Ann Boyd

Title: Ann Boyd
Author: Will N. Harben
Release Date: September 27, 2011 [EBook #37551]
Language: English
Character set encoding: UTF-8

Produced by Roger Frank, Mary Meehan, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net.

A Novel

By

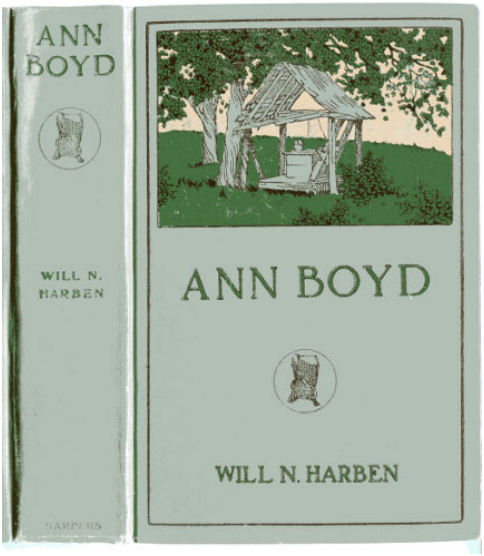
Will N. Harben

Author of

"Abner Daniel" "Pole Baker"

"The Georgians" etc.

New York and London



Harper & Brothers Publishers
1906

Published September, 1906.

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To
William Dean Howells

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'I RECKON IT WAS THE DIVINE INTENTION FOR ME AND YOU TO HAVE THIS SECRET BETWEEN US'

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Ann Boyd

I

Ann Boyd Stood at the open door of her corn-house, a square, one-storied hut made of the trunks of young pine-trees, the bark of which, being worm-eaten, was crumbling from the smooth hard-wood. She had a tin pail on her arm, and was selecting "nubbins" for her cow from the great heap of husked corn which, like a mound of golden nuggets, lay within. The strong-jawed animal could crunch the dwarfed ears, grain and corn together, when they were stirred into a mush made of wheat-bran and dish-water.

Mrs. Boyd, although past fifty, showed certain signs of having been a good-looking woman. Her features were regular, but her once slight and erect figure was now heavy, and bent as if from toil. Her hair, which in her youth had been a luxuriant golden brown, was now thinner and liberally streaked with gray. From her eyes deep wrinkles diverged, and the corners of her firm mouth were drawn downward. Her face, even in repose, wore an almost constant frown, and this habit had deeply gashed her forehead with lines that deepened when she was angry.

With her pail on her arm, she was turning back towards her cottage, which stood about a hundred yards to the right, beneath the shade of two giant oaks, when she heard her name called from the main-travelled road, which led past her farm, on to Darley, ten miles away.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Waycroft!" she exclaimed, without change of countenance, as the head and shoulders of a neighbor appeared above the rail-fence. "I couldn't imagine who it was calling me."

"Yes, it was me," the woman said, as Mrs. Boyd reached the fence and rested her pail on the top rail. "I hain't seed you since I seed you at church, Sunday. I tried to get over yesterday, but was too busy with one thing and another."

"I reckon you have had your hands full planting cotton," said Mrs. Boyd. "I didn't expect you; besides, I've had all I could do in my own field."

"Yes, my boys have been hard at it," said Mrs. Waycroft. "I don't go to the field myself, like you do. I reckon I ain't hardy enough, but keeping things for them to eat and the house in order takes all my time."

"I reckon," said Mrs. Boyd, studying the woman's face closely under the faded black poke-bonnet—"I reckon you've got something to tell me. You generally have. I wish I could not care a snap of the finger what folks say, but I'm only a natural woman. I want to hear things sometimes when I know they will make me so mad that I won't eat a bite for days."

Mrs. Waycroft looked down at the ground. "Well," she began, "I reckon you know thar would be considerable talk after what happened at meeting Sunday. You know a thing like that naturally *would* stir up a quiet community like this."

"Yes, when I think of it I can see there would be enough said, but I'm used to being the chief subject of idle talk. I've had twenty odd years of it, Mary

Waycroft, though this public row was rather unexpected. I didn't look for abuse from the very pulpit in God's house, if it *is* His. I didn't know you were there. I didn't know a friendly soul was nigh."

"Yes, I was there clean through from the opening hymn. A bolt from heaven on a sunny day couldn't have astonished me more than I was when you come in and walked straight up the middle aisle, and sat down just as if you'd been coming there regular for all them years. I reckon you had your own private reasons for making the break."

"Yes, I did." The wrinkled mouth of the speaker twitched nervously. "I'd been thinking it out, Mrs. Waycroft, for a long time and trying to pray over it, and at last I come to the conclusion that if I didn't go to church like the rest, it was an open admission that I acknowledged myself worse than others, and so I determined to go—I determined to go if it killed me."

"And to think you was rewarded that way!" answered Mrs. Waycroft; "it's a shame! Ann Boyd, it's a dirty shame!"

"It will be a long time before I darken a church door again," said Mrs. Boyd. "If I'm ever seen there it will be after I'm dead and they take me there feet foremost to preach over my body. I didn't look around, but I knew they were all whispering about me."

"You never saw the like in your life, Ann," the visitor said. "Heads were bumping together to the damagement of new spring hats, and everybody was asking what it meant. Some said that, after meeting, you was going up and give your hand to Brother Bazemore and ask him to take you back, as a member, but he evidently didn't think you had a purpose like that, or he wouldn't have opened up on you as he did. Of course, everybody thar knowed he was hitting at you."

"Oh yes, they all knew, and he had no reason for thinking I wanted to ask any favor, for he knows too well what I think of him. He hates the ground I walk on. He has been openly against me ever since he come to my house and asked me to let the Sunday-school picnic at my spring and in my grove. I reckon I gave it to him pretty heavy that day, for all I'd been hearing about what he had had to say of me had made me mad. I let him get out his proposal as politely as such a sneaking man could, and then I showed him where I stood. Here, Mrs. Waycroft, I've been treated like a dog and an outcast by every member of his church for the last twenty years, called the vilest names a woman ever bore by his so-called Christian gang, and then, when they want something I've got—something that nobody else can furnish quite as suitable for their purpose—why he saunters over to my house holding the skirts of his long coat as if afraid of contamination, and calmly demands the use of my property—property that I've slaved in the hot sun and sleet and rain to pay for with hard work. Oh, I was mad! You see, that was too much, and I reckon he never in all his life got such a tongue-lashing. When

I came in last Sunday and sat down, I saw his eyes flash, and knew if he got half an excuse he would let out on me. I was sorry I'd come then, but there was no backing out after I'd got there."

"When he took his text I knew he meant it for you," said the other woman. "I have never seen a madder man in the pulpit, never in my life. While he was talking, he never once looked at you, though he knew everybody else was doing nothing else. Then I seed you rise to your feet. He stopped to take a drink from his goblet, and you could 'a' heard a pin fall, it was so still. I reckon the rest thought like I did, that you was going right up to him and pull his hair or slap his jaws. You looked like you hardly knowed what you was doing, and, for one, I tuck a free breath when you walked straight out of the house. What you did was exactly right, as most fair-minded folks will admit, though I'm here to tell you, my friend, that you won't find fair-minded folks very plentiful hereabouts. The fair-minded ones are over there in that graveyard."

Mrs. Boyd stroked her quivering lips with her hard, brown hand, and said, softly: "I wasn't going to sit there and listen to any more of it. I'd thrown aside pride and principle and gone to do my duty to my religion, as I saw it, and thought maybe some of them—one or two, at least—would meet me part of the way, but I couldn't listen to a two hours' tirade about me and my—my misfortune. If I'd stayed any longer, I'd have spoken back to him, and that would have been exactly what he and some of the rest would have wanted, for then they could have made a case against me in court for disturbing public worship, and imposed a heavy fine. They can't bear to think that, in spite of all their persecution, I've gone ahead and paid my debts and prospered in a way that they never could do with all their sanctimony."

There was silence for a moment. A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the trees and the blades of long grass beside the road. There was a far-away tinkling of cow and sheep bells in the lush-green pastures which stretched out towards the frowning mountain against which the setting sun was levelling its rays.

"You say you haven't seen anybody since Sunday," remarked the loitering woman, in restrained, tentative tones.

"No, I've been right here. Why did you ask me that?"

"Well, you see, Ann," was the slow answer, "talking at the rate Bazemore was to your face, don't you think it would be natural for him to—to sort o' rub it on even heavier behind your back, after you got up that way and went out so sudden."

"I never thought of it, but I can see now that it would be just like him." Mrs. Boyd took a deep breath and lowered her pail to the ground. "Yes," she went on, reflectively, as she drew herself up again and leaned on the fence, "I reckon he got good and mad when I got up and left."

"Huh!" The other woman smiled. "He was so mad he could hardly speak. He fairly gulped, his eyes flashed, and he was as white as a bunch of cotton. He poured out another goblet of water that he had no idea of drinking, and his hand shook so much that the glass tinkled like a bell against the mouth of the pitcher. You must have got as far as the hitching-rack before his fury busted out. I reckon what he said was the most unbecoming thing that a stout, able-bodied man ever hurled at a defenceless woman's back."

There was another pause. Mrs. Boyd's expectant face was as hard as stone; her dark-gray eyes were two burning fires in their shadowy orbits.

"What did he say?" she asked. "You might as well tell me."

Mrs. Waycroft avoided her companion's fierce stare. "He looked down at the place where you sat, Ann, right steady for a minute, then he said: 'I'm glad that woman had the common decency to sit on a seat by herself while she was here; but I hope when meeting is over that some of you brethren will take the bench out in the woods and burn it. I'll pay for a new one out of my own pocket.'"

"Oh!" The exclamation seemed wrung from her when off her guard, and Mrs. Boyd clutched the rail of the fence so tightly that her strong nails sunk into the soft wood. "He said *that*! He said that *about me*!"

"Yes, and he ought to have been ashamed of himself," said Mrs. Waycroft; "and if he had been anything else than a preacher, surely some of the men there—men you have befriended—would not have set still and let it pass."

"But they *did* let it pass," said Mrs. Boyd, bitterly; "they did let it pass, one and all."

"Oh yes, nobody would dare, in this section, to criticise a preacher," said the other. "What any little, spindle-legged parson says goes the same as the word of God out here in the backwoods. I'd have left the church myself, but I knowed you'd want to hear what was said; besides, they all know I'm your friend."

"Yes, they all know you are the only white woman that ever comes near me. But what else did he say?"

"Oh, he had lots to say. He said he hadn't mentioned no names, but it was always the hit dog that yelped, and that you had made yourself a target by leaving as you did. He went on to say that, in his opinion, all that was proved at court against you away back there was just. He said some folks misunderstood Scripture when it come to deal with your sort and stripe. He said some argued that a church door ought always to be wide open to any sinner whatsoever, but that in your daily conduct of holding every coin so tight that the eagle on it squeals, and in giving nothing to send the Bible to the heathens, and being eternally at strife with your neighbors, you had showed, he said, that no good influence could be brought to bear on you, and that people who was really trying to live upright lives ought to shun you like they would a catching disease. He 'lowed you'd had

the same Christian chance in your bringing-up, and a better education than most gals, and had deliberately throwed it all up and gone your headstrong way. In his opinion, it would be wrong to condone your past, and tell folks you stood an equal chance with the rising generation fetched up under the rod and Biblical injunction by parents who knowed what lasting scars the fires of sin could burn in a living soul. He said the community had treated you right, in sloughing away from you, ever since you was found out, because you had never showed a minute's open repentance. You'd helt your head, he thought, if possible, higher than ever, and in not receiving the social sanction of your neighbors, it looked like you was determined to become the richest woman in the state for no other reason than to prove that wrong prospered."

The speaker paused in her recital. The listener, her face set and dark with fury, glanced towards the cottage. "Come in," she said, huskily; "people might pass along and know what we are talking about, and, somehow, I don't want to give them that satisfaction."

"That's a fact," said Mrs. Waycroft; "they say I fetch you every bit of gossip, anyway. A few have quit speaking to me. Bazemore would himself, if he didn't look to me once a month for my contribution. I hope what I've told you won't upset you, Ann, but you always say you want to know what's going on. It struck me that the whole congregation was about the most heartless body of human beings I ever saw packed together in one bunch."

"I want you to tell me one other thing," said Mrs. Boyd, tensely, as they were entering the front doorway of the cottage—"was Jane Hemingway there?"

"Oh yes, by a large majority. I forgot to tell you about her. I had my eyes on her, too, for I knowed it would tickle her nigh to death, and it did. When you left she actually giggled out loud and turned back an' whispered to the Mayfield girls. Her old, yellow face fairly shone, she was that glad, and when Bazemore went on talking about you and burning that bench, she fairly doubled up, with her handkerchief clapped over her mouth."

Mrs. Boyd drew a stiff-backed chair from beneath the dining-table and pushed it towards her guest. "There is not in hell itself, Mary Waycroft, a hatred stronger than I feel right now for that woman. She is a fiend in human shape. That miserable creature has hounded me every minute since we were girls together. As God is my judge, I believe I could kill her and not suffer remorse. There was a time when my disposition was as sweet and gentle as any girl's, but she changed it. She has made me what I am. She is responsible for it all. I might have gone on—after my—my misfortune, and lived in some sort of harmony with my kind if it hadn't been for her."

"I know that," said the other woman, as she sat down and folded her cloth bonnet in her thin hands. "I really believe you'd have been a different woman, as

you say, after—after your trouble if she had let you alone."

Mrs. Boyd seated herself in another chair near the open door, and looked out at a flock of chickens and ducks which had gathered at the step and were noisily clamoring for food.

"I saw two things that made my blood boil as I was leaving the church," said she. "I saw Abe Longley, who has been using my pasture for his cattle free of charge for the last ten years. I caught sight of his face, and it made me mad to think he'd sit there and never say a word in defence of the woman he'd been using all that time; and then I saw George Wilson, just as indifferent, near the door, when I've been favoring him and his shabby store with all my trade when I could have done better by going on to Darley. I reckon neither of those two men said the slightest thing when Bazemore advised the—the burning of the bench I'd sat on."

"Oh no, of course not!" said Mrs. Waycroft, "nobody said a word. They wouldn't have dared, Ann."

"Well, they will both hear from me," said Mrs. Boyd, "and in a way that they won't forget soon. I tell you, Mary Waycroft, this thing has reached a climax. That burning bench is going to be my war-torch. They say I've been at strife with my neighbors all along; well, they'll see now. I struggled and struggled with pride to get up to the point of going to church again, and that's the reception I got."

"It's a pity to entertain hard feelings, but I don't blame you a single bit," said Mrs. Waycroft, sympathetically. "As I look at it, you have done all you can to live in harmony, and they simply won't have it. They might be different if it wasn't for that meddlesome old Jane Hemingway. She keeps them stirred up. She and her daughter is half starving to death, while you—" Mrs. Waycroft glanced round the room at the warm rag carpet of many colors, at the neat fire-screen made of newspaper pictures pasted on a crude frame of wood, and, higher, to the mantel-piece, whose sole ornament was a Seth Thomas clock, with the Tower of London in glaring colors on the glass door—"while you don't ask anybody any odds. Instead of starving, gold dollars seem to roll up to your door of their own accord and fall in a heap. They tell me even that cotton factory which you invested in, and which Mrs. Hemingway said had busted and gone up the spout, is really doing well."

"The stock has doubled in value," said Mrs. Boyd, simply. "I don't know how to account for my making money. I reckon it's simply good judgment and a habit of throwing nothing away. The factory got to a pretty low ebb, and the people lost faith in it, and were offering their stock at half-price. My judgment told me it would pull through as soon as times improved, and I bought an interest in it at a low figure. I was right; it proved to be a fine investment."

"I was sorter sorry for Virginia Hemingway, Sunday," said Mrs. Waycroft.

"When her mother was making such an exhibition of herself in gloating over the way you was treated, the poor girl looked like she was ashamed, and pulled Jane's apron like she was trying to keep her quiet. I reckon you hain't got nothing against the girl, Ann?"

"Nothing except that she is that devilish woman's offspring," said Mrs. Boyd. "It's hard to dislike her; she's pretty—by all odds the prettiest and sweetest-looking young woman in this county. Her mother in her prime never saw the day she was anything like her. They say Virginia isn't much of a hand to gossip and abuse folks. I reckon her mother's ways have disgusted her."

"I reckon that's it," said the other woman, as she rose to go. "I know I love to look at her; she does my old eyes good. At meeting I sometimes gaze steady at her for several minutes on a stretch. Sitting beside that hard, crabbed old thing, the girl certainly does look out of place. She deserves a better fate than to be tied to such a woman. I reckon she'll be picked up pretty soon by some of these young men—that is, if Jane will give her any sort of showing. Jane is so suspicious of folks that she hardly lets Virginia out of her sight. Well, I must be going. Since my husband's death I've had my hands full on the farm; he did a lots to help out, even about the kitchen. Good-bye. I can see what I've said has made a change in you, Ann. I never saw you look quite so different."

"Yes, the whole thing has kind o' jerked me round," replied Mrs. Boyd. "I've taken entirely too much off of these people—let them run over me dry-shod; but I'll show them a thing or two. They won't let me live in peace, and now they can try the other thing." And Ann Boyd stood in the doorway and watched the visitor trudge slowly away.

"Yes," she mused, as she looked out into the falling dusk, "they are trying to drive me to the wall with their sneers and lashing tongues. But I'll show them that a worm can turn."

II

The next morning, after a frugal breakfast of milk and cornmeal pancake, prepared over an open fireplace on live coals, which reddened her cheeks and bare arms, Mrs. Boyd pinned up her skirts till their edges hung on a level with the tops of her coarse, calf-skin shoes. She then climbed over the brier-grown rail-fence

with the agility of a hunter and waded through the high, dew-soaked weeds and grass in the direction of the rising sun. The meadow was like a rolling green sea settling down to calmness after a storm. Here and there a tuft of dewy broom-sedge held up to her vision a sheaf of green hung with sparkling diamonds, emeralds, and rubies, and far ahead ran a crystal creek in and out among gracefully drooping willows and erect young reeds.

"That's his brindle heifer now," the trudging woman said, harshly. "And over beyond the hay-stack and cotton-shed is his muley cow and calf. Huh, I reckon I'll make them strike a lively trot! It will be some time before they get grass as rich as mine inside of them to furnish milk and butter for Abe Longley and his sanctimonious lay-out."

Slowly walking around the animals, she finally got them together and drove them from her pasture to the small road which ran along the foot of the mountain towards their owner's farm-house, the gray roof of which rose above the leafy trees in the distance. To drive the animals out, she had found it necessary to lower a panel of her fence, and she was replacing the rails laboriously, one by one, when she heard a voice from the woodland on the mountain-side, a tract of unproductive land owned by the man whose cows she was ejecting. It was Abe Longley himself, and in some surprise he hurried down the rugged steep, a woodman's axe on his shoulder. He was a gaunt, slender man, gray and grizzled, past sixty years of age, with a tuft of stiff beard on his chin, which gave his otherwise smooth-shaven face a forbidding expression.

"Hold on thar, Sister Boyd!" he called out, cheerily, though he seemed evidently to be trying to keep from betraying the impatience he evidently felt. "You must be getting nigh-sighted in yore old age. As shore as you are a foot high them's my cattle, an' not yourn. Why, I knowed my brindle from clean up at my wood-pile, a full quarter from here. I seed yore mistake an' hollered then, but I reckon you are gettin' deef as well as blind. I driv' 'em in not twenty minutes ago, as I come on to do my cuttin'."

"I know you did, Abe Longley," and Mrs. Boyd stooped to grasp and raise the last rail and carefully put it in place; "I know they are yours. My eyesight's good enough. I know good and well they are yours, and that is the very reason I made them hump themselves to get off of my property."

"But—but," and the farmer, thoroughly puzzled, lowered his glittering axe and stared wonderingly—"but you know, Sister Boyd, that you told me with your own mouth that, being as I'd traded off my own pasture-land to Dixon for my strip o' wheat in the bottom, that I was at liberty to use yourn how and when I liked, and, now—why, I'll be dad-blamed if I understand you one bit."

"Well, I understand what I'm about, Abe Longley, if you don't!" retorted the owner of the land. "I *did* say you could pasture on it, but I didn't say you

could for all time and eternity; and I now give you due notice if I ever see any four-footed animal of yours inside of my fences I'll run them out with an ounce of buckshot in their hides."

"Well, well, well!" Longley cried, at the end of his resources, as he leaned on his smooth axe-handle with one hand and clutched his beard with the other. "I don't know what to make of yore conduct. I can't do without the use of your land. There hain't a bit that I could rent or buy for love or money on either side of me for miles around. When folks find a man's in need of land, they stick the price up clean out of sight. I was tellin' Sue the other day that we was in luck havin' sech a neighbor—one that would do so much to help a body in a plight."

"Yes, I'm very good and kind," sneered Mrs. Boyd, her sharp eyes ablaze with indignation, "and last Sunday in meeting you and a lot of other able-bodied men sat still and let that foul-mouthed Bazemore say that even the wooden bench I sat on ought to be taken out and burned for the public good. You sat there and listened to *that*, and when he was through you got up and sung the doxology and bowed your head while that makeshift of a preacher called down God's benediction on you. If you think I'm going to keep a pasture for such a man as you to fatten your stock on, you need a guardian to look after you."

"Oh, I see," Longley exclaimed, a crestfallen look on him. "You are goin' to blame us all for what he said, and you are mad at everybody that heard it. But you are dead wrong, Ann Boyd—dead wrong. You can't make over public opinion, and you'd 'a' been better off years ago if you hadn't been so busy trying to do it, whether or no. Folks would let you alone if you'd 'a' showed a more repentant sperit, and not held your head so high and been so spiteful. I reckon the most o' your trouble—that is, the reason it's lasted so long, is due to the women-folks more than the men of the community, anyhow. You see, it sorter rubs women's wool the wrong way to see about the only prosperity a body can see in the entire county falling at the feet of the one—well, the one least expected to have sech things—the one, I mought say, who hadn't lived exactly up to the *best* precepts."

"I don't go to men like you for my precepts," the woman hurled at him, "and I haven't got any time for palavering. All I want to do is to give you due notice not to trespass on my land, and I've done that plain enough, I reckon."

Abe Longley's thin face showed anger that was even stronger than his avarice; he stepped nearer to her, his eyes flashing, his wide upper-lip twitching nervously. "Do you know," he said, "that's its purty foolhardy of you to take up a fight like that agin a whole community. You know you hain't agoin' to make a softer bed to lie on. You know, if you find fault with me fer not denouncin' Bazemore, you may as well find fault with every living soul that was under reach o' his voice, fer nobody budged or said a word in yore defence."

"I'm taking up a fight with no one," the woman said, firmly. "They can

listen to what they want to listen to. The only thing I'm going to do in future is to see that no person uses me for profit and then willingly sees me spat upon. That's all I've got to say to you." And, turning, she walked away, leaving him standing as if rooted among his trees on the brown mountain-side.

"He'll go home and tell his wife, and she'll gad about an' fire the whole community against me," Mrs. Boyd mused; "but I don't care. I'll have my rights if I die for it."

An hour later, in another dress and a freshly washed and ironed gingham bonnet, she fed her chickens from a pan of wet cornmeal dough, locked up her house carefully, fastening down the window-sashes on the inside by placing sticks above the movable ones, and trudged down the road to George Wilson's country-store at the crossing of the roads which led respectively to Springtown, hard-by on one side, and Darley, farther away on the other.

The store was a long, frame building which had once been whitewashed, but was now only a fuzzy, weather-beaten gray. As was usual in such structures, the front walls of planks rose higher than the pointed roof, and held large and elaborate lettering which might be read quite a distance away. Thereon the young store-keeper made the questionable statement that a better price for produce was given at his establishment than at Darley, where high rent, taxes, and clerk-hire had to be paid, and, moreover, that his goods were sold cheaper because, unlike the town dealers, he lived on the products from his own farm and employed no help. In front of the store, convenient alike to both roads, stood a rustic hitching-rack made of unbarked oaken poles into which railway spikes had been driven, and on which horseshoes had been nailed to hold the reins of any customer's mount. On the ample porch of the store stood a new machine for the hulling of pease, several ploughs, and a red-painted device for the dropping and covering of seed-corn. On the walls within hung various pieces of tin-ware and harnesses and saddles, and the two rows of shelving held a good assortment of general merchandise.

As Mrs. Boyd entered the store, Wilson, a blond young man with an ample mustache, stood behind the counter talking to an Atlanta drummer who had driven out from Darley to sell the store-keeper some dry-goods and notions, and he did not come to her at once, but delayed to see the drummer make an entry in his order-book; then he advanced to her.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Boyd," he smiled. "I am ordering some new prints for you ladies, and I wanted to see that he got the number of bolts down right. This is early for you to be out, isn't it? It's been many a day since I've seen you pass this way before dinner. I took a sort of liberty with you yesterday, knowing how good-natured you are. Dave Prixon was going your way with his empty wagon, and, as I was about to run low on your favorite brand of flour, I sent you a barrel

and put it on your account at the old price. I thought you'd keep it. You may have some yet on hand, but this will come handy when you get out."

"But I don't intend to keep it," replied the woman, under her bonnet, and her voice sounded harsh and crisp. "I haven't touched it. It's out in the yard where Prixon dumped it. If it was to rain on it I reckon it would mildew. It wouldn't be my loss. I didn't order it put there."

"Why, Mrs. Boyd!" and Wilson's tone and surprised glance at the drummer caused that dapper young man to prick up his ears and move nearer; "why, it's the best brand I handle, and you said the last gave you particular satisfaction, so I naturally—"

"Well, I don't want it; I didn't order it, and I don't intend to have you nor no one else unloading stuff in my front yard whenever you take a notion and want to make money by the transaction. Deduct that from my bill, and tell me what I owe you. I want to settle in full."

"But—but—" Wilson had never seemed to the commercial traveller to be so much disturbed; he was actually pale, and his long hands, which rested on the smooth surface of the counter, were trembling—"but I don't understand," he floundered. "It's only the middle of the month, Mrs. Boyd, and I never run up accounts till the end. You are not going *off*, are you?"

"Oh no," and the woman pushed back her bonnet and eyed him almost fiercely, "you needn't any of you think that. I'm going to stay right on here; but I'll tell you what I am going to do, George Wilson—I'm going to buy my supplies in the future at Darley. You see, since this talk of burning the very bench I sit on in the house of God, which you and your ilk set and listen to, why—"

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd," he broke in, "now don't go and blame me for what Brother Bazemore said when he was—"

"*Brother* Bazemore!" The woman flared up and brought her clinched hand down on the counter. "I'll never as long as I live let a dollar of my money pass into the hands of a man who calls that man brother. You sat still and raised no protest against what he said, and that ends business between us for all time. There is no use talking about it. Make out my account, and don't keep me standing here to be stared at like I was a curiosity in a side-show."

"All right, Mrs. Boyd; I'm sorry," faltered Wilson, with a glance at the drummer, who, feeling that he had been alluded to, moved discreetly across the room and leaned against the opposite counter. "I'll go back to the desk and make it out."

She stood motionless where he had left her till he came back with her account in his hand, then from a leather bag she counted out the money and paid it to him. The further faint, half-fearful apologies which Wilson ventured on making seemed to fall on closed ears, and, with the receipted bill in her bag, she

strode from the house. He followed her to the door and stood looking after her as she angrily trudged back towards her farm.

"Well, well," he sighed, as the drummer came to his elbow and stared at him wonderingly, "there goes the best and most profitable customer I've had since I began selling goods. It's made me sick at heart, Masters. I don't see how I can do without her, and yet I don't blame her one bit—not a bit, so help me God."

III

Wilson turned, and with a frown went moodily back to his desk and sat down on the high stool, gloomily eying the page in a ledger which he had just consulted.

"By George, that woman's a corker," said the drummer, sociably, as he came back and stood near the long wood-stove. "Of course, I don't know what it's all about, but she's her own boss, I'll stake good money on that."

"She's about the sharpest and in many ways the strongest woman in the state," said the store-keeper, with a sigh. "Good Lord, Masters, she's been my main-stay ever since I opened this shack, and now to think because that loud-mouthed Bazemore, who expects me to pay a good part of his salary, takes a notion to rip her up the back in meeting, why—"

"Oh, I see!" cried the drummer—"I understand it now. I heard about that at Darley. So *she's* the woman! Well, I'm glad *I* got a good look at her. I see a lot of queer things in going about over the country, but I don't think I ever ran across just her sort."

"She's had a devil of a life, Masters, from the time she was a blooming, pretty young girl till now that she is at war with everybody within miles of her. She's always been a study to me. She's treated me more like a son than anything else—doing everything in her power to help me along, buying, by George, things sometimes that I knew she didn't need because it would help me out, and now, because I didn't get up in meeting last Sunday and call that man down she holds me accountable. I don't know but what she's right. Why should I take her hard-earned money and sit still and allow her to be abused? She's simply got pride, and lots of it, and it's bad hurt."

"But what was it all about?" the drummer inquired.

"The start of it was away back when she was a girl, as I said," began the store-keeper. "You've heard of Colonel Preston Chester, our biggest planter, who lives a mile from here—old-time chap, fighter of duels, officer in the army, and all that?"

"Oh yes, I've seen him; in fact, I was at college at the State University with his son Langdon. He was a terrible fellow—very wild and reckless, full half the time, and playing poker every night. He was never known to pay a debt, even to his best friends."

"Langdon is a chip off of the old block," said Wilson. "His father was just like him when he was a young man. Between you and me, the Colonel never had a conscience; old as he now is, he will sit and laugh about his pranks right in the presence of his son. It's no wonder the boy turned out like he did. Well, away back when this Mrs. Boyd was a young and pretty girl, the daughter of honest, hard-working people, who owned a little farm back of his place, he took an idle fancy to her. I'm telling you now what has gradually leaked out in one way and another since. He evidently won her entire confidence, made her believe he was going to marry her, and, as he was a dashing young fellow, she must have fallen in love with him. Nobody knows how that was, but one thing is sure, and that is that he was seen about with her almost constantly for a whole year, and then he stopped off suddenly. The report went out that he'd made up his mind to get married to a young woman in Alabama who had a lot of money, and he did go off and bring home the present Mrs. Chester, Langdon's mother. Well, old-timers say young Ann Boyd took it hard, stayed close in at home and wasn't seen out for a couple of years. Then she come out again, and they say she was better-looking than ever and a great deal more serious and sensible. Joe Boyd was a young farmer those days, and a sort of dandy, and he fell dead in love with her and hung about her day and night, never seeming willing to let her out of his sight. Several other fellows, they say, was after her, but she seemed to like Joe the best, but nothing he'd do or say would make her accept him. I can see through it now, looking back on what has since leaked out, but nobody understood it then, for she had evidently got over her attachment for Colonel Chester, and Joe was a promising fellow, strong, good-looking, and a great beau and flirt among women, half a dozen being in love with him, but Ann simply wouldn't take him, and it was the talk of the whole county. He was simply desperate folks say, going about boring everybody he met with his love affair. Finally her mother and father and all her friends got after her to marry Joe, and she gave in. And then folks wondered more than ever why she'd delayed, for she was more in love with her husband than anybody had any reason to expect. They were happy, too. A child was born, a little girl, and that seemed to make them happier. Then Mrs. Boyd's mother and father died, and she came into the farm, and the Boyds were

comfortable in every way. Then what do you think happened?"

"I've been wondering all along," the drummer laughed. "I can see you're holding something up your sleeve."

"Well, this happened. Colonel Chester's wife was, even then, a homely woman, about as old as he was, and not at all attractive aside from her money, and marrying hadn't made him any the less devilish. They say he saw Mrs. Boyd at meeting one day and hardly took his eyes off of her during preaching. She had developed into about the most stunning-looking woman anywhere about, and knew how to dress, which was something Mrs. Chester, with all her chances, had never seemed to get onto. Well, that was the start of it, and from that day on Chester seemed to have nothing on his mind but the good looks of his old sweetheart. Folks saw him on his horse riding about where he could get to meet her, and then it got reported that he was actually forcing himself on her to such an extent that Joe Boyd was worked up over it, aided by the eternal gab of all the women in the section."

"Did Colonel Chester's wife get onto it?" the drummer wanted to know.

"It don't seem like she did," answered Wilson. "She was away visiting her folks in the South most of the time, with Langdon, who was a baby then, and it may be that she didn't care. Some folks thought she was weak-minded; she never seemed to have any will of her own, but left the Colonel to manage her affairs without a word."

"Well, go on with your story," urged the drummer.

"There isn't much more to tell about the poor woman," continued Wilson. "As I said, Chester got to forcing himself on her, and I reckon she didn't want to tell her husband what she was trying to forget for fear of a shooting scrape, in which Joe would get the worst of it; but this happened: Joe was off at court in Darley and sent word home to his wife that he was to be held all night on a jury. The man that took the message rode home alongside of Chester and told him about it. Well, I reckon, all hell broke out in Chester that night. He was a drinking man, and he tanked up, and, as his wife was away, he had plenty of liberty. Well, he simply went over to Joe Boyd's house and went in. It was about ten o'clock. My honest conviction is, no matter what others think, that she tried her level best to make him leave without rousing the neighborhood, but he wouldn't go, but sat there in the dark with his coat off, telling her he loved her more than her husband did, and that he never had loved his wife, and that he was crazy for her, and the like. How long this went on, with her imploring and praying to him to go, I don't know; but, at any rate, they both heard the gate-latch click and Joe Boyd come right up the gravel-walk. I reckon the poor woman was scared clean out of her senses, for she made no outcry, and Chester went to a window, his coat on his arm, and was climbing out when Joe, who couldn't get

in at the front door and was making for the one in the rear, met him face to face."

"Great goodness!" ejaculated the commercial traveller.

"Well, you bet, the devil was to pay," went on the store-keeper, grimly. "Chester was mad and reckless, and, being hot with liquor, and regarding Boyd as far beneath him socially, instead of making satisfactory explanations, they say he simply swore at Boyd and stalked away. Dumfounded, Boyd went inside to his miserable wife and demanded an explanation. She has since learned how to use her wits with the best in the land, but she was young then, and so, by her silence, she made matters worse for herself. He forced her to explain, and, seeing no other way out of the affair, she decided to throw herself on his mercy and make a clean breast of things her and her family had kept back all that time. Well, sir, she confessed to what had happened away back before Chester had deserted her, no doubt telling a straight story of her absolute purity and faithfulness to Boyd after marriage. Poor old Joe! He wasn't a fighting man, and, instead of following Chester and demanding satisfaction, he stayed at home that night, no doubt suffering the agony of the damned and trying to make up his mind to believe in his wife and to stand by her. As it looks now, he evidently decided to make the best of it, and might have succeeded, but somehow it got out about Chester being caught there, and that started gossip so hot that her life and his became almost unbearable. It might have died a natural death in time, but Mrs. Boyd had an enemy, Mrs. Jane Hemingway, who had been one of the girls who was in love with Joe Boyd. It seems that she never had got over Joe's marrying another woman, and when she heard this scandal she nagged and teased Joe about his babyishness in being willing to believe his wife, and told him so many lies that Boyd finally quit staying at home, sulking about in the mountains, and making trips away till he finally applied for a divorce. Ignorant and inexperienced as she was, and proud, Mrs. Boyd made no defence, and the whole thing went his way with very little publicity. But the hardest part for her to bear was when, having the court's decree to take charge of his child, Boyd came and took it away."

"Good gracious! that was tough, wasn't it?" exclaimed the drummer.

"That's what it was, and they say it fairly upset her mind. They expected her to fight like a tiger for her young, but at the time they came for it she only seemed stupefied. The little girl was only three years old, but they say Ann came in the room and said she was going to ask the child if it was willing to leave her, and they say she calmly put the question, and the baby, not knowing what she meant, said, 'Yes.' Then they say Ann talked to it as if it were a grown person, and told her to go, that she'd never give her a thought in the future, and never wanted to lay eyes on her again."

"That was pitiful, wasn't it?" said Masters. "By George, we don't dream of what is going on in the hearts of men and women we meet face to face every day.

And that's what started her in the life she's since led."

"Yes, she lived in her house like a hermit, never going out unless she absolutely had to. She had an old-fashioned loom in a shed-room adjoining her house, and night and day people passing along the road could hear her thumping away on it. She kept a lot of fine sheep, feeding and shearing them herself, and out of the wool she wove a certain kind of jean cloth which she sold at a fancy figure. I've seen wagon-loads of it pass along the road billed to a big house in Atlanta. This went on for several years, and then it was noticed that she was accumulating money. She was buying all the land she could around her house, as if to force folks as far from her as possible, and she turned the soil to a good purpose, for she knew how to work it. She hired negroes for cash, when others were paying in old clothes and scraps, and, as she went to the field with them and worked in the sun and rain like a man, she got more out of her planting than the average farmer."

"So she's really well off?" said the drummer.

"Got more than almost anybody else in the county," said Wilson. "She's got stocks in all sorts of things, and owns houses on the main street in Darley, which she keeps well rented. It seems like, not having anything else to amuse her, she turned her big brain to economy and money-making, and I've always thought she did it to hit back at the community. You see, the more she makes, the more her less fortunate neighbors dislike her, and she loves to get even as far as possible."

"And has she had no associates at all?" Masters wanted to know.

