of the trees.

"I think," said Burleson to Rolfe, who had just come up, "that we are ahead of the trouble now. Did you give my peaceful message to Abe Storm?"

"No, sir; he wasn't to home—damn him!"

The young man looked up quickly. "What's the trouble now?" he asked.

"There's plenty more trouble ahead," said the keeper, in a low voice. "Look at this belt, sir!" and he drew from his pocket a leather belt, unrolled it, and pointed at a name scratched on the buckle. The name was "Abe Storm."

"Where did that come from?" demanded Burleson.

"The man that fired the vlaie grass dropped it. Barry picked it up on patrol. There's the evidence, sir. The belt lay on the edge of the burning grass."

"You mean he dropped it last night, and Barry found it where the grass had been afire?"

"No, sir; that belt was dropped two hours since. *The grass was afire again.*"

The color left Burleson's face, then came surging back through the tightening skin of the set jaws.

"Barry put out the blaze, sir. He's on duty there now with Chase and Connor. God help Abe Storm if they get him over the sights, Mr. Burleson."

Burleson's self-command was shaken. He reached out his hand for the belt, flung away his axe, and walked up the slope of the knoll where the fire-warden sat calmly watching him.

For a few moments he stood before her, teeth set, in silent battle with that devil's own temper which had never been killed in him, which he knew now could never be ripped out and exterminated, which must, *must* lie chained—chained while he himself stood tireless guard, knowing that chains may break.

After a while he dropped to the ground beside her, like a man dead tired. "Tell me about these people," he said.

"What people, Mr. Burleson? My own?"

Her sensitive instinct had followed the little drama from her vantage-seat on the knoll; she had seen the patrol display the belt; she had watched the color die out and then flood the young man's face and neck; and she had read the surface signs of the murderous fury that

altered his own visage to a mask set with a pair of blazing eyes. And suddenly, as he dropped to the ground beside her, his question had swept aside formality, leaving them on the very edge of an intimacy which she had accepted, unconsciously, with her low-voiced answer.

“Yes—your own people. Tell what I should know I want to live in peace among them if they’ll let me.”

She gathered her knees in her clasped fingers and looked out into the forest. “Mr. Burleson,” she said, “for every mental, every moral deformity, man is answerable to man. You dwellers in the pleasant places of the world are pitiless in your judgment of the sullen, suspicious, narrow life you find edging forests, clinging to mountain flanks, or stupidly stifling in the heart of some vast plain. I cannot understand the mental cruelty which condemns with contempt human creatures who have had no chance—not one single chance. Are they ignorant? Then bear with them for shame! Are they envious, grasping, narrow? Do they gossip about neighbors, do they slander without mercy? What can you expect from starved minds, human intellects unnourished by all that you find so wholesome? Man’s progress only inspires man; man’s mind alone stimulates man’s mind. Where civilization is, there are many men; where is the greatest culture, the broadest thought, the sweetest toleration, there men are many, teaching one another unconsciously, consciously, always advancing, always uplifting, spite of the shallow tide of sin which flows in the footsteps of all progress—”

She ceased; her delicate, earnest face relaxed, and a smile glimmered for a moment in her eyes, in the pretty curled corners of her parted lips.

“I’m talking very like a school-marm,” she said. “I am one, by-the-way, and I teach the children of these people—*my* people,” she added, with an exquisite hint of defiance in her smile.

She rested her weight on one arm and leaned towards him a trifle.

“In Fox Cross-roads there is much that is hopeless, much that is sorrowful, Mr. Burleson; there is hunger, bodily hunger; there is sickness unsolaced by spiritual or bodily comfort—not even the comfort of death! Ah, you should see them—*once*! Once would be enough! And no physician, nobody that knows, I tell you—nobody through the long, dusty, stifling summers—nobody through the lengthening bitterness of the black winters—nobody except myself. Mr. Burleson, old man Storm died craving a taste of broth; and Abe Storm trapped a partridge for him, and Rolfe caught him and Grier jailed him—and confiscated the miserable, half-plucked bird!”

The hand which supported her weight was clinched; she was not looking at the man beside her, but his eyes never left hers.

“You talk angrily of market hunting, and the law forbids it. You say you can respect a poacher who shoots for the love of it, but you have only contempt for the market hunter. And you are right sometimes—” She looked him in the eyes. “Old Santry’s little girl is bedridden. Santry shot and sold a deer—and bought his child a patent bed. She sleeps almost a whole hour now without much pain.”

Burleson, eyes fixed on her, did not stir. The fire-warden leaned forward, picked up the belt, and read the name scratched with a hunting-knife on the brass buckle.

"Before Grier came," she said, thoughtfully, "there was misery enough here—cold, hunger, disease—oh, plenty of disease always. Their starved lands of sand and rock gave them a little return for heart-breaking labor, but not enough. Their rifles helped them to keep alive; timber was free; they existed. Then suddenly forest, game, vlaie, and lake were taken from them—fenced off, closed to these people whose fathers' fathers had established free thoroughfare where posted warnings and shot-gun patrols now block every trodden trail! What is the sure result?—and Grier was brutal! What could be expected? Why, Mr. Burleson, these people are Americans!—dwarfed mentally, stunted morally, year by year reverting to primal type—yet the fire in their blood set their grandfathers marching on Saratoga!—marching to accomplish the destruction of all kings! And Grier drove down here with a coachman and footman in livery and furs, and summoned the constable from Brier Bridge, and arrested old man Santry at his child's bedside—the new bed paid for with Grier's buck...."

She paused; then, with a long breath, she straightened up and leaned back once more against the tree.

"They are not born criminals," she said. "See what you can do with them—see what you can do for them, Mr. Burleson. The relative values of a deer and a man have changed since they hanged poachers in England."

They sat silent for a while, watching the men below.

"Miss Elliott," he said, impulsively, "may I not know your father?"

She flushed and turned towards him as though unpleasantly startled. That was only instinct, for almost at the same moment she leaned back quietly against the tree.

"I think my father would like to know you," she said. "He seldom sees men—men like himself."

"Perhaps you would let me smoke a cigarette, Miss Elliott?" he ventured.

"You were very silly not to ask me before," she said, unconsciously falling into his commonplace vein of easy deference.

"I wonder," he went on, lazily, "what that débris is on the land which runs back from the store at Fox Cross-roads. It can't be that anybody was simple enough to go boring for oil."

She winced; but the smile remained on her face, and she met his eyes quite calmly.

"That pile of débris," she said, "is, I fancy, the wreck of the house of Elliott. My father did bore for oil and found it—about a pint, I believe."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," cried Burleson, red as a pippin.

"I am not a bit sensitive," she said. Her mouth, the white, heavy lids of her eyes, contradicted her.

"There was a very dreadful smash-up of the house of Elliott, Mr. Burleson. If you feel a bit friendly towards that house, you will advise me how I may sell 'The Witch.' I don't mind

telling you why. My father has simply got to go to some place where rheumatism can be helped—be made bearable. I know that I could easily dispose of the mare if I were in a civilized region; even Grier offered half her value. If you know of any people who care for that sort of horse, I'll be delighted to enter into brisk correspondence with them."

"I know a man," observed Burleson, deliberately, "who would buy that mare in about nine-tenths of a second."

"Oh, I'll concede him the other tenth!" cried the girl, laughing. It was the first clear, care-free laugh he had heard from her—and so fascinating, so delicious, that he sat there silent in entranced surprise.

"About the value of the mare," she suggested, diffidently, "you may tell your friend that she is only worth what father paid for her—"

"Good Lord!" he said, "that's not the way to sell a horse!"

"Why not? Isn't she worth that much?"

"What did your father pay for her?"

The girl named the sum a trifle anxiously. "It's a great deal, I know—"

"It's about a third what she's worth," announced Burleson. "If I were you, I'd add seventy-five per cent., and hold out like—like a demon for it."

"But I cannot ask more than we paid—"

"Why not?"

"I—don't know. Is it honorable?"

They looked at each other for a moment, then he began to laugh. To her surprise, she felt neither resentment nor chagrin, although he was plainly laughing at her. So presently she laughed, too, a trifle uncertainly, shy eyes avoiding his, yet always returning curiously. She did not know just why; she was scarcely aware that she took pleasure in this lean-faced young horseman's company.

"I have always believed," she began, "that to sell anything for more than its value was something as horrid as—as usury."

"Such a transaction resembles usury as closely as it does the theory of Pythagoras," he explained; and presently their laughter aroused the workmen, who looked up, leaning on spade and pick.

"I cannot understand," she said, "why you make such silly remarks or why I laugh at them. A boy once affected me in the same way—years ago."

She sat up straight, a faint smile touching her mouth and eyes. "I think that my work is about ended here, Mr. Burleson. Do you know that my pupils are enjoying a holiday—because you choose to indulge in a forest-fire?"

He strove to look remorseful, but he only grinned.

"I did not suppose you cared," she said, severely, but made no motion to rise.

Presently he mentioned the mare again, asking if she really desired to sell her; and she said that she did.

"Then I'll wire to-night," he rejoined. "There should be a check for you day after to-morrow."

"But suppose the man did not wish to buy her?"

"No chance of that. If you say so, the mare is sold from this moment."