"Well, yes, there is one woman, a Mrs. Waycroft, who has always been intimate with her. She is the only—I started to say she was the only one, but there was a poor mountain fellow, Luke King, a barefoot boy who had a fine character, a big brain on him, and no education. His parents were poor, and did little for him. They say Mrs. Boyd sort of took pity on him and used to buy books and papers for him, and that she really taught him to read and write. She sent him off to school, and got him on his feet till he was able to find work in a newspaper office over at Canton, where he became a boss typesetter. I've always thought that her misfortune had never quite killed her natural impulses, for she certainly got fond of that fellow. I had an exhibition of both his regard and hers right here at the store. He'd come in to buy something or other, and was waiting about the stove one cold winter day, when a big mountain chap made a light remark about Mrs. Boyd. He was a head taller than Luke King was, but the boy sprang at him like a panther and knocked the fellow down. They had the bloodiest fight I ever saw, and it was several minutes before they could be separated. Luke had damaged the chap pretty badly, but he was able to stand, while the boy keeled over in a dead faint on the floor, bruised inside some way. The big fellow, fearing

arrest, mounted his horse and went away, and several of us were doing what we could with cold water and whiskey to bring the boy around when who should come in but Ann herself. She was passing the store, and some one told her about it. People who think she has no heart and is as cold as stone ought to have seen her that day. In all my life I never saw such a terrible face on a human being. I was actually afraid of her. She was all fury and all tenderness combined. She looked down at him in all his blood and bruises and white face, and got down on her knees by him. I saw a great big sob rise up in her, although her back was to me, and shake her from head to foot, and then she was still, simply stroking back his damp, tangled hair. 'My poor boy,' I heard her say, 'you can't fight my battles. God Himself has failed to do that, but I won't forget this—never—never!'"

"Lord, that was strong!" said Masters. "She must be wonderful!"

"She is more wonderful than her narrow-minded enemies dream of," returned the store-keeper. "You see, it's her pride that keeps her from showing her fine feelings, and it's her secluded life that makes them misunderstand her. Well, she brought her wagon and took the boy away. That was another queer thing," Wilson added. "She evidently had started to take him to her house, for she drove as far as the gate and then stopped there to study a moment, and finally turned round and drove him to the poor cabin his folks lived in. You see, she was afraid that even that would cause talk, and it would. Old Jane Hemingway would have fed on that morsel for months, as unreasonable as it would have been. Ann sent a doctor, though, and every delicacy the market afforded, and the boy was soon out. It wasn't long afterwards that Luke King went to college at Knoxville, and now he's away in the West somewhere. His mother, after his father's death, married a trifling fellow, Mark Bruce, and that brought on some dispute between her and her son, who had tried to keep her from marrying such a man. They say Luke told her if she did marry Bruce he'd go away and never even write home, and so far, they say, he has kept his word. Nobody knows where he is or what he's doing unless it is Mrs. Boyd, and she never talks. I can't keep from thinking he's done well, though, for he had a big head on him and a lot of determination."

"And this Mrs. Hemingway, her enemy," said the drummer, tentatively, "you say she was evidently the woman's rival at one time. But it seems she married some one else."

"Oh yes, she suddenly accepted Tom Hemingway, an old bachelor, who had been trying to marry her for a long time. Most people thought she did it to hide her feelings when Joe Boyd got married. She treated Tom like a dog, making him do everything she wanted, and he was daft about her till he died, just a couple of weeks after his child was born, who, by-the-way, has grown up to be the prettiest girl in all the country, and that's another feature in the story," the store-keeper smiled. "You see, Mrs. Boyd looks upon old Jane as the prime cause of her losing

her *own* child, and I understand she hates the girl as much as she does her mother."

A man had come into the store and stood leaning against a show-case on the side devoted to groceries.

"There's a customer," said the drummer; "don't let me keep you, old man; you know you've got to look at my samples some time to-day."

"Well, I'll go see what he wants," said Wilson, "and then I'll look through your line, though I don't feel a bit like it, after losing the best regular customer I have."

The drummer had opened his sample-case on the desk when Wilson came back.

"You say the woman's husband took the child away," remarked the drummer; "did he go far?"

"They first settled away out in Texas," replied Wilson, "but Joe Boyd, not having his wife's wonderful head to guide him, failed at farming there, and only about three years ago he came back to this country and bought a little piece of land over in Gilmer—the county that joins this one."

"Oh, so near as that! Then perhaps she has seen her daughter and—"

"Oh no, they've never met," said Wilson, as he took a sample pair of men's suspenders from the case and tested the elastic by stretching it between his hands. "I know that for certain. She was in here one morning waiting for one of her teams to pass to take her to Darley, when a peddler opened his pack of tin-ware and tried to sell her some pieces I was out of. He heard me call her by name, and, to be agreeable, he asked her if she was any kin to Joe Boyd and his daughter, over in Gilmer. I could have choked the fool for his stupidity. I tried to catch his eye to warn him, but he was intent on selling her a bill, and took no notice of anything else. I saw her stare at him steady for a second or two, then she seemed to swallow something, and said, 'No, they are no kin of mine.' And then what did the skunk do but try to make capital out of that. 'Well, you may be glad,' he said, 'that they are no kin, for they are as near the ragged edge as any folks I ever ran across.' He went on to say he stayed overnight at Boyd's cabin and that they had hardly anything but streak-o'-lean-streak-o'-fat meat and corn-bread to offer him, and that the girl had the worst temper he'd ever seen. Mrs. Boyd, I reckon, to hide her face, was looking at some of the fellow's pans, and he seemed to think he was on the right line, and so he kept talking. Old Joe, he said, had struck him as a good-natured, lazy sort of come-easy-go-easy mountaineer, but the girl looked stuck up, like she thought she was some better than appearances would indicate. He said she was a tall, gawky sort of girl, with no good looks to brag of, and he couldn't for the life of him see what she had to make her so proud.

"I wondered what Mrs. Boyd was going to do, but she was equal to that

emergency, as she always has been in everything. She held one of his pans up in the light and tilted her bonnet back on her head, I thought, to let me see she wasn't hiding anything, and said, as unconcerned as if he'd never mentioned a delicate subject. 'Look here,' she said, thumping the bottom of the pan with her finger, 'if you expect to do any business with *me* you'll have to bring copper-bottom ware to me. I don't buy shoddy stuff from any one. These pans will rust through in two months. I'll take half a dozen, but I'm only doing it to pay you for the time spent on me. It is a bad investment for any one to buy cheap, stamped ware.'"

IV

Mrs. Jane Hemingway, Ann Boyd's long and persistent enemy, sat in the passage which connected the two parts of her house, a big, earthernware churn between her sharp knees, firmly raising and lowering the bespattered dasher with her bony hands. She was a woman past fifty; her neck was long and slender, and the cords under the parchment-like skin had a way of tightening, like ropes in the seams of a tent, when she swallowed or spoke. Her dark, smoothly brushed hair was done up in the tightest of balls behind her head, and her brown eyes were easily kindled to suspicion, fear, or anger.

Her brother-in-law, Sam Hemingway, called "Hem" by his intimates, slouched in from the broad glare of the mid-day sun and threw his coat on a chair. Then he went to the shelf behind the widow, and, pouring some water into a tin pan from a pail, he noisily bathed his perspiring face and big, red hands. As he was drying himself on the towel which hung on a wooden roller on the weather-boarding of the wall, Virginia Hemingway, his niece, came in from the field bringing a pail of freshly gathered dewberries. In appearance she was all that George Wilson had claimed for her. Slightly past eighteen, she had a wonderful complexion, a fine, graceful figure, big, dreamy, hazel eyes, and golden-brown hair, and, which was rare in one of her station, she was tastily dressed. She smiled as she showed her uncle the berries and playfully "tickled" him under the chin.

"See there!" she chuckled.

"Pies?" he said, with an unctuous grin, as he peered down into her pail.

"I thought of you while I was gathering them," she nodded. "I'm going to try to make them just as you like them, with red, candied bars criss-crossing."

"Nothing in the pie-line can hold a candle to the dewberry unless it's the cherry," he chuckled. "The stones of the cherries sorter hold a fellow back, but I manage to make out. I et a pie once over at Darley without a stone in it, and you bet your life it was a daisy."

He went into his room for his tobacco, and Virginia sat down to stem her berries. He returned in a moment, leaning in the doorway, drawing lazily at his pipe. The widow glanced up at him, and rested her dasher on the bottom of the churn.

"I reckon folks are still talking about Ann Boyd and her flouncing out of meeting like she did," the widow remarked. "Well, that *was* funny, but what was the old thing to do? It would take a more brazen-faced woman than she is, if such a thing exists, to sit still and hear all he said."

"Yes, they are still hammering at the poor creature's back," said Sam, "and that's one thing I can't understand, nuther. She's got dead loads of money—in fact, she's independent of the whole capoodle of you women. Now, why don't she kick the dust o' this spot off of her heels an' go away whar she can be respected, an', by gosh! be let alone *one* minute 'fore she dies. They say she's the smartest woman in the state, but that don't show it—living on here whar you women kin throw a rock at her every time she raises her head above low ground."

"I've wondered why she don't go off, too," the widow said, as she peered down at the floating lumps of yellow butter in the snowy depths of her vessel, and deftly twirled her dasher in her fingers to make them "gather"; "but, Sam, haven't you heard that persons always want to be on the spot where they went wrong? I think she's that way. And when the facts leaked out on her, and her husband repudiated her and took the child away, she determined to stay here and live it down. But instead of calling humility and submission to her aid, she turned in to stinting and starving to make money, and now she flaunts her prosperity in our faces, as if *that* is going to make folks believe any more in her. Money's too easily made in evil ways for Christian people to bow before it, and possessions ain't going to keep such men as Brother Bazemore from calling her down whenever she puts on her gaudy finery and struts out to meeting. It was a bold thing for her to do, anyway, after berating him as she did when he went to her to get the use of her grove for the picnic."

"They say she didn't know Bazemore was to preach that day," said Sam. "She'd heard that the presiding elder was due here, and I'm of the opinion that she took that opportunity to show you all she wasn't afraid to appear in public."

Virginia Hemingway threw a handful of berry-stems out into the sunshine in the yard. "She's a queer woman," she said, innocently, "like a character in a

novel, and, somehow, I don't believe she is as bad as people make her out. I never told either of you, but I met her yesterday down on the road."

"*You* met her!" cried Mrs. Hemingway, aghast.

"Yes, she was going home from her sugar-mill with her apron full of fresh eggs that she'd found down at her hay-stacks, and just as she got close to me her dress got caught on a snag and she couldn't get it loose. I stopped and unfastened it, and she actually thanked me, though, since I was born, I've never seen such a queer expression on a human face. She was white and red and dark as a thunder-cloud all at once. It looked like she hated me, but was trying to be polite for what I'd done."

"You had no business touching her dirty skirt," the widow flared up. "The next thing you know it will go out that you and her are thick. It would literally ruin a young girl to be associated with a woman of that stamp. What on earth could have possessed you to—"

"Oh, come off!" Sam laughed. "Why, you know you've always taught Virgie to be considerate of old folks, and she was just doing what she ought to have done for any old nigger mammy."

"I looked at it that way," said the girl, "and I'm not sorry, for I don't want her to think I hate her, for I don't. I think she has had a hard life, and I wish it were in my power to help her out of her trouble."

"Virginia, what are you talking about?" cried Mrs. Hemingway. "The idea of your standing up for that woman, when—"

"Well, Luke King used to defend her," Virginia broke in, impulsively, "and before he went away you used to admit he was the finest young man in the county. I've seen him almost shed tears when he'd tell about what she'd done for him, and how tender-hearted and kind she was."

"Tender-hearted nothing!" snapped Mrs. Hemingway, under a deep frown. "Luke King was the only person that went about her, and she tried to work on his sympathies for some purpose or other. Besides, nobody knows what ever become of him; he may have gone to the dogs by this time; it looks like somebody would have heard of him if he had come to any good in the five years he's been away."

"Somehow, I think she knows where he is," Virginia said, thoughtfully, as she rose to put her berries away.

When she had gone, Sam laughed softly. "It's a wonder to me that Virgie don't know whar Luke is, *herself*," he said. "I 'lowed once that the fellow liked her powerful; but I reckon he thought she was too young, or didn't want to take the matter further when he was as poor as Job's turkey and had no sort of outlook ahead."

"I sort o' thought that, too," the widow admitted, "but I didn't want Virginia to encourage him when he was accepting so much from that woman."

Sam laughed again as he knocked the ashes from his pipe and cleaned the bowl with the tip of his finger. "Well, '*that woman*,' as you call her, is a power in the land that hates her," he said. "She knows how to hit back from her fortress in that old farm-house. George Wilson knows what it means not to stand by her in public, so does Abe Longley, that has to drive his cattle to grass two miles over the mountains. Jim Johnston, who was dead sure of renting her northeast field again next year, has been served with a notice to vacate, and now, if the latest news can be depended on, she's hit a broad lick at half the farmers in the valley, and, while I'm a sufferer with the balance, I don't blame her one bit. I'd 'a' done the same pine-blank thing years ago if I'd stood in her shoes."

"What's she done *now*?" asked the woman at the churn, leaning forward eagerly.

"Done? Why, she says she's tired o' footing almost the entire wheat-threshing bill for twenty measly little farmers. You know she's been standing her part of the expenses to get the Empire Company to send their steam thresher here, and her contribution amounted to more than half. She's decided, by hunky, to plant corn and cotton exclusively next year, and so notified the Empire Company. They can't afford to come unless she sows wheat, and they sent a man clean from Atlanta to argue the matter with her, but she says she's her own boss, an' us farmers who has land fittin' for nothing but wheat is going to get badly left in the lurch. Oh, Bazemore opened the battle agin her, and you-uns echoed the war-cry, an' the battle is good on. I'll go without flour biscuits and pie-crust, but the fight will be interesting. The Confed' soldiers made a purty good out along about '61, an' they done it barefooted an' on hard-tack an' water. If you folks are bent on devilling the hide off of the most influential woman in our midst, just because her foot got caught in the hem of her skirt an' tripped her up when she was a thoughtless young girl, I reckon us men will have to look on an' say nothing."

"She *did* slip up, as you say," remarked the widow, "and she's been a raging devil ever since."

"Ay! an' who made her one? Tell me that." Sam laughed. "You may not want to hear it, Jane, but some folks hint that you was at the bottom of it—some think lazy Joe Boyd would have stayed on in that comfortable boat, with a firm hand like hern at the rudder, if you hadn't ding-donged at him and told tales to him till he had to pull out."

"Huh! They say that, do they?" The widow frowned as she turned and looked straight at him. "Well, let 'em. What do I care? I didn't want to see as good-hearted a man as he was hoodwinked."

"I reckon not," Sam said, significantly, and he walked out of the passage down towards the barn. "Huh!" he mused, as he strode along crumbling leaf-

tobacco of his own growing and filling his pipe. "I come as nigh as pease tellin' the old woman some'n' else folks say, an' that is that she was purty nigh daft about Joe Boyd, once upon a time, and that dashing Ann cut her out as clean as a whistle. I'll bet that 'ud make my sister-in-law so dern hot she'd blister from head to foot."

V

That afternoon Jane Hemingway went out to the barn-yard. For years she had cultivated a habit of going thither, obviously to look after certain hens that nested there, but in reality, though she would not have admitted it even to herself, she went because from that coign of vantage she could look across her enemy's fertile acres right into the lone woman's doorway and sometimes catch a glimpse of Ann at work. There was one unpleasant contingency that she sometimes allowed her mind to dwell upon, and that was that Joe Boyd and his now grown daughter might, inasmuch as Ann's wealth and power were increasing in direct ratio to the diminution of their own, eventually sue for pardon and return. That had become Jane's nightmare, riding her night and day, and she was not going to let any living soul know the malicious things she had done and said to thwart it. Vaguely she regarded the possible coming-back of the father and daughter as her own undoing. She knew the pulse of the community well enough to understand that nothing could happen which would so soon end the war against Ann Boyd as such a reconciliation. Yes, it would amount to her own undoing, for people were like sheep, and the moment one ran to Ann Boyd's side in approval, all would flock around her, and it would only be natural for them to turn against the one woman who had been the primal cause of the separation.

Jane was at the bars looking out on a little, seldom-used road which ran between her land and Ann's, when her attention was caught by a man with a leather hand-bag strapped on his shoulders trudging towards her. He was a stranger, and his dusty boots and trousers showed that he had walked a long distance. As he drew near he took off his straw hat and bowed very humbly, allowing his burden to swing round in front of him till he had eased it down on the turf at his feet.

"Good-evening, madam," he said. "I'd like to show you something if you've got the time to spare. I've made so many mountain folks happy, and at such a

small outlay, that I tell you they are glad to have me come around again. This is a new beat to me, but I felt it my duty to widen out some in the cause of human suffering."

"What is it you've got?" Jane asked, smiling at his manner of speaking, as he deftly unlocked his valise and opened it out before her.

"It's a godsend, and that's no joke," said the peddler. "I've got a household liniment here at a quarter for a four-ounce flask that no family can afford to be without. You may think I'm just talking because it's my business, but, madam, do you know that the regular druggists all about over this country are in a combine not to sell stuff that will keep people in good trim? And why? you may ask me. Why? Because, I say, that it would kill the'r business. Go to one, I dare you, or to a doctor in regular practice, and they will mix up chalk and sweetened water and tell you you've got a serious internal complaint, and to keep coming day after day till your pile is exhausted, and then they may tell you the truth and ask you to let 'em alone. I couldn't begin, madam—I don't know your name—I say I couldn't begin to tell you the wonderful cures this liniment has worked all over this part of the state."

"What is it good for?" Jane Hemingway's face had grown suddenly serious. The conversation had caused her thoughts to revert to a certain secret fear she had entertained for several months.

"Huh—good for?—excuse me, but you make me laugh," the peddler said, as he held a bottle of the dark fluid up before her; "it's good for so many things that I could hardly get through telling you between now and sundown. It's good for anything that harms the blood, skin, or muscles. It's even good for the stomach, although I don't advise it taken internally, for when it's rubbed on the outside of folks they have perfect digestions; but what it is best for is sprains, lameness, or any skin or blood eruption. Do you know, madam, that you'd never hear of so many cancers and tumors, that are dragging weary folks to early graves hereabouts, if this medicine had been used in time?"

"Cancer?" The widow's voice had fallen, and she looked towards Ann Boyd's house, and then more furtively over her shoulder towards her own, as if to be sure of not being observed. "That's what I've always wondered at, how is anybody to know whether a—a thing is a cancer or not without going to a doctor, and, as you say, even *then* they may not tell you the truth? Mrs. Twiggs, over the mountain, was never let know she had her cancer till a few months before it carried her off. The family and the doctor never told her the truth. The doctor said it couldn't be cured, and to know would only make the poor thing brood over it and be miserable."

"That's it, now," said the medicine-vender; "but if it had been taken at the start and rubbed vigorously night and morning, it would have melted away under

this fluid like dirt under lye-soap and warm water. Madam, a cancer is nothing more nor less than bad circulation at a certain point where blood stands till it becomes foul and putrefies. I can—excuse me if I seem bold, but long experience in handling men and women has learnt me to understand human nature. Most people who are afraid they've got cancers generally show it on their faces, an' I'll bet my hat and walk bareheaded to the nighest store to get another that you are troubled on that line—a little bit, anyway."

Jane made no denial, though her thin face worked as she strove adequately to meet his blunt assertion. "As I said just now"—she swallowed, and avoided his covetous glance—"how is a person really to *know*?"

"It's a mighty easy matter for *me* to tell," said the peddler, and he spoke most reassuringly. "Just you let me take a look at the spot, if it's no trouble to you, and I may save you a good many sleepless nights. You are a nervous, broody sort of a woman yourself, and I can see by your face that you've let this matter bother you a lots."

"You think you could tell if you—you looked at it?" Jane asked, tremulously.

"Well, if I didn't it would be the first case I ever diagnosed improperly. Couldn't we go in the house?"

Jane hesitated. "I think I'd rather my folks didn't know—that is, of course, if it *is* one. My brother-in-law is a great hand to talk, and I'd rather it wasn't noised about. If there's one thing in the world I don't like it's the pity and the curiosity of other folks as to just about how long I'm going to hold out."

"I've seed a lots o' folks like you." The peddler smiled. "But, if you don't mind tellin', where's the thing located?"

"It's on my breast," Jane gulped, undecidedly, and then, the first bridge having been crossed, she unbuttoned her dress at the neck with fumbling fingers and pulled it down. "Maybe you can see as well here as anywhere."

"Oh yes, never was a better light for the business," said the vender, and he leaned forward, his eyes fixed sharply on the spot exposed between the widow's bony fingers. For a moment he said nothing. The woman's yellow breast lay flat and motionless. She scarcely breathed; her features were fixed by grim, fearful expectancy. He looked away from her, and then stooped to his pack to get a larger bottle. "I'm glad I happened to strike you just when I did, madam," he said. "Thar ain't no mistaking the charactericstics of a cancer when it's in its first stages. That's certainly what you've got, but I'm telling you God's holy truth when I say that by regular application and rubbing this stuff in for a month, night and morning, that thing will melt away like mist before a hot sun."

"So it really *is* one!" Jane breathed, despondently.

"Yes, it's a little baby one, madam, but this will nip it in the bud and save your life. It will take the dollar size, but you know it's worth it."

"Oh yes, I'll take it," Jane panted. "Put it there in the fence-corner among the weeds, and I'll come out to-night and get it."

"All right," and the flask tinkled against a stone as it slid into its snug hiding-place among the Jamestown weeds nestling close to the rotting rails.

"Here's your money. I reckon we'd better not stand here." And Jane gave it to him with quivering fingers. He folded the bill carefully, thrust it into a greasy wallet, and stooped to close his bag and throw the strap over his shoulder.

"Now I'm going on to the next house," he said. "They tell me a curious sort of human specimen lives over thar—old Ann Boyd. Do you know, madam, I heard of that woman's tantrums at Springtown night before last, and at Barley yesterday. Looks like you folks hain't got much else to do but poke at her like a turtle on its back. Well, she must be a character! I made up my mind I'd take a peep at 'er. You know a travelling physician like I am can get at folks that sort o' hide from the general run."

Jane Hemingway's heart sank. Why had it not occurred to her that he might go on to Ann Boyd's and actually reveal her affliction? Such men had no honor or professional reputation to defend. Suddenly she was chilled from head to foot by the thought that the peddler might even boast of her patronage to secure that of her neighbor—that was quite the method of all such persons. It was on her tongue actually to ask him not to go to Ann Boyd's house at all, but her better judgment told her that such a request would unduly rouse the man's curiosity, so she offered a feeble compromise.

"Look here," she said, "I want it understood between us that—that you are to tell nobody about me—about my trouble. That woman over there is at outs with all her neighbors, and—and she'd only be glad to—"

Jane saw her error too late. It appeared to her now in the bland twinkle of amused curiosity in the stranger's face.

"I understand—I understand; you needn't be afraid of me," the man said, entirely too lightly, Jane thought, for such a grave matter, and he pushed back the brim of his hat and turned. "Remember the directions, madam, a good brisk rubbing with a flannel rag—red if you've got it—soaked in the medicine, twice a day. Good-evening; I'll be off. I've got to strike some house whar they will let me stay all night. I know that old hag won't keep me, from all I hear."

The widow leaned despondently against the fence and watched him as he ploughed his way through the tall grass and weeds of the intervening marsh towards Ann Boyd's house. The assurance that the spot on her breast was an incipient cancer was bad enough without the added fear that her old enemy would possibly gloat over her misfortune. She remained there till she saw the vender approach Ann's door. For a moment she entertained the mild hope that he would be repulsed, but he was not.

She saw Ann's portly form framed in the doorway for an instant, and then the peddler opened the gate and went into the house. Heavy of heart, the grim watcher remained at the fence for half an hour, and then the medicine-vender came out and wended his way along the dusty road towards Wilson's store.

Jane went into the house and sat down wearily. Virginia was sewing at a western window, and glanced at her in surprise.

"What's the matter, mother?" she inquired, solicitously.

"I don't know as there is anything wrong," answered Jane, "but I am sort o' weak. My knees shake and I feel kind o' chilly. Sometimes, Virginia, I think maybe I won't last long."

"That's perfectly absurd," said the girl. "Don't you remember what Dr. Evans said last winter when he was talking about the constitutions of people? He said you belonged to the thin, wiry, raw-boned kind that never die, but simply stay on and dry up till they are finally blown away."

"He's not a graduated doctor," said Jane, gloomily. "He doesn't know everything."

VI

A week from that day, one sultry afternoon near sunset, a tall mountaineer, very poorly clad, and his wife came past Wilson's store. They paused to purchase a five-cent plug of tobacco, and then walked slowly along the road in a dust that rose as lightly as down at the slightest foot-fall, till they reached Ann Boyd's house.

"I'll stay out here at the gate," the man said. "You'll have to do all the talking. As Willard said, she will do more for Luke King's mother than she would for anybody else, and you remember how she backed the boy up in his objections to me as a step-daddy."

"Well, I'll do what I can," the woman said, plaintively. "You stay here behind the bushes. I don't blame you for not wanting to ask a favor of her, after all she said when we were married. She may spit in my face—they say she's so cantankerous."

Seating himself on a flat stone, the man cut the corner off of his tobacco-

plug and began to chew it, while his wife, a woman about sixty-five years of age, and somewhat enfeebled, opened the gate and went in. Mrs. Boyd answered the gentle rap and appeared at the door.

"Howdy do, Mrs. Boyd," the caller began. "I reckon old age hasn't changed me so you won't know me, although it's been ten years since me 'n' you met. I'm Mrs. Mark Bruce, that used to be Mrs. King. I'm Luke's mother, Mrs. Boyd."

"I knew you when you and Mark Bruce turned the bend in the road a quarter of a mile away," said Ann, sharply, "but, the Lord knows, I didn't think you'd have the cheek to open my front gate and stalk right into my yard after all you've said and done against me."

The eyes of the visitor fell to her worn shoe, through which her bare toes were protruding. "I had no idea I'd ever do such a thing myself until about two hours ago," she said, firmly; "but folks will do a lots, in a pinch, that they won't ordinarily. You may think I've come to beg you to tell me if you know where Luke is, but I hain't. Of course, I'd like to know—any mother would—but he said he'd never darken a door that his step-father went through, and I told 'im, I did, that he could go, and I'd never ask about 'im. Some say you get letters from him. I don't know—that, I reckon, is your business."

"You didn't come to inquire about your boy, then?" Ann said, curiously, "and yet here you are."

"It's about your law-suit with Gus Willard that I've come, Ann. He told you, it seems, that he was going to fight it to the bitter end, and he *did* call in a lawyer, but the lawyer told him thar was no two ways about it. If his mill-pond backed water on your land to the extent of covering five acres, why, you could make him shet the mill up, even if he lost all his custom. Gus sees different now, like most of us when our substance is about to take wings and fly off. He sees now that you've been powerful indulgent all them years in letting him back water on your property to its heavy damagement, and he says, moreover, that, to save his neck from the halter, he cayn't blame you fer the action. He says he *did* uphold Brother Bazemore in what he said about burning the bench that was consecrated till you besmirched it, and he admits he talked it here an' yan considerably. He said, an' Gus was mighty nigh shedding tears, in the sad plight he's in, that you had the whip in hand now, and that his back was bare, an' ef you chose to lay on the lash, why, he was powerless, for, said he, he struck the fust lick at you, but he was doin' it, he thought, for the benefit of the community."

"But," and the eyes of Ann Boyd flashed ominously, "what have *you* come for? Not, surely, to stand in my door and preach to me."

"Oh no, Ann, that hain't it," said the caller, calmly. "You see, Gus is at the end of his tether; he's in an awful fix with his wife and gals in tears, and he's plumb desperate. He says you hain't the kind of woman to be bent one way or

another by begging—that is, when you are a-dealing with folks that have been out open agin you; but now, as it stands, this thing is agoing to damage me and Mark awfully, fer Mark gets five dollars a month for helping about the mill on grinding days, and when the mill shets down he'll be plumb out of a job."

"Oh, I see!" and Ann Boyd smiled impulsively.

"Yes, that's the way of it," went on Mrs. Bruce, "and so Gus, about two hours ago, come over to our cabin with what he called his only hope, and that was for me to come and tell you about Mark's job, and how helpless we'll be when it's gone, and that—well, Ann, to put it in Gus's own words, he said you wouldn't see Luke King's mother suffer as I will have to suffer, for, Ann, we are having the hardest time to get along in the world. I was at meeting that day, and I thought what Bazemore said was purty hard on any woman, but I was mad at you, and so I set and listened. I'm no coward. If you do this thing you'll do it of your own accord. I cayn't get down on my knees to you, and I won't."

"I see." Ann's face was serious. She looked past the woman down the dust-clouded road along which a man was driving a herd of sheep. "I don't want you on your knees to me, Cynthia Bruce. I want simple justice. I was doing the best I could when Bazemore and the community began to drive me to the wall, then I determined to have my rights—that's all; I'll have my legal rights for a while and see what impression it will make on you all. You can tell Gus Willard that I will give him till the first of July to drain the water from my land, and if he doesn't do it he will regret it."

"That's all you'll say, then?" said the woman at the step.

"That's all I'll say."

"Well, I reckon you are right, Ann Boyd. I sorter begin to see what you've been put to all on account of that one false step away back when, I reckon, like all gals, you was jest l'arnin' what life was. Well, as that's over and done with, I wonder if you would mind telling me if you know anything about Luke. Me 'n' him split purty wide before he left, and I try to be unconcerned about him, but I cayn't. I lie awake at night thinking about him. You see, all the rest of my children are around me."

"I'll say this much," said Ann, in a softened tone, "and that is that he is well and doing well, but I don't feel at liberty to say more."

"Well, it's a comfort to know *that* much," said Mrs. Bruce, softly. "And it's nothing but just to you for me to say that it's due to you. The education you paid fer is what gave him his start in life, and I'll always be grateful to you fer it. It was something I never could have given him, and something none of the rest of my children got."

Mrs. Boyd stood motionless in the door, her eyes on the backs of the pathetic pair as they trudged slowly homeward, the red sunset like a world in con-

flagration beyond them.

"Yes, she's the boy's mother," she mused, "and the day will come when Luke will be glad I helped her, as he would if he could see the poor thing now. Gus Willard is no mean judge of human nature. I'll let him stew awhile, but the mill may run on. I can't fight *everybody*. Gus Willard is my enemy, but he's open and above-board."

VII

One morning about the first of May, Virginia Hemingway went to Wilson's store to purchase some sewing-thread she needed. The long, narrow room was crowded with farmers and mountaineers, and Wilson had called in several neighbors to help him show and sell his wares. Langdon Chester was there, a fine double-barrelled shot-gun and fishing-rod under his arm, wearing a slouch hat and hunter's suit, his handsome face well tanned by exposure to the sun in the field and on the banks of the mountain streams. He was buying a reel and a metallic fly that worked with a spring and was set like a trap. Fred Masters was there, lounging about behind the counters, and now and then "making a sale" of some small article from the shelves or show-cases. He had opened his big sample trunks at the hotel in Springtown, half a mile distant, and a buggy and pair of horses were at the door, with which he intended to transport the storekeeper to his sample-room as soon as business became quieter. Seeing the store so crowded, Virginia only looked in at the door and walked across the street and sat down in Mrs. Wilson's sitting-room to rest and wait for a better opportunity to get what she had come for.

Langdon Chester had recognized an old school-mate in the drummer, but he seemed not to care to show marked cordiality. However, the travelling man was no stickler for formality. He came from behind the counter and cordially slapped Langdon on the shoulder. "How are you, old chap?" he asked; "still rusticating on the old man's bounty, eh? When you left college you were going into the law, and soar like an eagle with the worm of Liberty in its beak skyward through the balmy air of politics, by the aid of all the 'pulls' of influential kin and money, but here you are as easy-going as of old."

"It was the only thing open to me," Chester said, with a flush of vexation.

"You see, my father's getting old, Masters, and the management of our big place here was rather too much for him, and so—"

"Oh, I see!" And the drummer gave his old friend a playful thumb-thrust in the ribs. "And so you are helping him out with that gun and rod? Well, that's *one* way of doing business, but it is far from my method—the method that is forced on me, my boy. When you get to a town on the four-o'clock afternoon train and have to get five sample trunks from the train to a hotel, scrap like the devil over who gets to use the best sample-room, finally buy your way in through porters as rascally as you are, then unpack, see the best man in town, sell him, or lose your job, pack again, trunks to excess-baggage scales—more cash and tips, and lies as to weight—and you roll away at midnight and try to nap sitting bolt-upright in the smoker—well, I say, you won't find that sort of thing in the gun-and-fishing-pole line. It's the sort of work, Chester, that will make you wish you were dead. Good Lord, I don't blame you one bit. In England they would call you one of the gentry, and, being an only son, you could tie up with an heiress and so on to a green old age of high respectability; but as for me, well, I had to dig, and I went in for it."

"I had no idea you would ever become a drummer," Langdon said, as he admired his friend's attire. Such tasty ties, shirts, and bits of jewelry that Masters wore, and such well brushed and pressed clothes were rarely seen in the country, and Langdon still had the good ideas of dress he had brought from college, and this was one extravagance his father cheerfully allowed him.

"It seemed the best thing for me," smiled the drummer. "I have a cousin who is a big stockholder in my house, and he got the job for me. I've been told several times by other members of the firm that I'd have been fired long ago but for that family pull. I've made several mistakes, sold men who were rotten to the core, and caused the house to lose money in several instances, and, well—poker, old man. Do you still play?"

"Not often, out here," said Langdon; "this is about the narrowest, church-going community you ever struck. I suppose you have a good deal of fun travelling about."

"Oh yes, fun enough, of its kind." Masters laughed. "Like a sailor in every port, a drummer tries to have a sweetheart in every town. It makes life endurable; sometimes the dear little things meet you at the train with sweet-smelling flowers and embroidered neckties so long that you have to cut off the ends or double them. Have a cigar—they don't cost me a red cent; expense account stretches like elastic, you know. My house kicked once against my drinking and cigar entries, and I said, all right, I'd sign the pledge and they could tie a blue ribbon on me, if they said the word, but that half my trade, I'd discovered, never could see prices right except through smoke and over a bottle. Then, what do you think?

Old man Creighton, head of the firm, deacon in a swell joss-house in Atlanta, winked, drew a long face, and said: 'You'll have to give the boy *some* freedom, I reckon. We are in this thing to pull it through, boys, and sometimes we may have to fight fire with fire or be left stranded.'"

"He's an up-to-date old fellow," Chester laughed. "I've seen him. He owns some fine horses. When a man does that he's apt to be progressive, no matter how many times he says his prayers a day."

"Yes, for an old duck, Creighton keeps at the head of the procession. I can generally get him to help me out when I get in a tight. He thinks I'm a good salesman. Once, by the skin of my teeth, I sold the champion bill in the history of the house. A new firm was setting up in business in Augusta, and I stocked three floors for them. It tickled old man Creighton nearly to death, for they say he walked the floor all night when the thing was hanging fire. There was a pile of profit in it, and it meant more, even, than the mere sale, for Nashville, Memphis, New Orleans, and Louisville men were as thick as flies on the spot. When I wired the news in the firm did a clog-dance in the office, and they were all at the train to meet me, with plug-hats on, and raised sand generally. Old Creighton drew me off to one side and wanted to know how I did it. I told him it was just a trick of mine, and tried to let it go at that, but he pushed me close, and I finally told him the truth. It came about over a game of poker I was playing with the head of the new firm. If I lost I was to pay him a hundred dollars. If he lost I was to get the order. He lost. I think I learned that 'palming' trick from you."

Langdon laughed impulsively as he lighted the drummer's cigar. "And what did the old man say to that?" he inquired.

"It almost floored him." Masters smiled. "He laid his hand on my shoulder. His face was as serious as I've seen it when he was praying in the amen corner at church, but the old duck's eyes were blazing. 'Fred,' he said, 'I want you to promise me to let that one thing alone—but, good gracious, if Memphis had sold that bill it would have hurt us awfully!'"

"You were always fond of the girls," Chester remarked as he smoked. "Well, out here in the country is no place for them."

"No place for them! Huh, that's *your* idea, is it? Well, let me tell you, Chester, I saw on the road as I came on just now simply the prettiest, daintiest, and most graceful creature I ever laid my eyes on. I've seen them all, too, and, by George, she simply took the rag off the bush. Slender, beautifully formed, willowy, small feet and hands, high instep, big, dreamy eyes, and light-brown hair touched with gold. She came out of a farm-house, walking like a young queen, about half a mile back. I made Ike drive slowly and tried to get her to look at me, but she only raised her eyes once."

"Virginia Hemingway," Chester said, coldly. "Yes, she's pretty. There's no

doubt about that."

"You know her, then?" said the drummer, eagerly. "Say, old man, introduce a fellow."

Chester's face hardened. The light of cordiality died out of his eyes. There was a significant twitching of his lips round his cigar. "I really don't see how I could," he said, after an awkward pause, during which his eyes were averted. "You see, Masters, she's quite young, and it happens that her mother—a lonely old widow—is rather suspicious of men in general, and I seem to have displeased her in some way. You see, all these folks, as a rule, go regularly to meeting, and as I don't go often, why—"

"Oh, I see," the drummer said. "But let me tell you, old chap, suspicious mother or what not, I'd see something of that little beauty if I lived here. Gee whiz! she'd make a Fifth Avenue dress and Easter hat ashamed of themselves anywhere but on her. Look here, Chester, I've always had a sneaking idea that sooner or later I'd be hit deep at first sight by some woman, and I'll be hanged if I know but what that's the matter with me right now. I've seen so many women, first and last, here and there, always in the giddy set, that I reckon if I ever marry I'd rather risk some pure-minded little country girl. Do you know, town girls simply know too much to be interesting. By George, I simply feel like I'd be perfectly happy with a little wife like the girl I saw this morning. I wish you could fix it so I could meet her this trip, or my next."

"I—I simply can't do it, Masters." There was a rising flush of vexation in the young planter's face as he knocked the ashes from his cigar into a nail-keg on the floor. "I don't know her well enough, in the first place, and then, in the next, as I said, her mother is awfully narrow and particular. She scarcely allows the girl out of sight; if you once saw old Jane Hemingway you'd not fancy making love before her eyes."

"Well, I reckon Wilson knows the girl, doesn't he?" the drummer said.

Chester hesitated, a cold, steady gleam of the displeasure he was trying to hide flashed in his eyes.

"I don't know that he knows her well enough for *that*," he replied. "The people round here think I'm tough enough, but you drummers—huh! some of them look on you as the very advance agents of destruction."

"That's a fact," Masters sighed, "the profession is getting a black eye in the rural districts. They think we are as bad as show people. By George, there she is now!"

"Yes, that's her," and the young planter glanced towards the front doorway through which Virginia Hemingway was entering. So fixed was the drummer's admiring gaze upon the pretty creature, that he failed to notice that his companion had quietly slipped towards the rear of the store. Chester stood for a moment

in the back doorway, and then stepped down outside and made his way into the wood near by. The drummer sauntered behind the counter towards the front, till he was near the show-case at which the girl was making her purchase, and there he stood, allowing the fire of his cigar to die out as he watched her, while Wilson was exhibiting to her a drawer full of thread for her to select from.

"By all that's good and holy, she simply caps the stack!" Masters said to himself; "and to think that these galoots out here in the woods are not onto it. She'd set Peachtree Street on fire. I'm going to meet that girl if I have to put on old clothes and work for day wages in her mother's cornfield. Great goodness! here I am, a hardened ladies' man, feeling cold from head to foot on a hot day like this. I'm hit, by George, I'm hit! Freddy, old boy, this is the thing you read about in books. I wonder if—"

But she was gone. She had tripped out into the sunshine. He saw the yellow light fall on her abundant hair and turn it into a blaze of gold. As if dreaming, he went to the door and stood looking after her as she moved away on the dusty road.

"I see you are killing time." It was George Wilson at his elbow. "I'll be through here and with you in a minute. My crowd is thinning out now. That's the way it comes—all in a rush; like a mill-dam broke loose."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry, Wilson," said Masters, his gaze bent upon the bushes behind which Virginia had just disappeared. "Say, now, old man, don't say you won't do it; the fact is, I want to be introduced to that girl—the little daisy you sold the thread to. By glory, she is the prettiest little thing I ever saw."

"Virginia Hemingway!" said the store-keeper. "Yes, she's a regular beauty, and the gentlest, sweetest little trick in seven states. Well, Masters, I'll be straight with you. It's this way. You see, she really *is* full grown, and old enough to receive company, I reckon, but her mother, the old woman I told you about who hates Ann Boyd so thoroughly—well, she doesn't seem to realize that Virginia is coming on, and so she won't consent to any of the boys going near her. But old Jane can't make nature over. Girls will be girls, and if you put too tight a rein on them they will learn to slip the halter, or some chap will teach them to take the bit in their teeth."

A man came to Wilson holding a sample of syrup on a piece of wrapping-paper, to which he had applied his tongue. "What's this here brand worth?" he asked.

"Sixty-five—best golden drip," was Wilson's reply. "Fill your jug yourself; I'll take your word for it."

"All right, you make a ticket of it—jug holds two gallons," said the customer, and he turned away.

"Say, Wilson, just a minute," cried the drummer; "do you mean that she—"

"Oh, look here now," said the store-keeper. "I don't mean any reflection against that sweet girl, but it has become a sort of established habit among girls here in the mountains, when their folks hold them down too much, for them to meet fellows on the sly, out walking and the like. Virginia, as I started to say, is full of natural life. She knows she's pretty, and she wouldn't be a woman if she didn't want to be told so—though, to be so good-looking, she is really the most sensible girl I know."

"You mean she has her fancies, then," said Masters, in a tone of disappointment.

"I don't say she has." Wilson had an uneasy glance on a group of women bending over some bolts of calico, one of whom was chewing a sample clipped from a piece to see if it would fade. "But—between me and you now—Langdon Chester has for the last three months been laying for her. I see he's slipped away; I'd bet my hat he saw her just now, and has made a break for some point on the road where he can speak to her."

"Chester? Why, the rascal pretended to me just now that he hardly knew her."

Wilson smiled knowingly. "That's his way. He is as sly as they make 'em. His daddy was before him. When it comes to dealing with women who strike their fancy they know exactly what they are doing. But Langdon has struck flint-rock in that little girl. He, no doubt, is flirting with all his might, but she'll have him on his knees before he's through with it. A pair of eyes like hers would burn up every mean thought in a man."

The drummer sighed, a deep frown on his brow. "You don't know him as well as I do," he said. "I knew him at college. George, that little trick ought not to be under such a fellow's influence I'm just a travelling man, but—well—"

"Well, what are you going to do about it—even if there *is* any danger?" said Wilson. "Get a drink in him, and Langdon, like his father, will fight at the drop of a hat. Conscience? He hasn't any. I sometimes wonder why the Almighty made them like they are, and other men so different, for it is only the men who are not bothered by conscience that have any fun in this life. One of the Chesters could drive a light-hearted woman to suicide and sleep like a log the night she was buried. Haven't I heard the old man laugh about Ann Boyd, and all she's been through? Huh! But I'm not afraid of that little girl's fate. She will take care of herself, and don't you forget it."

"Well, I'm sorry for her," said Masters, "and I'm going to try to meet her. I'm tough, George—I'll play a game of cards and bet on a horse, and say light things to a pretty girl when she throws down the bars—but I draw the line at downright rascality. Once in a while I think of home and my own folks."

"Now you are a-talking." And Wilson hurried away to a woman who sat in

a chair holding a bolt of calico in her arms, as if it were her first-born child and the other women were open kidnappers.

Masters stood motionless in the doorway, his eyes on the dusty road that stretched on towards Jane Hemingway's house.

"Yes, she's in bad, *bad* hands," he said; "and she is the first—I really believe she's the first that ever hit me this hard."

VIII

At dusk that day Ann Boyd went out to search for a missing cow. She crossed the greater part of her stretch of meadow-land in the foggy shadows, and finally found the animal mired to the knees in a black bog hidden from view by the high growth of bulrushes. Then came the task of releasing the patient creature, and Ann carried rails from the nearest fence, placing them in such a way that the cow finally secured a substantial footing and gladly sped homeward to her imprisoned calf. Then, to escape the labor of again passing through the clinging vines and high grass of the marsh, Ann took the nearest way to the main road leading from the store on to Jane Hemingway's cottage. She had just reached the little meeting-house, and a hot flush of anger at the memory of the insult passed upon her there was surging over her, when, happening to glance towards the graveyard in the rear of the building, she saw Virginia Hemingway and Langdon Chester, quite with the air of lovers, slowly walking homeward along a path which, if more rugged, led more directly towards the girl's home. Ann Boyd started and then stared; she could hardly credit the evidence of her sight—Virginia Hemingway and the scapegrace son of that man, of all men, together!

"Ah, ha!" she exclaimed, under her breath, and, falling back into the bushes which bordered the roadside, she stood tingling from head to foot with a new and unexpected sensation, her eager eyes on the loitering pair. "So *that's* it, is it? The young scamp has picked *her* out, devil that he is by blood and birth. Well, I might have known it. Who could know better than me what a new generation of that cursed stock would be up to? Right now he's the living image of what his father was at the same age. He's lying to her, too, with tongue, eyes, voice, and very bend of body. Great God, isn't she pretty? I never, in my best day, saw the minute that I could have held a candle to her, and yet they all said—but

that makes no difference. I wonder why I never thought before that he'd pick her out. As much as I hate her mammy, and her, too, I must acknowledge she's sweet-looking. She's pure-minded, too—as pure of thought as I was away back there when I wore my hair in a plait. But that man will crush your purity, you little, blind kitten, crush it like a fresh violet under a horse's hoof; *he'll* teach you what life is. That's the business the Chesters are good at. But, look! I do believe she's holding off from him." Ann crept onward through the bushes to keep pace with the couple, now and then stretching her neck or rising to her full height on tiptoe.

"He hasn't been on her track very long," she mused, "but he has won the biggest part of his battle—he's got her to meet him privately. A sight of this would lay her old mammy out stiff as a board, but she'll be kept in the dark. That scamp will see to that part of the affair. But she'll know in the end. Somebody will tell her the truth. Maybe the girl will herself, when the awful, lonely pinch comes and there is no other friend in sight. *Then*, Jane Hemingway, it will all come home to you. Then you'll look back on the long, blood-hound hunt you've given another woman in the same plight. The Almighty is doing it. He's working it out for Jane Hemingway's life-portion. The girl is the very apple of her eye; she has often said she was the image of herself, and that, as her own marriage and life had come to nothing, she was going to see to it that her only child's path was strewn with roses. Well, Langdon Chester is strewing the roses thick enough. Ha, ha, ha!" the peering woman chuckled. "Jane can come along an' pick 'em up when they are withered and crumble like powder at the slightest touch. Now I really will have something to occupy me. I'll watch this thing take root, and bud, and leave, and bloom, and die. Maybe I'll be the first to carry the news to headquarters. I'd love it more than anything this life could give me. I'd like to shake the truth in Jane Hemingway's old, blinking eyes and see her unable to believe it. I'd like to stand shaking it in her teeth till she knew it was so, and then I honestly believe I'd fall right down in front of her and roll over and over laughing. To think that I, maybe *I* will be able to flaunt the very thing in her face that she has all these years held over me—the very thing, even to its being a son of the very scoundrel that actually bent over the cradle of my girlhood and blinded me with the lies that lit up his face."

A few yards away the pair had paused. Chester had taken the girl's hand and was gently stroking it as it lay restlessly in his big palm. For a moment Ann lost sight of them, for she was stealthily creeping behind the low, hanging boughs of the bushes to get nearer. She found herself presently behind a big bowlder. She no longer saw the couple, but could hear their voices quite distinctly.

"You won't even let me hold your hand," she heard him say. "You make me miserable, Virginia. When I am at home alone, I get to thinking over your

coldness and indifference, and it nearly drives me crazy. Why did you jerk your hand away so quickly just now?"

"I don't see what you were talking to a drummer about me for, in a public place like that," the girl answered, in pouting tones.

"Why, it was this way, Virginia—now don't be silly!" protested Chester. "You see, this Masters and I were at college together, and rather intimate, and down at the store we were standing talking when you came in the front to buy something. He said he thought you were really the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and he was begging me to introduce him to you."

"Introduce him!" Virginia snapped. "I don't want to know him. And so you stood there talking about me!"

"It was only a minute, Virginia, and I couldn't help it," Chester declared. "I didn't think you'd care to know him, but I had to treat him decently. I told him how particular your mother was, and that I couldn't manage it. Oh, he's simply daft about you. He passed you on the road this morning, and hasn't been able to talk about anything since. But who could blame him, Virginia? You can form no idea of how pretty you are in the eyes of other people. Frankly, in a big gathering of women you'd create a sensation. You've got what every society woman in the country would die to have, perfect beauty of face and form, and the most remarkable part about it is your absolute unconsciousness of it all. I've seen good-looking women in the best sets in Augusta and Savannah and Atlanta, but they all seem to be actually making up before your very eyes. Do you know, it actually makes me sick to see a woman all rigged out in a satin gown so stiff that it looks like she's encased in some metallic painted thing that moves on rollers. It's beauty unadorned that you've got, and it's the real thing."

"I don't want to talk about myself eternally," said Virginia, rather sharply, the eavesdropper thought, "and I don't see why you seem to think I do. When you are sensible and talk to me about what we have both read and thought, I like you better."

"Oh, you want me to be a sort of Luke King, who put all sorts of fancies in your head when you were too young to know what they meant. You'd better let those dreams alone, Virginia, and get down to everyday facts. My love for you is a reality. It's a big force in my life. I find myself thinking about you and your coldness from early morning till late at night. Last Monday you were to come to the Henry Spring, and I was there long before the time, and stayed in agony of suspense for four hours, but I had my walk for nothing."

"I couldn't come," Ann Boyd heard the sweet voice say. "Mother gave me some work to do, and I had no excuse; besides, I don't like to deceive her. She's harsh and severe, but I don't like to do anything she would disapprove of."

"You don't really care much for me," said Langdon—"that is the whole thing

in a nutshell."

Virginia was silent, and Ann Boyd bit her lip and clinched her hands tightly. The very words and tone of enforced reproach came back to her across the rolling surf of time. She was for a moment lost in retrospection. The young girl behind the bushes seemed suddenly to be herself, her companion the dashing young Preston Chester, the prince of planters and slave-holders. Langdon's insistent voice brought back the present.

"You don't care for me, you know you don't," he was saying. "You were simply born with all your beauty and sweetness to drag me down to despair. You make me desperate with your maddening reserve and icy coldness, when all this hot fire is raging in me."

"That's what makes me afraid of you," Virginia said, softly. "I admit I like to be with you, my life is so lonely, but you always say such extravagant things and want to—to catch hold of me, and kiss me, and—"

"Well, how can I help myself, when you are what you are?" Chester exclaimed, with a laugh. "I don't want to act a lie to you, and stand and court you like a long-faced Methodist parson, who begins and ends his love-making with prayer. Life is too beautiful and lovely to turn it into a funeral service from beginning to end. Let's be happy, little girl; let's laugh and be merry and thank our stars we are alive."

"I won't thank my stars if I don't go on home." And Virginia laughed sweetly for the first time.

"Yes, I suppose we had better walk on," Langdon admitted, "but I'm not going out into the open road with you till I've had that kiss. No, you needn't pull away, dear—I'm going to have it."

The grim eavesdropper heard Virginia sharply protesting; there was a struggle, a tiny, smothered scream, and then something waked in the breast of Ann Boyd that lifted her above her sordid self. It was the enraged impulse to dart forward and with her strong, toil-hardened hands clutch the young man by the throat and drag him down to the ground and hold him there till the flames she knew so well had gone out of his face. Something like a prayer sprang to her lips—a prayer for help, and then, in a flush of shame, the slow-gained habit of years came back to her; she was taking another view—this time down a darkened vista.

"It's no business of mine," she muttered. "It's only the way things are evened up. After all, where would be the justice in one woman suffering from a thing for a lifetime and another going scot free, and that one, too, the daughter of the one person that has deliberately made a life miserable? No, siree! My pretty child, take care of yourself, I'm not your mother. If she would let me alone for one minute, maybe her eyes would be open to her own interests."

Laughing pleasantly over having obtained his kiss by sheer force, Langdon, holding Virginia's reluctant hand, led her out into an open space, and the watcher caught a plain view of the girl's profile, and the sight twisted her thoughts into quite another channel. For a moment she stood as if rooted to the ground behind the bushes which had shielded her. "That girl is going to be a hard one to fool," she muttered. "I can see that from her high forehead and firm chin. Now, it really *would* be a joke on me if—if Jane Hemingway's offspring was to avoid the pitfall I fell into, with all the head I've got. Then, I reckon, Jane *could* talk; that, I reckon, would prove her right in so bitterly denouncing me; but will the girl stand the pressure? If she intends to, she's made a bad beginning. Meeting a chap like that on the sly isn't the best way to be rid of him, nor that kiss; which she let him have without a scratch or loss of a hair on his side, is another bad indication. Well, the game's on. Me 'n' Jane is on the track neck to neck with the wire and bandstand ahead. If the angels are watching this sport, them in the highest seats may shed tears, but it will be fun to the other sort. I'm reckless. I don't much care which side I amuse; the whole thing come up of its own accord, and the Lord of Creation hasn't done as much for my spiritual condition as the Prince of Darkness. I may be a she-devil, but I was made one by circumstances as naturally as a foul weed is made to grow high and strong by the manure around its root. And yet, I reckon, there must be *some* dregs of good left in my cup, for I felt like strangling that scamp a minute ago. But that may have been because I forgot and thought he was his daddy, and the girl was me on the brink of that chasm twenty years wide and deeper than the mystery of the grave of mankind. I don't know much, but I know I'm going to fight Jane Hemingway as long as I live. I know I'm going to do that, for I know she will keep her nose to my trail, and I wouldn't be human if I didn't hit back."

The lovers had moved on; their voices were growing faint in the shadowy distance. The gray dusk had fallen in almost palpable folds over the landscape. The nearest mountain was lost like the sight of land at sea. She walked on to her cow that was standing bellowing to her calf in the stable-lot. Laying her hand on the animal's back, Ann said: "I'm not going to milch you to-night, Sooky; I'm going to let your baby have all he wants if it fills him till he can't walk. I'm going to be better to you—you poor, dumb brute—than I am to Jane Hemingway."

Lowering the time-worn and smooth bars, she let the cow in to her young, and then, closing the opening, she went into her kitchen and sat down before the fire and pushed out her water-soaked feet to the flames to dry them.

In an iron pot having an ash-covered lid was a piece of corn-pone stamped with the imprint of her fingers, and on some smouldering coals was a skillet containing some curled strips of fried bacon. These things Ann put upon a tin plate, and, holding it in her lap, she began to eat her supper. She was normal and

healthy, and therefore her excitement had not subdued her appetite. She ate as with hearty enjoyment, her mind busy with what she had heard and seen.

"Ah, old lady!" she chuckled, "you can laugh fit to split your sides when a loud-mouthed preacher talks in public about burning benches, but your laugh is likely to come back in an echo as hollow as a voice from the grave. If this thing ends as I want it to end, I'll be with you, Jane, as you've managed to be with me all these years."

Till far in the night Ann sat nursing her new treasure and viewing it in all its possible forms, till, growing drowsy, from a long day of fatigue, she undressed herself, and, putting on a dingy gray night-gown, she crept into her big feather-bed.

"It all depends on the girl," was her last reflection before sleep bore her off. "She isn't a bit stronger than I was at about the same age, and I'll bet the Chester power isn't a whit weaker than it was. Well, time will tell."

Late in the night she was waked by a strange dream, and, to throw it out of mind, she rose and walked out into the entry and took a drink of water from the gourd. She had dreamed that Virginia had come to her bedraggled and torn, and had cried on her shoulder, and begged her for help and protection. In the dream she had pressed the girl's tear-wet face against her own and kissed her, and said: "I know what you feel, my child, for I've been through it from end to end; but if the whole world turns against you, come here to me and we'll live together—the young and old of the queerest fate known to womankind."

"Ugh!" Ann ejaculated, with a shudder. "I wonder what's the matter with me." She went back to bed, lay down and drew her feet up under the sheets and shuddered. "To think I'd have a dream of that sort, and about *that woman's* child!"

IX

It was the first Sunday in June. Mrs. Waycroft came along the stony hill-side road that slanted gently down from her house to Ann Boyd's. It was a dry, breezeless morning under an unclouded sun, and but for the earliness of the hour it would have been hot.

"I was just wondering," she said to Ann, whom she found in the back-yard lowering a pail of butter into the well to keep it cool—"I was just wondering

if you'd heard that a new man is to preach to-day. He's a Mr. Calhoun, from Marietta, a pretty good talker, I've heard."

"No, I didn't know it," said Ann, as she let the hemp rope slowly glide through her fingers, till, with a soft sound, the pail struck the dark surface of the water forty feet below. "How am I to hear such things? Through the whole week, unless you happen along, I only have a pack of negroes about me, and they have their own meetings and shindigs to go to."

Mrs. Waycroft put her hand on the smooth, wooden windlass and peered down into the well. "This is a better place, Ann, to keep milk and butter cool than a spring-house, if you can just make folks careful about letting the bucket down. I got my well filled with milk from a busted jug once, when one of the hands, in a big hurry, pushed the bucket in and let it fall to the water."

"Nobody draws water here but me," said Ann. She had fixed her friend with a steady, penetrating stare. She was silent for a moment, then she said, abruptly: "You've got something else to say besides that about the new preacher; I have got so I read you like a book. I watched you coming along the road. I could see you over the roof of the house when you was high up in the edge of the timber, and I knew by your step you had something unusual on your mind. Besides, you know good and well that I'd never darken the door of that house again, not if forty new preachers held forth there. No, you didn't come all the way here so early for that."

The other woman smiled sheepishly under her gingham bonnet.

"I'm not going to meeting myself," she said, "and I reckon I was just talking to hear myself run on. I'm that away, you know."

"You might learn not to beat the Old Nick around a stump with a woman like me," said Ann, firmly. "You know I go straight at a thing. I've found that it pays in business and everything else."

"Well, then, I've come to tell you that I'm going over to Gilmer to-morrow to see my brother and his wife."

"Ah, you say you are!" Ann showed surprise against her will. "Gilmer?"

"Yes, you see, Ann, they've been after me for a long time, writing letters and sending word, so now that my crop is laid by I've not really got a good excuse to delay; seems like everything tends to pull me that way whether or no, for Pete McQuill is going over in the morning with an empty wagon, and, as he's coming back Thursday, why, it will just suit. I wouldn't want to stay longer than that."

The two women stood staring at each other in silence for a moment, then Ann shrugged her powerful shoulders and averted her eyes.

"That wasn't *all* you come to say," she said, almost tremulously.

"No, it wasn't, Ann; I admit it wasn't *all*—not quite all."

There was another silence. Ann fastened the end of the rope to a strong

nail driven in the wood-work about the well with firm, steady fingers, then she sighed deeply.

"You see, Ann," Mrs. Waycroft gathered courage to say, "your husband and Nettie live about half a mile or three-quarters from brother's, and I didn't know but what you—I didn't know but what I might accidentally run across them."

Ann's face was hard as stone. Her eyes, resting on the far-off blue mountains and foot-hills, flashed like spiritual fires. It was at such moments that the weaker woman feared her, and Mrs. Waycroft's glance was almost apologetic. However, Ann spoke first.

"You may as well tell me, Mary Waycroft," she faltered, "exactly what you had in mind. I know you are a friend. You are a friend if there ever was one to a friendless woman. What was you thinking about? Don't be afraid to tell me. You could not hurt my feelings to save your life."

"Well, then, I will be plain, Ann," returned the widow. "I have queer thoughts about you sometimes, and last night I laid awake longer than usual and got to thinking about the vast and good blessings I have had in my children, and from that I got to thinking about you and the only baby you ever had."

"Huh! you needn't bother about *that*," said Ann, her lips quivering. "I reckon I don't need sympathy in that direction."

"But I *did* bother; I couldn't help it, Ann; for, you see, it seems to me that a misunderstanding is up between you and Nettie, anyway. She's a grown girl now, and I reckon she can hardly remember you; but I have heard, Ann, that she's never had the things a girl of her age naturally craves. She's got her beaus over there, too, so folks tell me, and wants to appear well; but Joe Boyd never was able to give her anything she needs. You see, Ann, I just sorter put myself in your place, as I laid there thinking, and it struck me that if I had as much substance as you have, and was as free to give to the needy as you are, that, even if the law *had* turned my child over to another to provide for, that I'd love powerful to do more for it than he was able, showing to the girl, and everybody else, that the court didn't know what it was about. And, Ann, in that way I'd feel that I was doing my duty in spite of laws or narrow public opinion."

Ann Boyd's features were working, a soft flush had come into her tanned cheeks, her hard mouth had become more flexible.

"I've thought of that ten thousand times," she said, huskily, "but I have never seen the time I could quite come down to it. Mary, it's a sort of pride that I never can overcome. I feel peculiar about Net—about the girl, anyway. It seems to me like she died away back there in her baby-clothes, with her playthings—her big rag-doll and tin kitchen—and that I almost hate the strange, grown-up person she's become away off from me. As God is my Judge, Mary Waycroft, I believe I could meet her face to face and not feel—feel like she was any near kin of mine,

I can't see no reason in this way of feeling. I know she had nothing to do with what took place, but she represents Joe Boyd's part of the thing, and she's lost her place in my heart. If she could have grown up here with me it would have been different, but—" Ann went no further. She stood looking over the landscape, her hand clutching her strong chin. There was an awkward silence. Some of Ann's chickens came up to her very skirt, chirping and springing open-mouthed to her kindly hand for food. She gently and absent-mindedly waved her apron up and down and drove them away.

"I understand all that," said Mrs. Waycroft; "but I believe you feel that way just because you've got in the habit of it. I really believe you ought to let me"—the speaker caught her breath—"ought to just let me tell Nettie, when I see her, about what I know you to be at heart, away down under what the outside world thinks. And you ought to let me say that if her young heart yearns for anything her pa can't afford to buy, that I know you'd be glad, out of your bounty, to give it to her. I really believe it would open the girl's eyes and heart to you. I believe she'd not only accept your aid, but she'd be plumb happy over it, as any other girl in the same fix would be."

"Do you think that, Mary? Do you think she'd take anything—a single thing from my hands?"

"I do, Ann, as the Lord is my Creator, I do; any natural girl would be only too glad. Young women hungering for nice things to put on along with other girls ain't as particular as some hide-bound old people. Then I'll bet she didn't know what it was all about, anyway."

There was a flush in Ann's strong neck and face to the very roots of her hair. She leaned against the windlass and folded her bare arms. "Between me and you, as intimate friends, Mary Waycroft, I'd rather actually load that girl down with things to have and wear than to have anything on the face of this earth. I'd get on the train myself and go clean to Atlanta and lay myself out. What she had to wear would be the talk of the country for miles around. I'd do it to give the lie to the court that said she'd be in better hands than in mine when she went away with Joe Boyd. Oh, I'd do it fast enough, but there's no way. She wouldn't propose it, nor I wouldn't for my life. I wouldn't run the risk of being refused; that would actually humble me to the dust. No, I couldn't risk that."

"I believe, Ann, that I could do it for you in such a way that——"

"No, nobody could do it; it isn't to be done!"

"I started to say, Ann, that I believed I could kind o' hint around and find out how the land lies without using your name at all."

Ann Boyd held her breath; her face became fixed in suspense. She leaned forward, her great eyes staring eagerly at her neighbor.

"Do you think you could do that?" she asked, finally, after a lengthy pause.

"Do you think you could do it without letting either of them know I was—was willing?"

"Yes, I believe I could, and you may let it rest right here. You needn't either consent or refuse, Ann, but I'll be back here about twelve o'clock Thursday, and I'll tell you what takes place."

"I'll leave the whole thing in your hands," said Ann, and she moved towards the rear door of her house. "Now"—and her tone was more joyful than it had been for years—"come in and sit down."

"No, I can't; I must hurry on back home," said the visitor. "I must get ready to go; Pete wants to make an early start."

"You know you'll have plenty of time all this evening to stuff things in that carpet-bag of yours." Ann laughed, and her friend remarked that it was the first smile and joke she had heard from Ann Boyd since their girlhood together.

"Well, I will go in, then," said Mrs. Waycroft. "I love to see you the way you are now, Ann. It does my heart good."

But the mood was gone. Ann was serious again. They sat in the sitting-room chatting till the people who had been to meeting began to return homeward along the dusty road. Among them, in Sam Hemingway's spring wagon, with its wabbling wheels and ragged oil-cloth top, were Jane and her daughter Virginia, neither of whom looked towards the cottage as they passed.

"I see Virginia's got a new hat," commented Mrs. Waycroft. "Her mother raked and scraped to get it; her credit's none too good. I hear she's in debt up to her eyes. Every stick of timber and animal down to her litter of pigs—even the farm tools—is under mortgage to money-lenders that won't stand no foolishness when pay-day comes. I saw two of 'em, myself, looking over her crop the other day and shaking their heads at the sight of the puny corn and cotton this dry spell. But she'd have the hat for Virginia if it took the roof from over her head. Her very soul's bound up in that girl. Looks like she thinks Virginia's better clay than common folks. They say she won't let her go with the Halcomb girls because their aunt had that talk about her."

"She's no better nor no worse, I reckon," said Ann, "than the general run of girls."

"There goes Langdon Chester on his prancing horse," said Mrs. Waycroft. "Oh, my! that *was* a bow! He took off his hat to Virginia and bent clean down to his horse's mane. If she'd been a queen he couldn't have been more gallant. For all the world, like his father used to be to high and low. I'll bet that tickled Jane. I can see her rear herself back, even from here. I wonder if she's fool enough to think, rascal as he is, that Langdon Chester would want to marry a girl like Virginia just for her good looks."

"No, he'll never marry her," Ann said, positively, and her face was hard, her

eyes set in a queer stare at her neighbor. "He isn't the marrying sort. If he ever marries, he'll do it to feather his nest."

The visitor rose to go, and Ann walked with her out to the gate. Mrs. Waycroft was wondering if she would, of her own accord, bring up the subject of their recent talk, but she did not. With her hand on the gate, she said, however, in a non-committal tone:

"When did you say you'd be back?"

"Thursday, at twelve o'clock, or thereabouts," was the ready reply.

"Well, take good care of yourself," said Ann. "That will be a long, hot ride over a rough road there and back."

Going into her kitchen, Ann, with her roughly shod foot, kicked some live embers on the hearth under the pot and kettle containing her dinner, bending to examine the boiling string-beans and hunch of salt pork.

"I don't feel a bit like eating," she mused, "but I reckon my appetite will come after I calm down. Let's see now. I've got two whole days to wait before she gets back, and then the Lord above only knows what the news will be. Seems to me sorter like I'm on trial again. Nettie was too young to appear for or against me before, but now she's on the stand. Yes, she's the judge, jury, and all the rest put together. I almost wish I hadn't let Mary Waycroft see I was willing. It may make me look like a weak, begging fool, and that's something I've avoided all these years. But the game is worth the risk, humiliating as it may turn out. To be able to do something for my own flesh and blood would give me the first joy I've had in many a year. Lord, Lord, maybe she will consent, and then I'll get some good out of all the means I've been piling up. Homely as they say she is, I'd like to fairly load her down till her finery would be the talk of the county, and shiftless Joe Boyd 'ud blush to see her rustle out in public. Maybe—I say *maybe*—nobody really knows what a woman will do—but maybe she'll just up and declare to him that she's coming back to me, where other things will match her outfit. Come back! how odd!—come back here where she used to toddle about and play with her tricks and toys, on the floor and in the yard. That would be a glorious vindication, and then—I don't know, but maybe I'd learn to love her. I'm sure I'd feel grateful for it—even—even if it was my money and nothing else that brought her to me."

X

To Ann Boyd the period between Mrs. Waycroft's departure and return was long and fraught with conflicting emotions. Strange, half-defined new hopes fluttered into existence like young birds in air that was too chill, and this state of mind was succeeded by qualms of doubt and fear not unlike the misgivings which had preceded the child's birth; for it had been during that time of detachment from her little world that Ann's life secret had assumed its gravest and most threatening aspect. And if she had not loved the child quite as much after it came as might have seemed natural, she sometimes ascribed the shortcoming to that morbid period which had been filled with lurking shadows and constantly whispered threats rather than the assurances of a blessed maternity.

Yes, the lone woman reflected, her kind neighbor had taken a reasonable view of the situation. And she tried valiantly to hold this pacifying thought over herself as she sat at her rattling and pounding loom, or in her walks of daily inspection over her fields and to her storage-houses, where her negro hands were at work. Yes, Nettie would naturally crave the benefits she could confer, and, to still darker promptings, Ann told herself, time after time, that, being plain-looking, the girl would all the more readily reach out for embellishments which would ameliorate that defect. Yes, it was not unlikely that she would want the things offered too much to heed the malicious and jealous advice of a shiftless father who thought only of his own pride and comfort. And while Ann was on this rack of disquietude over the outcome of Mrs. Waycroft's visit, there was in her heart a new and almost unusual absence of active hatred for the neighbors who had offended her. Old Abe Longley came by the second day after Mrs. Waycroft's departure. He was filled with the augmented venom of their last contact. His eyes flashed and the yellow tobacco-juice escaped from his mouth and trickled down his quivering chin as he informed her that he had secured from a good, law-abiding Christian woman the use of all the pasture-land he needed, and that she could keep hers for the devils' imps to play pranks on at night to her order. For just one instant her blood boiled, and then the thought of Mrs. Waycroft and her grave and spiritual mission cooled her from head to foot. She stared at the old man blankly for an instant, and then, without a word, turned into her house, leaving him astounded and considerably taken aback. That same day from her doorway she saw old Mrs. Bruce, Luke King's mother, slowly shambling along the road, and she went out and leaned on her gate till Mrs. Bruce was near, then she said, "Mrs. Bruce, I've got something to tell you."

The pedestrian paused and then turned in her course and came closer.

"You've heard from my boy?" she said, eagerly.

"No, not since I saw you that day," said Ann. "But he's all right, Mrs. Bruce, as I told you, and prospering. I didn't come out to speak of him. I've decided to drop that law-suit against Gus Willard. He can keep his pond where it is and run

his mill on."

"Oh, you don't mean it, surely you don't mean it, Ann!" the old woman cried. "Why, Gus was just back from Darley last night and said your lawyers said thar was to be no hitch in the proceedings; but, of course, if *you* say so, why—"

"Well, I *do* say so," said Ann, in a tone which sounded strange and compromising even to herself. "I *do* say so; I don't want your husband to lose his job. Luke wouldn't like for you to suffer, either, Mrs. Bruce."

"Then I'll go at once and tell Willard," said the older woman. "He'll be powerful glad, Ann, and maybe he will think as I do, an' as Luke always contended against everybody, that you had a lots o' good away down inside of you."

"Tell him what you want to," Ann answered, and she returned to her house.

On the morning she was expecting Mrs. Waycroft to return, Ann rose even before daybreak, lighting an abundant supply of pine kindling-wood to drive away the moist darkness, and bustling about the house to kill time. It was the greatest crisis of her rugged life; not even the day she was wedded to Joe Boyd could equal it in impending gravity. She was on trial for her life; the jury had been in retirement two days and nights carefully weighing the evidence for and against the probability of a simple, untutored country girl's acceptance of certain luxuries dear to a woman's heart, and would shortly render a verdict.

"She will," Ann said once, as she put her ground coffee into the tin pot to boil on the coals—"she will if she's like the ordinary girl; she won't if she's as stubborn as Joe or as proud as I am. But if she does—oh! if she does, won't I love to pick out the things! She shall have the best in the land, and she can wear them and keep them in the log-cabin her father's giving her till she will be willing to come here to this comfortable house and take the best room for herself. I don't know that I'd ever feel natural with a strange young woman about, but I'd go through it. If she didn't want to stay all the time, I'd sell factory stock or town lots and give her the means to travel on. She could go out and see the world and improve like Luke King's done. I'd send her to school if she has the turn and isn't past the age. It would be a great vindication for me. Folks could say her shiftless father took her off when she was too young to decide for herself, but when she got old enough to know black from white, and right from wrong, she obeyed her heart's promptings. But what am I thinking about, when right at this minute she may—?" Ann shrugged her shoulders as she turned from the cheerful fire and looked out on her fields enfolded in the misty robe of early morning. Above the dun mountain in the east the sky was growing yellow. Ann suddenly grew despondent and heaved a deep sigh.

"Even if she *did* come here in the end, and I tried to do all I could," she mused, "Jane Hemingway would begin on her and make it unpleasant. She'd

manage to keep all civilization away from the girl, and nobody couldn't stand that. No, I reckon the jig's up with me. I'm only floundering in a frying-pan that will cook me to a cinder in the end. This life's given me the power of making money, but it's yellow dross, and I hate it. It isn't the means to any end for me unless—unless—unless my dau—unless she *does* take Mrs. Waycroft's offer. Yes, she may—the girl actually may! And in that case she and I could run away from Jane Hemingway—clean off to some new place."

Ann turned back to the fireplace and filled her big delft cup to the brim with strong coffee, and, blowing upon it to cool it, she gulped it down.

"Let's see"—her musings ran on apace—"milching the three cows and feeding the cattle and horses and pigs and chickens will take an hour. I could stretch it out to that by mixing the feed-stuff for to-morrow. Then I could go to the loom and weave up all my yarn; that would be another hour. Then I might walk down to the sugar-mill and see if they are getting it fixed for use when the sorgum's ripe, but all that wouldn't throw it later than ten o'clock at latest, and there would still be two hours. Pete McQuill is easy on horses; he'll drive slow—a regular snail's pace; it will be twelve when he gets to the store, and then the fool may stop to buy something before he brings her on."