"I do say so," she answered, in a low voice, "and thank you, Mr. Burleson. You do not realize how astonished I am—how fortunate—how deeply happy—"

"I can only realize it by comparison," he said.

What, exactly, did he mean by that? She looked around at him; he was absorbed in scooping a hole in the pine-needles with his riding-crop.

She made up her mind that his speech did not always express his thoughts; that it was very pleasant to listen to, but rather vague than precise.

"It is quite necessary," he mused aloud, "that I meet your father—"

She looked up quickly. "Oh! have you business with him?"

"Not at all," said Burleson.

This time the silence was strained; Miss Elliott remained very still and thoughtful.

"I think," he said, "that this country is only matched in paradise. It is the most beautiful place on earth!"

To this astonishing statement she prepared no answer. The forest was attractive, the sun perhaps brighter than usual—or was it only her imagination due to her own happiness in selling The Witch?

"When may I call upon Mr. Elliott?" he asked, suddenly. "To-night?"

No; really he was too abrupt, his conversation flickering from one subject to another without relevance, without logic. She had no time to reflect, to decide what he meant, before, crack! he was off on another trail—and his English no vehicle for the conveyance of his ideas.

“There is something,” he continued, “that I wish to ask you. May I?”

She bit her lip, then laughed, her gray eyes searching his. “Ask it, Mr. Burleson, for if I lived a million years I’m perfectly certain I could never guess what you are going to say next.”

“It’s only this,” he said, with a worried look, “I don’t know your first name.”

“Why should you?” she demanded, amused, yet instinctively resentful. “I don’t know yours, either, Mr. Burleson—and I don’t even ask you.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” he said; “my name is only John William. Now will you tell me yours?”

She remained silent, coping with a candor that she had not met with since she went to parties in a muslin frock. She remembered one boy who had proposed elopement on ten minutes’ acquaintance. Burleson, somehow or other, reminded her of that boy.

“My name,” she said, carelessly, “is Constance.”

“I like that name,” said Burleson.

It was pretty nearly the last straw. Never had she been conscious of being so spontaneously, so unreasonably approved of since that wretched boy had suggested flight at her first party. She could not separate the memory of the innocent youth from Burleson; he was intensely like that boy; and she had liked the boy, too—liked him so much that in those ten heavenly minutes’ acquaintance she was half persuaded to consent—only there was nowhere to fly to, and before they could decide her nurse arrived.

“If you had not told me your first name,” said Burleson, “how could anybody make out a check to your order?”

“Is *that* why—” she began; and without the slightest reason her heart gave a curious little tremor of disappointment.

“You see,” he said, cheerfully, “it was not impertinence—it was only formality.”

“I see,” she said, approvingly, and began to find him a trifle tiresome.

Meanwhile he had confidently skipped to another subject. “Phosphates and nitrogen are what those people need for their farms. Now if you prepare your soil—do your own mixing, of course—then begin with red clover, and plough—”

Her gray eyes were so wide open that he stopped short to observe them; they were so beautiful that his observation continued until she colored furiously. It was the last straw.

“The fire is out, I think,” she said, calmly, rising to her feet; “my duty here is ended, Mr. Burleson.”

“Oh—are you going?” he asked, with undisguised disappointment. She regarded him in silence for a moment. How astonishingly like that boy he was—this six-foot—

“Of course I am going,” she said, and wondered why she had said “of course” with emphasis. Then she whistled to her mare.

“May I ride with you to the house?” he asked, humbly.

She was going to say several things, all politely refusing. What she did say was, “Not this time.”

Then she was furious with herself, and began to hate him fiercely, until she saw something in his face that startled her. The mare came up; she flung the bridle over hastily, set foot to metal, and seated herself in a flash. Then she looked down at the man beside her, prepared for his next remark.

It came at once. “When may we ride together, Miss Elliott?”

She became strangely indulgent. “You know,” she said, as though instructing youth, “that the first proper thing to do is to call upon my father, because he is older than you, and he is physically unable to make the first call.”

“Then by Wednesday we may ride?” he inquired, so guilelessly that she broke into a peal of delicious laughter.

“How old are you, Mr. Burleson? Ten?”

“I feel younger,” he said.

“So do I,” she said. “I feel like a little girl in a muslin gown.” Two spots of color tinted her cheeks. He had never seen such beauty in human guise, and he came very near saying so. Something in the aromatic mountain air was tempting her to recklessness. Amazed, exhilarated by the temptation, she sat there looking down at him; and her smile was perilously innocent and sweet.

“Once,” she said, “I knew a boy—like you—when I wore a muslin frock, and I have never forgotten him. He was extremely silly.”

“Do you remember only silly people?”

“I can’t forget them; I try.”

“Please don’t try any more,” he said.

She looked at him, still smiling. She gazed off through the forest, where the men were going home, shovels shouldered, the blades of axe and spade blood-red in the sunset light.

How long they stood there she scarcely reckoned, until a clear primrose light crept in among the trees, and the evening mist rose from an unseen pond, floating through the dimmed avenues of pines.

“Good-night,” she said, gathered bridle, hesitated, then held out her ungloved hand.

Galloping homeward, the quick pressure of his hand still burning her palm, she swept along in a maze of disordered thought. And being by circumstances, though not by inclination, an orderly young woman, she attempted a mental reorganization. This she completed as she wheeled her mare into the main forest road; and, her happy, disordered thoughts rearranged with a layer of cold logic to quiet them, reaction came swiftly; her cheeks burned when she remembered her own attitude of half-accepted intimacy with this stranger. How did he regard her? How cheaply did he already hold her—this young man idling here in the forest for his own pleasure?

But she had something more important on hand than the pleasures of remorseful cogitation as she rode up to the store and drew bridle, where in their shirt-sleeves the prominent citizens were gathered. She began to speak immediately. She did not mince matters; she enumerated them by name, dwelt coldly upon the law governing arson, and told them exactly where they stood.

She was, by courtesy of long residence, one of them. She taught their children, she gave them pills and powders, she had stood by them even when they had the law against them—stood by them loyally and in the very presence of Grier, fencing with him at every move, combating his brutality with deadly intelligence.

They collapsed under her superior knowledge; they trusted her, fawned on her, whined when she rebuked them, carried themselves more decently for a day or two when she dropped a rare word of commendation. They respected her in spite of the latent ruffianly instinct which sneers at women; they feared her as a parish fears its priest; they loved her as they loved one another—which was rather toleration than affection; the toleration of half-starved bob-cats.

And now the school-marm had turned on them—turned on them with undisguised contempt. Never before had she betrayed contempt for them. She spoke of cowardice, too. That bewildered them. Nobody had ever suggested that.

She spoke of the shame of jail; they had heretofore been rather proud of it—all this seated there in the saddle, the light from the store lamp shining full in her face; and they huddled there on the veranda, gaping at her, stupefied.

Then she suddenly spoke of Burleson, praising him, endowing him with every quality the nobility of her own mind could compass. She extolled his patience under provocation, bidding them to match it with equal patience. She bad them be men in the face of this Burleson, who was a man; to display a dignity to compare with his; to meet him squarely, to deal fairly, to make their protests to his face and not whisper crime behind his back.

And that was all; she swung her mare off into the darkness; they listened to the far gallop, uttering never a word. But when the last distant hoof-stroke had ceased, Mr. Burleson's life and forests were safe in the country. How safe his game was they themselves did not exactly know.

That night Burleson walked into the store upon the commonplace errand of buying a jack-knife. It was well that he did not send a groom; better still when he explained, "one of the old-fashioned kind—the kind I used as a school-boy."

“To whittle willow whistles,” suggested old man Santry. His voice was harsh; it was an effort for him to speak.

“That’s the kind,” said Burleson, picking out a one-blader.

Santry was coughing; presently Burleson looked around.

“Find swallowing hard?” he asked.

“Swallerin’ ain’t easy. I ketched cold.”

“Let’s see,” observed Burleson, strolling up to him and deliberately opening the old man’s jaws, not only to Santry’s astonishment, but to the stupefaction of the community around the unlighted stove.

“Bring a lamp over here,” said the young man.

Somebody brought it.

“Tonsilitis,” said Burleson, briefly. “I’ll send you something to-night?”

“Be you a doctor?” demanded Santry, hoarsely.

“Was one. I’ll fix you up. Go home; and don’t kiss your little girl. I’ll drop in after breakfast.”

Two things were respected in Fox Cross-roads—death and a doctor—neither of which the citizens understood.

But old man Santry, struggling obstinately with his awe of things medical, rasped out, “I ain’t goin’ to pay no doctor’s bills fur a cold!”

“Nobody pays me any more,” said Burleson, laughing. “I only doctor people to keep my hand in. Go home, Santry; you’re sick.”

Mr. Santry went, pausing at the door to survey the gathering with vacant astonishment.

Burleson paid for the knife, bought a dozen stamps, tasted the cheese and ordered a whole one, selected three or four barrels of apples, and turned on his heel with a curt good-night.

“Say!” broke out old man Storm as he reached the door; “you wasn’t plannin’ to hev the law on Abe, was you?”

“About that grass fire?” inquired Burleson, wheeling in his tracks. “Oh no; Abe lost his temper and his belt. Any man’s liable to lose both. By-the-way”—he came back slowly, buttoning his gloves—“about this question of the game—it has occurred to me that it can be adjusted very simply. How many men in this town are hunters?”