The old-fashioned clock on the mantel-piece indicated that it was half-past eleven when Ann had done everything about the house and farm she could think of laying her hands to, and she was about to sit down in the shade of an apple-tree in the yard when she suddenly drew herself up under the inspiration of an idea. Why not start down the road to meet the wagon? No, that would not do. Even to such a close friend as Mrs. Waycroft she could not make such an obvious confession of the impatience which was devouring her. But, and she put the afterthought into action, she would go to the farthest corner of her own land, where her premises touched the main road, and that was fully half a mile. She walked to that point across her own fields rather than run the chance of meeting any one on the road, though the way over ploughed ground, bog, fen, and through riotous growth of thistle and clinging briers was anything but an easy one. Reaching the point to which she had directed her steps, and taking a hasty survey of the road leading gradually up the mountain, she leaned despondently on her rail-fence.

"She won't, she won't—the girl won't!" she sighed. "I feel down in my heart of hearts that she won't. Joe Boyd won't let her; he'd see how ridiculous it would make him appear, and he'd die rather than give in, and yet Mary Waycroft knows something about human nature, and she said—Mary said—"

Far up the road there was a rumble of wheels. Pete McQuill would let his horses go rapidly down-hill, and that, perhaps, was his wagon. It was. She recognized the gaunt, underfed white-and-bay pair through the trees on the mountain-side. Then Ann became all activity. She discovered that one of the rails of the

panel of fence near by had quite rotted away, leaving an opening wide enough to admit of the passage of a small pig. To repair such a break she usually took a sound rail from some portion of the fence that was high enough to spare it, and this she now did, and was diligently at work when the wagon finally reached her. She did not look up, although she plainly heard Mrs. Waycroft's voice as she asked McQuill to stop.

"You might as well let me out here," the widow said. "I'll walk back with Mrs. Boyd."

The wagon was lumbering on its way when Ann turned her set face, down which drops of perspiration were rolling, towards her approaching friend.

"You caught me hard at it." She tried to smile casually. "Do you know patching fence is the toughest work on a farm—harder 'n splitting rails, that men complain so much about."

"It's a man's work, Ann, and a big, strong one's, too. You ought never to tax your strength like that. You don't mean to tell me you lifted that stack of rails to put in the new one."

"Yes, but what's that?" Ann smiled. "I shouldered a hundred-and-fifty-pound sack of salt the other day, and it was as hard as a block of stone. I'm used to anything. But I'm through now. Let's walk on home and have a bite to eat."

"You don't seem to care much whether—" Mrs. Waycroft paused and started again. "You haven't forgotten what I said I'd try to find out over there, have you, Ann?"

"Me? Oh no, but I reckon I'm about pegged out with all I've done this morning. Don't I look tired?"

"You don't looked tired—you look worried, Ann. I know you; you needn't try to hide your feelings from me. We are both women. When you are suffering the most you beat about the bush more than any other time. That's why this is going to be so hard for me."

"It's going to be *hard* for you, then?" Ann's impulsive voice sounded hollow; her face had suddenly grown pale. "I know what *that* means. It means that Joe set his foot down against me and—"

"I wish I could tell you all, every blessed word, Ann, but you've already had too much trouble in this life, and I feel like I was such a big, ignorant fool to get this thing up and make such a mess of it."

Ann climbed over the fence and stood in the road beside her companion. Her face was twisted awry by some force bound up within her. She laid her big, toil-worn hand on Mrs. Waycroft's shoulder.

"Now, looky here," she said, harshly. "I'm going to hear every word and know everything that took place. You must not leave out one single item. I've

got the right to know it all, and I will. Now, you start in."

"I hardly know how, Ann," the other woman faltered. "I didn't know folks in this world could have so little human pity or forgiveness."

"You go ahead, do you hear me? You blaze away. I can stand under fire. I'm no kitten. Go ahead, I tell you."

"Well, Ann, I met Joe and Nettie day before yesterday at bush-arbor meeting. Joe was there, and looked slouchier and more downhearted than he ever did in his life, and Nettie was there with the young man she is about to marry—a tall, serious-faced, parson-like young man, a Mr. Lawson. Well, after meeting, while he was off feeding his horse, I made a break and got the girl by herself. Well, Ann, from all I could gather, she—well, she didn't look at it favorably."

"Stop!" Ann cried, peremptorily, "I don't want any shirking. I want to hear actually every word she said. This thing may never come up between you and me again while the sun shines, and I want the truth. You are not toting fair. I want the facts—*every word the girl said*, every look, every bat of the eye, every sneer. I'm prepared. You talk plain—*plain*, I tell you!"

"I see I'll *have* to," sighed Mrs. Waycroft, her eyes averted from the awful stare in Ann's eyes. "The truth is, Ann, Nettie's been thinking all her life, till just about a month ago, that you were—dead. Joe Boyd told her you was dead and buried, and got all the neighbors to keep the truth from her. It leaked out when she got engaged to young Lawson; his folks, Ann, they are as hide-bound and narrow as the worst hard-shell Baptists here—his folks raised objections and tried to break it off."

"On account of me?" said Ann, under her breath.

"Well, they tried to break it off," evaded Mrs. Waycroft, "and, in all the trouble over it, Nettie found out the facts—Joe finally told her. They say, Ann, that it brought her down to a sick-bed. She's a queer sort of selfish girl, that had always held her head too high, and the discovery went hard with her. Then, Ann, the meanest thing that was ever done by a human being took place. Jane Hemingway was over there visiting a preacher's wife she used to know, and she set in circulation the blackest lie that was ever afloat. Ann, she told over there that all your means—all the land and money you have made by hard toil, big brain, and saving—come to you underhand."

"Underhand?" Ann exclaimed. "What did she mean by that, pray? What could the old she-cat mean by—"

Mrs. Waycroft drew her sun-bonnet down over her eyes. She took a deep breath. "Ann, she's a *terrible* woman. I used to think maybe you went too far in hating her so much, but I don't blame you now one bit. On the way over the mountain, I looked all the circumstances over, and actually made up my mind that you'd almost be justified in killing her, law or no law. Ann, she circulated

a report over there that all you own in the world was given to you by Colonel Chester."

"Ugh! Oh, my God!" Ann groaned like a strong man in sudden pain; and then, with her face hidden by her poke-bonnet, she trudged heavily along by her companion in total silence.

"I've told you the worst now," Mrs. Waycroft said. "Nettie had heard all that, and so had Lawson. His folks finally agreed to raise no objections to the match if she'd never mention your name. Naturally, when I told her about what I thought *maybe*—you understand, *maybe*—you'd be willing to do she was actually scared. She cried pitifully, and begged me never to allow you to bother her. She said—I told you she looked like a selfish creature—that if the Lawsons were to find out that you'd been sending her messages it might spoil all. I told her it was all a lie of Jane Hemingway's making out of whole cloth, but the silly girl wouldn't listen. I thought she was going to have a spasm."

They had reached the gate, and, with a firm, steady hand, Ann opened it and held it ajar for her guest to enter before her.

They trudged along the gravel walk, bordered with uneven stones, to the porch and went in. On entering the house Ann always took off her bonnet. She seemed to forget its existence now.

"Yes, I hate that woman," Mrs. Waycroft heard her mutter, "and if the Lord doesn't furnish me with some way of getting even I'll die a miserable death. I could willingly see her writhe on a bed of live coals. No hell could be hot enough for that woman." Ann paused suddenly at the door, and gazed across the green expanse towards Jane's house. Mrs. Waycroft heard her utter a sudden, harsh laugh. "And I think I see her punishment on the way. I see it—I see it!"

"What is it you say you see?" the visitor asked, curiously.

"Oh, nothing!" Ann said, and she sat down heavily in her chair and tightly locked her calloused hands in front of her.

XI

The continuous dry weather during the month of June had caused many springs and a few wells to become dry, and the women of that section found it difficult to get sufficient soft water for the washing of clothes. Mrs. Hemingway, whose

own well was fed from a vein of limestone water too hard to be of much use in that way, remembered a certain rock-bottom pool in a shaded nook at the foot of the rugged hill back of her house where at all times of the year a quantity of soft, clear water was to be found; so thither, with a great bundle of household linen tied up in a sheet, she went one morning shortly after breakfast.

Her secret ailment had not seemed to improve under the constant application of the peddler's medicine, and, as her doubts of ultimate recovery increased correspondingly, her strength seemed to wane. Hence she paused many times on the way to the pool to rest. Finally arriving at the spot and lowering her burden, she met a great and irritating surprise, for, bending over a tub at the edge of the pool, and quite in command of the only desirable space for the placing of tubs and the sunning of articles, was Ann Boyd. Their eyes met in a stare of indecision like that of two wild animals meeting in a forest, and there was a moment's preliminary silence. It was broken by an angry outburst from the new-comer. "Huh!" she grunted, "you here?"

It was quickly echoed by a satisfied laugh from the depths of Ann's sunbonnet. "You bet, old lady, I've beat you to the tank. You've toted your load here for nothing. You might go down-stream a few miles and find a hole good enough for your few dirty rags. I've used about all this up. It's getting too muddy to do any good, but I've got about all I want."

"This land isn't yours," Jane Hemingway asserted, almost frothing at the mouth. "It belongs to Jim Sansom."

"Jim may hold deeds to it," Ann laughed again, "but he's too poor to fence it in. I reckon it's public property, or you wouldn't have lugged that dirty load all the way through the broiling sun on that weak back of yours."

Jane Hemingway stood panting over her big snowball. She had nothing to say. She could not find a use for her tongue. Through her long siege of underhand warfare against the woman at the tub she had wisely avoided a direct clash with Ann's eye, tongue, or muscle. She was more afraid of those things to-day than she had ever been. A chill of strange terror had gone through her, too, at the mention of her weak back. That the peddler had told Ann about the cancer she now felt was more likely than ever. Without a word, Jane bent to lift her bundle, but her enemy, dashing the water from her big, crinkled hands, had advanced towards her.

"You just wait a minute," Ann said, sharply, her great eyes flashing, her hands resting on her stocky hips. "I've got something to say to you, and I'm glad to get this chance. What I've got to hurl in your death-marked face, Jane Hemingway, isn't for other ears. It's for your own rotting soul. Now, you listen!"

Jane Hemingway gasped. "Death-marked face," the root of her paralyzed tongue seemed to articulate to the wolf-pack of fears within her. Her thin legs

began to shake, and, to disguise the weakness from her antagonist's lynx eyes, she sank down upon her bundle. It yielded even to her slight weight, and her sharp knees rose to a level with her chin.

"I don't want to talk to you," she managed to say, almost in a tone of appeal.

"Oh, I know that, you trifling hussy, but I do to you, Jane Hemingway. I'm going to tell you what you are. You are worse than a thief—than a negro thief that steals corn from a crib at night, or meat from a smoke-house. You are a low-lived, plotting liar. For years you have railed out against my character. I was a bad woman because I admitted my one fault of girlhood, but you married a man and went to bed with him that you didn't love a speck. You did that to try to hide a real love for another man who was another woman's legal husband. Are you listening?—I say, are you *listening*?"

"Yes, I'm listening," faltered Jane Hemingway, her face hidden under her bonnet.

"Well, you'd better. When I had my first great trouble, God is witness to the fact that I thought I loved the young scamp who brought it about. I *thought* I loved him, anyway. That's all the excuse I had for not listening to advice of older people. I wasn't old enough to know right from wrong, and, like lots of other young girls, I was bull-headed. My mother never was strict with me, and nobody else was interested in me enough to learn me self-protection. I've since then been through college in that line, and such low, snaky agents of hell as you are were my professors. No wonder you have hounded me all these years. You loved Joe Boyd with all the soul you had away back there, and you happened to be the sort that couldn't stand refusal. So when you met him that day on the road, and he told you he was on the way to ask me the twentieth time to be his wife, you followed him a mile and fell on his neck and threatened suicide, and begged and cried and screamed so that the wheat-cutting gang at Judmore's wondered if somebody's house was afire. But he told you a few things about what he thought of me, and they have rankled with you through your honeymoon with an unloved husband, through your period of childbirth, and now as you lean over your grave. Bad woman that you are, you married a man you had no respect for to hide your disappointment in another direction. You are decent in name only. Thank God, my own conscience is clear. I've been wronged all my life more than I ever wronged beast or man. I had trouble; but I did no wrong according to my dim lights. But you—you with one man's baby on your breast went on hounding the wife of another who had won what you couldn't get. You, I reckon, love Joe Boyd to this day, and will the rest of your life. I reckon you thought when he left me that he would marry you, but no man cares for a woman that cries after him. You even went over there to Gilmer a month or so ago to try to attract his attention with new finery bought on a credit, and you even made up to the

daughter that was stolen from me, but I have it from good authority that neither one of them wanted to have anything to do with you."

"There's not a bit of truth in that," said the weaker woman, in feeble self-defence. She would have said some of the things she was always saying to others but for fear that, driven further, the strong woman might actually resort to violence. No, there was nothing for Jane Hemingway to do but to listen.

"Oh, I don't care what you deny," Ann hurled at her. "I know what I'm talking about." Then Ann's rage led her to say something which, in calmer mood, she would, for reasons of her own, not have even hinted at. "Look here, Jane," she went on, bending down and touching the shrinking shoulder of her enemy, "in all your life you never heard me accused of making false predictions. When I say a thing, folks know that I know what I'm talking about and look for it to happen. So now I say, positively, that I'm going to get even with you. Hell and all its inmates have been at your back for a score of years, but God—Providence, the law of nature, or whatever it is that rights wrong—is bound to prevail, and you are going to face a misfortune—a certain sort of misfortune—that I know all about. I reckon I'm making a fool of myself in preparing you for it, but I'm so glad it's coming that I've got to tell it to somebody. When the grim time comes I want you to remember that you brought it on yourself."

Ann ceased speaking and stood all of a quiver before the crouching creature. Jane Hemingway's blood, at best sluggish of action, turned cold. With her face hidden by her bonnet, she sat staring at the ground. All her remaining strength seemed to have left her. She well knew what Ann meant. The peddler had told her secret—had even revealed more of the truth than he had to her. Discovering that Ann hated her, he had gone into grim and minute particulars over her affliction. He had told Ann the cancer was fatal, that the quack lotion he had sold would only keep the patient from using a better remedy or resorting to the surgeon's knife. In any case, her fate was sealed, else Ann would not be so positive about it.

"I see I hit you all right that pop, madam!" Ann chuckled. "Well, you will wait the day in fear and trembling that is to be my sunrise of joy. Now, pick up your duds and go home. I want you out of my sight."

Like a subject under hypnotic suggestion, Jane Hemingway, afraid of Ann, and yet more afraid of impending fate, rose to her feet. Ann had turned back to her tub and bent over it. Jane felt a feeble impulse to make some defiant retort, but could not rouse her bound tongue to action. In her helplessness and fear she hated her enemy more than ever before, but could find no adequate way of showing it. The sun had risen higher and its rays beat fiercely down on her thin back, as she managed to shoulder her bundle and move homeward.

XII

She had scarcely turned the bend in the path, and was barely out of Ann's view, when she had to lower her bundle and rest. Seated on a moss-grown stone near the dry bed of the stream which had fed Ann's pool before the drought, she found herself taking the most morbid view of her condition. The delicate roots of the livid growth on her breast seemed to be insidiously burrowing more deeply towards her heart than ever before. Ah, what a fool she had been at such a crisis to listen to an idle tramp, who had not only given her a stone when she had paid for bread, but had revealed her secret to the one person she had wished to keep it from! But she essayed to convince herself that all hope was not gone, and the very warning Ann had angrily uttered might be turned to advantage. She would now be open about her trouble, since Ann knew it, anyway, and perhaps medical skill might help her, even yet, to triumph. Under that faint inspiration she shouldered her burden and crept slowly homeward.

Reaching her cottage, she dropped the ball of clothes at the door and went into the sitting-room, where Virginia sat complacently sewing at a window on the shaded side of the house. The girl had only a few moments before washed her long, luxuriant hair, and it hung loose and beautiful in the warm air. She was merrily singing a song, and hardly looked at her mother as she paused near her.

"Hush, for God's sake, hush!" Jane groaned. "Don't you see I'm unable to stand?"

In sheer astonishment Virginia turned her head and noticed her mother's pale, long-drawn face. "What is it, mother, are you sick?"

By way of reply the old woman sank into one of the hide-bottomed chairs near the open doorway and groaned again. Quickly rising, and full of grave concern, the girl advanced to her. Standing over the bowed form, she looked out through the doorway and saw the bundle of clothes.

"You don't mean to tell me, mother, that you have carried that load all about looking for water to wash in!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"Yes, I took them to the rock-pool and back; but that ain't it," came from between Jane's scrawny hands, which were now spread over her face. "I am

strong enough bodily, still, but I met Ann Boyd down there. She had all the place there was, and had muddied up the water. Virginia, she knows about that spot on my breast that the medicine peddler said was a cancer. She wormed it out of him. He told her more than he did me. He told her it would soon drag me to the grave. It's a great deal worse than it was before I began to rub his stuff on it. He's a quack. I was a fool not to go to a regular doctor right at the start."

"You think, then, that it really *is* a cancer?" gasped the girl, and she turned pale.

"Yes, I have no doubt of it now, from the way it looks and from the way that woman gloated over me. She declared she knew all about it, and that nothing on earth had made her so glad. I want to see Dr. Evans. I wish you'd run over to his house and have him come."

"But he's not a regular doctor," protested the girl, mildly. "They say he is not allowed to practise, and that he only uses remedies of his own making. The physicians at Darley were talking of having him arrested not long ago."

"Oh, I know all that," Jane said, petulantly, "but that's because he cured one or two after they had been given up by licensed doctors. He knows a lots, and he will tell me, anyway, whether I've got a cancer or not. He knows what they are. He told Mrs. Hiram Snodgrass what her tumor was, and under his advice she went to Atlanta and had it cut out, and saved her life when two doctors was telling her it was nothing but a blood eruption that would pass off. You know he is good-hearted."

With a troubled nod, Virginia admitted that this was true. Her sweet mouth was drawn down in pained concern, a stare of horror lay in her big, gentle eyes. "I'll go bring him," she promised. "I saw him pass with a bag of meal from the mill just now."

"Well, tell him not to say anything about it," Jane cautioned her. "Evidently Ann Boyd has not talked about it much, and I don't want it to be all over the neighborhood. I despise pity. I'm not used to it. If it gets out, the tongues of these busy-bodies would run me stark crazy. They would roost here like a swarm of buzzards over a dying horse."

Virginia returned in about half an hour, accompanied by a gray-headed and full-whiskered man of about seventy years of age, who had any other than the look of even a country doctor. He wore no coat, and his rough shirt was without button from his hairy neck to the waistband of his patched and baggy trousers. His fat hands were too much calloused by labor in the field and forest, and by digging for roots and herbs, to have felt the pulse of anything more delicate than an ox, and under less grave circumstances his assumed air of the regular visiting physician would have had its comic side.

"Virginia tells me you are a little upset to-day," he said, easily, after he had

gone to the water-bucket and taken a long, slow drink from the gourd. He sat down in a chair near the widow, and laid his straw hat upon the floor, from which it was promptly removed by Virginia to one of the beds. "Let me take a look at your tongue."

"I'll do no such of a thing," retorted Jane, most flatly. "There is nothing wrong with my stomach. I am afraid I've got a cancer on my breast, and I want to make sure."

"You don't say!" Evans exclaimed. "Well, it wouldn't surprise me. I see 'em mighty often these days. Well, you'd better let me look at it. Stand thar in the door so I can get a good light. I'm wearing my wife's specks. I don't know whar I laid mine, but I hope I'll get 'em back. I only paid twenty-five cents for 'em in Darley, and yet three of my neighbors has taken such a liking to 'em that I've been offered as high as three dollars for 'em, and they are only steel rims and are sorter shackly at the hinges at that. Every time Gus Willard wants to write a letter he sends over for my specks and lays his aside. I reckon he thinks I'll get tired sendin' back for 'em and get me another pair. Now, that's right"—Mrs. Hemingway had taken a stand in one of the rear doors and unbuttoned her dress. Despite her stoicism, she found herself holding her breath in fear and suspense as to what his opinion would be. Virginia, pale and with a fainting sensation, sat on the edge of the nearest bed, her shapely hands tightly clasped in her lap. She saw Dr. Evans bend close to her mother's breast and touch and press the livid spot.

"Do you feel that?" he asked.

"Yes, and it hurts some when you do that."

"How long have you had it thar?" he paused in his examination to ask, peering over the rims of his spectacles.

"I noticed it first about a year ago, but thought nothing much about it," she answered.

"And never showed it to nobody?" he said, reprovingly.

"I let a peddler, who had stuff to sell, see it awhile back." There was a touch of shame in Jane's face. "He said his medicine would make it slough off, but—"

"Slough nothing! That trifling skunk!" Evans cried. "Why, he's the biggest fake unhung! He sold that same stuff over the mountain to bald-headed men to make hair grow. Huh, I say! they talk about handling *me* by law, and kicking *me* out of the country on account of my knowledge and skill, and let chaps like him scour the country from end to end for its last cent. What the devil gets into you women? Here you've let this thing go on sinking its fangs deeper and deeper in your breast, and only fertilizing it by the treatment he was giving you. Are you hankering for a change of air? Thar was Mrs. Telworthy, that let her liver run on till she was as yaller as a pumpkin with jaundice before she'd come to me. I

give 'er two bottles of my purifier, and she could eat a barbecued ox in a month."

"What do you think I ought to do about this?" asked Jane; and Virginia, with strange qualms at heart, thought that her mother had put it that way to avoid asking if the worst was really to be faced.

Evans stroked his bushy beard wisely. "Do about it?" he repeated, as he went back to his chair, leaving the patient to button her dress with stiff, fumbling fingers. "I mought put you on a course of my blood purifier and wait developments, and, Sister Hemingway, if I was like the regular run of doctors, with their own discoveries on the market, I'd do it in the interest of science, but I'm not going to take the resk on my shoulders. A man who gives domestic remedies like mine is on safe ground when he's treating ordinary diseases, but I reckon a medical board would decide that this was a case for a good, steady knife. Now, I reckon you'd better get on the train and take a run down to Atlanta and put yourself under Dr. Putnam, who is noted far and wide as the best cancer expert in the land."

"Then—then that's what it is?" faltered Mrs. Hemingway.

"Oh yes, that's what you've got, all right enough," said Evans, "and the thing now is to uproot it."

"How—how much would it be likely to cost?" the widow asked, her troubled glance on Virginia's horror-stricken face.

"That depends," mused Evans. "I've sent Putnam a number of cases, and he would, I think, make you a special widow-rate, being as you and me live so nigh each other. At a rough guess, I'd say that everything—board and room and nurse, treatment, medicines, and attention—would set you back a hundred dollars."

"But where am I to get that much money?" Jane said, despondently.

"Well, thar you have me," Evans laughed. "I reckon you know your resources better than anybody else, but you'll have to rake it up some way. You ain't ready to die yet. Callihan has a mortgage on your land, hain't he?"

"Yes, and on my crop not yet gathered," Jane sighed; "he even included every old hoe and axe and piece of harness, and the cow and calf, and every chair and knife and fork and cracked plate in the house."

"Well," and Evans rose and reached for his hat, "as I say, you'll have to get up the money; it will be the best investment you could make."

When he had left, Virginia, horror-stricken, sat staring at her mother, a terrible fear in her face and eyes.

"Then it really *is* a cancer?" she gasped.

"Yes, I was afraid it was all along," said Jane. "You see, the peddler said so plainly, and he told Ann Boyd about it. Virginia, she didn't know I knew how bad it was, for she hinted at some awful end that was to overtake me, as if it would be news to me. Daughter, I'm going to try my level best to throw this thing off.

I always had a fear of death. My mother had before me; she was a Christian woman, and was prepared, if anybody was, and yet she died in agony. She laid in bed and begged for help with her last breath. But my case is worse than hers, for my one foe in this life is watching over me like a hawk. Oh, I can't stand it! You must help me study up some way to raise that money. If it was in sight, I'd feel better. Doctors can do wonders these days, and I'll go to that big one if I possibly can."

XIII

One afternoon, about a week later, as Ann Boyd sat in her weaving-room twisting bunches of carded wool into yarn on her old spinning-wheel, the whir of which on her busy days could be heard by persons passing along the road in front of her gate, a shadow fell on her floor, and, looking up, she saw a tall, handsome young man in the doorway, holding his hat in one hand, a valise in the other. He said nothing, but only stood smiling, as if in hearty enjoyment of the surprise he was giving her.

"Luke King!" she exclaimed. "You, of all people on the face of the earth!"

"Yes, Aunt Ann"—he had always addressed her in that way—"here I am, like a bad coin, always turning up."

The yellow bunches of wool fell to the floor as she rose up and held out her hand.

"You know I'm glad to see you, my boy," she said, "but I wasn't expecting you; I don't know as I ever looked for you to come back here again, where you've had such a hard time of it. When you wrote me you was the chief editor of a paying paper out there, I said to myself that you'd never care to work here in the mountains, where there is so little to be made by a brainy man."

"If I were to tell you the main thing that brought me back you'd certainly scold me," he laughed; "but I never hid a fault from you, Aunt Ann. The truth is, good, old-fashioned home-sickness is at the bottom of it."

"Homesickness, for *this*?" Ann sneered contemptuously, as she waved her hand broadly—"homesick for the hard bed you had at your step-father's, in a pine-pole cabin, with a mud chimney and windows without glass, when you've been the equal, out there, of the highest and best in the land, and among folks

that could and would appreciate your talents and energy and were able to pay cash for it at the highest market-price?"

"You don't understand, Aunt Ann." He flushed sensitively under her stare of disapproval as he sat down in a chair near her wheel. "Maybe you never did understand me thoroughly. I always had a big stock of sentiment that I couldn't entirely kill. Aunt Ann, all my life away has only made me love these old mountains, hills, and valleys more than ever, and, finally, when a good opportunity presented itself, as—"

"Oh, you are just like the rest, after all. I'd hoped to the contrary," Ann sighed. "But don't think I'm not glad to see you, Luke." Her voice shook slightly. "God knows I've prayed for a sight of the one face among all these here in the mountains that seemed to respect me, but there was another side to the matter. I wanted to feel, Luke, that I had done you some actual good in the world—that the education I helped you to get was going to lift you high above the average man. When you wrote about all your good-luck out there, the big salary, the interest the stockholders had given you in the paper that bid fair to make a pile of money, and stood so high in political influence, I was delighted; but, Luke, if a sentimental longing for these heartless red hills and their narrow, hide-bound inhabitants has caused you actually to throw up—"

"Oh, it's really not so bad as that," King hastened to say. "The truth is—though I really *was* trying to keep from bragging about my good-fortune before I'd had a chance to ask after your health—the truth is, Aunt Ann, it's business that really brings me back, though I confess it was partly for sentimental reasons that I decided on the change. It's this way: A company has been formed in Atlanta to run a daily paper on somewhat similar lines to the one we had in the West, and the promoters of it, it seems, have been watching my work, and that sort of thing, and so, only a few days ago, they wrote offering me a good salary to assume chief charge and management of the new paper. At first I declined, in a deliberate letter, but they wouldn't have it that way—they telegraphed me that they would not listen to a refusal, and offered me the same financial interest as the one I held."

"Ah, they did, eh?" Ann's eye for business was gleaming. "They offered you as good as you had?"

"Better, as it has turned out, Aunt Ann," said King, modestly, "for when my associates out there read the proposition, they said it was my duty to myself to accept, and with that they took my stock off my hands. They paid me ten thousand dollars in cash, Aunt Ann. I've got that much ready money and a position that is likely to be even better than the one I had. So, you see, all my home-sickness—"

"Ten thousand dollars!" Ann cried, her strong face full of gratification. "Ten thousand dollars for my sturdy mountain-boy! Ah, that will open the eyes of

some of these indolent know-it-all louts who said the money spent on your education was thrown in the fire. You are all right, Luke. I'm a judge of human stock as well as cattle and horses. If you'd been a light fellow you'd have dropped me when you began to rise out there; but you didn't. Your letters have been about the only solace I've had here in all my loneliness and strife, and here you are to see me as soon as you come—that is, I reckon, you haven't been here many days."

"I got to Darley at two o'clock to-day," King smiled, affectionately. "I took the hack to Springtown and left my trunk there, to walk here. I haven't seen mother yet, Aunt Ann. I had to see you first."

"You are a good boy, Luke," Ann said, with feeling, as was indicated by her husky voice and the softening of her features. "So you *are* going to see your mother?"

"Yes, I'm going to see her, Aunt Ann. For several years I have felt resentment about her marrying as she did, but, do you know, I think success and good-fortune make one forgiving. Somehow, with all my joy over my good-luck, I feel like I'd like to shake even lazy old Mark Bruce by the hand and tell him I am willing to let by-gones be by-gones. Then, if I could, I'd like to help him and my mother and step-brother and step-sisters in some material way."

"Huh! I don't know about that," Ann frowned. "Help given to them sort is certainly throwed away; besides, what's yours is yours, and if you started in to distribute help you'll be ridden to death. No, go to see them if you *have* to, but don't let them wheedle your justly earned money out of you. They don't deserve it, Luke."

"Oh, well, we'll see about it," King laughed, lightly. "You know old Bruce may kick me out of the house, and if mother stood to him in it again"—King's eyes were flashing, his lip was drawn tight—"I guess I'd never go back any more, Aunt Ann."

"Old Mark would never send you away if he thought you had money," Ann said, cynically. "If I was you I'd not let them know about that. You see, you could keep them in the dark easily enough, for I've told them absolutely nothing except that you were getting along fairly well."

King smiled. "They never would think I had much to judge by this suit of clothes," he said. "It is an old knockabout rig I had to splash around in the mud in while out hunting, and I put it on this morning—well, just because I did not want to come back among all my poor relatives and friends dressed up as I have been doing in the city, Aunt Ann," he laughed, as if making sport of himself. "I've got a silk high-hat as slick as goose-grease, and a long jimswinger coat, and pants that are always ironed as sharp as a knife-blade in front. I took your advice and decided that a good appearance went a long way, but I don't really think I overdid it."

"I'm glad you didn't put on style in coming back, anyway," Ann said, proudly. "It wouldn't have looked well in you; but you did right to dress like the best where you were, and it had something—a lots, I imagine—to do with your big success. If you want to go in and win in any undertaking, don't think failure for one minute, and the trouble is that shabby clothes are a continual reminder of poverty. Make folks believe at the outset that you are of the best, and then *be* the best."

King was looking down thoughtfully. "There is one trouble," he said, "in making a good appearance, and that comes from the ideas of some as to what sort of man or woman is the best. Before I left Seattle, Aunt Ann, my associates gave me a big dinner at the club—a sort of good-bye affair to drink to my future, you know—and some of the most distinguished men in the state were there, men prominent in the business and political world. And that night, Aunt Ann"—King had flushed slightly and his voice faltered—"that night a well-meaning man, a sort of society leader, in his toast to me plainly referred to me as a scion of the old Southern aristocracy, and he did it in just such a way as to make it appear to those who knew otherwise that I would be sailing under false colors if I did not correct the impression. He had made a beautiful talk about our old colonial homes, our slaves in livery, our beautiful women, who invariably graced the courts of Europe, and concluded by saying that it was no wonder I had succeeded where many other men with fewer hereditary influences to back them had failed."

"Ah, you *were* in a fix!" Ann said. "That is, it was awkward for you, who I know to be almost too sincere for your own good."

"Well, I couldn't let it pass, Aunt Ann—I simply couldn't let all those men leave that table under a wrong impression. I hardly know what I said when I replied, but it seemed to be the right thing, for they all applauded me. I told him I did not belong to what was generally understood to be the old aristocracy of the South, but to what I considered the new. I told them about our log-cabin aristocracy, Aunt Ann, here in these blue mountains, for which my soul was famished. I told them of the sturdy, hard-working, half-starved mountaineers and their scratching, with dull tools, a bare existence out of this rocky soil. I told them of my bleak and barren boyhood, my heart-burnings at home, when my mother married again, the nights I'd spent at study in the light of pine-knots that filled the house with smoke. Then I told them about the grandest woman God ever brought to life. I told them about you, Aunt Ann. I gave no names, went into no painful particulars, but I talked about what you had done for me, and how you've been persecuted and misunderstood, till I could hardly hold back the tears from my eyes."

"Oh, hush, Luke," Ann said, huskily—"hush up!"

"Well, I may now, but I couldn't that night," said King. "I got started, and it

came out of me like a flood. I said things about you that night that I've thought for years, but which you never would let me say to you."

"Hush, Luke, hush—you are a good boy, but you mustn't—" Ann's voice broke, and she placed her hand to her eyes.

"There was a celebrated novelist there," King went on, "and after dinner he came over to me and held out his hand. He was old and white-haired, and his face was full of tender, poetic emotion. 'If you ever meet your benefactress again,' he said, 'tell her I'd give half my life to know her. If I'd known her I could write a book that would be immortal.'"

There was a pause. Ann seemed to be trying to crush out some obstruction to deliberate utterance in her big, throbbing throat.

"If he knew my life just as it has been," she said, finally—"if he knew it all—all that I've been through, all I've thought through it all, from the time I was an innocent, laughing girl 'till now, as an old woman, I'm fighting a battle of hate with every living soul within miles of me—if he knew all *that*, he could write a book, and it would be a big one. But it wouldn't help humanity, Luke. My hate's mine, and the devil's. It's not for folks born lucky and happy. Some folks seem put on earth for love. I'm put here for hate and for joy over the misfortune of my enemies."

"You know many things, Aunt Ann," King said, softly, "and you are older than I am, but you can't see the end of it all as clearly as I do."

"You think not, my boy?"

"No, Aunt Ann; I have learned that nothing exists on earth except to produce ultimate good. The vilest crime, indirectly, is productive of good. I confidently expect to see the day that you will simply rise one step higher in your remarkable life and learn to love your enemies. Then you'll be understood by them all as I understand you, for they will then look into your heart, your *real* heart, as I've looked into it ever since you took pity on the friendless, barefoot boy that I was and lifted me out of my degradation and breathed the breath of hope into my despondent body. And when that day comes—mark it as my prediction—you will slay the ill-will of your enemies with a glance from your eye, and they will fall conquered at your feet."

"Huh!" Ann muttered, "you say that because you are just looking at the surface of things. You see, I know a lots that you don't. Things have gone on here and are still going on that nothing earthly could stop."

"That's it, Aunt Ann," Luke King said, seriously—"it won't be anything earthly. It will be *heavenly*, and when the bolt falls you will acknowledge I am right. Now, I must go. It will be about dark when I get to my step-father's."

Ann walked with him to the gate, and as she closed it after him she held out her hand. It was quivering. "You are a good boy, Luke," she said, "but you

don't know one hundredth part of what they've said and done since you left. I never wrote you."

"I don't care what they've done or said out of their shallow heads and cramped lives," King laughed—"they won't be able to affect your greater existence. You'll slay it all, Aunt Ann, with forgiveness—yes, and pity. You'll see the day you'll pity them rather than hate them."

"I don't believe it, Luke," Ann said, her lips set firmly, and she turned back into the house. Standing in the doorway, she watched him trudge along the road, carrying his valise easily in his hand and swinging it lightly to and fro.

"What a funny idea!" she mused. "Me forgive Jane Hemingway! The boy talks that way because he's young and full of dreams, and don't know any better. If he was going through what I am he'd hate the whole world and every living thing in it."

She saw him pause, turn, and put his valise down on the side of the road. He was coming back, and she went to meet him at the gate. He came up with a smile.

"The thought's just struck me," he said, "that you'd be the best adviser in the world as to what I ought to invest my ten thousand in. You never have made a mistake in money matters that I ever heard of, Aunt Ann; but maybe you'd rather not talk about my affairs."

"I don't know why," she said, as she leaned over the gate. "I'll bet that money of yours will worry me some, for young folks these days have no caution in such matters. Ten thousand dollars—why, that is exactly the price—" She paused, her face full of sudden excitement.

"The price of what, Aunt Ann?" he asked, wonderingly.

"Why, the price of the Dickerson farm. It's up for sale. Jerry Dickerson has been wanting to leave here for the last three years, and every year he's been putting a lower and lower price on his big farm and comfortable house and every improvement. His brother's gone in the wholesale grocery business in Chattanooga, and he wants to join him. The property is worth double the money. I wouldn't like to advise you, Luke, but I'd rather see your money in that place than anything else. It would be a guarantee of an income to you as long as you lived."

"I know the place, and it's a beauty," King said, "and I'll run over there and look at it to-morrow, and if it's still to be had I may rake it in. Think of me owning one of the best plantations in the valley—*me*, Aunt Ann, your barefoot, adopted son."

Ann's head was hanging low as she walked back to the cottage door.

"'Adopted son,'" she repeated, tenderly. "As God is my Judge, I—I believe he's the only creature alive on this broad earth that I love. Yes, I love that boy.

What strange, sweet ideas he has picked up! Well, I hope he'll always be able to keep them. I had plenty of them away back at his age. My unsullied faith in mankind was the tool that dug the grave of my happiness. Poor, blind boy! he may be on the same road. He may see the day that all he believes in now will crumble into bitter powder at his touch. I wonder if God can really be *all*-powerful. It seems strange that what is said to be the highest good in this life is doing exactly what He, Himself, has failed to do—to keep His own creatures from suffering. That really *is* odd."

XIV

Luke King was hot, damp with perspiration, and covered with the red dust of the mountain road when he reached the four-roomed cabin of his step-father among the stunted pines and gnarled wild cedars.

Old Mark Bruce sat out in front of the door. He wore no shoes nor coat, and his hickory shirt and trousers had been patched many times. His gray hair was long, sunburned, and dyed with the soil, and the corrugated skin of his cheeks and neck was covered with long hairs. As his step-son came into view from behind the pine-pole pig-pen, the old man uttered a grunt of surprise that brought to the doorway two young women in unadorned home-spun dresses, and a tall, lank young man in his shirt-sleeves. It was growing dark, and they all failed to recognize the new-comer.

"I suppose you have forgotten me," King said, as he put his valise on a wash-bench by a tub of suds and a piggin of lye-soap.

"By Jacks, it's Luke King!" After that ejaculation of the old man he and the others stared speechlessly.

"Yes, that's who I am," continued King. "How do you do, Jake?" (to the tall young man in the doorway). "We might as well shake hands for the sake of old times. You girls have grown into women since I left. I've stayed away a long time and seen a lot of the world, but I've always wanted to get back. Where is mother?"

Neither of the girls could summon up the courage to answer, and, as they gave him their stiff hands, they seemed under stress of great embarrassment.

”She’s poorly,” said the old man, inhospitably keeping his seat. ”She’s had a hurtin’ in ’er side from usin’ that thar battlin’ stick too much on dirty clothes, hoein’ corn an’ one thing an’ another, an’ a cold settled on her chest. Mary, go tell yore ma her son’s turned up at last. Huh, all of us, except her, thought you was dead an’ under ground! She’s always contended you was alive an’ had a job somers that was payin’ enough to feed an’ clothe you. How’s times been a-servin’ you?”

”Pretty well.” King removed his valise from the bench and took its place wearily.

”Is that so? Things is worse than ever here. Whar have you been hangin’ out?”

”Seattle was the last place,” King answered. ”I’ve worked in several towns since I left here.”

”Huh, about as I expected! An’ I reckon you hain’t got much to show fer it except what you got on yore back an’ in that carpet-bag.”

”That’s about all.”

”What you been followin’?”

”Doing newspaper work,” replied the young man, coloring.

”I ’lowed you might keep at that. You used to git a dollar a day at Canton, I remember. Married?”

”No.”

”Hain’t able to support a woman, I reckon. Well, you’ve showed a great lot o’ good sense thar; a feller of the wishy-washy, drift-about sort, like you, can sorter manage to shift fer hisself ef he hain’t hampered by a pack o’ children an’ a sick woman.”

At this juncture Mary returned. She flushed as she caught King’s expectant glance. She spoke to her father.

”She said tell ’im to come in thar.”

Luke went into the front room and turned thence into a small chamber adjoining. It was windowless and dark, the only light filtering indirectly through the front room. On a low, narrow bed, beneath a ladder leading to a trap-door above, lay a woman.

”Here I am, Luke,” she cried out, warningly. ”Don’t stumble over that pan o’ water. I’ve been takin’ a hot mustard foot-bath to try and get my blood warm. I have chilly spells every day about this time. La me! How you take me by surprise! I’ve prayed for little else in many a year, an’ was just about to give up. I took a little hope from some’n’ old Ann Boyd said one day about you bein’ well an’ employed somers out West, but then I met Jane Hemingway, an’ she give me the blues. She ’lowed that old Ann just pretended you was doin’ well to convince folks she’d made no mistake in sendin’ you to school. But, thank God, here you

are alive, anyway."

"Yes, I'm as sound as a new dollar, mother." His foot came in contact with a three-legged stool in the darkness, and he recognized it as an old friend and drew it to the head of her bed and sat down. He took one of her hard, thin hands and bent over her. Should he kiss her? She had not taught him to do so as a child, and he had never done it later in his youth, not even when he had left home, but he had been out in the world and grown wiser. He had seen other men kiss their mothers, and his heart had ached. With his hand on her hard, withered cheek he turned her face towards him and pressed his lips to hers. She was much surprised, and drew herself from him instinctively, and wiped her mouth with a corner of the coverlet, but he knew she was pleased.

"Why, Luke!" she said, quickly, "what on earth do you mean? Have you gone plumb crazy?"

"I wanted to kiss you, that's all," he said, awkwardly. They were both silent for a moment, then she spoke, tremblingly: "You always was womanish and tender-like; it don't harm anybody, though; none o' the rest in this family are that way. But, my stars! I can't tell a bit how you look in this pitch-dark. Mary! oh, Mary!"

"What you want, ma?" The nearness of the speaker in the adjoining room betrayed the fact that she had been listening.

"I can't see my hand before me," answered the old woman. "I wish you'd fetch a light here. You'll find a stub of a candle in the clock under the turpentine-bottle. I hid it thar so as to have some'n' to read the Book with Sunday night if any preacher happened to drop in to hold family worship."

The girl lighted the bit of tallow-dip and braced it upright in a cracked teacup with some bits of stone. She brought it in, placed it on a dry-goods box filled with cotton-seed and ears of corn, and shambled out. King's heart sank as he looked around him in the dim light. The room was only a lean-to shed walled with slabs driven into the ground and floored with puncheons. The bedstead was a crude, wooden frame supported by perpendicular saplings fastened to floor and rafters. The irregular cracks in the wall were filled with mud, rags, and newspapers. Bunches of dried herbs, roots, and red peppers hung above his head, and piles of clothing, earth-dyed and worn to shreds, and agricultural implements lay about indiscriminately. Disturbed by the light, a hen flew from her nest behind a dismantled cloth-loom, and with a loud cackling ran out at the door. There was a square cat-hole in the wall, and through it a lank, half-starved cat crawled and came purring and rubbing against the young man's ankle.

The old woman shaded her eyes and gazed at him eagerly. "You hain't altered so overly much," she observed, "'cept your skin looks mighty fair fer a man, and yore hands feel soft."

Then she lowered her voice into a cautious whisper, and glanced furtively towards the door. "You favor your father—I don't mean Mark, but your own daddy. You are as like him as can be. He helt his head that away, an' had yore habit o' being gentle with women-folks. You've got his high temper, too. La me! that last night you was at home, an' Mark cussed you an' kicked yore writin'-paper in the fire, I didn't sleep a wink. I thought you'd gone off to borrow a gun. It was almost a relief to know you'd left, kase I seed you an' him couldn't git along. Your father was a different sort of a man, Luke, and sometimes I miss 'im sharp. He loved books an' study like you do. He had good blood in 'im; his father was a teacher an' circuit-rider. I don't know why I married Mark, unless it was kase I was afraid of bein' sent to the poor-farm, but, la me! this is about as bad."

There was a low whimper in her voice, and the lines about her mouth had tightened. King's breast heaved, and he suddenly put out his hand and began to stroke her thin, gray hair. A strange, restful feeling stole over him. The spell was on her, too; she closed her eyes and a satisfied smile lighted her wan face. Then her lips began to quiver, and she quickly turned her face from him.

"I'm a simpleton," she sobbed, "but I can't help it. Nobody hain't petted me nor tuck on over me a bit since your pa died. I never treated you right, neither, Luke. I ort never to 'a' let Mark run over you like he did."

"Never mind that," King said. "He and I have already made friends; but you must not lie in this dingy hole; you need medicine, and good, warm food."

"Oh, I'm goin' to git up," she answered, lightly. "I'm not sick, Luke. I jest laid down awhile to rest. I have to do this nearly every evening. I must git the house straight. Mary an' Jane hain't no hands at house-work 'thout I stand right over 'em, an' Jake an' his pa is continually a-fussing. I feel stronger already. If you'll go in t'other room I'll rise. They'll never fix you nothin' to eat nor nowhar to sleep. I reckon you'll have to lie with Jake like you used to, till I can fix better. Things has been in an awful mess since I got so porely."

He went into the front room. The old man had brought his hand-bag in. He had placed it in a chair and opened it and was coolly inspecting the contents in the firelight. Jake and the two girls stood looking on. King stared at the old man, but the latter did not seem at all abashed.

"Huh," he said, "you seem to be about as well stocked with little tricks as a notion peddler—five or six pair o' striped socks and no end o' collars; them things folded under the shirts looks like another suit o' clothes. I reckon you have had a good job if you carry two outfits around. Though I *have* heard of printin'-men that went off owin' accounts here an' yan."

"I paid what I owed before I left," King said, with an effort at lightness as he closed the valise and put it into a corner.

In a few minutes his mother came in. She blew out the candle, and as she

crossed to the mantel-piece she carefully extinguished the smoking wick with her fingers. The change in her was more noticeable to her son than it had been when she was reclining. She looked very frail in her faded black cotton gown. Somehow, bent as she was, she seemed shorter than of old, more cowed and hopeless. Her shoes were worn through, and her bare feet showed through the holes.

"Mary," she asked, "have you put on the supper?"

"Yes'm, but it hain't tuck up yet." The girl went into the next room, which was used at once for cooking and dining, and her mother followed her. In a few minutes the old woman came to the door.

"Walk out, all of you," she said, wearily. "Luke, it seems funny to make company of you, but somehow I can't treat you like the rest. You'll have to make out with what is set before you, though hog-meat is mighty scarce this year. Just at fattenin'-time our pigs took the cholera an' six laid down in the swamp in one day and died. Pork is fetchin' fifteen cents a pound in town, and mighty few will sell on a credit."

XV

After supper King left his mother and step-sisters removing the dishes from the table and went out. He was sickened to the depths of his sensitive soul by the sordid meal he had just seen the family partake of with evident relish, as if it were of unusual occurrence. And he was angry with himself, too, for feeling so, when such a life had been their lot so long.

He crossed the little brook that ran on a bed of brown stone behind the cabin, and leaned against the rail-fence which surrounded the pine-pole corn-crib. He could easily leave them in their squalor and ignorance and return to the great, intellectual world—the world which read his editorials and followed his precepts, the key-note of which had always been the love of man for man as the greatest force in the universe—but, after all, would that not stamp him with the brand he most despised—hypocrisy? A pretty preacher, he, of such fine-spun theories, while his own mother and her step-children were burrowing in the soil like eyeless animals, and he living on the fat of the land along with the wealth and power of the country!

The cabin door shone out, a square of red light against the blackness of the hill and the silent, serried pines beyond. He heard Jake whistling a tune he had whistled long ago, when they had worked Mark Bruce's crop side by side, and the spasmodic creaking of the puncheons as the family moved about within.

A figure appeared in the doorway. It was his mother, and she was coming to search for him.

"Here I am, mother!" he cried out, gently, as she advanced through the darkness; "look out and don't get your feet wet."

She chuckled childishly as she stepped across the brook on the largest stones. When she reached him she put her hand on his arm and laughed: "La me, boy, a little wet won't hurt me—I'm used to a good soakin' mighty nigh every drenchin' rain. I slept with a stream of it tricklin' through the roof on my back one night, an' I've milched the cows in that thar lot when the mire was shoe-mouth deep in January. I 'lowed I'd find you out here. You used to be a mighty hand to sneak off to yoreself to study, and you are still that away. But you are different in some things, too. You don't talk our way exactly, an' I reckon that's what aggravates Mark. He was goin' on jest now about yore stuck-up way o' eatin with yore pocket-handkerchief spread out in yore lap."

King looked past her at the full moon rising above the trees on the mountain-top.

"Mother," said he, abruptly, and he put his arm impulsively around her neck, and his eyes filled—"mother, I can't stay here but a few days. I have work to do in Atlanta. Your health is bad, and you are not comfortable; the others are strong and can stand it, but you can't. Come down there with me for a while, anyway. I'll put you under a doctor and bring back your health."

She looked up into his eyes steadily for a moment, then she slapped him playfully on the breast and drew away from him. "How foolish you talk fer a grown-up man!" she laughed; "why, you know I can't leave Mark and the children. He'd go stark crazy 'thout me around to grumble at, an' then the rest ud be without my advice an' counsel. La me, what makes you think I ain't comfortable? This cabin is a sight better 'n the last one we had, an' drier an' a heap warmer inside when fire-wood kin be got. Hard times like these now is likely to come at any time an' anywhar. It strikes rich an' pore alike. Thar's Dickerson offerin' that fine old farm, with all the improvements, fer a mere song to raise money to go into business whar he kin hope to pay out o' debt. They say now that the place—lock, stock, and barrel—kin be had fer ten thousand. Why, when you was a boy he would have refused twenty. Now, ef we-all had it instead o' him, Mark an' Jake could make it pay like rips, fer they are hard workers."

"You think they could, mother?" His heart bounded suddenly, and he stood staring thoughtfully into her eyes.

"Pay?—of course they could. Fellers that could keep a roof over a family's head on what they've had to back 'em could get rich on a place like that. But, la me, what's the use o' pore folks thinkin' about the property o' the rich an' lucky? It's like dreamin' you are a queen at night an' wakin' up in hunger an' rags."

"I remember the farm and the old house very well," King remarked, reflectively, the queer light still in his earnest eyes.

"The *old* one! Huh, Dickerson got on a splurge the year you left, an' built a grand new one with some money from his wife's estate. He turned the old one into a big barn an' stable an' gin. You must see the new house 'fore you go away, Luke. It's jest splendid, with green blinds to the winders, a fancy spring-house with a tin rooster on top that p'ints the way the wind blows, and on high stilts like thar's a big tank and a windmill to keep the house supplied with water. I hain't never been in it, but they say they've got wash-tubs long enough to lie down in handy to every sleepin'-room, and no end of fancy contraptions."

"We'd better go in, mother," he said, abruptly. "You'll catch your death of cold out here in the dew."

She laughed as they walked back to the cabin, side by side. A thick smoke and its unpleasant odor met them at the door.

"It's Mark burnin' rags inside to oust the mosquitoes so he kin sleep," she explained. "They are wuss this year than I ever seed 'em. Seems like the general starvation has tackled them, too, fer they look like they will eat a body up whether or no. Jake an' the gals grease their faces with lamp-oil when they have any, but I jest kiver up my head with a rag an' never know they are about. I reckon we'd better go to bed. Jake has fixed him a pallet on the fodder in the loft, so you kin lie by yoreself. He's been jowerin' at his pa ever since supper about treatin' you so bad. I thought once they'd come to blows."

The next morning, after breakfast, Jake threw a bag of shelled corn on the back of his mare, and, mounting upon it as if it were a saddle, he started off down the valley to the mill, and his father shouldered an axe and went up on the hill to cut wood.

"Whar you going?" Mrs. Bruce asked, as she followed Luke to the door.

His eyes fell to the ground. "I thought," he answered, "that I'd walk over to the Dickerson farm and take a look at the improvements. I used to hunt over that land."

"Well, whatever you do, be sure you get back to dinner," she said. "Me an' Jane took a torch last night after you went to bed an' blinded a hen on the roost and pulled her down; I'm goin' to make you an' old-time chicken-pie like you used to love on Christmas."

Half a mile up the road, which ran along the side of the hill from which the slow, reverberating clap, clap of Mark Bruce's axe came on the still air, King

came into view of the rich, level lands of the Dickerson plantation. He stood in the shade of a tall poplar and looked thoughtfully at the lush green meadows, the well-tilled fields of corn, cotton, and sorghum, and the large, two-storied house, with its dormer-windows, tall, fluted columns, and broad verandas—at the well-arranged out-houses, barns, and stables, and the white-gravelled drives and walks from the house to the main road. Then he turned and looked back at the cabin—the home of his nearest kin.

The house was hardly discernible in the gray morning mist that lingered over the little vale in which it stood. He saw Jake, far away, riding along, in and out, among the sassafras and sumach bushes that bordered a worn-out wheat-field, his long legs dangling at the sides of the mare. There was a bent, blurred figure at the wood-pile in the yard; it was his mother or one of the girls.

"Poor souls!" he exclaimed; "they have been in a dreary tread-mill all their lives, and have never known the joy of one gratified ambition. If only I could conquer my own selfish desires, I could lay before them that which they never dreamed of possessing—a glorious taste of genuine happiness. It would take my last dollar of ready money, but I'd still have my interest in the new paper and this brain and will of mine. Aunt Ann would never see it my way, and she might throw me over for doing it, but why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I do it when my very soul cries out for it? Why have I been preaching this thing all this time and making converts right and left if I am to draw back the first time a real opportunity confronts me? It may be to test my mettle. Yes, that's what it is. I've got to do one or the other—keep the money—or give it to them."

XVI

King turned towards the Dickerson place and walked on, a great weight of indecision on him. He had always held up Ann Boyd as his highest human example. She would laugh the idea to scorn—the idea of putting old Mark Bruce and his "lay-out" into such a home and circumstances; and yet, estimable as she was in many things, still she was not a free woman. She showed that by her slavery to the deepest hatred that ever burned in a human breast. No, it was plain to the young philosopher that in some things, at least, she was no guide for him. Rather

might it not eventually result in the hate-hardened woman's learning brighter walks of life from him, young as he was? And yet, he told himself, the money was his, not theirs, and few really succeeded in life who gave away their substance.

The road led him past Jane Hemingway's cottage, and at the fence, in the barn-yard, he saw Virginia. He saw her, bareheaded, with her wonderful hair and exquisite profile and curve of neck, shoulder, and breast, before she was aware of his approach, and the view brought him to a stand behind some bushes which quite hid him from her view.

"It is Virginia—it must be—yes, it is Virginia!" he said, ecstatically. "She has become what I knew she would become, the loveliest woman in the world; she is exactly as I have fancied her all these years—proud, erect—and her eyes, oh! I must look into her eyes again! Ah, now I know what brought me home! Now I know why I was not content away. Yes, this was the cause—Virginia—my little friend and pupil—Virginia!"

She had turned her head, and with the startled look of a wild young fawn on the point of running away, she stood staring at him.

"Have you entirely forgotten me, Virginia?" he asked, advancing almost with instinctive caution towards her.

"Oh no, now I know you," she said, with, he thought, quite the girlish smile he had taken with him in his roaming, and she leaned over the fence and gave him her hand. He felt it pulsing warmly in his, and a storm of feeling—the accumulation of years—rushed over him as he looked into the eyes he had never forgotten, and marvelled over their wonderful lights and shadows. It was all he could do to steady his voice when he next spoke.

"It has been several years since I saw you," he said, quite aimlessly. "In fact, you were a little girl then, Virginia, and now you are a woman, a full-grown woman—just think of that! But why are you looking at me so steadily from head to foot?"

"I—I can hardly realize that it really is you," Virginia said. "You see, Luke—Mr. King, I mean—I thought you were—really, I thought you were dead. My mother has said it many times. She quite believed it, for some reason or other."

"She *wanted* to believe it, Virginia, with all respect to your mother. She hates Aunt Ann—Mrs. Boyd, you know—and it seems she almost hoped I'd never amount to anything, since it was Mrs. Boyd's means that gave me my education."

"Yes, that's the way it must have been," admitted the girl, "and it seems strange for you to be here when I have thought I'd perhaps never see you again."

"So you really thought I was done for?" he said, trying to assume a calmness he was far from feeling under the titillating spell her beauty and sweet, musical voice had cast over him.

"Yes, mother often declared it was so, and then—" She broke off, her color rising slightly.

"And, then, Virginia—?" he reminded her, eagerly.

She looked him frankly in the eyes; it was the old, fearless, childlike glance that had told him long ago of her strong, inherent nobility of character.

"Well, I really thought if you *had* been alive you'd have come back to your mother. You would have written, anyway. She's been in a pitiful condition, Mr. King."

"I know it now, Virginia," he said, his cheeks hot with shame. "I'm afraid you'll never understand how a sane man could have acted as I have, but I went away furious with her and her husband, and I never allowed my mind to dwell in tenderness on her."

"That was no excuse," the girl said, still firmly, though her eyes were averted. "She had a right to marry again, and, if you and her husband couldn't get along together, that did not release you from your duty to see that she was given ordinary comfort. I've seen her walk by here and stop to rest, when it looked like she could hardly drag one foot after another. The thought came to me once that she was starving to give what she had to eat to the others."

"You needn't tell me about it," he faltered, the flames of his shame mounting high in his face—"I stayed there last night. I saw enough to drag my soul out of my body. Don't form hasty judgment yet, Virginia. You shall see that I'll do my duty now. I'll work my hands to the bone."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you talk that way," the girl answered. "It would make her so happy to have help from you."

"Your ideas of filial duty were always beautiful, Virginia," he said, his admiring eyes feasting on her face. "I remember once—I shall never forget it—it was the day you let me wade across the creek with you in my arms. You said you were too big to be carried, but you were as light as a feather. I could have carried you that way all day and never been tired. It was then that you told me in all sincerity that you would really die for your mother's sake. It seemed a strangely unselfish thing for a little girl to say, but I believe now that you'd do it."

"Yes, in my eyes it is the first, almost the *whole* of one's duty in life," Virginia replied. "I hardly have a moment's happiness now, owing to my mother's failing health."

"Yes, I was sorry to hear she was afflicted," said King. "She's up and about, though, I believe."

"Yes, but she is suffering more than mere bodily pain. She has her trouble on her mind night and day. She's afraid to die, Luke. That's queer to me. Even at my age I'd not be afraid, and she is old, and really ought not to care. I'd think she would have had enough of life, such as it has been from the beginning till now,

full of strife, anger, and envy. I hear her calling me now, and I must go in. Come see her, won't you?"

"Yes, very soon," King said, as she turned away. He stood at the fence and watched her as she moved gracefully over the grass to the gate near the cottage. At the door she turned and smiled upon him, and then was gone.

"Yes, I now know why I came back," he said. "It was Virginia—little Virginia—that brought me. Oh, God, isn't she beautiful—isn't she strong of character and noble? Away back there when she wore short dresses she believed in me. Once" (he caught his breath) "I seemed to see the dawn of love in her eyes, but it has died away. She has out-grown it. She thought me dead; she didn't want to think me alive and capable of neglecting my mother. Well, she shall see. She, too, looks on me as an idle drift-about; in due time she shall know I am more serious than that. But I must go slowly; if I am too impulsive I may spoil all my chances, and, Luke King, if that woman does not become your wife you will be a failure—a dead failure at everything to which you lay your hands, for you'd never be able to put your heart into anything again—you couldn't, for it's hers for all time and eternity."

It was dusk when he returned to his mother's cabin. Jake sat on his warm bag of meal just inside the door. Old Mark had taken off his shoes, and sat under a persimmon-tree "cooling off" and yelling impatiently at his wife to "hurry up supper."

When she heard Luke had returned, she came to the door where he sat talking to Jake. "We didn't know what had become of you," she said, as she emerged from the cabin, bending her head to pass through the low doorway.

"I got interested in looking over the Dickerson farm," he replied, "and before I realized it the sun was almost down."

"Oh, it don't matter; I saved you a piece of pie; I'm just warming it over now. I'll bet you didn't get a bite o' dinner."

"Yes, I did. The fact is, Dickerson remembered me, and made me go to dinner with him; but I'm ready to eat again."

As they were rising from the table a few minutes later, King said, in a rather constrained tone, "I've got something to say to you all, and I may as well do it now."

With much clatter they dragged their chairs after him to the front room and sat down with awkward ceremony—the sort of dignified quiet that usually governed them during the visit of some strolling preacher or benighted peddler. They stared with ever-increasing wonder as he placed his own chair in front of them. Old Mark seemed embarrassed by the formality of the proceedings, and endeavored to relieve himself by assuming indifference. He coughed conspicuously and hitched his chair back till it leaned against the door-jamb.

There was a queer, boyish tremor in Luke King's voice when he began to speak, and it vibrated there till he had finished.

"Since I went away from you," he began, his eyes on the floor, "I have studied hard and closely applied myself to a profession, and, though I've wandered about a good deal, I've made it pay pretty well. I'm not rich, now, but I'm worth more than you think I am. In big cities the sort of talent I happen to have brings a sort of market-price, and I have profited by my calling. You have never had any luck, and you have worked hard and deserve more than has fallen to your lot. You'd never be able to make anything on this poor land, even if you could buy your supplies as low as those who pay cash, but you have not had the ready money at any time, and the merchants have swindled you on every deal you've made with them. The Dickerson plantation is the sort of place you really need. It is worth double the price he asked for it. I happened to have the money to spare, and I bought it to-day while I was over there."

There was a profound silence in the room. The occupants of the row of chairs stared at him with widening eyes, mute and motionless. A sudden breeze came in at the door and turned the oblong flame of the candle on the mantel towards the wall, and caused black ropes of smoke from the pine-knots in the chimney to curl out into the room like pyrotechnic snakes. Mrs. Bruce bent forward and peered into King's motionless face and smiled and slyly winked, then she glanced at the serious faces of the others, and broke into a childish laugh of genuine merriment.

"La me! ef you-uns ain't settin' thar with mouths open like bull-frogs swallowin' down ever'thing that boy says, as ef it was so much law an' gospel."

But none of them entered her mood; indeed, they gave her not so much as a glance. Without replying to her, King rose and took the candle from the mantelpiece. He stood it on the table and laid a folded document beside it. "There's the deed," he said. "It's made out to mother as long as she lives, and to fall eventually to her step-daughters and step-son, Jake."

He left the paper on the table and went back to his chair. An awkward silence ensued. It was broken by old Mark. He coughed and threw his tobacco-quid out at the door, and, smiling to hide his half-sceptical agitation, he moved to the table. His gaunt back was to them, and his grizzled face went out of view when he bent to hold the paper in the light.

"By Jacks, that's what it is!" he blurted out. "There's no shenanigan about it. The Dickerson place is Mariar Habersham Bruce's, ef *I* kin read writin'."

With a great clatter of heavy shoes and tilted chairs falling back into place, they rose and gathered about him, leaving their benefactor submerged in their combined shadow. Each took the paper, examined it in reverent silence, and then slowly fell back, leaving the document on the table. Mark Bruce started

aimlessly towards the next room, but finally turned to the front door, where he stood irresolute, staring out at the night-wrapped mountain road. Mrs. Bruce looked at Luke helplessly and went into the next room, and, exchanging glances of dumb wonder with each other, the girls followed. Jake noticed that the wind was blowing the document from the table, and he rescued it and silently offered it to his step-brother.

King motioned it from him. "Give it to mother," he said. "She'll take care of it; besides, it's been recorded at the court-house. By-the-way, Dickerson will get out at once; the transfer includes all the furniture, and the crops, which are in a good condition."

King had Jake's bed to himself again that night. For hours he lay awake listening to the insistent drone of conversation from the family, which had gathered under the apple-trees in front of the cabin. About eleven o'clock some one came softly into his room. The moon had risen, and its beams fell in at the open door and through a window with a sliding wooden shutter. It was Mrs. Bruce, and she was moving with catlike caution.

"Is that you, mother?" he asked.

For an instant she was so much startled at finding him awake that she made no reply. Then she stammered: "Oh, I was tryin' so hard not to wake you! I jest wanted to make shore yore bed was comfortable. We put new straw in the tick to-day, and sometimes new beds lie lumpy and uneven."

"It's all right," he assured her. "I wasn't asleep, anyway."

He could feel her still trembling in excitement as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "I reckon you couldn't sleep, nuther," she said. "Thar hain't a shut eye in this cabin. They've all laid down, an' laid down, an' got up over an' over." She laughed softly and twisted her hands nervously in her lap. "We are all that excited we don't know which end of us is up. Why, Luke, boy, it will be the talk of the whole county, and it'll be a big feather in old Ann Boyd's cap—you goin' off an' makin' money so fast after she give you your schoolin', an' they all predicted it ud come to no good end. Sech luck hain't fell to any family as pore as we are sence I kin remember. I don't know as I ever heard o' such a thing in my life. La me, it ud make you split your sides laughin' to set out thar an' listen to all the plans them children are a-makin'. But Mark, he has the least to say of all, an', Luke, as happy as I am, I'm sorter sorry fer that pore old fellow. He feels bad about the way he's always treated you, an' run down yore kind o' work. He's too back'ard an' shamefaced to ax yore pardon, an' in a sheepish sort of a way, jest now, he hinted he'd like fer me to plaster it over fer 'im. He's a good man, Luke, but he's gittin' old an' childish, an' has been hounded to death by debt an' circumstances."

"He's all right," King said, strangely moved. "Tell him I have not the slight-

est ill-will against him, an' I hope he'll get along well on the new place."

"Somehow you keep talkin' like you don't intend to stay long," she said, tentatively.

"I know, but I sha'n't be far away," he replied. "I can run up from my work in Atlanta every now and then, and it would be great to rest up on a farm among home folks, here in the mountains."

"Well, I'll be glad of that," Mrs. Bruce said, plaintively. "I have got sorter used to my step-children, but they ain't the same as a body's own flesh and blood. I'm proud of you, Luke," she added, tremulously. "After all my fears that you'd not come to much, you've turned out to be my main-stay. You'll be a great man before you die. Anybody that kin make an' throw away ten thousand dollars as easy as you have, ain't no small potato as men go these days. I reckon the trouble with us all is that none of us had brains enough to comprehend what yore aims was. But Ann Boyd did. She's the most wonderful woman that ever lived in this part of the country, anyhow—kicked an' shoved about, hated an' hatin', an' yet ever' now an' then hittin' the nail square on the head an' doin' somethin' big an' grand—something Christ-like an' holy—like what she done when she withdrawed her suit agin Gus Willard, simply because it would throw Mark out of a job to go on with it."

"Yes, she's a good woman, mother."

Mrs. Bruce went out, so that her son might go to sleep, but he slept very little. All night, at intervals, the buzz of low voices and sudden outbursts of merriment reached him and found soothing lodgment in his satisfied soul. Then, too, he was revelling in the memory of Virginia Hemingway's eyes and voice, and a dazzling hope that his meeting with her had inspired.

His mother stole softly into his room towards the break of day. This time it was to bring an old shawl, full of holes and worn to shreds, which she cautiously spread over him, for the mountain air had grown cool. She thought him asleep, but as she was turning away he caught her hand and drew her down and kissed her.

"Why, Luke!" she exclaimed; "don't be foolish! What's got in you? I—" But her voice had grown husky, and her words died away in an irrepressible sob. She did not stir for an instant, then she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

XVII

It was in the latter part of August. Breezes with just a touch of autumnal crispness bore down from the mountain-sides, clipping from their stems the first dead and dying leaves, and swept on across Ann Boyd's level cotton-fields, where she was at work at the head of a score of cotton-pickers—negro men, boys, women, and girls. There were certain social reasons why the unemployed poor white females would not labor under this strange woman, though they needed her ready money as badly as the blacks, and that, too, was a constant thorn in the flesh of Ann's pride. She could afford to pay well for work, inasmuch as her planting and harvesting were invariably profitable. She had good agricultural judgment, and she used it. Even her cotton picking would average up better to the acre than any other farmer's, for she saw to it that her workers put in good time and left no white, fluttering scrap on stalk, leaf, or bole to attract the birds looking for linings for their winter's nests. When her black band had left a portion of her field, it was as if a forest fire had swept over it, leaving it brown and bare. The negroes were always ready to work for her, for the best of them were never criticised for having done so. The most fault-finding of her enemies had even been glad of the opportunity to call attention to the fact that only negroes would sink so low as to toil by her side. But the blacks didn't care, and in their taciturn fidelity they never said aught against her. As a rule, the colored people had contempt for the "pore white trash," and reverenced the ex-slave-holder and his family; but Ann Boyd was neither one nor the other. She was rich, and therefore powerful—a creature to be measured by no existing standards. When they worked for their old owners and others of the same impoverished class, they were asked to take in payment old clothing, meat—and not the choicest—from the smoke-house, and grain from the barn, or a questionable order to some store-keeper who, being dubious about the planter's account himself, usually charged double in self-protection. But on Ann's place it was different. At the end of each day, hard, jingling cash was laid into their ready palms, and it was symbolic of the freedom which years before had been talked about so much, but which somehow had appeared in name only. Yes, Ann Boyd was different. Coming in closer contact with her than the whites, they knew her better and felt her inherent worth. They always addressed her as "Miss Ann," and as "Miss Ann" she was known among them far and near—a queer, powerful individuality about whose private life—having naught to lose or gain by it—they never gossiped.

On the present day, when the sun dipped below the mountain-top, Ann raised the cow's horn, which she always wore at her belt, and blew a resounding blast upon it. This was the signal that the day's toil was ended, and yet so faithful were her black allies that each tried to complete the row he happened to be on before he brought in his bag. The crop for the year was good over all that portion of the state, and the newspapers, which Ann read carefully by candle-light at

night, were saying that, owing to the little cotton being produced in other parts of the South, the price was going to be high. And that meant that Ann Boyd would be a "holder" in the market—not needing ready money, her bales would remain in a warehouse in Darley till the highest price had been reached in the long-headed woman's judgment, which in this, too, was always good—so good, in fact, that the Darley cotton speculators were often guided by it to their advantage.

The gathering-bags all in the cotton-house, Ann locked the rusty padlock, paid the toilers from her leather bag, and trudged home to her well-earned supper. When that was prepared and eaten, she moved her chair to the front porch and sat down; but the air was cool to unpleasantness, and she moved back into the gracious warmth of the big, open fire. All the afternoon her heart had thrilled over a report that Jane Hemingway's small cotton crop was being hastily and carelessly gathered and sold at the present low price by the man who held a mortgage on it. It pleased Ann to think that Jane would later hear of her own high receipts and be stung by it. Then, too, she had heard that Jane was more and more concerned about her bodily affliction and the inability to receive proper treatment. Yes, Jane was getting payment for what she had done in such an underhanded way, and Ann was glad of it.

Other things had not gone to please Ann of late. She had tried her best to be in sympathy with Luke King's action in paying out his last dollar of ready money for a farm for his family, whom she heartily despised for their treatment of her, but she could not see it from the young man's sanguine and cheerful stand-point. She had seen the Bruce family driving by in one of the old-fashioned vehicles the Dickersons had owned, and the sight had seemed ludicrous to her. "The boy will never amount to anything," she said. "He'll be poor all his life. He'll let anybody impose on him." And yet she loved him with a strange, insistent affection she could hardly understand. Even when she had bitterly upbraided him for that amazing act of impulsive generosity, as he sat in her doorway the next morning, and she saw the youthful blaze of enthusiasm in his eyes as he essayed to justify his course by the theories of life which had guided him in his professional career—even then an impulse was tugging at her heart to listen and believe the things he was so ardently declaring would free her from her bondage to hate and avarice. She could have kissed him as she might have kissed a happy, misguided son, and yet her coldness, her severity, she argued, was to be for his ultimate good. He had sent her copies of his new paper, with his editorials proudly marked in blue pencil. They were all in the same altruistic vein, and, strange to say, the extracts printed from leading journals all over the South in regard to his work were full of hearty approval. He had become a great factor for good in the world. He was one man who had the unfaltering courage of his convictions. Ann laughed to herself as she recalled all she had said to him that day. No wonder that he had thrown

it off with a smile and a playful kiss, when such high authorities were backing him up. True, he might live in such a way as never to need the money which had been her weapon of defence, and he might finally rise to a sort of penniless greatness. Besides, his life was one thing, hers another. No great calamity had come to him in youth, such as she had known and so grimly fought; no persistent enemy was following his track with the scent and bay of a blood-hound, night and day seeking to rend him to pieces.

These reflections were suddenly disturbed by a most unusual sound at that time of night. It was the sharp click of the iron gate-latch. Ann's heart sprang to her throat and seemed to be held there by taut suspense. She stood up, her hand on the mantel-piece, bending her ears for further sounds. Then she heard a heavy, even tread approaching. How could it be? And yet, though a score of years had sped since it had fallen on her ears, she knew it well. "It can't be!" she gasped. "It's somebody else that happens to walk like him; he'd never dare to—"

The step had reached the porch. The sagging floor bent and creaked. It was Joe Boyd. She knew it now full well, for no one else would have paused like that before rapping. There was silence. The visitor was actually feeling for the door-latch. It was like Joe Boyd, after years of absence, to have thought to enter her house as of old without the formality of announcing himself. He tried the latch; the door was fast. He paused another moment, then rapped firmly and loudly. Ann stood motionless, her face pale and set almost in a grimace of expectancy. Then Boyd stalked heavily to the window at the end of the porch; she saw his bushy head and beard against the small square of glass. As one walking in sleep, Ann stepped close to the window, and through the glass their eyes met in the first visual greeting since he had gone away.

"Open the door, Ann," he said, simply. "I want to see you."

"Huh, you *do*, do you?" she cried. "Well, you march yourself through that gate an' come round here in daytime. I see myself opening up at night for you or anybody else."

He pressed his face closer to the glass. His breath spread moisture upon it, and he raised his hands on either side of his head that he might more clearly see within.

"I want to see you, Ann," he repeated, simply. "I've been riding since dinner, and just got here; my hoss is lame."

"Huh!" she sniffed. "I tell you, Joe Boyd, I'll not—" She went no further. Something in his aging features tied her tongue. He had really altered remarkably; his face was full of lines cut since she had seen him. His beard had grown rough and bristly, as had his heavy eyebrows. How little was he now like the once popular beau of the country-side who had been considered the best "catch" among young farmers! No, she had not thought of him as such a wreck, such an

impersonation of utter failure, and even resignation to it.

"I reckon you'd better open the door an' let me in, Ann," he said. "I won't bother you long. I've just a few words to say. It's not about me. It's about Nettie."

"Oh, it's about the child!" Ann breathed more freely. "Well, wait a minute, till I make a light."