Nobody answered at first, inherent suspicion making them coy. However, it finally appeared that in a community of twenty families there were some four of nature's noblemen who "admired to go gunnin' with a smell-dog."

"Four," repeated Burleson. "Now just see how simple it is. The law allows thirty woodcock, thirty partridges, and two deer to every hunter. That makes eight deer and two hundred and forty birds out of the preserve, which is very little—if you shoot straight enough to get your limit!" he laughed. "But it being a private preserve, you'll do your shooting on Saturdays, and check off your bag at the gate of the lodge—so that you won't make any mistakes in going over the limit." He laughed again, and pointed at a lean hound lying under the counter.

"Hounds are barred; only 'smell-dogs' admitted," he said. "And"—he became quietly serious—"I count on each one of you four men to aid my patrol in keeping the game-laws and the fire-laws and every forest law on the statutes. And I count on you to take out enough fox and mink pelts to pay me for my game—and you yourselves for your labor; for though it is my game by the law of the land, what is mine is no source of pleasure to me unless I share it. Let us work together to keep the streams and coverts and forests well stocked. Good-night."

About eleven o'clock that evening Abe Storm slunk into the store, and the community rose and fell on him and administered the most terrific beating that a husky young man ever emerged from alive.

III

In October the maple leaves fell, the white birches showered the hill-sides with crumpled gold, the ruffed grouse put on its downy stockings, the great hare's flanks became patched with white. Cold was surely coming; somewhere behind the blue north the Great White Winter stirred in its slumber.

As yet, however, the oaks and beeches still wore their liveries of rustling amber, the short grass on hill-side pastures was intensely green, flocks of thistle-birds disguised in demure russet passed in wavering flight from thicket to thicket, and over all a hot sun blazed in a sky of sapphire, linking summer and autumn together in the magnificence of a perfect afternoon.

Miss Elliott, riding beside Burleson, had fallen more silent than usual. She no longer wore her sombrero and boy's clothes; hat, habit, collar, scarf—ay, the tiny polished spur on her polished boot—were eloquent of Fifth Avenue; and she rode a side-saddle made by Harrock.

"Alas! alas!" said Burleson; "where is the rose of yesterday?"

"If you continue criticising my habit—" she began, impatiently.

"No—not for a minute!" he cried. "I didn't mention your habit or your stock—"

"You are always bewailing that soiled sombrero and those unspeakable breeches—"

"I never said a word—"

"You did. You said, 'Where is the rose of yesterday?'"

“I meant the wild rose. You are a cultivated rose now, you know—”

She turned her face at an angle which left him nothing to look at but one small, close-set ear.

“May I see a little more of your face by-and-by?” he asked.

“Don’t be silly, Mr. Burleson.”

“If I’m not, I’m afraid you’ll forget me.”

They rode on in silence for a little while; he removed his cap and stuffed it into his pocket.

“It’s good for my hair,” he commented, aloud; “I’m not married, you see, and it behooves a man to keep what hair he has until he’s married.”

As she said nothing, he went on, reflectively: “Eminent authorities have computed that a man with lots of hair on his head stands thirty and nineteen-hundredths better chance with a girl than a man who has but a scanty crop. A man with curly hair has eighty-seven chances in a hundred, a man with wavy hair has seventy-nine, a man—”

“Mr. Burleson,” she said, exasperated, “I am utterly at a loss to understand what it is in you that I find attractive enough to endure you.”

“Seventy-nine,” he ventured—“my hair is wavy—”

She touched her mare and galloped forward, and he followed through the yellow sunshine, attendant always on her caprice, ready for any sudden whim. So when she wheeled to the left and lifted her mare over a snake-fence, he was ready to follow; and together they tore away across a pasture, up a hill all purple with plummy bunch-grass, and forward to the edge of a gravel-pit, where she whirled her mare about, drew bridle, and flung up a warning hand just in time. His escape was narrower; his horse’s hind hoofs loosened a section of undermined sod; the animal stumbled, sank back, strained with every muscle, and dragged himself desperately forward; while behind him the entire edge of the pit gave way, crashing and clattering into the depths below.

They were both rather white when they faced each other.

“Don’t take such a risk again,” he said, harshly.

“I won’t,” she answered, with dry lips; but she was not thinking of herself. Suddenly she became very humble, guiding her mare alongside of his horse, and in a low voice asked him to pardon her folly.

And, not thinking of himself, he scored her for the risk she had taken, alternately reproaching, arguing, bullying, pleading, after the fashion of men. And, still shaken by the peril she had so wilfully sought, he asked her not to do it again, for his sake—an informal request that she accepted with equal informality and a slow droop of her head.

Never had she received such a thorough, such a satisfying scolding. There was not one word too much—every phrase refreshed her, every arbitrary intonation sang in her ears like music. And so far not one selfish note had been struck.

She listened, eyes downcast, face delicately flushed—listened until it pleased him to make an end, which he did with amazing lack of skill:

“What do you suppose life would hold for *me* with you at the bottom of that gravel-pit?”

The selfish note rang out, unmistakable, imperative—the clearest, sweetest note of all to her. But the question was no question and required no answer. Besides, he had said enough—just enough.

“Let us ride home,” she said, realizing that they were on dangerous ground again—dangerous as the gravel-hill.

And a few moments later she caught a look in his face that disconcerted and stampeded her. “It was partly your own fault, Mr. Burleson. Why does not your friend take away the mare he has bought and paid for?”

“Partly—my—fault!” he repeated, wrathfully.

“Can you not let a woman have that much consolation?” she said, lifting her gray eyes to his with a little laugh. “Do you insist on being the only and perfect embodiment of omniscience?”

He said, rather sulkily, that he didn’t think he was omniscient, and she pretended to doubt it, until the badinage left him half vexed, half laughing, but on perfectly safe ground once more.

Indeed, they were already riding over the village bridge, and he said: “I want to stop and see Santry’s child for a moment. Will you wait?”

“Yes,” she said.

So he dismounted and entered the weather-battered abode of Santry; and she looked after him with an expression on her face that he had never surprised there.

Meanwhile, along the gray village thoroughfare the good folk peeped out at her where she sat her mare, unconscious, deep in maiden meditation.

She had done much for her people; she was doing much. Fiction might add that they adored her, worshipped her very footprints!—echoes all of ancient legends of a grateful tenantry that the New World believes in but never saw.

After a little while Burleson emerged from Santry’s house, gravely returning the effusive adieus of the family.

“You are perfectly welcome,” he said, annoyed; “it is a pleasure to be able to do anything for children.”

And as he mounted he said to Miss Elliott, "I've fixed it, I think."

"Fixed her hip?"

"No; arranged for her to go to New York. They do that sort of thing there. I see no reason why the child should not walk."

"Oh, do you think so?" she exclaimed, softly. "You make me very happy, Mr. Burleson."

He looked her full in the face for just the space of a second.

"And you make me happy," he said.

She laughed, apparently serene and self-possessed, and turned up the hill, he following a fraction of a length behind.

In grassy hollows late dandelions starred the green with gold, the red alder's scarlet berries flamed along the road-side thickets; beyond, against the sky, acres of dead mullein stalks stood guard above the hollow scrub.

"Do you know," she said, over her shoulder, "that there is a rose in bloom in our garden?"

"Is there?" he asked, without surprise.

"Doesn't it astonish you?" she demanded. "Roses don't bloom up here in October."

"Oh yes, they do," he muttered.

At the gate they dismounted, he silent, preoccupied, she uneasily alert and outwardly very friendly.

"How warm it is!" she said; "it will be like a night in June with the moon up—and that rose in the garden.... You say that you are coming this evening?"

"Of course. It is your last evening."

"Our last evening," she repeated, thoughtfully.... "You said ..."

"I said that I was going South, too. I am not sure that I am going."

"I am sorry," she observed, coolly. And after a moment she handed him the bridle of her mare, saying, "You will see that she is forwarded when your friend asks for her?"

"Yes."

She looked at the mare, then walked up slowly and put her arms around the creature's silky neck. "Good-bye," she said, and kissed her. Turning half defiantly on Burleson, she smiled, touching her wet lashes with her gloved wrist.

“The Arab lady and the faithful gee-gee,” she said. “I know The Witch doesn’t care, but I can’t help loving her.... Are you properly impressed with my grief?”

There was that in Burleson’s eyes that sobered her; she instinctively laid her hand on the gate, looking at him with a face which had suddenly grown colorless and expressionless.

“Miss Elliott,” he said, “will you marry me?”

The tingling silence lengthened, broken at intervals by the dull stamping of the horses.

After a moment she moved leisurely past him, bending her head as she entered the yard, and closing the gate slowly behind her. Then she halted, one gloved hand resting on the closed gate, and looked at him again.

There is an awkwardness in men that women like; there is a *gaucherie* that women detest. She gazed silently at this man, considering him with a serenity that stunned him speechless.