He saw her go to the mantel-piece and get a candle and bend over the fire. There was a sudden flare of bluish flame as the dripping tallow became ignited in the hot ashes, then she straightened up and placed the light on a table. She moved slowly to the door and opened it. They stood face to face. He started—as if from the habit of general greeting—to hold out his rough hand, but changed his mind and rubbed it awkwardly against his thigh as his dumb stare clung to hers.

"Yes," he began, doggedly, "it's about Nettie." He had started to close the door after him, but, grasping the shutter firmly, Ann pushed it back against the wall.

"Let the door stand open," she said, harshly.

"Oh," he grunted, stupidly, "I didn't know but somebody passin' along the road might—"

"Well, let 'em pass and look in, too," Ann retorted. "I'd a sight rather they'd pass and see you here in open candle-light than to have the door of my house closed with us two behind it. Huh!"

"Well," he said, a blear in his big, weary eyes, "you know best, I reckon. I admit I don't go deep into such matters. It's sorter funny to see you so particular, though, and with—with *me*."

He walked to the fire and mechanically held out his hands to the warmth. Then, with his back to the red glow, he stood awkwardly, his eyes on the floor. After a pause, he said, suddenly: "If you don't mind, Ann, I'd rather set down. I'm tired to death, nearly, from that blasted long ride. Coming down-hill for five or six miles on a slow, stiff-jointed hoss is heavy on a man as old as I am."

She reached behind her and gave him a chair, but refused to sit down herself, standing near him as he sank into the chair; and, quite in his old way, she noticed he thrust out his pitifully ill-shod feet to the flames and clasped his hair-grown hands in his lap—that, too, in the old way, but with added feebleness.

"You said it was about the child," Ann reminded him. "Ain't she well?"

"Oh yes, she's well an' hearty," Boyd made haste to reply. "I reckon you may think it's odd fer me to ride away over here, but, Ann, I'm a man that feels like I want to do my full duty if I can in this life, and I've been bothering a lots here lately—a lots. I've lost sleep over a certain delicate matter, but nothing I kin do seems to help me out. It's a thing, you see, that I couldn't well ask advice on, and so I had to tussle with it in private. Finally I thought I'd just ride over and

lay the whole thing before you."

"Well, what is it?" Ann asked.

"It's about the hardest thing to talk about that I ever tried to approach," Boyd said, with lowered glance, "but I reckon I'll have to get it out and be done with it, one way or another. You see, Ann, when the law gave me the custody of the child I was a younger man, with more outlook and health and management, in the judgment of the court, than I've got now, and I thought that what I couldn't do for my own flesh and blood nobody else could, and so I took her off."

"*Yes, you took her off!*" Ann straightened up, and a sneer touched her set features; there was a sarcastic, almost triumphant cry of vindictiveness in her tone.

"Yes, I thought all that," Boyd continued. "And I meant well, but miscalculated my own capacity and endurance. Instead of making money hand over hand as folks said almost any man could do out West, I sunk all I put in. We come back this way then, and I located in Gilmer, thinking I'd do better on soil I understood, and among the kind o' folks and religion I was used to, but it's been down-hill work ever since then. When Nettie was little it didn't seem like so much was demanded, but now, Ann, she's like all the balance o' young women of her age. She wants things like the rest around her, an' she pines for them, an' sulks, and—and makes me feel awful. It's a powerful hard matter for me to dress her like some o' the rest about us, and she's the proudest thing that ever wore shoe-leather."

"Oh, I see!" said Ann. "She's going about, too, with—she's bein' courted by some feller or other."

"Yes, Sam Lawson, over there, a likely young chap, has taken a big fancy to her, and he's good enough, too, but I reckon a little under the influence of his daddy, who is a hard-shell Baptist, a man that believes in sanctification and talks it all the time. Well, to come down to it, things between Nettie and Sam is sorter hanging fire, and Nettie's nearly crazy for fear it will fall through. And that's why, right now, I screwed up to the point of coming to see you."

"You thought I could help her out in her courting?" Ann sneered, and yet beneath her sneer lay an almost eager curiosity.

"Well, not that exactly"—Joe Boyd spread out his rough fingers very wide to embrace as much of his dust-coated beard as possible; he pulled downward on a rope of it, and let his shifting glance rest on the fire—"not that exactly, Ann."

"Well, then, I don't understand, Joe Boyd," Ann said; "and let me tell you that no matter what sort of young thing I was when we lived together, I'm now a *business* woman, and a *successful* one, and I have a habit of not beating about the bush. I talk straight and make others do the same. Business is business, and life is short."

"Well, I'll talk as straight as I can," Boyd swallowed. "You see, as I say, old

Lawson is a narrow, grasping kind of a man, and he can't bear the idea of his only boy not coming into something, even if it's very little, and I happen to know that he's been expecting my little farm over there to fall to Nettie."

"Well, *won't* it?" Ann demanded.

Boyd lowered his shaggy head. There was a piteous flicker of despair in the lashes of the eyes Ann had once loved so well.

"It's mortgaged to the hilt, Ann," he gulped, "and next Wednesday if I can't pay down five hundred to Carson in Darley, it will go under the hammer. That will bust Nettie's love business all to flinders. Old Lawson's got Sam under his thumb, and he'll call it off. Nettie knows all about it. She's no fool for a girl of her age; she found out about the debt; she hardly sleeps a wink, but mopes about with red eyes all day long. I thought I had trouble away back when me 'n' you—away back there, you know—but I was younger then, and this sorter seems to be *my* fault."

Ann fell to quivering with excitement as she reached for a chair and leaned upon it, her stout knee in the seat, her strong, bare arms resting on the back.

"Right here I want to ask you one question, Joe Boyd, before we go a step further. Did Mary Waycroft make a proposal to Nettie—did Mary Waycroft hint to Nettie that maybe I'd be willing to help her along in some substantial way?"

The farmer raised a pair of shifting eyes to the piercing orbs above him, and then looked down.

"I believe she did something of the sort, Ann," he said, reluctantly, "but, you see—"

"I see nothing but *this*," Ann threw into the gap left by his sheer inability to proceed—"I see nothing but the fact that my proposition scared her nearly to death. She was afraid it would get out that she was having something to do with me, and now, if I do rescue this land from public sale, I must keep in the background, not even let her know where the money is coming from."

"I didn't say *that*," Boyd said, heavily stricken by the combined force of her tone and words. "The—the whole thing's for *you* to decide on. I've tussled with it till I'm sick and tired. I wouldn't have come over if I hadn't thought it was my bounden duty to lay it before you. The situation has growed up unforeseen out of my trouble and yours. If you want the girl's land to go under hammer and bust up her marriage, that's all right. I won't cry about it, for I'm at the end of my rope. You see, law or no law, she's yore natural flesh and blood, jest as she is mine, an' she wasn't—the girl wasn't responsible fer what you an' me tuck a notion to do away back there. The report is out generally that everything you touch somehow turns to gold—that you are rolling in money. That's the reason I thought it was my duty—by God, Ann Lincoln"—his eyes were flashing with something like the fire which had blazed in them when he had gone away in

his health and prime—"I wouldn't ask you for a red cent, for myself, not if I was dying for a mouthful of something to eat. I'm doing this because it seems right according to my poor lights. The child's happiness is at stake; you can look at it as you want to and act as you see fit."

Ann bit her lip; a shudder passed over her strong frame from head to foot. She lowered her big head to her hands. "Sometimes," she groaned, "I wish I could actually curse God for the unfairness of my lot. The hardest things that ever fell to the fate of any human being have been mine. In agony, Jesus Christ prayed, they say, to let His cup pass if possible. *His* cup! What *was* His cup? Just death—that's all; but *this* is a million times worse than death—this here crucifixion of pride—this here forcing me to help and protect people who deny me, who shiver at a hint of my approach, yelling 'Unclean, unclean!' like the lepers outside the city gates—beyond the walls that encompass accepted humanity. Joe Boyd"—she raised her face and stared at him—"you don't no more know me than you know the stars above your head. I am no more the silly girl that you married than I am some one else. I learned the lesson of life away back there when you left in that wagon with the child of my breast. I have fought a long battle, and I'm still fighting. To me, with all my experience, you—you poor little thing—are a baby of a man. You had a wife who, if she *does* say it, had the brain of a dozen such men as you are, and yet you listened to the talk of a weak, jealous, disappointed woman and came and dared to wipe your feet on me, spit in my face, and drag my name into the mire of public court. I made no defence then—I don't make any now. I'll never make any. My life shall be my defence before God, and Him only. I wish it could be a lesson to all young women who are led into misfortune such as mine. To every unfortunate girl I'd say, 'Never marry a man too weak to understand and appreciate you.' I loved you, Joe Boyd, as much as a woman ever loved a man, but it was like the love of a strong man for a weak, dependent woman. Somehow I gloried in your big, hulking helplessness. What I have since done in the management of affairs I wanted to do for you."

"Oh, I know all that, Ann, but this is no time or place to—"

"But it's *got* to be the time and place," she retorted, shaking a stiff finger in his face. "I want to show you one side of this matter. I won't mention names, but a man, an old man, come to me one day. He set there on my door-step and told me about his life of his own free will and accord, because he'd heard of mine, and wanted to comfort me. He'd just buried his wife—a woman he'd lived with for thirty-odd years, and big tears rolled down his cheeks while he was talking. He said he was going to tell me what he'd never told a living soul. He said away back, when he was young, he loved his wife and courted her. He saw that she loved him, but she kept holding off and wouldn't give in till he was nearly distracted; then he said her mother come to him and told him what the trouble was. It was

because the girl had had bad luck like I did. She loved him and wanted to make him a good wife, but was afraid it would be wrong. He said he told the girl's mother that it made no difference to him, and that he then and there promised never on this earth to mention it to her, and he never did. She was the woman he lived with for a third of a century in holy wedlock, and who he couldn't speak of without shedding tears. Now, Joe Boyd, here's my point—the only difference I can see in that woman's conduct and mine is that I would have told you, but I didn't think you was the kind of a man to tell a thing like that to. I didn't think you was strong enough, as a man, but I thought your happiness and mine depended on our marriage, and so after you had dogged my steps for years I consented. So you see, if—if, I say—you had gone and let the old matter drop, you wouldn't have been in the plight you are now, and our child would have had more of the things she needed."

"There are two sides to it," Boyd said, raising a sullen glance to her impassioned face. "And that reminds me of an old man I knew about. He was the best husband that ever walked the earth. He loved his wife and children, and when he was seventytwo years of age he used to totter about with his grandchildren all day long, loving them, with his whole heart. Then one day proof was handed him—actual proof—that not a speck of his blood flowed in their veins. He was hugging one of the little ones in his arms when he heard the truth. Ann, it killed him. That's t'other side. You nor me can't handle a matter as big and endless as that is. The Lord God of the universe is handling ours. We can talk and plan, but most of us, in a pinch, will do as generations before us have done in sech delicate matters."

"I suppose so." Ann's lips were white; there was a wild, hunted look in her great, staring eyes.

"I tried to reason myself out of the action I finally took," Boyd went on, deliberately, "but there was nothing else to do. I was bothered nigh to death. The thing was running me stark crazy. I had to chop it off, and I'm frank to say, even at this late day, that I don't see how I could have done otherwise. But I didn't come here to fetch all this up. It was just the other matter, and the belief that it was my duty to give you a chance to act on it as you saw fit."

"If her wedding depends on it, the farm must be saved," Ann said, quietly. "I give away money to others, why shouldn't I to—to her? I'll get a blank and write a check for the money."

He lowered his head, staring at the flames. "That's for you to decide," he muttered. "When the debt is paid the land shall be deeded to her. I'll die rather than borrow on it again."

Ann went to the clock on the mantel-piece and took down a pad of blank checks and a pen and bottle of ink. Placing them on the table, she sat down and

began to write with a steady hand and a firm tilt of her head to one side.

"Hold on!" Boyd said, turning his slow glance upon her. "Excuse me, but there's one thing we haven't thought of."

Ann looked up from the paper questioningly. "What is that?"

"Why, you see, I reckon I'd have to get that check cashed somewhere, Ann, and as it will have your name on it, why, you see, in a country where everybody knows everybody else's business—"

"I understand," Ann broke in—"they would know I had a hand in it."

"Yes, they would know that, of course, if I made use of that particular check."

Ann Boyd rested her massive jaw on her hand in such a way as to hide her face from his view. She was still and silent for a minute, then she rose, and, going to the fire, she bent to the flame of a pine-knot and destroyed the slip of paper.

"I don't *usually* keep that much money about the house," she said, looking down on him, "but I happen to have some hidden away. Go out and get your horse ready and I'll bring it to you at the fence."

He obeyed, rising stiffly from his chair and reaching for his worn slouch hat.

He was standing holding his bony horse by the rein when she came out a few minutes later and gave him a roll of bills wrapped in a piece of cloth.

"Here it is," she said. "You came after it under a sense of duty, and I am sending it the same way. I may be made out of odd material, but I don't care one single thing about the girl. If you had come and told me she was dead, I don't think I'd have felt one bit different. It might have made me a little curious to know which of us was going next—you, me, or her—that's all. Good-bye, Joe Boyd."

"Good-bye, Ann," he grunted, as he mounted his horse. "I'll see that this matter goes through right."

XVIII

Colonel Preston Chester and his son Langdon were at breakfast two days after this. The dining-room of the old mansion was a long, narrow chamber on the

first floor, connected with the brick kitchen outside by a wooden passage, roofed, latticed at both sides, and vine-grown. The dining-room had several wide windows which opened on a level with the floor of the side veranda. Strong coffee, hot biscuits, and birds delicately browned were brought in by a turbaned black woman, who had once been a slave in the family, and then she discreetly retired.

The old gentleman, white-haired, pink and clear of complexion, and wearing a flowing mustache and an imperial, which he nervously clutched and twisted in his soft fingers, was not in a good humor.

"Here I am ready to go to Savannah, as I promised, to pay a visit and bring your mother back," he fumed, "and now find that you have taxed my credit at the bank so heavily with your blasted idleness and poker debts that they actually gave me a lecture about my financial condition. But I've certainly headed you off, sir. I left positive orders that no check of yours is to be honored during my absence."

"You did that, father? Why—"

"Of course I did it. I can't put up with your extravagance and damnable habits, and I don't intend to."

"But, father, I've heard you say you cost your parents on an average of four thousand dollars a year before you got married, and—"

"Don't begin that twaddle over again," roared the Colonel in his coffee-cup. "What my father did for me in those easy times has nothing to do with our condition in the present day. Besides, it was the custom of the times to live high, while now it's coming to be a disgrace to be idle or to have luxuries. We've got to work like the rest at something or other. Here's that Luke King back from the West with enough money to install his whole gang of white trash in one of the best places in the entire river valley, and is conducting a paper in Atlanta that everybody is talking about. Why, blast it all, I heard Governor Crawford say at the Capital City Club the other day that if he—mind you, the governor of the State—if he could get King's influence he would be re-elected sure. Think of that, when I put a fortune into your education. You are doing nothing for your name, while he's climbing like that on the poor chances he had."

"Oh, he had education, such as he needed," Langdon replied, with a retaliatory glance at his father. "Ann Boyd sent him to school, you know."

The old man's eyes wavered; he drank from his cup silently, and then carefully wiped his mustache on his napkin. It was not the first time Langdon had dared to pronounce the woman's name in his presence, and it looked as if the Colonel dreaded further allusions.

"Well, I've got to make the trip to Savannah," he said, still avoiding his son's glance, and trying to keep up his attitude of cold reproof. He was becoming convinced that Langdon was acquiring a most disagreeable habit of justifying

his own wild conduct by what he had heard of his father's past, and this was decidedly irritating to the planter, who found enough to reproach himself with in reflecting upon what he had gone through without being held accountable for another career which looked quite as bad in the bud and might bear even worse fruit.

"Yes, I think myself, all jokes aside, that you ought to go," Langdon said. "I'll do the best I can to keep things straight here. The hunting will be good, and I can manage to kill time. You'll want to take along some spending money, father. Those old chums of yours down there will draw you into a poker game sure."

"I'll cut that out, I reckon"—the Colonel smiled in spite of himself. Langdon was such a copy of what he had been at the same age that it seemed, under stress of certain memories, almost wrong to reprove him. "No, I've sworn off from cards, and that's one thing I want you to let alone. I don't want to hear of your having any more of those all-night carouses here, leaving bullet-holes in your grandfather's portrait, as you and your dissolute gang did the last time I was away. It's a wonder to me you and those fellows didn't burn the house down."

At this juncture Langdon was glad to see the overseer of the plantation on the veranda, and the Colonel went out to give him some instructions.

Two nights later, when he had seen his father off at the door and turned back into the great, partly lighted house, Langdon set about thinking how he could spend the evening and rid himself of the abiding sense of loneliness that had beset him. He might stroll over to Wilson's store, but the farmers he met there would be far from congenial, for he was not popular with many of them, and unless he could meet, which was unlikely at night, some drummer who would play poker freely with the funds of the house he represented against Langdon's ready promises to pay, his walk would be fruitless. No, he would not go to the store, he decided; and still he was in no mood, at so early an hour, for the solitude of his room or the antiquated library, from the shelves of which frowned the puritanical books of his Presbyterian ancestors. Irresolute, he had wandered to the front veranda again, and as he stood looking eastward he espied, through the trees across the fields and meadows, a light. It was Jane Hemingway's kitchen candle, and the young man's pulse beat more rapidly as he gazed at it. He had occasionally seen Virginia outside the house of evenings, and had stolen chats with her. Perhaps he might have such luck again. In any case, nothing would be lost in trying, and the walk would kill time. Besides, he was sure the girl was beginning to like him; she now trusted him more, and seemed always willing to talk to him. She believed he loved her; who could doubt it when he himself had been surprised at his tenderness and flights of eloquence when inspired by her rare beauty and sweetness? Sometimes he believed that his feeling for the beautiful, trustful girl was a love that would endure, but when he reflected on the

difference in their stations in life he had grave and unmanly doubts. As he walked along the road, the light of Jane's candle, like the glow of a fire-fly, intermittently appearing and disappearing ahead of him through the interstices of the trees and foliage, the memory of the gossip about his father and Ann Boyd flashed unpleasantly upon him. Was he, after all, following his parent's early bent? Was family history repeating itself? But when the worst was said about that affair, who had been seriously injured? Certainly not the easy-going Colonel, surely not the sturdy pariah herself, who had, somehow, turned her enforced isolation to such purpose that she was rich in the world's goods and to all appearances cared not a rap for public opinion.

————

That day had been the gloomiest in Virginia's life. Early in the morning Jane had gone to Darley for the twentieth time to try to borrow the money with which to defray her expenses to Atlanta. She had failed again, and came home at dusk absolutely dejected.

"It's all up with me!" she groaned, as she sank heavily into a chair in front of the cheerful fire Virginia had in readiness, and pushed her worn shoes out to the flames. "I went from one old friend to another, telling them my condition, but they seemed actually afraid of me, treating me almost like a stranger. They all told tales of need, although they seemed to have plenty of everything. Judge Crane met me in Main Street and told me I could appeal to the county fund and get on the pauper list, but without offering to help me; he said he knew I'd almost rather die than fall so low. No, I'll not do that, Virginia. That's what would tickle Ann Boyd and some others powerfully."

With lagging steps and a heart like lead, Virginia went about preparing the simple meal. Her mother ate only hot buttered toast with boiled milk on it to soften it for her toothless gums, but the fair cook scarcely touched food at all. Her mother's grewsome affliction was in the sensitive girl's mind all through each successive day, and even at night her sleep was broken by intermittent dreams of this or that opportunity to raise the coveted money. Sometimes it was the jovial face of a crude, penniless neighbor who laughed carelessly as he handed her a cumbersome roll of bank-bills; again she would find a great heap of gold glittering in the sun, only to wake with her delicate fingers tightly clasped on nothing at all—to wake that she might lie and listen to Jane's sighs and moans as the old woman crouched over the ash-buried coals to light a tallow-dip to look, for the thousandth time, at the angry threat of fate upon her withered breast.

To-night, greatly wearied by her long ride and being on her feet so long, Jane went to bed early, and, when she was alone, Virginia, with a mental de-

pression that had become almost physical pain, went out and sat on the front door-step in the moonlight. That very day a plan of her own in regard to the raising of the money had fallen to earth. She had heard of the munificent gift Luke King had made to his mother, and she determined that she would go to him, lay the case before him, and pledge herself to toil for him in any capacity till he was repaid; but when she had gone as far in the direction of the newly purchased farm as the Hincock Spring, she met Mary Bruce in a new dress and hat, and indirectly discovered that King had given up his last dollar of ready money to secure the property for his people. No, she would not take her own filial troubles to a young man who was so nobly battling with his own. At any other moment she might have had time to admire King's sacrifice, but her mind was too full of her own depressing problem to give thought to that of another. Her sharp reproof to him for his neglect of his mother during his absence in the West flitted through her memory, and at a less troubled moment she would have seen how ridiculously unjust her childish words must have sounded.

As she sat, weighted down with these things, she heard a step down the road. It was slow and leisured, if not deliberately cautious. It was accompanied by a persistent spark of fire which flitted always on a straight line, in view and out, among the low bushes growing close to the fence along the roadside. A moment later a handsome face in the flare of a burning cigar appeared, smiling confidently at the gate. It was Langdon Chester.

"Come out here," he said, in a soft, guarded voice. "I want to see you."

Virginia rose, listened to ascertain if her mother was still asleep, and then, drawing her light shawl about her shoulders, she went to the fence. He reached over the gate and took her hand and pressed it warmly. "I was awfully afraid I'd not see you," he said. "I've failed so many times. My father left to-day, and I am very lonely in that big house with not a soul nearer than the negro-quarter."

"It must be lonely," Virginia said, trying to be pleasant and to throw off her despondency.

"Your mother went to town to-day, didn't she?" Chester pursued, still holding the hand which showed an indifferent inclination to quit his clasp. "I think I saw her coming back. Did she get what she went for?"

"No, she failed utterly," Virginia sighed. "I don't know what to do. She's suffering awfully—not in bodily pain, you know, for there is none at all, but in the constant and morbid fear of death. It is an awful thing to be face to face, day after day, night after night, with a mother who is in such agony. I never dreamed such a fate could be in store for any young girl. It is actually driving me crazy."

"Yes, yes," Langdon said, hesitatingly. "I want to tell you something. I had a talk with my father about her just before he left. I've worried over it, too, little girl. Folks may run me down, you know, but I've got real feelings; and so, as a last

resort, as I say, I told him about it. He's hard up himself, as you may know, along with our heavy family expenses, and interest on debts, and taxes, but I managed to put it in such a way as to get him interested, and he's promised to let me have the money provided he can make a certain deal down at Savannah. But he says it must be kept absolutely quiet, you understand. If he sends me this money, you must not speak of it to any one—the old man is very peculiar."

Virginia's heart bounded, the hot blood of a dazzling new hope pulsed madly in her veins. The tensity of her hand in his warm clasp relaxed; her eyes, into which his own passionate ones were melting, held kindling fires of gratitude and trust.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried, "if he only *would*!"

"Well, there is a splendid chance of his doing it," Langdon said. "I was awfully afraid to mention the subject to him, you know, for fear that he would suspect my interest was wholly due to you, but it happens that he has never seen us together, and so he thought it was simply my sympathy for one of our neighbors. I had to do something, Virginia. I couldn't stay idle when my beautiful little sweetheart was in such downright trouble."

With a furtive glance towards the house and up and down the road, Langdon drew her towards him. Just one instant she resisted, and then, for the first time in her life, she allowed him to kiss her without open protest. She remained thus close to him, permitting him to stroke her soft, rounded cheeks gently. Never before were two persons impelled by diverse forces so closely united.

"When do you—you think your father will write?" she asked, her voice low, her soul almost shrieking in joy.

"That depends," said Chester. "You see, he may not get at the matter *the very day* he arrives in Savannah, for he is a great old codger to let matters slide in the background while he is meeting old friends. But, little girl, I don't intend to let it slip out of his mind. I'll drop him a line and urge him to fix it up if possible. That, I think, will bring him around. Your mother is sound asleep," he added, seductively; "let's walk a little way down the road. I sha'n't keep you long. I feel awfully happy with you all to myself."

She raised no objection as he unfastened the latch of the gate with deft, noiseless fingers and, smiling playfully, drew her after him and silently closed the opening.

"Now, this is more like it," he said. "Lovers should have the starry skies above them and open fields about. Forget your mother a little while, Virginia. It will all come out right, and you and I will be the happiest people in the world. Great Heavens! how perfectly lovely you are in the moonlight! You look like a statue of Venus waking to life."

They had reached the brook which rippled on brown stones across the road

at the foot of the slight rise on which the cottage stood, when they saw some one approaching. It was Ann Boyd driving her cow home, her heavy skirts pinned up half-way to her stout knees. With one sharp, steady stare at them, Ann, without greeting of any kind, lowered her bare, dew-damp head and trudged on.

"It's that miserly old hag, Ann Boyd," Langdon said, lightly. "I don't like her any more than she does me. I reckon that old woman has circulated more lies about me than all the rest of the country put together."

At the first sight of Ann, Virginia had withdrawn her hand from Langdon's arm and passionate clasp of fingers, but the action had not escaped Ann's lynx eyes.

"It's coming, thank God, it's coming as fast as a dog can trot!" she chuckled as she plodded along after her waddling cow. "Now, Jane Hemingway, you'll have something else to bother about besides your blasted cancer—something that will cut your pride as deep as that does your selfish flesh. It won't fail to come, either. Don't I know the Chester method? Huh, if I don't, it isn't known. With his head bent that way, and holding her hand with hand and arm both at once, he might have been his father over again. Huh, I felt like tearing his eyes out, just now—the young beast! I felt like she was me, and the old brink was yawning again right at my feet. Huh, I felt that way about Jane Hemingway's daughter—that's the oddest thing of all! But she *is* beautiful; she's the prettiest thing I ever saw in all my life. No wonder he is after her; she's the greatest prize for a Chester in Georgia. Jane's asleep right now, but she'll wake before long and she'll wonder with all her wounded pride how God ever let her close her eyes. Yes, my revenge is on the way. I see the light its blaze has cast on ahead. It may be Old Nick's torch—what do I care? He can wave it, wave it, wave it!"

She increased her step till she overtook her cow. Laying her hand on the animal's back, she gently patted it. "Go on home to your calf, you hussy," she laughed. "The young of even *your* sort is safer, according to the plan that guides the world, than Jane Hemingway's. She's felt so safe, too, that she's made it her prime object in life to devil a person for exactly what's coming under her own roof—*exactly to a gnat's heel*!"

XIX

One evening, about four days later, Mrs. Waycroft hurried in to see Ann. The sharp-sighted woman, as she nodded indifferently to the visitor, and continued her work of raking live coals under a three-legged pot on the hearth, saw that Mrs. Waycroft was the fluttering bearer of news of some sort, but she made no show of being ready to listen to it. The widow, however, had come to be heard, she had come for the sheer enjoyment of recital.

"Ann," she panted, "let that oven alone and listen to me. I've got about the biggest piece of news that has come your way in many a long day."

"You say you have?" Ann's brass-handled poker rang as she gave a parting thrust at a burning chunk, and struck the leg of the pot.

"Yes, and I dropped on to it by the barest accident. About an hour after sunset to-day, I was in the graveyard, sitting over Jennie's grave, and planning how to place the new stones. I looked at the spot where I'd been sitting afterwards, and saw that it was well sheltered with thick vines. I was completely covered from the sight of anybody passing along the road. Well, as I was sitting there kind o' tired from my work and the walk, I heard a man's voice and a woman's. It was Langdon Chester and Virginia Hemingway. He seemed to be doing most of the talking, and since God made me, I never heard such tender love-making since I was born. I knew I had no business to listen, but I just couldn't help it. It took me back to the time I was a girl and used to imagine that some fine young man was coming to talk to me that way and offer me a happy home and all heart could desire. I never dreamed such tender words could fall from a man's tongue. I tried to see Virginia's face, but couldn't. He went on to say that his folks was to know nothing at present about him and her, but that everything would finally be satisfactorily arranged."

"Huh, I reckon so!" Ann ejaculated, off her usual guard, and then she lapsed into discreet silence again.

"But I got on to the biggest secret of all," Mrs. Waycroft continued. "It seems that Langdon has been talking in a roundabout way to his father about Jane's sad plight, and that Colonel Chester had agreed to send the money for the operation from Savannah."

"Huh! he's got no money to give away," slipped again from Ann's too facile lips, "and if he *did* have it, he wouldn't—"

"Well, that may be, or it may not," said Mrs. Waycroft; "but Langdon said he wasn't going to wait for the check. He said a man in Darley had been bantering him for a long time to buy his fine horse, Prince, and as he didn't care to keep the animal, he had sent him by one of the negroes on the place this morning."

"Oh, he did that!" Ann panted. She carefully leaned the poker against the jamb of the fireplace and sat staring, her rugged face working under stress of deep and far-reaching thought.

"So I heard him say as plainly as you and me are talking right now. He said the negro couldn't possibly make the transfer and get back with the money till about ten o'clock to-night. And that, to me, Ann—just between us two, was the oddest thing of all. For he was begging her to slip away from home at that hour and come to his house for the money, so she could surprise her ma with it the first thing in the morning."

"He was, was he? huh!" Ann rose and went to the door and looked out. There she stood stroking her set face with a steady hand. She was tingling with excitement and trying to hide it. Then she turned back and bent low to look at the coals under her pot. "Well, I reckon she was willing to grant a little favor like that under the circumstances."

"She had to be begged powerful," said the visitor. "I never in all my life heard such pleading. Part of the time he'd scold her and reproach her with not caring for him like he did for her. Then he'd accuse her of being suspicious of him, even when he was trying his level best to help her out of trouble. Finally, he got to talking about how folks died, slow-like, from cancers, and what her real duty was to her mother. It was then that she give in. I know she did, though I didn't hear what she said, for he laughed out sudden, and gladlike, and I heard him kiss her and begin over again, about how happy they were going to be and the like. I reckon, Ann, he really *does* mean to marry her."

"I reckon so," Ann said. "I reckon so. Such things have been known to happen."

"Well, we'll wait and see what comes of it," said Mrs. Waycroft. "Anyway, Jane will get her cancer-money, and that's all she cares for. They say she's in agony day and night, driving Virginia distracted. I'm sorry for that pore little thing. I don't like her mammy, for treating you as she has so long and persistent, but I can't hold Virginia accountable."

Ann shrugged her broad shoulders. There was a twinkling light of dawning triumph in each of her non-committal eyes, and unwonted color in her cheeks, all of which escaped the widow's notice.

"Well, that wasn't the end," she said, tentatively.

"I couldn't hear any more, Ann. They walked on. I stood up and watched them as they went on through the bushes, arm in arm, towards her home. I'm sure he loves her. Anybody would know it that heard him talk; besides she is pretty—you know that, Ann. She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen anywhere. They looked fine, too, walking side by side. They say he's a spendthrift and got bad habits, but maybe his folks will be glad to have him settle down with such a sensible girl if she is poor. She'll keep him straight. I'd rather nothing is said about where Jane's money is coming from, Ann. That seems to be their secret, and I have no right to circulate it."

"I'll not talk it," Ann said. "It will be safe with me."

When the widow had left, Ann became a changed creature in outward appearance. She stood on the porch till her guest had disappeared in the dusk, and then she paced the floor of her sitting-room in a spasm of ecstasy, now and then shaken by a hearty laugh.

"I see through him," she chuckled. "He is trying to ease his dirty conscience by paying money down. It's a slick trick—on a par with a promise to marry. He's telling his filthy soul that he's saving her mother's life. The girl's as blind as a bat—the average woman can only see one thing at a time; she's simply bent on getting that money, and thinks of nothing else. But, Jane Hemingway—old lady—I've got you where I want you at last. It won't be long before your forked tongue will be tied fast in a knot. You can't keep on after me publicly for what is in your own dirty flesh. And when you know the truth you'll know, too, that it all come about to save your worthless life. You'll get down on your knees then and beg the Lord to have mercy on you. Maybe you'll remember all you've done against me from your girl-days till now as you set with your legs dangling in the grave. Folks will shun your house, too, unless you rid it of contagion. But you *bet I'll* call. I'll send in *my* card. Me'n' you'll be on a level then, and we'll owe it to the self-same high and mighty source."

Ann suddenly felt a desire for the open air, as if the very walls of her house checked the pleasurable out-pourings of her triumph, and she went outside and strode up and down in the yard, fairly aflame with joy. All at once she paused; she was confronting the sudden fear that she might be fired by a false hope. Virginia, it was true, had agreed to go to Chester's at the appointed hour, but might she not, in calmer moments, when removed from Langdon's persistent influence, think better of it and stay at home? Ah, yes, there was the chance that the girl might fail to keep the appointment, and then—

Cold from head to foot, Ann went back into the cottage and stood before the fire looking at the clock. It was fifteen minutes of ten, and ten was the hour. Why not make sure of the outcome? Why not, indeed? It was a good idea, and would save her days and days of suspense.

Going out, Ann trudged across the dewy meadow, her coarse skirt clutched in her hands till she stood in one of the brier-grown fence-corners near the main road. Here, quite hidden from the open view of any one passing, by the shade of a young mulberry-tree, whose boughs hung over her like the ribs of an umbrella, she stood and waited. She must have been there ten minutes or more, her tense gaze on the road leading to Jane Hemingway's cottage, when she was sure she heard soft footsteps coming towards her. Yes, it was some one, but could it be—? It was a woman's figure; she could see that already, and, yes, there could be no mistake now—it *was* Virginia. There was no one in the neighborhood quite

so slight, light of foot, and erect. Ann suddenly crouched down till she could peer between the lower rails of the fence. She held her breath while the girl was passing, then she clasped her hands over her knees and chuckled. "It's *her*!" she whispered. "It's her, and she's headed for everlasting doom if ever a creature walked into a net of damnation."

When Virginia was thirty or forty yards away, Ann cautiously climbed over the fence, almost swearing in impatience as she pulled her skirts from the detaining clutch of thorns, briers, and splinters, and with her head down she followed.

"I'll make dead sure," she said, between pressed lips. "This is a matter I don't want to have a shadow of a doubt about."

Presently, the long, white palings comprising the front fence at the Chesters' appeared into view, and the dark, moving figure of the girl outlined against it could be seen more clearly.

Virginia moved onward till she had reached the gate. The smooth, steel latch clicked; there was a rip of darkness in the ribbon of white; the hinges creaked; the gate closed with a slam, as if it had slipped from nerveless fingers, and the tall boxwood bordering the walk to the door of the old house swallowed Virginia from the sight of her grim pursuer.

"That will do me," Ann chuckled, as she turned back, warm with content in every vein. On her rapid walk to her house she allowed her fancy to play upon scores of situations in which the happening of that night would bring dire humiliation and shame to her enemy. Ann well knew what was coming; she had only to hold the album of her own life open and let the breeze of chance turn the pages to view what Jane Hemingway was to look upon later.

XX

Ann had just closed her gate, and was turning towards her door, when she heard a sound on the porch, and a man stepped down into the yard. It was Luke King.

"Why, hello, Aunt Ann!" he cried out, cheerily. "Been driving hogs out of your field I'll bet. You need me here with my dog Pomp, who used to be such a dandy at that job."

"Oh, it's you, Luke!" Ann cried, trying to collect herself, after the start he

had given her.

"Yes, I didn't mean to come at this hour of night, but as I was riding by just now, on my way home to see my mother, who is not exactly well, I noticed your door open, and not seeing you in sight, I hitched my horse up the road a piece and came back and watched at the gate. Then not hearing any sound, and knowing you never go to bed with your door open, I went in. Then you bet I *was* scared. Things do once in a while happen here in the mountains, and—"

"Oh, well, nothing was the matter with me," Ann smiled. "Besides, I can take care of myself."

"I know that, too," he said. "I'm glad to get this chance to talk to you. I understand that mother is not as ill as they thought she was, and I'll have to catch the first train back to Atlanta in the morning. I'm doing pretty well down there, Aunt Ann."

"I know it, Luke, and I'm glad," Ann said, her mind still on the things she had just witnessed.

"But you haven't yet forgiven me for giving my people that farm. I can see that by your manner."

"I thought it was foolish," she replied.

"But that's because you simply don't know all about it, Aunt Ann," he insisted. "I don't want to make you mad again; but really I would do that thing over again and again. It has helped me more than anything I ever did. You see, you've been thinking on one line all your life and, of late years, I have been on quite another. You are a great woman, Aunt Ann, but you still believe that the only way to fight is to hit back. You have been hitting back for years, and may keep on at it for a while, but you'll see the truth one of these days, and you'll actually love your neighbors—even your vilest enemies. You'll come to see—your big brain will simply *have* to grasp it—that your retaliation, being obedient to bad life-laws, is as blamable as the antagonism of your enemies. The time will come when your very suffering will be the medium through which you will view and pity their sordid narrowness. Then you'll appear to them in their long darkness as a blazing light; they will look up to you as a thing divine; they will fall blinded at your feet; they will see your soul as it has always been, pure white and dazzlingly bright, and look upon you as the very impersonation of—"

"Huh, don't be a fool!" Ann sank on the edge of the porch, her eyes fixed angrily on the ground. "You are ignorant of what you are talking about—as ignorant as a new-born baby. You are a silly dreamer, boy. Your life is an easy, flowery one, and you can't look into a dark, rugged one like mine. If God is at the head of all things, he put evil here as well as the good, and to-night I'm thankful for the evil. I'm tasting it, I tell you, and it's sweet, sweet, sweet!"