Yet all the while her brain was one vast confusion, and the tumult of her own heart held her dumb. Even the man himself appeared as a blurred vision; echoes of lost voices dinned in her ears—the voices of children—of a child whom she had known when she wore muslin frocks to her knees—a boy who might once have been this man before her—this tall, sunburned young man, awkward, insistent, artless—oh, entirely without art in a wooing which alternately exasperated and thrilled her. And now his awkwardness had shattered the magic of the dream and left her staring at reality—without warning, without the courtesy of a “*garde à vous!*”

And his answer? He was waiting for his answer. But men are not gods to demand!—not highwaymen to bar the way with a “Stand and deliver!” And an answer is a precious thing—a gem of untold value. It was hers to give, hers to withhold, hers to defend.

“You will call on us to say good-bye this evening?” she asked, steadying her voice.

A deep color stung his face; he bowed, standing stiff and silent until she had passed through the open door of the veranda. Then, half blind with his misery, he mounted, wheeled, and galloped away, The Witch clattering stolidly at his stirrup.

Already the primrose light lay over hill and valley; already the delicate purple net of night had snared forest and marsh; and the wild ducks were stringing across the lakes, and the herons had gone to the forest, and plover answered plover from swamp to swamp, plaintive, querulous, in endless reiteration—“Lost! lost! she’s lost—she’s lost—she’s lost!”

But it was the first time in his life that he had so interpreted the wild crying of the killdeer plover.

There was a gown that had been packed at the bottom of a trunk; it was a fluffy, rather shapeless mound of filmy stuff to look at as it lay on the bed. As it hung upon the perfect figure of a girl of twenty it was, in the words of the maid, “a dhream an’ a blessed vision, glory be!” It ought to have been; it was brand-new.

At dinner, her father coming in on crutches, stared at his daughter—stared as though the apparition of his dead wife had risen to guide him to his chair; and his daughter laughed across the little table—she scarcely knew why—laughed at his surprise, at his little tribute to her beauty—laughed with the quick tears brimming in her eyes.

Then, after a silence, and thinking of her mother, she spoke of Burleson; and after a while of the coming journey, and their new luck which had come up with the new moon in September—a luck which had brought a purchaser for the mare, another for the land—all of it, swamp, timber, barrens—every rod, house, barn, garden, and stock.

Again leaning her bare elbows on the cloth, she asked her father who the man could be that desired such property. But her father shook his head, repeating the name, which was, I believe, Smith. And that, including the check, was all they had ever learned of this investor who had wanted what they did not want, in the nick of time.

“If he thinks there is gas or oil here he is to be pitied,” said her father. “I wrote him and warned him.”

“I think he replied that he knew his own business,” said the girl.

“I hope he does; the price is excessive—out of all reason. I trust he knows of something in the land that may justify his investment.”

After a moment she said, “Do you really think we may be able to buy a little place in Florida—a few orange-trees and a house?”

His dreamy eyes smiled across at her.

“Thank God!” she thought, answering his smile.

There was no dampness in the air; she aided him to the garden, where he resumed his crutches and hobbled as far as the wonderful bush that bore a single belated rose.

“In the South,” he said, under his breath, “there is no lack of these.... I think—I think all will be well in the South.”

He tired easily, and she helped him back to his study, where young Burleson presently found them, strolling in with his hands in the pockets of his dinner-jacket.

His exchange of greetings with Miss Elliott was quietly formal; with her father almost tender. It was one of the things she cared most for in him; and she walked to the veranda, leaving the two men alone—the man and the shadow of a man.

Once she heard laughter in the room behind her; and it surprised her, pacing the veranda there. Yet Burleson always brought a new anecdote to share with her father—and heretofore he had shared these with her, too. But now!—

Yet it was by her own choice she was alone there, pacing the moonlit porches.

The maid—their only servant—brought a decanter; she could hear the ring of the glasses, relics of better times.... And now better times were dawning again—brief, perhaps, for her father, yet welcome as Indian summer.

After a long while Burleson came to the door, and she looked up, startled.

“Will you sing? Your father asks it.”

“Won’t you ask me, too, Mr. Burleson?”

“Yes.”

“But I want to show you my rose first. Will you come?—it is just a step.”

He walked out into the moonlight with her; they stood silently before the bush which had so capriciously bloomed.

“Now—I will sing for you, Mr. Burleson,” she said, amiably. And they returned to the house, finding not a word to say on the way.

The piano was in decent tune; she sat down, nodding across at her father, and touched a chord or two.

“The same song—the one your mother cared for,” murmured her father.

And she looked at Burleson dreamily, then turned, musing with bent head, sounding a note, a tentative chord. And then she sang.

A dropping chord, lingering like fragrance in the room, a silence, and she rose, looking at her father. But he, dim eyes brooding, lay back unconscious of all save memories awakened by her song. And presently she moved across the room to the veranda, stepping out into the moonlit garden—knowing perfectly well what she was doing, though her heart was beating like a trip-hammer, and she heard the quick step on the gravel behind her.

She was busy with the long stem of the rose when he came up; she broke it short and straightened up, smiling a little greeting, for she could not have spoken for her life.

“Will you marry me?” he asked, under his breath.

Then the slow, clear words came, “I cannot.”

“I love you,” he said, as though he had not heard her. “There is nothing for me in life without you; from the moment you came into my life there was nothing else, nothing in heaven or earth but you—your loveliness, your beauty, your hair, your hands, the echo of your voice haunting me, the memory of your every step, your smile, the turn of your head—all that I love in you—and all that I worship—your sweetness, your loyalty, your bravery, your honor. Give me all this to guard, to adore—try to love me; forget my faults, forgive all that I lack. I know—I know what I am—what little I have to offer—but it is all that I am, all that I have. Constance! Constance! Must you refuse?”

“Did I refuse?” she faltered. “I don’t know why I did.”

With bare arm bent back and hand pressed over the hand that held her waist imprisoned, she looked up into his eyes. Then their lips met.

“Say it,” he whispered.

“Say it? Ah, I do say it: I love you—I love you. I said it years ago—when you were a boy and I wore muslin gowns above my knees. Did you think I had not guessed it?... And you told father to-night—you told him, because I never heard him laugh that way before.... And you are Jack—my boy that I loved when I was ten—my boy lover? Ah, Jack, I was never deceived.”

He drew her closer and lifted her flushed face. “I told your father—yes. And I told him that we would go South with him.”

“You—you dared assume that!—before I had consented!” she cried, exasperated.

“Why—why, I couldn’t contemplate anything else.”

Half laughing, half angry, she strained to release his arm, then desisted, breathless, gray eyes meeting his.

“No other man,” she breathed—“no other man—” There was a silence, then her arms crept up closer, encircling his neck. “There is no other man,” she sighed.

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THE MARKET-HUNTER

A WARM October was followed by a muggy, wet November. The elm leaves turned yellow but did not fall; the ash-trees lighted up the woods like gigantic lanterns set in amber; single branches among the maples slowly crimsoned. As yet the dropping of acorns rarely broke the forest silence in Sagamore County, although the blue-jays screamed in the alders and crows were already gathering for their annual caucus.

Because there had been as yet no frost the partridges still lurked deep in the swamps, and the woodcock skulked, shunning the white birches until the ice-storms in the north should set their comrades moving southward.

There was little doing in the feathered world. Of course the swallows had long since departed, and with the advent of the blue-jays and golden-winged wood peckers a few heavy-pinioned hawks had appeared, wheeling all day over the pine-woods, calling querulously.

Then one still night the frost silvered the land, and the raccoons whistled from the beach-woods on the ridges, and old man Jocelyn's daughter crept from her chilly bed to the window which framed a staring, frosty moon.

Through the silence she heard a whisper like the discreet rustle of silken hangings. It was the sound of leaves falling through the darkness. She peered into the night, where, unseen, the delicate fingers of the frost were touching a million leaves, and as each little leaf was summoned she heard it go, whispering obedience.

Now the moonlight seemed to saturate her torn, thin night-gown and lie like frost on her body; and she crept to the door of her room, shivering, and called, "Father!"

He answered heavily, and the bed in the next room creaked.

"There is a frost," she said; "shall I load the cartridges?"

She could hear him stumble out of bed and grope for the window.

Presently he yawned loudly and she heard him tumble back into bed.

"There won't be no flight to-night," he said; "the birds won't move for twenty-four hours. Go to bed, Jess."

"But there are sure to be a few droppers in to-night," she protested.

"Go to bed," he said, shortly.

After a moment she began again: "I don't mind loading a dozen shells, dad."

"What for?" he said. "It's my fault I ain't ready. I didn't want you foolin' with candles around powder and shot."

"But I want you to have a good time to-morrow," she urged, with teeth chattering. "You know," and she laughed a mirthless laugh, "it's Thanksgiving Day, and two woodcock are as good as a turkey."

What he said was, "Turkey be darned!" but, nevertheless, she knew he was pleased, so she said no more.

There was a candle on her bureau; she lighted it with stiff fingers, then trotted about over the carpetless floor, gathering up the loading-tools and flimsy paper shells, the latter carefully hoarded after having already served.

Sitting there at the bedside, bare feet wrapped in a ragged quilt, and a shawl around her shoulders, she picked out the first shell and placed it in the block. With one tap she forced out the old primer, inserted a new one, and drove it in. Next she plunged the rusty measuring-cup into the black powder and poured the glistening grains into the shell, three drams and a half. On this she drove in two wads. Now the shell was ready for an ounce and an eighth of number nine shot, and she measured it and poured it in with practised hand. Then came the last wad, a quick twirl of the crimper, and the first shell lay loaded on the pillow.

Before she finished her hands were numb and her little feet like frozen marble. But at last two dozen cartridges were ready, and she gathered them up in the skirt of her night-gown and carried them to her father's door.

"Here they are," she said, rolling them in a heap on the floor; and, happy at his sleepy protest, she crept back to bed again, chilled to the knees.

At dawn the cold was intense, but old man Jocelyn, descending the dark stairway gun in hand, found his daughter lifting the coffee-pot from the stove.

"You're a good girl, Jess," he said. Then he began to unwind the flannel cover from his gun. In the frosty twilight outside a raccoon whistled from the alders.

When he had unrolled and wiped his gun he drew a shaky chair to the pine table and sat down. His daughter watched him, and when he bent his gray head she covered her eyes with one delicate hand.

"Lord," he said, "it being Thanksgiving, I do hereby give Thee a few extry thanks." And "Amen" they said together.

Jess stood warming herself with her back to the stove, watching her father busy with his bread and coffee. Her childish face was not a sad one, yet in her rare smile there was a certain beauty which sorrow alone brings to young lips and eyes.

Old man Jocelyn stirred his sugarless coffee and broke off a lump of bread.

"One of young Gordon's keepers was here yesterday," he said, abruptly.

His daughter slowly raised her head and twisted her dishevelled hair into a great, soft knot. "What did Mr. Gordon's keeper want?" she asked, indifferently.

"Why, some one," said old man Jocelyn, with an indescribable sneer—"some real mean man has been and shot out them swales along Brier Brook."

"Did you do it?" asked the girl.

"Why, come to think, I guess I did," said her father, grinning.

"It is your right," said his daughter, quietly; "the Brier Brook swales were yours."

"Before young Gordon's pa swindled me out o' them," observed Jocelyn, tearing off more bread. "And," he added, "even old Gordon never dared post his land in them days. If he had he'd been tarred 'n' feathered."

His daughter looked grave, then a smile touched her eyes, and she said: "I hear, daddy, that young Gordon gives you cattle and seeds and ploughs."

Jocelyn wheeled around like a flash. "Who told you that?" he demanded, sharply.

The incredulous smile in her eyes died out. She stared at him blankly.

“Why, of course it wasn’t true,” she said.

“Who told you?” he cried, angrily.

“Murphy told me,” she stammered. “Of course it is a lie! of course he lied, father! I told him he lied—”

With horror in her eyes she stared at her father, but Jocelyn sat sullenly brooding over his coffee-cup and tearing bit after bit from the crust in his fist.

“Has young Gordon ever said that to you?” he demanded, at length.

“I have never spoken to him in all my life,” answered the girl, with a dry sob. “If I had known that he gave things to—to—us—I should have died—”

Jocelyn’s eyes were averted. “How dare he!” she went on, trembling. “We are not beggars! If we have nothing, it is his father’s shame—and his shame! Oh, father, father! I never thought—I never for one instant thought—”

“Don’t, Jess!” said Jocelyn, hoarsely.

Then he rose and laid a heavy hand on the table. “I took his cows and his ploughs and his seed. What of it? He owes me more! I took them for your sake—to try to find a living in this bit of flint and sand—for you. Birds are scarce. They’ve passed a law against market-shooting. Every barrel of birds I send out may mean prison. I’ve lived my life as a market-hunter; I ain’t fitted for farming. But you were growing, and you need schooling, and between the game-warden and young Gordon I couldn’t keep you decent—so I took his damned cattle and I dug in the ground. What of it!” he ended, violently. And, as she did not speak, he gave voice to the sullen rage within him—“I took his cattle and his ploughs as I take his birds. They ain’t his to give; they’re mine to take—the birds are. I guess when God set the first hen partridge on her nest in Sagamore woods he wasn’t thinking particularly about breeding them for young Gordon!”

He picked up his gun and started heavily for the door. His eyes met the eyes of his daughter as she drew the frosty latch for him. There was a pause, then he pulled his cap over his eyes with a long grunt.

“Dear dad,” she said, under her breath.

“I guess,” he observed unsteadily, “you’re ashamed of me, Jess.”

She put both arms around his neck and laid her head against his.

“I think as you do,” she said; “God did not create the partridges for Mr. Gordon—but, darling dad, you will never, never again take even one grain of buckwheat from him, will you?”

“His father robbed mine,” said Jocelyn, with a surly shrug. But she was content with his answer and his rough kiss, and when he had gone out into the gray morning, calling his mongrel setter from its kennel, she went back up the stairs and threw herself on her icy bed. But her little face was hot with tearless shame, and misery numbed her limbs, and she cried

out in her heart for God to punish old Gordon's sin from generation to generation—meaning that young Gordon should suffer for the sins of his father. Yet through her torture and the burning anger of her prayer ran a silent undercurrent, a voiceless call for mercy upon her and upon all she loved, her father and—young Gordon.

After a while she fell asleep dreaming of young Gordon. She had never seen him except Sundays in church, but now she dreamed he came into her pew and offered her a hymn-book of ivory and silver; and she dreamed they sang from it together until the church thrilled with their united voices. But the song they sang seemed to pain her, and her voice hurt her throat. His voice, too, grew harsh and piercing, and—she awoke with the sun in her eyes and the strident cries of the blue-jays in her ears.

Under her window she heard somebody moving. It was her father, already returned, and he stood by the door, drawing and plucking half a dozen woodcock.

When she had bathed and dressed, she found the birds on the kitchen-table ready for the oven, and she set about her household duties with a glance through the window where Jocelyn, crouching on the bank of the dark stream, was examining his set-lines one by one.

The sun hung above the forest, sending fierce streams of light over the flaming, frost-ripened foliage. A belt of cloud choked the mountain gorge in the north; the alders were smoking with chilly haze.

As she passed across the yard towards the spring, bucket in hand, her father called out: "I guess we'll keep Thanksgiving, Jess, after all. I've got a five-pounder here!"

He held up a slim, gold-and-green pickerel, then flung the fish on the ground with the laugh of a boy. It was always so; the forest and the pursuit of wild creatures renewed his life. He was born for it; he had lived a hunter and a roamer of the woods; he bade fair to die a poacher—which, perhaps, is no sin in the eyes of Him who designed the pattern of the partridge's wings and gave two coats to the northern hare.

His daughter watched him with a strained smile. In her bitterness against Gordon, now again in the ascendant, she found no peace of mind.

"Dad," she said, "I set six deadfalls yesterday. I guess I'll go and look at them."

"If you line them too plainly, Gordon's keepers will save you your trouble," said Jocelyn.

"Well, then, I think I'll go now," said the girl. Her eyes began to sparkle and the wings of her delicate nostrils quivered as she looked at the forest on the hill.

Jocelyn watched her. He noted the finely moulded head, the dainty nose, the clear, fearless eyes. It was the sensitive head of a free woman—a maid of windy hill-sides and of silent forests. He saw the faint quiver of the nostril, and he thought of the tremor that twitches the dainty muzzles of thoroughbred dogs afield. It was in her, the mystery and passion of the forest, and he saw it and dropped his eyes to the fish swinging from his hand.

"Your mother was different," he said, slowly.

Instinctively they both turned towards the shanty. Beside the doorstep rose a granite headstone.

After a while Jocelyn drew out his jack-knife and laid the fish on the dead grass, and the girl carried the bucket of water back to the house. She reappeared a moment later, wearing her father's shooting-jacket and cap, and with a quiet "good-bye" to Jocelyn she started across the hill-side towards the woods above.

Jocelyn watched her out of sight, then turning the pickerel over, he slit the firm, white belly from vent to gill.

About that time, just over the scrubby hill to the north, young Gordon was walking, knee deep in the bronzed sweet fern, gun cocked, eyes alert. His two beautiful dogs were working close, quartering the birch-dotted hill-side in perfect form. But they made no points; no dropping woodcock whistled up from the shelter of birch or alder; no partridge blundered away from bramble covert or willow fringe. Only the blue-jays screamed at him as he passed; only the heavy hawks, sailing, watched him with bright eyes.

He was a dark-eyed, spare young man, with well-shaped head and a good mouth. He wore his canvas shooting-clothes like a soldier, and handled his gun and his dogs with a careless ease that might have appeared slovenly had the results been less precise. But even an amateur could see how thoroughly the ground was covered by those silent dogs. Gordon never spoke to them; a motion of his hand was enough.

Once a scared rabbit scuttled out of the sweet fern and bounded away, displaying the piteous flag of truce, and Gordon smiled to himself when his perfectly trained dogs crossed the alluring trail without a tremor, swerving not an inch for bunny and his antics.

But what could good dogs do, even if well handled, when there had been no flight from the north? So Gordon signalled the dogs and walked on.

That part of his property which he had avoided for years he now came in sight of from the hill, and he halted, gun under his arm. There was the fringe of alders, mirrored in Rat's Run; there was Jocelyn's shanty, the one plague-spot in his estate; there, too, was old man Jocelyn, on his knees beside the stream, fussing with something that glistened, probably a fish.

The young man on the hill-top tossed his gun over his shoulder and called his two silvery-coated dogs to heel; then he started to descend the slope, the November sunlight dancing on the polished gun-barrels. Down through the scrubby thickets he strode; burr and thorn scraped his canvas jacket, blackberry-vines caught at elbow and knee. With an unfeigned scowl he kept his eyes on Jocelyn, who was still pottering on the stream's bank, but when Jocelyn heard him come crackling through the stubble and looked up the scowl faded, leaving Gordon's face unpleasantly placid.