"Ah, I know," King sighed. "You are trying to make yourself believe you are

glad Mrs. Hemingway is in such agony over her affliction."

"I didn't say anything about her affliction." Ann stared half fearfully into his honest face.

"But I know you well enough to see that's what you are driving at." King sat down beside her, and for a moment rested his hand on her shoulder. "But it's got to end. It shall not go on. I am talking to you, Aunt Ann, with the voice of the New Thought that is sweeping the face of the world to-day—only that mountain in the east and that one in the west have dammed its flow and kept it from this benighted valley. I did not intend yet to tell you the great overwhelming secret of my life, but I want to do it to-night. You love me as a son. I know that, and I love you as a mother. You are in a corner—in the tightest place you've ever been in in all your life. I'm going to ask you to do something for my sake that will tear your very soul out by the roots. You'll have to grant my wish or refuse—if you refuse, I shall be miserable for life."

"Luke, what's the matter with you?" Ann shook his hand from its resting-place on his shoulder, and with bated breath leaned towards him.

King was silent for a moment, his brows drawn together, his head lowered, his strong, manly hands clasped between his knees. A buggy passed along the road. In it sat Fred Masters and another man. Both were smoking and talking loudly.

"Well, listen, and don't break in, Aunt Ann," King said, in a calm, steady voice. "I'm going to tell you something you don't yet know. I'm going to tell you of my first and only great love."

"Oh, is *that* it?" Ann took a deep breath of relief. "You've been roped in down there already, eh? Well, I thought that would come, my boy, with the papers full of you and your work."

"Wait, I told you not to break in," he said. "I don't believe I'm a shallow man. To me the right kind of love is as eternal as the stars, and every bit as majestic. Mine, Aunt Ann, began years ago, here in the mountains, on the banks of these streams, in the shadow of these green hills. I loved her when she was a child. I went far off and met women of all sorts and ranks, and in their blank faces I always saw the soulful features of my child sweetheart. I came back here—*here*, do you understand, to find her the loveliest full-grown human flower that ever bloomed in God's spiritual sunshine."

"You mean—great God, you mean—? Look here, Luke King." Ann drew her body erect, her eyes were flashing fire. "Don't tell me it is Virginia Hemingway. Don't, don't—"

"That's who it is, and no one else this side of heaven!" he cried, in an impassioned voice. "That's who it is, and if I lose her—if I lose her my life will be a total failure. I could never rise above it, *never*!"

Their eyes met in a long, steady stare.

"You love that girl!" Ann gasped; "*that girl!*"

"With all my soul and body," he answered, fervidly. "Life, work, success, power, nothing under high heaven can knock it out of me. She has got to be mine, and you must never interfere, either. I love you as a son loves his mother, and you must not take her from me. You must do more—you must help me. I've never asked many things of you. I ask only this one—give her to me, help me to win her. That's all. Now we understand each other. She's the whole world to me. She's young; she may be thoughtless; her final character is just forming; but she is destined to be the grandest, loveliest woman on the face of the earth. She is to be my wife, Aunt Ann—*my wife*!"

Ann's head sank till her massive brow touched her crossed arms; he could see that she was quivering from head to foot. There was a long pause, then the woman looked up, faint defiance struggling in her face.

"You *are* a fool," she said. "A great, big, whimpering fool of a man. She's the only one, eh? Jane Hemingway's daughter is an angel on earth, above all the rest. Huh! and just because of her pretty face and slim body and high head. Huh, oh, you *are* a fool—an idiot, if there ever was one!"

"Stop, talk sense, if you *will* talk," he said, sternly, his eyes flashing. "Don't begin to run her down. I won't stand it. I know what she is. I know she was made for me!"

"She's not a whit better than the average," Ann retorted, her fierce eyes fixed on his face. "She's as weak as any of the rest. Do you know—do you know—" Ann looked away from him. "Do you know Langdon Chester has his eye on her, that he is following her everywhere, meeting her unbeknownst to her old mammy?"

"Yes, I know that, too," King surprised her with the statement; "and between you and me, that as much as my mother's sickness made me lay down my work and come up here to-night. It is the crisis of my whole life. She is at the turning-point of hers, just as you were at yours when you were a young and happy girl. She might listen to him, and love him; it is as natural for her to believe in a well-acted lie, as it is for her to be good and pure. Listen and don't get mad—the grandest woman I ever knew once trusted in falseness, and suffered. Virginia might, too; she might enter the life-darkness that you were led into by sheer faith in mankind, and have a life of sorrow before her. But if it should happen, Aunt Ann, my career in the right way would end."

"You wouldn't let a—a thing like that—" Ann began, anxiously, "a thing like that ruin your whole life, when—"

"Wouldn't I? You don't know me. These two hands would be dyed to the bone with the slow death-blood of a certain human being, and I would go to the

gallows with both a smile and a curse. That's why it's my crisis. I don't know how far it has gone. I only know that I want to save her from—yes, from what you've been through, and lay my life and energy at her feet."

"Jane Hemingway's *daughter*!" Ann Boyd groaned.

"Yes, Jane Hemingway's daughter. You hate her, I know, with the unreasonable hatred that comes from despising her mother, but you've got to help me, Aunt Ann. You put me where I am, in education and standing, and you must not see me pulled down."

"How could I help you, even—even—oh, you don't know, you don't know that at this very minute—"

"Oh yes, he may be with her right now, for all I know," King broke in, passionately. "He may be pouring his lies into her confiding ear at this very minute, as you say, but Fate would not be cruel enough to let them harm her. You must see her, Aunt Ann. For my sake, you must see her. You will know what to say. One word from you would open her eyes, when from me it would be an offence. She would know that you knew; it would shock her to her very soul, but it would—if she's actually in danger—save her; I know her well enough for that; it would save her."

"You are asking too much of me, Luke," Ann groaned, almost in piteous appeal. "I can't do it—I just *can't*!"

"Yes, you will," King said. "You have got a grand soul asleep under that crust of sordid hatred and enmity, and it will awake, now that I have laid bare my heart. You, knowing the grim penalty of a false step in a woman's life, will not sit idle and see one of the gentlest of your kind blindly take it. You can't, and you won't. You'll save her for me. You'll save me, too—save me from the fate of a murderer."

He stood up. "I'm going now," he finished. "I must hurry on home. I won't have time to see you in the morning before I leave, but you now know what I am living for. I am living only for Virginia Hemingway. Men and women are made for each other, we were made for each other. She may fancy she cares for that man, but she doesn't, Aunt Ann, any more than you now care for—but I won't say it. Good-bye. You are angry now, but you will get over it, and—and, you will stand by me, and by her."

XXI

Left alone, still crouching on her door-step, Ann, with fixed eyes and a face like carved stone, watched him move away in the soft moonlight, the very embodiment of youth and faith. She twisted her cold hands between her knees and moaned. What was the matter with her, anyway? Was it possible that the recent raging fires of her life's triumph were already smouldering embers, half covered with the ashes of cowardly indecision? Was she to sit quaking like that because a mere youth wanted his toy? Was she not entitled to the sweet spoils of victory, after her long struggle and defence? Yes, but Virginia! After all, what had the innocent, sweet-natured girl to do with the grim battle? Never, in all Ann had heard of the constant gossip against her, had one word come from Virginia. Once, years ago, Ann recalled a remark of Mrs. Waycroft that the girl had tried to keep her mother from speaking so harshly of the lone brunt of general reproach, and yet Virginia was at that very moment treading the crumbling edge of the self-same precipice over which Ann had toppled.

The lone woman rose stiffly and went into the house to go to bed—to go to bed—to sleep! with all that battle of emotion in her soul and brain. The clock steadily ticking and throwing its round, brass pendulum from side to side caught her eye. It was too dark to see the hands, so she lighted a tallow-dip, and with the fixed stare of a dying person she peered into the clock's face. Half-past ten! Yes, there was perhaps time for the rescue. If she were to get to Chester's in time, her judgment of woman's nature told her one word from her would complete the rescue—the rescue of Jane Hemingway's child—Jane's chief hope and flag of virtue that she would still wave defiantly in her eyes. Without undressing—why, she could not have explained—Ann threw herself on her bed and buried her face in the pillow, clutching it with tense, angry hands.

"Oh, what's the matter with me?" she groaned. "Why did that fool boy come here to-night, telling me that it would bring him to the gallows stained to the bone with the dye of hell, and that *I* must keep her in the right road—me? Huh, me keep a girl in the right track, so they can keep on saying I'm the only scab on the body of the community? I won't; by all the powers above and below, *I won't*! She can look out for herself, even if it *does* ruin an idiot of a man and pull him—It really *would* ruin him, though. Maybe it would ruin *me*. Maybe he's right and I ought to make a life business of saving others from what I've been through—saving even my enemies. Christ said it; there is no doubt about that. He said it. He never had to go through with what I have, though, for He was free from the desire to fight, but He meant that one thing, as the one great law of life—*the only law of life*! Oh, God, I must do something! I must either save the girl or let it go on. I don't know which to do, as God is my creator, I don't actually know which to do. I don't—I don't—I don't—really—know—which—I *want* to do. That's it—I don't know which I *want* to do. I'm simply crazy to-night. I've never

felt this way before. I've always been able to tell whether I wanted, or didn't want, a thing, but now—"

She turned over on her side. Then she sat up, staring at the clock. Next she put her feet on the floor and stood erect. "I won't," she said, between set teeth. "I won't. Before God, and all the imps of hell I'll not meddle with it. It's Jane Hemingway's business to look after her silly girl, and not mine."

She went again to the porch and stood staring out into the white moonlight. The steady beat of the hoofs of Luke King's horse, dying out on the still night, came to her. Dear, dear boy! he did love the girl and he never would be the same again—never. It would mean his downfall from the glorious heights he had climbed. He would grapple as a wild beast with the despoiler, and, as he said, go willingly to his own end? Yes, that was Luke King; he had preached of the rugged road to heaven, he would take the easier way to hell, and laugh in his despair at the whole thing as a joke of fate.

Before she knew it, Ann found herself out at her gate. Forces within her raised her hand to the latch and pushed her body through.

"I'll not meddle," she said, and yet she moved on down the road. She met no one, heard nothing save the dismal croakings of the frogs in the marshes. On she went, increasing her speed at every step. Yes, she realized now that she must try to save the girl, for Virginia had done her no personal injury. No, she must abide another time and seek some other means for revenge against the mother. Chance would offer something. Why, the cancer—why hadn't she thought of that? Wasn't that enough for any human being to bear? Yes, Jane would get her reward. It was fast on the road. And for Luke's sake—for the sake of the brave, good-hearted, struggling boy, she would try to save his sweetheart. Yes, that seemed inevitable. The long, white fence of the Chester place suddenly cut across her view. Near the centre Ann descried the tall, imitation stone gate-posts, spanned at the top by a white crescent, and towards this portal she sped, breathing through her big nostrils like a laboring ox.

Reaching the gate and opening it, she saw a buggy and a pair of horses hitched near the door. Ann paused among the boxwood bushes and stared in perplexity. What could it mean? she asked herself. Had Colonel Chester suddenly returned home, or was Langdon recklessly planning to flee the country with the thoughtless girl? Mystified, Ann trudged up the gravelled walk, seeing no one, till she stood on the veranda steps. The big, old-fashioned drawing-room on the right of the dark entrance-hall was lighted up. Loud, masculine laughter and bacchanalian voices burst through the half-open windows. Ann went up the steps and peered in at one of them, keeping her body well back in the shadow. There were three men within—two drummers, one of whom was Fred Masters, and Langdon Chester. The latter, calm and collected, and yet with a

look of suppressed fury on his face, was reluctantly serving whiskey from an ancient cut-glass decanter. Ann saw that he was on the verge of an angry outburst, and began to speculate on the cause. Ah! she had an idea, and it thrilled her through and through. Quietly retracing her steps to the lawn, she inspected the exterior of the great, rambling structure. She was now sure that the visit of the men had come in the nature of an unwelcome surprise to the young master of the house, and she found herself suddenly clinging to the warm hope that the accident might have saved the girl.

"Oh, God, let it be so!" Ann heard herself actually praying. "Give the poor young thing a chance to escape what I've been through!"

But where was the object of her quest? Surely, Virginia had not gone back home, else Ann would have met her on the way. Looking long and steadily at the house, Ann suddenly descried a dim light burning up-stairs in the front room on the left-hand side of the upper hall. Instinct told her that she ought to search there, and, going back to the house, the determined rescuer crossed the veranda, walked boldly through the open doorway, and tiptoed to the foot of the broad, winding stairway. Loud laughter, the clinking of glasses, and blatant voices raised in harsh college-songs burst upon her. The yawning space through which the stairs reached upward was dark, but with a steady hand on the smooth walnut balustrade, Ann mounted higher and higher with absolutely fearless tread. She had just gained the first landing, and stood there encompassed in darkness, when the door of the drawing-room was suddenly wrenched open and Langdon and Masters, in each other's arms, playfully struggled into view.

"You really must go now, boys," Chester was saying, in a persuasive voice. "I don't want to be inhospitable, you know, but I have that important work to do, and it must be done to-night. It is a serious legal matter, and I promised to mail the papers to my father the first thing in the morning."

"Papers nothing!" Masters cried, in a drink-muffled tone. "This is the first time I ever honored your old ancestral shack with my presence, and I won't be sent off like a tramp from the door. Besides, you are not open and above-board—you never were so at college. That was your great forte, freezing your friends out of asking questions where your private devilment was concerned. That, and the reputation of your family for fighting duels, kept the whole school afraid of you. On my honor, Dick," he called out to the man in the drawing-room, "I tell you I'm sure I saw a woman with him on the steps of the veranda as we drove up. He had hold of her hand and was pulling her into the hall."

"Ah, don't be absurd," Ann heard Chester say, with a smooth, guarded laugh. "Get in your rig, boys, and drive back to the hotel. I'll see you in the morning."

"Get in the rig nothing!" Masters laughed. "We are going to spend the night

here, aren't we, Dick?"

"You bet; that's what I came for," a voice replied from within. "But let him go do his work, Fred. You and I can finish the game, and empty his decanter. You can't walk off with my money and not give me a chance to win it back."

"Yes, yes, that's a bang-up idea," Masters laughed, and he pushed Chester by main force back into the light. "You go burn the midnight oil, old man, and I'll make this tenderfoot telegraph his house for more expense money."

With a thunderous slam, the door was closed. Loud voices in hot argument came from the room, and then there was silence. Chester had evidently given up in despair of getting rid of his guests. Ann moved on up the steps. In the room on the left the light was still burning, she could see a pencil of it under the door-shutter. To this she groped and softly rapped, bending her ear to the key-hole to listen. There was no sound within. Ann rapped again, more loudly, her hand on the latch. She listened again, and this time she was sure she heard a low moan. Turning the bolt, she found the door locked, but at the same instant noticed that the key had been left in the door on the outside. Turning the key, Ann opened the door, went in, and softly closed the opening after her. A lamp, turned low, stood on the mantel-piece, and in its light she saw a crouching figure in a chair. It was Virginia, her face covered with her hand, moaning piteously.

"Let me go home, for God's sake, let me go home!" she cried, without looking up. "You said I was to get the money, if I came only to the door, and now—oh, oh!" The girl buried her face still deeper in her apron and sobbed.

Ann, an almost repulsive grimace on her impassive face, stood over her and looked about the quaintly furnished room with its quiet puritanical luxury of space, at the massive mahogany centre-table, with carved legs and dragon-heads supporting the polished top, the high-posted bed and rich, old, faded canopy, the white counterpane and pillows looking like freshly fallen snow.

"Thank God," Ann said, aloud.

Virginia heard, sat as if stunned for an instant, and then with a stare of bewilderment looked up.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I thought it was—"

"I know, huh, child! nobody could know better than I do. Don't ask me what I come here for. I don't know any better than you do, but I come, and I'm going to get you out of it—that is, if I'm in time to do any good at all. Oh, you understand me, Virginia Hemingway. If I'm in time, you'll march out of here with me, if not, God knows you might as well stay here as anywhere else."

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd, how can you ask me such an awful—"

"Well, then, I won't!" Ann said, more softly. "Besides, I can see the truth in your young face. The Almighty has put lights in the eyes of women that only one thing can put out. Yours are still burning."

Virginia rose to her feet and clutched Ann's strong arm convulsively.

"Oh, if you only knew *why* I came, you'd not have the heart to think me absolutely bad. Mrs. Boyd, as God is my Judge, I came because he—"

"You needn't bother to tell me anything about it," Ann grunted, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I know why you come; if I hadn't suspicioned the truth I'd have let you alone, but I ain't going to tell you why I come. I come, that's all. I come, and if we are going to get out of here without a scandal we've got to be slick about it. Those devils are still carousing down there. Let's go now while the parlor door is shut."

They had reached the threshold of the chamber when Virginia drew back suddenly.

"He told me not to dare to go that way!" she cried. "He said I'd be seen if I did. He locked me in, Mrs. Boyd—*he* locked the door!"

"I know that, too," Ann retorted, impatiently. "Didn't I have to turn the key to get in? But we've *got* to go this way. We've got to go down them steps like I come, and past the room where they are holding high carnival. We've got to chance it, but we must be quick about it. We haven't time to stand here talking."

She turned the carved brass knob and drew the shutter towards her. At the same instant she shrank back into Virginia's arms, for the drawing-room door was wrenched open, and Masters's voice rang out loudly in the great hall.

"We will see where he bunks, won't we, Dick? By George, the idea of an old college-chum refusing to let a man see his house! I want to look at the photographs you used to stick up on the walls, you sly dog! Oh, you've got them yet! You don't throw beauties like them away when they cost a dollar apiece."

"Go back to your game, boys!" Langdon commanded, with desperate coolness. "I'll show you the house after a while. Finish your game!"

"The cold-blooded scoundrel!" Ann exclaimed, under her breath. "Not a drop has passed his lips to-night, as much as he likes a dram." She closed the door gently and stood looking about the room. On the edge of the mantel-piece she saw something that gleamed in the dim lamplight, and she went to it. It was a loaded revolver.

"He threatened you with this, didn't he?" Ann asked, holding it before her with the easy clasp of an expert.

"No, he didn't do that," Virginia faltered, "but he told me if—if I made a noise and attracted their attention and caused exposure, he'd kill himself. Oh, Mrs. Boyd, I didn't mean to come here to this room at first. I swear I didn't. He begged me to come as far as the front door to get the money the man had brought back from Darley, then—"

"Then those drunken fools drove up, and he persuaded you to hide here," Ann interrupted, her mind evidently on something else. "Oh, I understand; they

played into his hands without knowing it, and it's my private opinion that they saved you, silly child. You can't tell me anything about men full of the fire of hell. You'd 'a' gone out of this house at break of day with every bit of self-respect wrung out of you like water out of a rag. You'd 'a' done that, if I hadn't come."

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd—"

"Don't oh Mrs. Boyd me!" Ann snapped out. "I know what I'm talking about. That isn't the point. The point is getting out to the road without a row and a scandal that will ring half-way round the world. Let a couple of foul-mouthed drummers know a thing like this, and they would actually pay to advertise it in the papers. I tell you, child—"

Ann broke off to listen. The door of the drawing-room seemed to be opened again, and as quickly closed.

"Come on." Ann held the revolver before her. "We've got to make a break for freedom. This ain't no place for a pure young woman. You've got what the highfaluting society gang at Darley would call a chaperon, but she isn't exactly of the first water, according to the way such things are usually graded. Seems like she's able to teach you tricks to-night."

Virginia caught Ann's arm. "You are not going to shoot—" she began, nervously.

"Not unless I *have* to," Ann said. "But only hell knows what two drunken men and a cold, calculating devil of that brand will do in a pinch. I'll see you down them steps, and out into God's moonlight, if I have to drag you over enough corpses to make a corduroy road. I know how to shoot. I killed a squirrel once in a high tree with a pistol. Come on; they happen to be quiet right now."

Ann opened the door and led the quaking girl across the upper corridor to the stairs, and they began to grope down the steps, Ann's revolver harshly scratching as it slid along the railing. The voices in the drawing-room, as they neared the door, grew more boisterous. There was a spasmodic and abortive effort at song on the part of Masters, a dash of a deck of playing-cards on the floor, angry swearing, and the calm remonstrance of the master of the house. Down the steps the two women went till the drawing-room door was passed. Then the veranda was gained, and the wide lawn and gravelled walks stretched out invitingly in the moonlight.

"Thank God," Ann muttered, as if to herself. "Now come on, let's hustle out into the shelter of the woods."

Speeding down the walk, hand-in-hand, they passed through the gate and reached the road. "Slick as goose-grease," Ann chuckled. "Now we are plumb safe—as safe as we'd be anywhere in the world."

Drawing Virginia into the shadow of the trees bordering the road, she continued, more deliberately: "I could take you through the woods and across my

meadows and fields, but it's a rough way at night, and it won't be necessary. We can take the main road and dodge out of the way if we hear anybody coming."

"I'm not afraid now," Virginia sighed. "I'm not thinking about that. I'm only worried about what you think—what you think, Mrs. Boyd."

"Never you mind what *I* think, child," Ann said, quietly. "God knows I never would blame you like other folks, for I know a thing or two about life. I've learned my lesson."

Virginia laid her hand firmly on Ann's strong one. "He promised me the money to have mother's operation performed. Oh, I couldn't let the chance escape, Mrs. Boyd—it meant so much to the poor woman. You have no idea what torture she is in. He wouldn't give it to me unless—unless I went all the way to his house for it. I hardly knew why, but—yes, I *knew*—"

"That's right," Ann broke in, "it won't do any good to tell a story about it. You knew what he wanted; any girl of your age with common-sense would know."

"Yes, I knew," Virginia confessed again, her head hanging, "but it was the only chance to get the money, and I thought I'd risk it. I *did* risk it, and have come away empty-handed. I'm safe, but my poor mother—"

"Put that woman out of it for one minute, for God's sake!" Ann hurled at her. "And right here I want it understood I didn't leave a warm bed to-night to do her a favor. I done it, that's all there is about it, but keep her out of it."

"All right," the girl gave in. "I don't want to make you mad after what you have done, but I owe it to myself to show you that I was thinking only of her. I am not bad at heart, Mrs. Boyd. I wanted to save my mother's life."

"And you never thought of yourself, poor child!" slipped impulsively from Ann's firm lips. "Yes, yes, I believe that."

"I thought only of her, till I found myself locked there in his room and remembered what, in my excitement, I had promised him. I promised him, Mrs. Boyd, to make no outcry, and—and—" Virginia raised her hands to her face. "I promised, on my word of honor, to wait there till he came back. When you knocked on the door I thought it was he, and when you opened it and came in and stood above me, I thought it was all over. Instead, it was you, and—"

"And here we are out in the open air," Ann said, shifting the revolver to the other hand. She suddenly fixed her eyes on Virginia's thin-clad shoulders. "You didn't come here a cool night like this without something around you, did you?"

"No, I—oh, I've left my shawl!" the girl cried. "He took it from me, and kept it. He said it was to bind me to my promise to stay till he got back."

"The scoundrel!—the wily scamp!" Ann muttered. "Well, there is only one thing about it, child. I'm going back after that shawl. I wouldn't leave a thing like that in the hands of a young devil beat in his game; he'd make use of it. You go

on home. I'll get your shawl by some hook or crook. You run over to my house on the sly to-morrow morning and I'll give it back to you."

"But, Mrs. Boyd, I—"

"Do as I tell you," the elder woman commanded, "and see that you keep this thing from Jane Hemingway. I don't want her to know the part I've taken to-night. Seems to me I'd rather die. What I've done, I've done, but it isn't for her to know. I've helped her daughter out of trouble, but the fight is still on between me and her, and don't you forget it. Now, go on; don't stand there and argue with me. Go on, I tell you. What you standing there like a sign-post with the boards knocked off for? Go on home. I'm going back for that shawl."

Virginia hesitated for a moment, and then, without speaking again, and with her head hanging down, she turned homeward.

XXII

As Ann Boyd reached the veranda, on her return to the house, loud and angry voices came from the parlor through an open window.

"Blast you, I believe it *was* some woman," she heard Masters say in a maudlin tone, "and that's why you are so anxious to hurry us away. Oh, I'm onto you. George Wilson told me you were hanging round the girl you refused to introduce me to, and for all I know—"

"That's no business of yours," Chester retorted, in a tone of sudden fury. "I've stood this about as long as I'm going to, Masters, even if you are drunk and don't know what you are about. Peterkin, you'd better take your friend home; my house is not a bar-room, and my affairs are my own. I want that understood."

"Look here, Masters," a new voice broke in, "you *are* going too far, and I'm not going to stand for it. Chester's right. When you are full you are the most unreasonable man alive. This is my turnout at the door—come on, or I'll leave you to walk to Springtown."

"Well, I'll go all right," threatened Masters, "but I am not done yet. I'll see you again, my boy. What they used to say in college is true; you won't tote fair. You are for number one every time, and would sacrifice a friend for your own interests at the drop of a hat."

"Take him on, take him on!" cried Chester.

"Oh, I'm going all right!" growled Masters. "And I'm not drunk either. My judgment of you is sober-headed enough. You—"

They were coming through the hall to gain the door, and Ann quickly concealed herself behind one of the tall Corinthian columns that supported the massive, projecting roof of the veranda. She was standing well in the shadow when Masters, drawn forcibly by his friend, staggered limply out and down the steps. Langdon followed to the edge of the veranda, and stood there, frowning sullenly in the light from the window. He was pale and haggard, his lip quivering in the rage he was trying to control as he watched Peterkin half lifting and almost roughly shoving Masters into the vehicle.

"The puppy!" Ann heard him muttering. "I ought to have slapped his meddlesome mouth."

Several minutes passed. Ann scarcely dared to breathe freely, so close was she to the young planter. Masters was now in the buggy, leaning forward, his head lolling over the dashboard, and Peterkin was getting in beside him. The next moment the impatient horses had turned around and were off down the drive in a brisk trot.

"Yes, I ought to have kicked the meddling devil out and been done with it!" Ann heard Langdon say. "She, no doubt, has heard all the racket and been scared to death all this time, poor little thing!"

Chester was on the point of turning into the hall when a step sounded at the corner of the house nearest the negro quarter, and a short, portly figure emerged into the light.

"Marse Langdon, you dar?" a voice sounded.

"Yes, Aunt Maria." The young planter spoke with ill-disguised impatience. "What is it?"

"Nothin', Marse Langdon, 'cep' dem rapscallions kept me awake, an' I heard you stormin' out at um. I tol' yo' pa, Marse Langdon, ef dey was any mo' night carouses while he was gone I'd let 'im know, but I ain't gwine mention dis, kase I done see how hard you tried to oust dat low white trash widout a row. You acted de plumb gentleman, Marse Langdon. Is de anything I kin do fer you, Marse Langdon?"

"No, Aunt Maria." Chester's tone betrayed impatience even with the consideration of the faithful servant. "No, I don't want a thing. I'm going to bed. I've got a headache. If any one should call to-night, which is not likely at this hour, send them away. I sha'n't get up."

Ann was now fearful lest in turning he would discover her presence before the negro had withdrawn, and, seeing her opportunity while his attention was still on the road, from which the trotting of the departing horses came in a steady

beat of hoofs, she noiselessly glided into the big hall through the open door and stood against a wall in the darkness.

"Now, I reckon, they will let me alone!" she heard Chester say, as he came into the hall and turned into the parlor. The next instant he had blown out the tall prismed lamp, lowered a window, and come out to close and lock the front door.

His hand was on the big brass handle when, in a calm voice, Ann addressed him:

"I want a word with you, Mr. Chester," she said, and she moved towards him, the revolver hanging at her side.

She heard him gasp, and he stood as if paralyzed in the moonbeams which fell through the open doorway and the side-lights of frosted glass.

"Who are you?" he managed to articulate.

"Oh, you know me, I reckon, Mr. Chester. I'm Ann Boyd. I want to see you on a little private business, just between you and me, you know. It needn't go any further."

"Oh, Ann Boyd!" he exclaimed, and the thought ran through his bewildered brain that she had mistaken him for his father, and that he was accidentally running upon evidence of an intercourse between the two that he had thought was a thing of the past. "But, Mrs. Boyd," he said, "you've made a mistake. My father is away; he left for Savannah—"

"I didn't want to see your father," Ann snarled, angrily. "My business is with you, my fine young man, and nobody else."

"Me?" he gasped, in growing surprise. "Me?"

"Yes, you. I've come back for Virginia Hemingway's shawl. She says you kept it. Just between you and me," she went on, "I don't intend to leave a thing like that in the hands of a man of your stamp to hold over the poor girl and intimidate her with."

"You say—you say—" He seemed unable to formulate expression for his abject astonishment, and he left the door and aimlessly moved to the railing of the stairs and stood facing her. His eyes now fell on the revolver in her hand, and the sight of it increased his wondering perturbation.

"I said I wanted her shawl," Ann repeated, firmly, "and I don't see no reason why I should stand here all night to get it. You know what you did with it. Hand it to me!"

"Her shawl?" he muttered, still staring at her wide-eyed and bewildered, and wondering if this might not be some trap the vindictive recluse was setting for him.

"Oh, I see," Ann laughed—"you think the poor, frail thing is still up there locked in that room; but she ain't. I saw her coming this way to-night, and,

happening to know what you wanted her for, I come after her. You was busy with them galoots in the parlor, and I didn't care to bother you, so I went up and fetched her down without waiting to send in a card. She's in her bed by this time, poor little thing! And I come back for the shawl. I wasn't afraid of you, even without this gun that I found in your room. Thank God, the girl's as pure as she was the day she drew milk from her mother's breast, and I'll see to it that you won't never bother her again. This night you have sunk lower than man ever sunk—even them in your own family. You tried everything hell could invent, and when you failed you went to heaven for your bribes. You knew how she loved her wretched old hag of a mammy and what she wanted the money for. Some sensible folks argue that there isn't no such place as a hell. I tell you, Langdon Chester, there *is* one, and it's full to running over—packed to the brink—with your sort. For your own low and selfish gratification you'd consign that beautiful flower of a girl to a long life of misery. You dirty scamp, I'm a good mind to—Look here, get me that shawl! You'll make me mad in a minute." She suddenly advanced towards him, the revolver raised half threateningly, and he shrank back in alarm.

"Don't, don't point that thing at me!" he cried. "I don't want trouble with you."

"Well, you get that shawl then, and be quick about it."

He put a foot on the lower step of the stairs. "It's up at the door of the room," he said, doggedly. "I dropped it there just for a joke. I was only teasing her. I—I know she's a good girl. She—she knew I was going to give it back to her. I was afraid she'd get frightened and run down before those men, and—"

"And your hellish cake would be dough!" Ann sneered. "Oh, I see, but that isn't getting the shawl."

He took another slow step, his eyes upon her face, and paused.

"You are trying to make it out worse than it is," he said, at the end of his resources. "I promised to give her the money, which I had locked in the desk in the library for safe-keeping, and asked her to come get it. She and I were on the steps when those men drove up. I begged her to run up-stairs to that room. I—I locked the door to—to keep them out more than for—for any other reason."

"Oh yes, I know you did, Langdon Chester, and you took her shawl for the same reason and made the poor, helpless, scared thing agree to wait for you. A good scamp pleases me powerful, but you are too good a sample for any use. Get the shawl."

"I don't want to be misunderstood," Chester said, in an all but conciliatory tone, as he took a slow, upward step.

"Well, you bet there's no danger of me not understanding you," Ann sneered. "Get that shawl."

Without another word he groped up the dark steps. Ann heard him walking

about on the floor above, striking matches and uttering exclamations of anger. Presently she heard him coming. When half-way down the stairs he paused and threw the shawl to her.

"There it is," he said, sullenly. "Leave my revolver on the steps."

Ann caught the shawl, which, like some winged thing, swooped down through the darkness, and the next instant she had lowered the hammer of the revolver and laid it on the lowest step of the stairs.

"All right, it's an even swap," she chuckled—"your gun for our shawl. Now go to your bed and sleep on this. It's my opinion that, bad as you are, young man, I've done you a favor to-night."

"There's one thing I'll try to find out," he summoned up retaliatory courage to say, "and that is why you are bothering yourself so much about the daughter of a woman you are doing all you can to injure."

Ann laughed from the door as she crossed the threshold, the shawl under her arm. "It will do you good to study on that problem," she said. "You find that out, and I'll pay you well for the answer. I don't know that myself."

From the window of his room above, Langdon watched her as she passed through the gate and disappeared on the lonely road.

"She won't tell it," he decided. "She'll keep quiet, unless it is her plan to hold it over Jane Hemingway. That may be it—and yet if that is so, why didn't she—wait?"

XXIII

The sun had just risen the next morning, and its long, red streamers were kindling iridescent fires in the jewels of dew on the dying grass of the fields. White mists, like tenderly caressing clouds, hung along the rocky sides of the mountains. Ann Boyd, her eyes heavy from unwonted loss of sleep, was at the barn feeding her horses when she saw Virginia coming across the meadows. "She wants her shawl, poor thing!" Ann mused. "I'll go get it."

She went back into the house and brought it out just as the beautiful girl reached the barn-yard fence and stood there wordless, timid, and staring. "You see, I kept my word," the elder woman said, with an effort at a smile. "Here is your shawl." Virginia reached out for it. She said nothing, simply folding the shawl on

her arm and staring into Ann's eyes with a woe-begone expression. She had lost her usual color, and there were black rings round her wonderful eyes that gave them more depth and seeming mystery than ever.

"I hope your mother wasn't awake last night when you got back," Ann said.

"No, she wasn't—she was sound asleep," Virginia said, without change of expression. It was as if, in her utter depression, she had lost all individuality.

"Then she don't know," Ann put in.

"No, she don't suspect, Mrs. Boyd. If she did, she'd die, and so would I."

"Well, I don't see as she is likely to know—*ever*, as long as she lives," Ann said, in a crude attempt at comfort-giving.

"I fancied you'd *want* her to know," said the girl, looking at Ann frankly. "After I thought it over, I came to the conclusion that maybe you did it all so you could tell her. I see no other reason for—for you being so—so good to—to me."

"Well, I don't know as I've been good to anybody." Ann's color was rising in spite of her cold exterior. "But we won't talk about that. Though I'll tell you one thing, child, and that is that I'll never tell this to a living soul. Nobody but you and me an' that trifling scamp will ever know it. Now, will *that* do you any good? It's the same, you see, as if it had never really taken place."

"But it *did* take place!" Virginia said, despondently.

"Oh yes, but you don't know when you are in luck," Ann said, grimly. "In things like that a miss is as good as a mile. Study my life awhile, and you'll fall down on your knees and thank God for His mercy. Huh, child, don't be silly! I know when a young and good-looking girl that has gone a step too far is fortunate. Look here—changing the subject—I saw your mammy standing in the back door just now. Does she know you left the house?"

"Yes, I came to look for the cow," said Virginia.

"Then she don't suspicion where you are at," said Ann. "Now, you see, she may have noticed that you walked off without a shawl, and you'd better not wear one home. Leave it with me and come over for it some time in the day when she won't miss you."

"I think I'd better take it back," Virginia replied. "She wears it herself sometimes and might miss it."

"Oh, I see!" Ann's brows ran together reflectively. "Well, I'll tell you. Tote it under your arm till you get near the house, and then drop it somewhere in the weeds or behind the ash-hopper, and go out and get it when she ain't looking."

"I'll do that, then," the girl said, wearily. "I was thinking, Mrs. Boyd, that not once last night did I remember to thank you for—"

"Oh, don't thank *me*, child!" Had Ann been a close observer of her own idiosyncrasies, her unwary softness of tone and gentleness to a daughter of her sworn enemy would have surprised her. "Don't thank me," she repeated. "Thank

God for letting you escape the lot of others just as young and unsuspecting as you ever were. I don't deserve credit for what I done last night. In fact, between you and me, I tried my level best not to interfere. Why I finally gave in I don't know, but I done it, and that's all there is to it. I done it. I got started and couldn't stop. But I want to talk to you. Come in the house a minute. It won't take long. Jane—your mother—will think the cow has strayed off, but there stands the cow in the edge of the swamp. Come on."

Dumbly, Virginia followed into the house and sank into a chair, holding her shapely hands in her lap, her wealth of golden-brown hair massed on her head and exquisite neck. Ann shambled in her untied, dew-wet shoes to the fireplace and poured out a cup of coffee from a tin pot on the coals.

"Drink this," she said. "If what I hear is true, you don't get any too much to eat and drink over your way."

Virginia took it and sipped it daintily, but with evident relish.

"I see you take to that," Ann said, unconscious of the genuine, motherly delight she was betraying. "Here, child, I'll tell you what I want you to do. These spiced sausages of mine, dry as powder in the corn-shuck, are the best and sweetest flavored that ever you stuck a tooth in. They fry in their own grease almost as soon as they hit a hot pan when they are sliced thin."

"Oh no, I thank you," Virginia protested; "I really couldn't."