"Good-morning, Jocelyn," said the young man, stepping briskly to the bank of the stream; "I want a word or two with you."

"Words are cheap," said Jocelyn, sitting up on his haunches; "how many will you have, Mr. Gordon?"

“I want you,” said Gordon, slowly emphasizing each word, “to stop your depredations on my property, once and for all.”

Squatting there on the dead grass, Jocelyn eyed him sullenly without replying.

“Do you understand?” said Gordon, sharply.

“Well, what’s the trouble now—” began Jocelyn, but Gordon cut him short.

“Trouble! You’ve shot out every swale along Brier Brook! There isn’t a partridge left between here and the lake! And it’s a shabby business, Jocelyn—a shabby business.”

He flung his fowling-piece into the hollow of his left arm and began to walk up and down the bank.

“This is my land,” he said, “and I want no tenants. There were a dozen farms on the property when it came to me; I gave every tenant a year’s lease, rent free, and when they moved out I gave them their houses to take down and rebuild outside of my boundary-lines. Do you know any other man who would do as much?”

Jocelyn was silent.

“As for you,” continued Gordon, “you were left in that house because your wife’s grave is there at your very threshold. You have your house free, you pay no rent for the land, you cut your wood without payment. My gardener has supplied you with seed, but you never cultivate the land; my manager has sent you cows, but you sell them.”

“One died,” muttered Jocelyn.

“Yes—with a cut throat,” replied Gordon. “See here, Jocelyn, I don’t expect gratitude or civility from you, but I do expect you to stop robbing me!”

“Robbing!” repeated Jocelyn, angrily, rising to his feet.

“Yes, robbing! My land is posted, warning people not to shoot or fish or cut trees. The land, the game, and the forests are mine, and you have no more right to kill a bird or cut a tree on my property than I have to enter your house and steal your shoes!”

Gordon’s face was flushed now, and he came and stood squarely in front of Jocelyn. “You rob me,” he said, “and you break not only my own private rules, but also the State laws. You shoot for the market, and it’s a dirty, contemptible thing to do!”

Jocelyn glared at him, but Gordon looked him straight in the eye and went on, calmly: “You are a law-breaker, and you know it! You snare my trout, you cover the streams with set-lines and gang-hooks, you get more partridges with winter grapes and deadfalls than you do with powder and shot. As long as your cursed poaching served to fill your own stomach I stood it, but now that you’ve started wholesale game slaughter for the market I am going to stop the whole thing.”

The two men faced each other in silence for a moment; then Jocelyn said: "Are you going to tear down my house?"

Gordon did not answer. It was what he wanted to do, but he looked at the gaunt, granite headstone in the door-yard, then dropped the butt of his gun to the dead sod again. "Can't you be decent, Jocelyn?" he asked, harshly.

Jocelyn was silent.

"I don't want to turn you out," said Gordon. "Can't you let my game alone? Come, let's start again; shall we? I'll send Banks down to-morrow with a couple of cows and a crate or two of chickens, and Murphy shall bring you what seeds you want for late planting—"

"To hell with your seeds!" roared Jocelyn, in a burst of fury. "To hell with your cows and your Murphys and your money and yourself, you loafing millionaire! Do you think I want to dig turnips any more than you do? I was born free in a free land before you were born at all! I hunted these swales and fished these streams while you were squalling for your pap!"

With blazing eyes the ragged fellow shook his fist at Gordon, cursing him fiercely, then with a violent gesture he pointed at the ground under his feet: "Let those whose calling is to dig, dig!" he snarled. "I've turned my last sod!"

Except that Gordon's handsome face had grown a little white under the heavy coat of tan, he betrayed no emotion as he said: "You are welcome to live as you please—under the law. But if you fire one more shot on this land I shall be obliged to ask you to go elsewhere."

"Keep your ears open, then!" shouted Jocelyn, "for I'll knock a pillowful of feathers out of the first partridge I run over!"

"Better not," said Gordon, gravely.

Jocelyn hitched up his weather-stained trousers and drew his leather belt tighter. "I told you just now," he said, "that I'd never turn another sod. I'll take that back."

"I am glad to hear it," said Gordon, pleasantly.

"Yes," continued Jocelyn, with a grim gesture, "I'll take it back. You see, I buried my wife yonder, and I guess I'm free to dig up what I planted. And I'll do it."

After a pause he added: "Tear the house down. I'm done with it. I guess I can find room somewhere underground for her, and a few inches on top of the ground for me to sit down on."

"Don't talk like that," said Gordon, reddening to the roots of his hair. "You are welcome to the house and the land, and you know it. I only ask you to let my game alone."

"Your game?" retorted Jocelyn. "They're wild creatures, put there by Him who fashioned them."

“Nonsense!” said Gordon, dryly. “My land is my own. Would you shoot the poultry in my barn-yard?”

“If I did,” cried Jocelyn, with eyes ablaze, “I’d not be in your debt, young man. You are walking on my father’s land. Ask *your* father why! Yes, go back to the city and hunt him up at his millionaire’s club and ask him why you are driving Tom Jocelyn off of his old land!”

“My father died three years ago,” said Gordon, between his set teeth. “What do you mean?”

Jocelyn looked at him blankly.

“What do you mean?” repeated Gordon, with narrowing eyes.

Jocelyn stood quite still. Presently he looked down at the fish on the ground and moved it with his foot. Then Gordon asked him for the third time what he meant, and Jocelyn, raising his eyes, answered him: “With the dead all quarrels die.”

“That is not enough!” said Gordon, harshly. “Do you believe my father wronged you?”

“He’s dead,” said Jocelyn, as though speaking to himself.

Presently he picked up the fish and walked towards his house, gray head bent between his shoulders.

For a moment Gordon hesitated, then he threw his gun smartly over his shoulder and motioned his dogs to heel. But his step had lost something of its elasticity, and he climbed the hill slowly, following with troubled eyes his own shadow, which led him on over the dead grass.

The edge of the woods was warm in the sunshine. Faint perfumes of the vanished summer lingered in fern and bramble.

He did not enter the woods. There was a fallen log, rotten and fragrant, half buried in the briers, and on it he found a seat, calling his dogs to his feet.

In the silence of morning he could hear the pine-borers at work in the log he was sitting on, scra-ape! scra-ape! scr-r-rape! deep in the soft, dry pulp under the bark. There were no insects abroad except the white-faced pine hornets, crawling stiffly across the moss. He noticed no birds, either, at first, until, glancing up, he saw a great drab butcher-bird staring at him from a dead pine.

At first that inert oppression which always came when the memory of his father returned to him touched his fine lips with a gravity too deep for his years. No man had ever said that his father had dealt unfairly with men, yet for years now his son had accumulated impressions, vague and indefinable at first, but clearer as he grew older, and the impressions had already left the faintest tracery of a line between his eyebrows. He had known his father as a hard man; he knew that the world had found him hard and shrewd. And now, as he grew older and understood what the tribute of honest men was worth, even to the dead, he waited to hear one word. But he never heard it. He had heard other things, however, but always veiled, like the menacing outbreak of old man Jocelyn—nothing tangible, nothing that he could answer or

refute. At times he became morbid, believing he could read reproach in men's eyes, detect sarcasm in friendly voices. Then for months he would shun men, as he was doing now, living alone month after month in the great, silent house where his father and his grandfather's father had been born. Yet even here among the Sagamore Hills he had found it—that haunting hint that honor had been moulded to fit occasions when old Gordon dealt with his fellow-men.

He glanced up again at the butcher-bird, and rose to his feet. The bird's cruel eyes regarded him steadily.

"You wholesale murderer," thought Gordon, "I'll just give you a charge of shot."

But before he could raise his gun, the shrike, to his amazement, burst into an exquisite song, sweet and pure as a thrush's melody, and, spreading its slaty wings, it sailed off through the sunshine.

"That's a new trick to me," said Gordon, aloud, wondering to hear such music from the fierce feathered criminal. But he let it go for the sake of its song, and, lowering his gun again, he pushed into the underbrush.

The yellow beech leaves illuminated the woods above and under foot; he smelled the scent of ripened foliage, he saw the purple gentians wistfully raising their buds which neither sun nor frost could ever unseal.

In a glade where brambles covered a tiny stream, creeping through layers of jewel-weed and mint, the white setter in the lead swung suddenly west, quartered, wheeled, crept forward and stiffened to a point. Behind him his mate froze into a silvery statue. But Gordon walked on, gun under his arm, and the covey rose with a roar of heavy wings, driving blindly through the tangle deep into the dim wood's depths.

Gordon was not in a killing mood that morning.

When the puzzled dogs had come wagging in and had been quietly motioned to heel, Gordon stood still and looked around at the mottled tree-trunks glimmering above the underbrush. The first beechnuts had dropped; a few dainty sweet acorns lay under the white oaks. Somewhere above a squirrel scolded incessantly.

As he was on the point of moving forward, stooping to avoid an ozier, something on the edge of the thicket caught his eye. It was a twig, freshly broken, hanging downward by a film of bark.

After he had examined it he looked around cautiously, peering into the thicket until, a few yards to the right, he discovered another twig, freshly broken, hanging by its film of bark.

An ugly flush stained his forehead; he set his lips together and moved on noiselessly. Other twigs hung dangling every few yards, yet it took an expert's eye to detect them among the tangles and clustering branches. But he knew what he was to find at the end of the blind trail, and in a few minutes he found it. It was a deadfall, set, and baited with winter grapes.

Noiselessly he destroyed it, setting the heavy stone on the moss without a sound; then he searched the thicket for the next “line,” and in a few moments he discovered another broken twig leading to the left.

He had been on the trail for some time, losing it again and again before the suspicion flashed over him that there was somebody ahead who had either seen or heard him and who was deliberately leading him astray with false “lines” that would end in nothing. He listened; there was no sound either of steps or of cracking twigs, but both dogs had begun growling and staring into the demi-light ahead. He motioned them on and followed. A moment later both dogs barked sharply.

As he stepped out of the thicket on one side, a young girl, standing in the more open and heavier timber, raised her head and looked at him with grave, brown eyes. Her hands were on the silky heads of his dogs; from her belt hung a great, fluffy cock-partridge, outspread wings still limber.

He knew her in an instant; he had seen her often in church. Perplexed and astonished, he took off his cap in silence, finding absolutely nothing to say, although the dead partridge at her belt furnished a text on which he had often displayed biting eloquence.

After a moment he smiled, partly at the situation, partly to put her at her ease.

“If I had known it was you,” he said, “I should not have followed those very inviting twigs I saw dangling from the oziers and moose-vines.”

“Lined deadfalls are thoroughfares to woodsmen,” she answered, defiantly. “You are as free as I am in these woods—but not more free.”

The defiance, instead of irritating him, touched him. In it he felt a strange pathos—the proud protest of a heart that beat as free as the thudding wings of the wild birds he sometimes silenced with a shot.

“It is quite true,” he said, gently; “you are perfectly free in these woods.”

“But not by your leave!” she said, and the quick color stung her cheeks.

“It is not necessary to ask it,” he replied.

“I mean,” she said, desperately, “that neither I nor my father recognize your right to these woods.”

“Your father?” he repeated, puzzled.

“Don’t you know who I am?” she said, in surprise.

“I know you sing very beautifully in church,” he said, smiling.

“My name,” she said, quietly, “is the name of your father’s old neighbor. I am Jessie Jocelyn.”

His face was troubled, even in his surprise. The line between his eyes deepened. "I did not know you were Mr. Jocelyn's daughter," he said, at last.

Neither spoke for a moment. Presently Gordon raised his head and found her brown eyes on him.

"I wish," he said, wistfully, "that you would let me walk with you a little way. I want to ask your advice. Will you?"

"I am going home," she said, coldly.

She turned away, moving two or three paces, then the next step was less hasty, and the next was slower still. As he joined her she looked up a trifle startled, then bent her head.

"Miss Jocelyn," he said, abruptly, "have you ever heard your father say that my father treated him harshly?"

She stopped short beside him. "Have you?" he repeated, firmly.

"I think," she said, scornfully, "your father can answer that question."

"If he could," said Gordon, "I would ask him. He is dead."

She was listening to him with face half averted, but now she turned around and met his eyes again.

"Will you answer my question?" he said.

"No," she replied, slowly; "not if he is dead."

Young Gordon's face was painfully white. "I beg you, Miss Jocelyn, to answer me," he said. "I beg you will answer for your father's sake and—in justice to my father's son."

"What do you care—" she began, but stopped short. To her surprise her own bitterness seemed forced. She saw he did care. Suddenly she pitied him.

"There was a promise broken," she said, gravely.

"What else?"

"A man's spirit."

They walked on, he clasping his gun with nerveless hands, she breaking the sapless twigs as she passed, with delicate, idle fingers.

Presently he said, as though speaking to himself: "He had no quarrel with the dead, nor has the dead with him—now. What my father would now wish I can do—I can do even yet—"

Under her deep lashes her brown eyes rested on him pitifully. But at his slightest motion she turned away, walking in silence.

As they reached the edge of the woods in a burst of sunshine he looked up at her and she stopped. Below them the smoke curled from her weather-racked house. "Will you have me for a guest?" he said, suddenly.

"A guest!" she faltered.

A new mood was on him; he was smiling now.

"Yes, a guest. It is Thanksgiving Day, Miss Jocelyn. Will you and your father forget old quarrels—and perhaps forgive?"

Again she rested her slender hands on his dogs' heads, looking out over the valley.

"Will you forgive?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I? Yes," she said, startled.

"Then," he went on, smiling, "you must invite me to be your guest. When I look at that partridge, Miss Jocelyn, hunger makes me shameless. I want a second-joint—indeed I do!"

Her sensitive lips trembled into a smile, but she could not meet his eyes yet.

"Our Thanksgiving dinner would horrify you," she said—"a pickerel taken on a gang-hook, woodcock shot in Brier Brook swales, and this partridge—" She hesitated.

"And that partridge a victim to his own rash passion for winter grapes," added Gordon, laughing.

The laugh did them both good.

"I could make a chestnut stuffing," she said, timidly.

"Splendid! Splendid!" murmured Gordon.

"Are you really coming?" she asked.

Something in her eyes held his, then he answered with heightened color, "I am very serious, Miss Jocelyn. May I come?"

She said "Yes" under her breath. There was color enough in her lips and cheeks now.

So young Gordon went away across the hills, whistling his dogs cheerily on, the sunlight glimmering on the slanting barrels of his gun. They looked back twice. The third time she looked he was gone beyond the brown hill's crest.

She came to her own door all of a tremble. Old man Jocelyn sat sunning his gray head on the south porch, lean hands folded over his stomach, pipe between his teeth.

"Daddy," she said, "look!" and she held up the partridge. Jocelyn smiled.

All the afternoon she was busy in the kitchen, and when the early evening shadows lengthened across the purple hills she stood at the door, brown eyes searching the northern slope.

The early dusk fell over the alder swales; the brawling brook was sheeted with vapor.

Up-stairs she heard her father dressing in his ancient suit of rusty black and pulling on his obsolete boots. She stole into the dining-room and looked at the table. Three covers were laid.

She had dressed in her graduating gown—a fluffy bit of white and ribbon. Her dark soft hair was gathered simply; a bunch of blue gentian glimmered at her belt.

Suddenly, as she lingered over the table, she heard Gordon's step on the porch, and the next instant her father came down the dark stairway into the dining-room just as Gordon entered.

The old man halted, eyes ablaze. But Gordon came forward gravely, saying, "I asked Miss Jocelyn if I might come as your guest to-night. It would have been a lonely Thanksgiving at home."

Jocelyn turned to his daughter in silence. Then the three places laid at table and the three chairs caught his eye.

"I hope," said Gordon, "that old quarrels will be forgotten and old scores wiped out. I am sorry I spoke as I did this morning. You are quite right, Mr. Jocelyn; the land is yours and has always been yours. It is from you I must ask permission to shoot."

Jocelyn eyed him grimly.

"Don't make it hard for me," said Gordon. "The land is yours, and that also which you lost with it will be returned. It is what my father wishes—now."

He held out his hand. Jocelyn took it as though stunned.

Gordon, still holding his hand, drew him outside to the porch.

"How much did you have in the Sagamore & Wyandotte Railway before our system bought it?" asked Gordon.

"All I had—seven thousand dollars—" Suddenly the old man's hand began to tremble. He raised his gray head and looked up at the stars.

"That is yours still," said Gordon, gently, "with interest. My father wishes it."

Old man Jocelyn looked up at the stars. They seemed to swim in silver streaks through the darkness.

"Come," said Gordon, gayly, "we are brother sportsmen now—and that sky means a black frost and a flight. Will you invite me to shoot over Brier Brook swales to-morrow?"

As he spoke, high in the starlight a dark shadow passed, coming in from the north, beating the still air with rapid wings. It was a woodcock, the first flight bird from the north.

“Come to dinner, young man,” said Jocelyn, excited; “the flight is on and we must be on Brier Brook by daybreak.”

In the blaze of a kerosene-lamp they sat down at table. Gordon looked across at Jocelyn’s daughter; her eyes met his, and they smiled.

Then old man Jocelyn bent his head on his hard clasped hands.

“Lord,” he said, tremulously, “it being Thanksgiving, I gave Thee extry thanks this A.M. It being now P.M., I do hereby double them extry thanks”—his mind wandered a little—“with interest to date. Amen.”

THE PATH-MASTER

“The bankrupt can always pay one debt, but neither God nor man can credit him with the payment.”

I

WHEN Dingman, the fate game-warden, came panting over the mountain from Spencers to confer with young Byram, road-master at Foxville, he found that youthful official reshingling his barn.

The two men observed each other warily for a moment; Byram jingled the shingle-nails in his apron-pocket; Dingman, the game-warden, took a brief but intelligent survey of the premises, which included an unpainted house, a hen-yard, and the newly shingled barn.

“Hello, Byram,” he said, at length.

“Is that you?” replied Byram, coldly.

He was a law-abiding young man; he had not shot a bird out of season for three years.

After a pause the game-warden said, “Ain’t you a-comin’ down off’n that ridge-pole?”

“I’m a-comin’ down when I quit shinglin’,” replied the road-master, cautiously. Dingman waited; Byram fitted a shingle, fished out a nail from his apron-pocket, and drove it with unnecessary noise.

The encircling forest re-echoed the hammer strokes; a squirrel scolded from the orchard.

“Didn’t I hear a gun go off in them alder bushes this morning?” inquired the game-warden. Byram made no reply, but hammered violently. “Anybody got a ice-house ’round here?” persisted the game-warden.

Byram turned a non-committal eye on the warden.

“I quit that business three years ago, an’ you know it,” he said. “I ’ain’t got no ice-house for to hide no pa’ttridges, an’ I ain’t a-shootin’ out o’ season for the Saratogy market!”

The warden regarded him with composure.

“Who said *you* was shootin’ pa’ttridges?” he asked. But Byram broke in:

“What would I go shootin’ them birds for when I ’ain’t got no ice-box?”

“Who says *you* got a ice-box?” replied the warden, calmly. “There is other folks in Foxville, ain’t there?”

Byram grew angrier. “If you want to stop this shootin’ out o’ season,” he said, “you go to them rich hotel men in Saratogy. Are you afraid jest because they’ve got a pull with them politicians that makes the game-laws and then pays the hotel men to serve ’em game out o’ season an’ reason? Them’s the men to ketch; them’s the men that set the poor men to vi’latin’ the law. Folks here ’ain’t got no money to buy powder ’n’ shot for to shoot nothin’. But when them Saratogy men offers two dollars a bird for pa’ttridge out o’ season, what d’ye think is bound to happen?”

“Shootin’,” said the warden, sententiously. “An’ it’s been did, too. An’ I’m here for to find out who done that shootin’ in them alders.”

“Well, why don’t you find out, then?” sneered young Byram from his perch on the ridge-pole.

“That’s it,” said the warden, bitterly; “all you folks hang together like bees in a swarm-bunch. You’re nuthin’ but a passel o’ critters that digs ginseng for them Chinese an’ goes gunnin’ for pa’ttridges out o’ season—”

“I’ll go gunnin’ for *you*!” shouted Byram, climbing down the ladder in a rage. “I am going to knock your head off, you darned thing!”

Prudence halted him; the game-warden, who had at first meditated flight, now eyed him with patronizing assurance.

“Don’t git riled with me, young man,” he said. “I’m a ’fical of this State. Anyway, it ain’t you I’m lookin’ for—”

“Well, why don’t you say so, then?” broke in Byram, with an oath.

“But it’s one o’ your family,” added the warden.

“My family!” stammered Byram, in genuine surprise. Then an ugly light glimmered in his eyes. “You mean Dan McCloud?”

“I do,” said the warden, “an’ I’m fixed to git him, too.”

“Well, what do you come to me for, then?” demanded Byram.

“For because Dan McCloud is your cousin, ain’t he? An’ I jest dropped in on you to see how the land lay. If it’s a fight it’s a fight, but I jest want to know how many I’m to buck against. Air you with him? I’ve proofs. I know he’s got his ice-box stuffed full o’ pa’ttridges an’ woodcock. Air you with him?”

“No,” said Byram, with a scowl; “but I ain’t with you, neither!”

“Don’t git riled,” said the warden. “I’m that friendly with folks I don’t want no riled nobody. Look here, friend, you an’ me is ’ficials, ain’t we?”

“I’m road-master of Foxville,” said Byram, aggressively.

“Well, then, let’s set down onto this bunch o’ shingles an’ talk it over ’ficially,” suggested the warden, suavely.

“All right,” said Byram, pocketing his hammer; “if you’re out to ketch Dan McCloud I don’t care. He’s a low-down, shifty cuss, who won’t pay his road-tax, an’ I say it if he is my cousin, an’ no shame to me, neither.”

The warden nodded and winked.

“If you he’p me ketch Dan McCloud with them birds in his ice-box, I’ll he’p you git your road-tax outen him,” he proposed. “An’ you git half the reward, too.”

“I ain’t no spy,” retorted Byram, “an’ I don’t want no reward outen nobody.”

“But you’re a ’ficial, same as me,” persisted the warden. “Set down onto them shingles, friend, an’ talk it over.”

Byram sat down, fingering the head of his hammer; the warden, a fat, shiny man, with tiny, greenish eyes and an unshaven jaw, took a seat beside him and began twisting a greasy black mustache.

“You an’ me’s ’ficials,” he said, with dignity, “an’ we has burdens that folks don’t know. My burden is these here folks that shoots pa’ttridges in July; your burdens is them people who don’t pay no road-tax.”

“One o’ them people is Dan McCloud, an’ I’m goin’ after that road-tax to-night,” said Byram.

“Can’t you wait till I ketch McCloud with them birds?” asked the warden, anxiously.

“No, I can’t,” snapped Byram; “I can’t wait for no such thing!” But he spoke without enthusiasm.

“Can’t we make it a kind o’ ’ficial surprise for him, then?” suggested the warden. “Me an’ you is ’ficials; your path-masters is ’ficials. We’ll all go an’ see Dan McCloud, that’s what we’ll do. How many path-masters hev you got to back you up?”

Byram’s face grew red as fire.

“One,” he said; “we ain’t a metropolipus.”

“Well, git your path-master an’ come on, anyhow,” persisted the game-warden, rising and buttoning his faded coat.

“I—I can’t,” muttered Byram.

“Ain’t you road-master?” asked Dingman, astonished.

“Yes.”

“Then, can’t you git your own path-master to do his dooty an’ execoote the statoots?”

“You see,” stammered Byram, “I app’inted a—a lady.”

“A what!” cried the game-warden.

“A lady,” repeated Byram, firmly. “Tell the truth, we ’ain’t got no path-master; we’ve got a path-mistress—Elton’s kid, you know—”

“Elton?”

“Yes.”

“What hung hisself in his orchard?”

“Yes.”

“His kid? The girl that folks say is sweet on Dan McCloud?”

A scowl crisped Byram’s face.

“It’s a lie,” he said, thickly.

After a silence Byram spoke more calmly. “Old man Elton he didn’t leave her nothin’. She done chores around an’ taught school some, down to Frog Holler. She’s that poor—nothin’ but pertaters an’ greens for to eat, an’ her a-savin’ her money for to go to one o’ them female institoots where women learn to nurse sick folks.”

“So you ’pinted her path-master to kinder he’p her along?”

“I—I kinder did.”

“She’s only a kid.”

“Only a kid. ’Bout sixteen.”

“An’ it’s against the law?”

“Kinder ’gainst it.”

The game-warden pretended to stifle a yawn.

“Well,” he said, petulantly. “I never knowed nothin’ about it—if they ask me over to Spencers.”

“That’s right! An’ I’ll he’p you do your dooty regardin’ them pa’tridges,” said Byram, quickly. “Dan McCloud’s a loafer an’ no good. When he’s drunk he raises hell down to the store. Foxville is jest plumb sick o’ him.”

“Is it?” inquired the game-warden, with interest.

“The folks is that sick o’ him that they was talkin’ some o’ runnin’ him acrost the mountains,” replied Byram; “but I jest made the boys hold their horses till I got that there road-tax outen him first.”

“Can’t you git it?”

“Naw,” drawled Byram. “I sent Billy Delany to McCloud’s shanty to collect it, but McCloud near killed Bill with a axe. That was Tuesday. Some o’ the boys was fixin’ to run McCloud outer town, but I guess most of us ain’t hankerin’ to lead the demonstration.”

“‘Fraid?”

“Ya-as,” drawled Byram.

The game-warden laboriously produced a six-shooter from his side pocket. A red bandanna handkerchief protected the shiny barrel; he unwrapped this, regarded the weapon doubtfully, and rubbed his fat thumb over the butt.

“Huh!” ejaculated Byram, contemptuously, “he’s got a repeatin’-rifle; he can cut a pa’tridge’s head off from here to that butternut ’cross the creek!”

“I’m goin’ to git into his ice-house all the same,” said the warden, without much enthusiasm.

“An’ I’m bound to git my road-tax,” said Byram, “but jest how I’m to operate I dunno.”

“Me neither,” added the warden, musingly. “God knows I hate to shoot people.”

What he really meant was that he hated to be shot at.

A young girl in a faded pink sunbonnet passed along the road, followed by a dog. She returned the road-master's awkward salutation with shy composure. A few moments later the game-warden saw her crossing the creek on the stepping-stones; her golden-haired collie dog splashed after her.

"That's a slick girl," he said, twisting his heavy black mustache into two greasy points.

Byram glanced at him with a scowl.

"That's the kid," he said.

"Eh? Elton's?"

"Yes."

"Your path-master?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Nuthin'—she's good-lookin'—for a path-master," said the warden, with a vicious leer intended for a compliment.

"What of it?" demanded Byram, harshly.

"Be you fixin' to splice with that there girl some day?" asked the game-warden, jocosely.

"What of it?" repeated Byram, with an ugly stare.

"Oh," said the warden, hastily, "I didn't know nothin' was goin' on; I wasn't meanin' to rile nobody."

"Oh, you wasn't, wasn't you?" said Byram, in a rage. "Now you can jest git your pa'tridges by yourself an' leave me to git my road-tax. I'm done with you."