"But I know you *can*," Ann insisted, as she cut down from a rafter overhead one of the sausages and deftly sliced it in a pan already hot on the coals. "You needn't tell me you ain't hungry. I can see it in your face. Besides, do you know it's a strange fact that a woman will eat just the same in trouble as out, while a man's appetite is gone the minute he's worried?"

The girl made no further protest, and Ann soon brought some hot slices of the aromatic food, with nicely browned toast, and placed them in a plate in her lap. "How funny all this seems!" Ann ran on.

"Here I am feeding you up and feeling sorry for you when only last night I—well, I've got to talk to you, and I'm going to get it over with. I'll have to speak of the part of my life that has been the cud for every idle woman in these mountains to chaw on for many, many years, but I'm going to do it, so you will know better what you escaped last night; but, first of all, I want to ask you a straight question, and I don't mean no harm nor to be meddling where I have no business. I want to know if you love this Langdon Chester as—well, as you've always fancied you'd love the man you became a wife to."

There was a moment's hesitation on the part of the girl. Her cheeks took on color; she broke a bit of the sausage with her fork, but did not raise it to her lips.

"I'm asking you a simple, plain question," Ann reminded her.

"No, I don't," Virginia answered, haltingly;—"that is, not now, not—"

"Ah, I see!" the old woman cried. "The feeling died just as soon as you saw straight down into his real nature, just as soon as you saw that he'd treat you like a slave, that he'd abuse you, beat you, lock you up, if necessary—in fact, do anything a brute would do to gain his aims."

"I'm afraid, now, that I never really loved him," Virginia said, a catch in her voice.

"Humph!" Ann ejaculated. "I see. Then you went all the way over that lonely road to his house with just one thought in your mind, and that was to get that money for your mother."

"As God is my Judge, Mrs. Boyd, that's all I went for," Virginia said, her earnest eyes staring steadily at her companion.

"Well, I'm glad it was that way," Ann mused. "There was a time when I thought you were a silly girl whose head could easily be turned, but I've been hearing fine things about you, and I see you are made of good, solid, womanly stuff. Now, I want to tell you the whole truth, and then, if you want to consider me a friend and a well-wisher, all right. I'm no better-hearted than the average mortal woman. The truth is, Virginia Hemingway, I hate your mother as much as one human being can hate another this side of the bad place. She's been a thorn in my side the biggest part of my life. Away back when I was about your age, I got into just such a tight as you was in last night. For a long time afterwards I was nearly crazy, but when the prime cause of my trouble went off and married I begun to try to live again. I fell in love with a real good-natured, honest man. I wanted him to know the truth, but I never knew how to tell him, and so I kept holding off. He was a great beau among the girls of that day, making love to all of them, your mother among the rest. Finally, I give in. I couldn't resist his begging, my friends advised it, and me and him was married. That was the beginning of your mammy's enmity. It kept up, and when the truth about me finally leaked out she saw to it that my husband would not overlook the past—she saw to it that I was despised, kicked, and sneered at by the community—and my husband left with my only child. I sent up a daily prayer to be furnished with the means for revenge, but it didn't do any good, and then I got to begging the devil for what the Lord had refused. That seemed to work better, for one day a hint came to me that Langdon Chester was on your trail. That gave me the first glimpse of hope of solid revenge I'd had. I kept my eyes and ears open day and night. I saw your doom coming—I lived over what I'd been through, and the thought that you were to go through it was as sweet to me as honey in the comb. Finally the climax arrived. I saw you on the way to his house last night, and understood what it meant. I was squatting down behind a fence at the side of the road. I saw you pass, and followed you clean to the gate, and then turned back, at every

step exulting over my triumph. The very sky overhead was ablaze with the fire of your fall to my level. But at my gate I was halted suddenly. Virginia—to go back a bit—there is a certain young man in this world that I reckon is the only human being that I love. I love him, I reckon, because he always seemed to love me, and believe me better than I am, and, more than that, he was the only person that ever pointed out a higher life to me. He was the poor boy that I educated, and who went off and done well, and has just come back to this country."

"Luke King!" Virginia exclaimed, softly, and then she impulsively placed her hand on her lips and sat staring at the speaker, almost breathlessly alert.

"Yes, Luke King," said Ann, with feeling. "Strange to say, he has always said the day would come when I'd rise above hatred and revenge; he has learned some queer things in the West. Well, last night when I met him he said he'd come up to see his mother, who he heard was a little sick, but he finally admitted that her sickness wasn't all that fetched him. He said he was worried. He was more downhearted than I ever saw him before. Virginia Hemingway, he said he was worried about *you*."

"About *me*? Oh no," Virginia gasped.

"Yes, about you," Ann went on. "The poor fellow sat down on the doorstep and laid bare his whole young heart to me. He'd loved you, he said, ever since you was a little girl. He'd taken your sweet face off with him on that long stay, and it had been with him constantly. It was on your account he yielded to the temptation to locate in Georgia again, and when he come back and saw you a full-grown woman he told me he felt that you and he were intended for one another. He said he knew your beautiful character. He said he'd been afraid to mention it to you, seeing you didn't feel the same way, and he thought it would be wiser to let it rest awhile; but then he learned that Langdon Chester was going with you, and he got worried. He was afraid that Langdon wouldn't tote fair with you. I may as well tell you the truth, Virginia. I never was so mad in all my life, for there I was right at that minute gloating over your ruin. I was feeling that way while he was telling me, with tears in his eyes and voice, that if—if harm came to a hair of your bonny head he'd kill Langdon Chester in cold blood, and go to the gallows with a smile on his lips. He didn't know anything wrong, he was just afraid—that was all, just afraid—and he begged me—just think of it, *me*, who was right then hot with joy over your plight—he begged me to see you some day soon and try to get you to care for him. I was so mad I couldn't speak, and he went off, his last word being that he knew I wouldn't fail him."

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd, I can't stand this!" Virginia bowed her head and began to sob. "He was always a good friend, but I never dreamed that he cared for me that way, and now he thinks that I—thinks that I—oh!"

"Well," Ann went on, disregarding the interruption, "I was left to tussle with

the biggest situation of my life. I tried to fight it. I laid down to sleep, but rolled and tossed, unable to close my eyes, till at last, as God is my Judge, something inside of me—a big and swelling something I'd never felt before—picked me up and made me go to that house. You know the rest. Instead of standing by in triumph and seeing the child of my enemy swept away by my fate, I was praying God to save her. I don't know what to make of my conduct, even now. Last night, when I come back to my house, I seemed all afire with feelings like none I ever had. As the Lord is my holy Guide, I felt like I wished I'd comforted you more—wished I'd taken you in my poor old arms there in the moonlight and held you to my breast, like I wish somebody had done me away back there before that dark chasm opened in front of me. I'm talking to you now as I never dreamt I could talk to a female, much less a daughter of Jane Hemingway; but I can't help it. You are Luke's chosen sweetheart, and to cast a slur on you for what took place last night would be to blight my own eternal chances of salvation; for, God bless your gentle little soul, you went there blinded by your mother's suffering, an excuse I couldn't make. No, there's just one thing about it. Luke is right. You are a good, noble girl, and you've had your cross to bear, and I want to see you get what I missed—a long, happy life of love and usefulness in this world. You will get it with Luke, for he is the grandest character I ever knew or heard about. I don't know but what right now it is his influence that's making me whirl about this odd way. I don't know what to make of it. As much as I hate your mother, I almost feel like I could let her stand and abuse me to my face and not talk back. Now, dry your eyes and finish that sausage. I reckon I hain't the virago and spitfire you've been taught to think I am. Most of us are better on the inside than out. Stop—stop now! crying won't do any good."

"I can't help it," Virginia sobbed. "You are so good to me, and to think that it was from my mother that you got all your abuse."

"Well, never mind about that," Ann said, laying her hand almost with shamefaced stealth on the girl's head and looking towards the swamp through the open door. "I see your cow is heading for home on her own accord. Follow her. This is our secret; nobody need know but us two. Your mammy would have you put in a house of detention if she knew it. Slip over and see me again when her back is turned. Lord, Lord, I wonder why I never thought about pitying you all along, instead of actually hating you for no fault of yours!"

Virginia rose, put the plate on the table, and, with her face full of emotion, she impulsively put her arms around Ann's neck.

"You are the best woman on earth," she said, huskily, "and I love you—I can't help it. I love you."

"Oh, I reckon you don't do *that*," Ann said, coloring to the roots of her heavy hair. "That wouldn't be possible."

"But I *do*, I tell you, I *do*," Virginia said again, "and I'll never do an unwomanly thing again in my life. But I don't want to meet Luke King again. I couldn't after what has happened."

"Oh, you let that take care of itself," Ann said, accompanying Virginia to the door.

She stood there, her red hands folded under her apron, and watched the girl move slowly across the meadow after the plodding cow.

"What a pretty trick!" Ann mused. "And to think she'd actually put her arms round my old neck and hug me, and say she—oh, that was odd, very, very odd! I don't seem to be my own boss any longer."

An hour later, as she stood in her front porch cutting the dying vines from the strings which held them upward, she saw Mrs. Waycroft hastening along the road towards her. "There, I clean forgot that woman," Ann said, her brow wrinkled. "She's plumb full of what she heard that scamp saying to Virginia at the graveyard. I'll have to switch her off the track some way, the Lord only knows how, but off she goes, if I have to lie to my best friend till I'm black in the face."

"I've been wanting to get over all morning," the visitor said, as she opened the gate and hurried in. "I had my breakfast two hours ago, but Sally Hinds and her two children dropped in and detained me. They pretended they wanted to talk about the next preaching, but it was really to get something to eat. The littlest one actually sopped the gravy from the frying-pan with a piece of bread-crust. I wanted to slip out last night and come over here to watch the road to see if Virginia Hemingway kept her promise, but just about that hour Jim Dilk—he lives in my yard, you know—he had a spasm, and we all thought he was going to die."

"Well, I reckon," Ann said, carelessly, as she pulled at a rotten piece of twine supporting a dead vine, and broke it from its nail under the eaves of the porch—"I reckon you'd 'a' had your trip for nothing, and maybe feel as sneaking about it as I confess I do."

"Sneaking?" echoed Mrs. Waycroft.

"Yes, the truth is, I was mean enough, Mary, to hold watch on the road in that chill night air, and got nothing but a twitch of rheumatism in my leg as a reward. The truth is, Virginia Hemingway is all right. She wanted that money bad enough, but it was just on old Jane's account, and she wasn't going to be led into sech a trap as that. I reckon Langdon Chester was doing most of the talking when you saw them together. She may be flirting a little with him, as most any natural young girl would, but, just between me 'n' you—now, see that this goes no further, Mary—there is a big, big case up between Virginia and Luke King."

"You *don't say*! How did you drop onto that?" gasped Mrs. Waycroft.

"Well, I don't feel at liberty exactly to tell how I got onto it," Ann said,

pulling at another piece of twine; "but it will get out before long. Luke has been in love with her ever since she wore short dresses."

"Huh, that *is* a surprise!" said Mrs. Waycroft. "Well, she is fortunate, Ann. He's a fine young man."

XXIV

Towards sunset that afternoon, as Ann was returning from her cotton-house, she came upon Virginia in a thicket on the roadside picking up pieces of fallen tree-branches for fire-wood. Ann had approached from the rear, and Virginia was unaware of her nearness. To the old woman's surprise, the girl's eyes were red from weeping, and there was a droop of utter despondency on her as she moved about, her apron full of sticks, her glance on the ground. Ann hesitated for a minute, and then stepped across the stunted grass and touched her on the arm.

"What's the matter *now*, child?" she asked.

The girl turned suddenly and flushed to the roots of her hair, but she made no response.

"What's gone wrong?" Ann pursued, anxiously. "Don't tell me your mother has found out about—"

"Oh no, it's not that," Virginia said, wiping her eyes with her disengaged hand. "It's not that. I'm just miserable, Mrs. Boyd, that's all—thoroughly miserable. You mustn't think I'm like this all the time, for I'm not. I've been cheerful at home all day—as cheerful as I could be under the circumstances; but, being alone out here for the first time, I got to thinking about my mother, and the sadness of it all was too much for me."

"She hain't worse, is she?" Ann asked.

"Not that anybody could see, Mrs. Boyd," the girl replied; "but the cancer must be worse. Two doctors from Springtown, who were riding by, stopped to ask for a drink of water, and my uncle told them about mother's trouble. It looked like they just wanted to see it out of professional curiosity, for when they heard we had no money and were deeply in debt they didn't offer any advice. But they looked very much surprised when they made an examination, and it was plain

that they didn't think she had much chance. My mother was watching their faces, and knew what they thought, and when they had gone away she fairly collapsed. I never heard such pitiful moaning in all my life. She is more afraid of death than any one I ever saw, and she just threw herself on her bed and prayed for mercy. Oh, it was awful! awful! Then my uncle came in and said the doctors had said the specialist in Atlanta could really cure her, if she had the means to get the treatment, and that made her more desperate. From praying she turned almost to cursing in despair. My uncle is usually indifferent about most matters, but the whole thing almost made him sick. He went out to the side of the house to keep from hearing her cries. Some of his friends came along the road and joked with him, but he never spoke to them. He told me there was a young doctor at Darley who was willing to operate on her, but that he would be doing it only as an experiment, and that nobody but the Atlanta specialist would be safe in such a case."

"And the cost, if I understood right," said Ann—"the cost, first and last, would foot up to about a hundred dollars."

"Yes, that's what it would take," Virginia sighed.

Ann's brow was furrowed; her eyes flashed reminiscently. "She ought to have been laying by something all along," she said, "instead of making it her life business to harass and pull down a person that never did her no harm."

"Don't say anything against her!" Virginia flared up. "If you do, I shall be sorry I said what I did this morning. You have been kind to me, but not to her, and she is my mother, who is now lying at the point of death begging for help that never will come."

Ann stared steadily, and then her lashes began to flicker. "I don't know but I think more of you for giving me that whack, my girl," she said, simply. "I deserve it. I've got no right on earth to abuse a mother to her only child, much less a mother in the fix yours is in. No, I went too far, my child. You are not in the fight between me and her."

"You ought to be ashamed to be in it, when she's down," said Virginia, warmly.

"Well, I *am*," Ann admitted. "I *am*. Come on to my gate with me. I want to talk to you. There is a lot of loose wood lying about up there, and you are welcome to all you pick up; so you won't be losing time."

With her apron drawn close up under her shapely chin, her eyes still red and her cheeks damp, Virginia obeyed. If she had been watching her companion closely, she might have wondered over the strange expression of Ann's face. Now and then, as she trudged along, kicking up the back part of her heavy linsey skirt in her sturdy strides, a shudder would pass over her and a weighty sigh of indecision escape her big chest.

"To think this would come to me!" she muttered once. "*Me!* God knows it looks like my work t'other night was far enough out of my regular track without—huh!"

Reaching the gate, she told Virginia to wait a minute at the fence till she went into the house. She was gone several minutes, during which time the wondering girl heard her moving about within; then she appeared in the doorway, almost pale, a frown on her strong face.

"Look here, child," she said, coming out and leaning her big, bare elbows on the top rail of the fence, "I've thought this all over and over till my head spins like a top, and I can see but one way for your mother to get out of her trouble. I'm the greatest believer you ever run across of every human being doing his or her *full* duty in every case. Now, strange as it may sound, I left my home last night and deliberately made it my special business to step in between you and the only chance of getting the money your mother stands in need of. I thought I was doing what was right, and I still believe I was, as far as it went, but I was on the point of making a botched job of it. I'd get mighty few thanks, I reckon, for saving you from the clutches of that scamp if I left your mother to die in torment of body and soul. So, as I say, there ain't but one way out of it."

Ann paused; she was holding something tightly clasped in her hand, and not looking at Virginia.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," the girl said, wonderingly. "If you see any way out, it is more than I can."

"Well, your mother's got to go to Atlanta," Ann said, sheepishly; "and, as I see it, there isn't but one person whose duty it is to put up the cash for it, *and that person is me*."

"You? Oh no, Mrs. Boyd!"

"But I know better, child. The duty has come on me like a load of bricks dumped from a wagon. The whole thing has driven me slap-dab in a corner. I know when I'm whipped—that's one of the things that has helped me along in a moneyed way in this life—it was always knowing when to let up. I've got to wave the white flag in this battle till my enemy's on her feet, then the war may go on. But"—Ann opened her hand and displayed the bills she was holding—"take this money home with you."

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd, I couldn't think of—"

"Well, don't think about it; take it on, and don't argue with a woman older than you are, and who knows better when and how a thing has to be done."

Most reluctantly Virginia allowed Ann to press the money into her unwilling hand. "But remember this," Ann said, firmly: "Jane Hemingway must never know where you got it—never! Do you understand? It looks like I can stand most anything better than letting that woman know I put up money on this; besides,

bad off as she is, she'd peg out before she'd let me help her."

Virginia's face was now aflame with joy. "I tell you what I'll do," she said. "I'll accept it as a loan, and I'll pay it back some day if I have to work my hands to the bone."

"Well, you can do as you like about that," Ann said. "The only thing I absolutely insist on is that she isn't told who sent it. It wouldn't be hard to keep her in the dark; if you'll promise me right here, on your word, not to tell, then you can say you gave your sacred promise to that effect, and that would settle it."

"Well, I'll do that," Virginia finally agreed. "I know I can do that."

"All right," Ann said. "It may set the old thing to guessing powerful, and she may bore you to tell, promise or no promise, but she'll never suspicion *me*—never while the sun shines from the sky."

"No, she won't suspect you," Virginia admitted, and with a grateful, backward look she moved away.

Ann stood leaning against the fence, her eyes on the receding figure as the girl moved along the sunlit road towards the dun cottage in the shadow of the mountain.

"I reckon I'm a born idiot," she said; "but there wasn't no other way out of it—no other under the sun. I got my foot in it when I laid in wait watching for the girl to walk into that trap. If I hadn't been so eager for that, I could have left Jane Hemingway to her fate. Good Lord, if this goes on, I'll soon be bowing and scraping at that old hag's feet—*me!* huh! when it's been *her* all this time that has been at the bottom of the devilment."

XXV

During this talk Jane Hemingway had gone out to the fence to speak to Dr. Evans, who had passed along the road, a side of bacon on his left shoulder, and she came back, and with a low groan sat down. Sam Hemingway, who sat near the fire, shrugged his shoulders and sniffed. "You are making too much of a hullabaloo over it," he said. "I've been thinking about the matter a lots, and I've come to the final conclusion that you are going it entirely too heavy, considering the balance of us. Every man, woman, and child, born and unborn, is predestinated to die, and them that meet their fate graceful-like are the right sort. Seeing you takin'

on after them doctors left actually turned *me* sick at the stomach, and that ain't right. I'll be sick enough when my own time comes, I reckon, without having to go through separate spells for all my kin by marriage every time they have a little eruption break out on them. Then here's Virginia having her bright young life blighted when it ought to be all sunshine and roses, if I may be allowed to quote the poets. I'll bet when you was a young girl your cheeks wasn't kept wet as a dish-rag by a complaining mother. No, what you've got to do, Sister Jane, is to pucker up courage and face the music—be resigned."

"Resigned! I say, resigned!" was the rebellious reply—"I say, resigned! with a slow thing like this eating away at my vitals and nothing under high heaven to make it let go. You can talk, sitting there with a pipe in your mouth, and every limb sound, and a long life ahead of you."

"But you are openly disobeying Biblical injunction," said Sam, knocking his exhausted pipe on the heel of his shoe. "You are kicking agin the pricks. All of us have to die, and you are raising a racket because your turn is somewhere in sight. You are kicking agin something that's as natural as a child coming into the world. Besides, you are going back on what you preach. You are eternally telling folks there's a life in front of us that beats this one all hollow, and, now that Providence has really blessed you by giving you a chance to sorter peep ahead at the pearly gates, you are actually balking worse than a mean mule. I say you ought to give me and Virginia a rest. If you can't possibly raise the scads to pay for having the thing cut out, then pucker up and grin and bear it. Folks will think a sight more of you. Being a baby at both ends of life is foolish—there ain't nobody willing to do the nursing the second time."

"I want you to hush all that drivel, Sam," the widow retorted. "I reckon folks are different. Some are born with a natural dread of death, and it was always in my family. I stood over my mother and watched her breathe her last, and it went awfully hard with her. She begged and begged for somebody to save her, even sitting up in bed while all the neighbors were crouched about crying and praying, and yelled out to them to stop that and do something. We'd called in every doctor for forty miles about, and she had somehow heard of a young one away off, and she was calling out his name when she fell back and died."

"Well, she must have had some load on her mind that she wasn't ready to dump at the throne," said Sam, without a hint of humor in his drawling voice. "I've always understood your folks, in the woman line at least, was unforgiving. They say forgiveness is the softest pillow to expire on. I dunno, I've never tried it."

"I'm miserable, simply miserable!" groaned Jane. "Dr. Evans has just been to Darley. He promised to see if any of my old friends would lend me the money, but he says nobody had a cent to spare."

"Folks never have cash for an investment of that sort," answered Sam. "I fetched up your case to old Milward Dedham at the store the other day. He'd just sold five thousand acres of wild mountain land to a Boston man for the timber that was on it, and was puffed up powerful. I thought if ever a man would be prepared to help a friend he would. 'La me, Sam,' said he, 'you are wasting time trying to keep a woman from pegging out when wheat's off ten cents a bushel. Any woman ought to be happy lying in a grave that is paid for sech times as these.'"

The widow was really not listening to Sam's talk. With her bony elbows on her knee, her hand intuitively resting on the painless and yet insistent seat of her trouble, she rocked back and forth, sighing and moaning. There was a clicking of the gate-latch, a step on the gravelled walk, and Virginia, flushed from exercise in the cool air, came in and emptied her apron in the chimney corner, from which her uncle lazily dragged his feet. He leaned forward and critically scanned the heap of wood.

"You've got some good, rich, kindling pine there, Virginia," he drawled out. "But you needn't bother after to-day, though. I'll have my wagon back from the shop to-morrow, and Simpson has promised to lend me his yoke of oxen, and let me haul some logs from his hill. Most of it is good, seasoned red oak, and when it gets started to burning it pops like a pack of fire-crackers."

Virginia said nothing. Save for the firelight, which was a red glow from live coals, rather than any sort of flame, the big room was dark, and her mother took no notice of her, but Sam had his eyes on her over his left shoulder.

"Your mother has been keeping up the same old song and dance," he said, dryly; "so much so that she's clean forgot living folks want to eat at stated times. I reckon you'll have to make the bread and fry what bacon is left on that strip of skin."

Virginia said nothing to him, for her glance was steadily resting on her mother's despondent form. "Mother," she said, in a faltering, almost frightened tone, for she had been accustomed to no sort of deception in her life, and the part she was to play was a most repellent one—"mother, I've got something to tell you, and I hardly know how to do it. Down the road just a while ago I met a friend—a person who told me—the person told me—"

"Well, what did the person tell you?" Sam asked, as both he and the bowed wreck at the fire stared through the red glow.

"The person wants to help you out of trouble, mother, and gave me the hundred dollars you need. Before I got it I had to give my sacred word of honor that I'd never let even you know who sent it. I hardly knew what to do, but I thought perhaps I ought to—"

"What? You mean—oh, Virginia, you don't mean—" Jane began, as she rose

stiffly, her scrawny hand on the mantel-piece, and took a step towards her almost shrinking daughter.

"Here's the money, mother," Virginia said, holding out the roll of bills, now damp and packed close together by her warm, tense fingers. "That's all I am allowed to tell you. I had to promise not to let you know who sent it."

As if electrified from death to life, Jane Hemingway sprang forward and took the money into her quivering fingers. "A light, Sam!" she cried. "Make a light, and let me see. If the child's plumb crazy I want to know it, and have it over with. Oh, my Lord! Don't fool me, Virginia. Don't raise my hopes with any trick anybody wants to play."

With far more activity than was his by birth, Sam stood up, secured a tallow candle from the mantel-piece, and bent over the coals.

"Crazy?" he said. "I *know* the girl's crazy, if she says there's any human being left on the earth after Noah's flood who gives away money without taking a receipt for it—to say nothing of a double, iron-clad mortgage."

"It looks and feels like money!" panted the widow. "Hurry up with the light. I wonder if my prayer has been heard at last."

"Hearing it and answering are two different things; the whole neighborhood has *heard* it often enough," growled Sam, as he fumed impatiently over the hot coals, fairly hidden in a stifling cloud of tallow-smoke.

"Here's a match," said Virginia, who had found one near the clock, and she struck it on the top of one of the dog-irons, and applied it to the dripping wick. At the same instant the hot tallow in the coals and ashes burst into flame, lighting up every corner and crevice of the great, ill-furnished room. Sam, holding the candle, bent over Jane's hands as they nervously fumbled the money.

"Ten-dollar bills!" she cried. "Oh, count 'em, Sam! I can't. They stick together, she's wadded 'em so tight."

With almost painful deliberation Sam counted the money, licking his rough thumb as he raised each bill.

"It's a hundred dollars all right enough," he said, turning the roll over to his sister-in-law. "The only thing that's worrying me is who's had sech a sudden enlargement of the heart in this section."

"Virginia, who gave you this money?" Mrs. Hemingway asked, her face abeam, her eyes gleaming with joy.

"I told you I was bound by a promise not to tell you or anybody else," Virginia awkwardly replied, as she avoided their combined stare.

"Oh, I smell a great big dead rat under the barn!" Sam laughed. "I'd bet my Sunday-go-to-meeting hat I know who sent it."

"You do?" exclaimed the widow. "Who do you think it was, Sam?"

"Why, the only chap around about here that seems to have wads of cash to

throw at cats," Sam laughed. "He pitched one solid roll amounting to ten thousand at his starving family awhile back. Of course, he did this, too. He always *did* have a hankering for Virginia, anyway. Hain't I seen them two—"

"He didn't send it!" Virginia said, impulsively. "There! I didn't intend to set you guessing, and after this I'll never answer one way or the other. I didn't know whether I ought to take it on those conditions or not, but I couldn't see mother suffering when this would help her so much."

"No, God knows I'm glad you took it," said Jane, slowly, "even if I'm never to know. I'm sure it was a friend, for nobody but a friend would care that much to help me out of trouble."

"You bet it was a friend," said Sam, "unless it was some thief trying to get rid of some marked bills he's hooked some'r's. Now, Virginia, for the love of the Lord, get something ready to eat. For a family with a hundred dollars in hand, we are the nighest starvation of any I ever heard of."

While the girl was busy preparing the cornmeal dough in a wooden bread-tray, her mother walked about excitedly.

"I'll go to Darley in the hack in the morning," she said, "and right on to Atlanta on the evening train. I feel better already. Dr. Evans says I won't suffer a particle of pain, and will come back weighing more and with a better appetite."

"Well, I believe I'd not put myself out to improve on mine," said Sam, "unless this person who is so flush with boodle wants to keep up the good work. Dern if I don't believe I'll grow *me* a cancer, and talk about it till folks pay me to hush."

XXVI

It was one fairly warm evening, three days after Jane had left for Atlanta. Virginia had given Sam his supper, and he had strolled off down to the store with his pipe. Then, with a light shawl over her shoulders, the girl sat in the bright moonlight on the porch. She had not been there long when she saw a man on a horse in the road reining in at the gate. Even before he dismounted she had recognized him. It was Luke King. Hardly knowing why she did so, she sprang up and was on the point of disappearing in the house, when, in a calm voice, he called out to her:

"Wait, Virginia! Don't run. I have a message for you."

"For me?" she faltered, and with unaccountable misgivings she stood still.

Throwing the bridle-rein over the gate-post, he entered the yard and came towards her, his big felt-hat held easily in his hand, his fine head showing to wonderful advantage in the moonlight.

"You started to run," he laughed. "You needn't deny it. I saw you, and you knew who it was, too. Just think of my little friend dodging whenever she sees me. Well, I can't help that. It must be natural. You were always timid with me, Virginia."

"Won't you come in and have a chair?" she returned. "Mother has gone away to Atlanta, and there is no one at home but my uncle and me."

"I knew she was down there," King said, feasting his hungry and yet gentle and all-seeing eyes on her. "That's what I stopped to speak to you about. She sent you a message."

"Oh, you saw her, then!" Virginia said, more at ease.

"Yes, I happened to be at the big Union car-shed when her train came in, and saw her in the crowd. The poor woman didn't know which way to turn, and I really believe she was afraid she'd get lost or stolen, or something as bad. When she saw me she gave a glad scream and fairly tumbled into my arms. She told me where she wanted to go, and I got a cab and saw her safe to the doctor's."

"Oh, that was very good of you!" Virginia said. "I'm so glad you met her."

"She was in splendid spirits, too, when I last saw her," King went on. "I dropped in there this morning before I left, so that I could bring you the latest news. She was very jolly, laughing and joking about everything. The doctor had not had time to make an examination, but he has a way of causing his patients to look on the bright side. He told her she had nothing really serious to fear, and it took a big load off her mind."

They were now in the house, and Virginia had lighted a candle and he had taken a seat near the open door.

"Doctors have a way of pretending to be cheerful, even before very serious operations, haven't they?" she asked, as she sat down not far from him.

She saw him hesitate, as if in consideration of her feelings, and then he said, "Yes, I believe that, too, Virginia; still, he is a wonderful man, and if any one can do your mother good he can."

"If *anybody* can?—yes," she sighed.

"You mustn't get blue," he said, consolingly; "and yet how can you well help it, here almost by yourself, with your mother away under such sad circumstances?"

"Your own mother was not quite well recently," Virginia said, considerately. "I hope she is no worse."

"Oh, she's on her feet again," he laughed, "as lively as a cricket, moving

about bossing that big place."

"Why, I thought, seeing you back so—so soon," the girl stammered; "I thought that you had perhaps heard—"

"That she was sick again? Oh no!" he exclaimed, and then he saw her drift and paused, and, flushed and embarrassed, sat staring at the floor.

"You didn't—surely you didn't come all the way here to—to tell me about my mother!" Virginia cried, "when you have important work to do down there?"

There was a moment's hesitation on his part; then he raised his head and looked frankly into her eyes.

"What's the use of denying it?" he said. "I don't believe in deception, even in small things. It never does any good. I *did* have work to do down there, but I couldn't go on with it, Virginia, while you were here brooding as you are over your mother's condition. So I stayed at my desk till the north-bound train was ready to pull out. Then I made a break for it, catching the last car as it whizzed past the crossing near the office. The train was delayed on the way up, and after I got to Darley I was afraid I couldn't get a horse at the stable and get here before you were in bed; but you see I made it. Sam Hicks will blow me up about the lather his mare is in. I haven't long to stay here, either, for I must get back to Darley to catch the ten-forty. I'll reach the office about four in the morning, if I can get the conductor to slow up in the Atlanta switch-yard for me to hop off at the crossing."

"And you did all that simply to tell me about my mother?" Virginia said. "Why, she could have written."

"Yes, but seeing some one right from the spot is more satisfying," he said, with embarrassed lightness. "I wanted to tell you how she was, and I'm glad, whether you are or not."

"I'm glad to hear from her," said Virginia. "It is only because I did not want to put you to so much trouble."

"Don't bother about that, Virginia. I'd gladly do it every night in the week to keep you from worrying. Do you remember the day, long ago, that I came to you down at the creek and told you I was dissatisfied with things here, and was going away off to begin the battle of life in earnest?"

"Yes, I remember," Virginia answered, almost oblivious of the clinging, invisible current which seemed to be sweeping them together.

He drew a deep breath, as if to take in courage for what he had to say, and then went on:

"You were only a little girl then, hardly thirteen, and yet to me, Virginia, you were a woman capable of the deepest feeling. I never shall forget how you rebuked me about leaving my mother in anger. You looked at me as straight and frank as starbeams, and told me you'd not desert your mother in her old age for

all the world. I never forgot what you said and just the way you said it, and through all my turbulent life out West your lecture was constantly before me. I was angry at my mother, but finally I got to looking at her marriage differently, and then I began to want to see her and to do my filial duty as you were doing yours. That was one reason I came back here. The other was because—Virginia, it was because I wanted to see *you*."

"Oh, don't, don't begin—" but Virginia's protest died away in her pulsing throat. She lowered her head and covered her hot face with her hands.

"But I have begun, and I must go on," he said. "Out West I met hundreds of attractive women, but I could never look upon them as other men did because of the—the picture of you stamped on my brain. I was not hearing a word about you, but you were becoming exactly what I knew you would become; and when I saw you out there in the barn-yard that first day after I got back, my whole being caught fire, and it's blazing yet—it will blaze as long as there is a breath of my life left to fan it. For me there can be but one wife, little girl, and if she fails me I'll go unmarried to my grave."

"Oh, don't! don't!" Virginia sobbed, her tones muffled by her hands pressed tightly over her face. "You don't know me. I'm not what you think I am. I'm only a poor, helpless, troubled—"

"Don't! don't!" he broke in, fearfully—"don't decide against me hastily! I know—God knows I am unworthy of you, and if you don't feel as I do you will never link your young life to mine. Sometimes I fear that your shrinking from me as you often do is evidence against my hopes. Oh, dear, little girl, am I a fool? Am I a crazy idiot asking you for what you can't possibly give?"

A sob which she was trying to suppress shook her from head to foot, and she rose and stepped to the door and stood there looking out on the moonlit road, where his impatient horse was pawing the earth and neighing. There was silence. King leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his strong fingers locked like prongs of steel in front of him, his face deep cut with the chisel of anxiety. For several minutes he stared thus at her white profile struck into sharp clearness by the combined light from without and within.

"I see it all," he groaned. "I've lost. While I was away out there treasuring your memory and seeing your face night after night, day after day—holding you close, pulling these rugged old mountains about you for protection, you were not—you were not—I was simply not in your thoughts."

Then she turned towards him. She seemed to have grown older and stronger since he began speaking so earnestly.

"You must not think of me that way any longer," she sighed. "You mustn't neglect your work to come to see me, either."

"You will never be my wife, then, Virginia?"

"No, I could never be that, Luke—no, not that—never on earth."

He shrank together as if in sudden, sharp physical pain, and then he rose to his full height and reached for his hat, which she had placed on the table. His heavy-soled boots creaked on the rough floor; he tipped his chair over, and it would have fallen had he not awkwardly caught it and restored it to its place.

"You have a good reason, I am sure of that," he said, huskily.

"Yes, yes, I—I have a reason." Her stiff lips made answer. "We are not for each other, Luke. If you've been thinking so, so long, as you say, it is because you were trying to make me fit your ideal, but I am not that in reality. I tell you I'm only a poor, suffering girl, full of faults and weaknesses, at times not knowing which way to turn."

He had reached the door, and he stepped out into the moonlight, his massive head still bare. He shook back his heavy hair in a determined gesture of supreme faith and denial and said: "I know you better than you know yourself, because I know better than you do how to compare you to other women. I want you, Virginia, just as you are, with every sweet fault about you. I want you with a soul that actually bleeds for you, but you say it must not be, and you know best."

"No, it can't possibly be," Virginia said, almost fiercely. "It can never be while life lasts. You and I are as wide apart as the farthest ends of the earth."

He bowed his head and stood silent for a moment, then he sighed as he looked at her again. "I've thought about life a good deal, Virginia," he said, "and I've almost come to the conclusion that a great tragedy must tear the soul of every person destined for spiritual growth. This may be my tragedy, Virginia; I know something of the tragedy that lifted Ann Boyd to the skies, but her neighbors don't see it. They are still beating the material husk from which her big soul has risen."

"I know what she is," Virginia declared. "I'm happy to be one who knows her as she is—the grandest woman in the world."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," King said. "I knew if anybody did her justice it would be you."

"If I don't know how to sympathize with her, no one does," said the girl, with a bitterness of tone he could not fathom. "She's wonderful; she's glorious. It would be worth while to suffer anything to reach what she has reached."

"Well, I didn't come to talk of her, good as she has been to me," King said, gloomily. "I must get back to the grind and whir of that big building. I shall not come up again for some time. I have an idea I know what your reason is, but it would drive me crazy even to think about it."

She started suddenly, and then stared steadily at him. In the white moonlight she looked like a drooping figure carved out of stone, even to every fold of

her simple dress and wave of her glorious hair.

"You think you know!" she whispered.

"Yes, I think so, and the pronunciation of a single name would prove it, but I shall not let it pass my lips to-night. It's my tragedy, Virginia."

"And mine," she said to herself, but to him it seemed that she made no response at all, and after a moment's pause he turned away.

"Good-bye," he said, from the gate.

"Good-bye, Luke," she said, impulsively.

But at the sound of his name he whirled and came back, his brow dyed with red, his tender eyes flashing. "I'll tell you one other thing, and then I'll go," he said, tremulously. "Out West, one night, after a big ball which had bored the life out of me—in fact, I had only gone because it was a coming-out affair of the daughter of a wealthy friend of mine. In the smoking-room of the big hotel which had been rented for the occasion I had a long talk with a middle-aged bachelor, a man of the world, whom I knew well. He told me his story. In his younger days he had been in love with a girl back East, and his love was returned, but he wanted to see more of life and the world, and was not ready to settle down, and so he left her. After years spent in an exciting business and social life, and never meeting any one else that he could care for, a sudden longing came over him to hear from his old sweetheart. He had no sooner thought of it than his old desires came back like a storm, and he could not even wait to hear from her. He packed up hastily, took the train, and went back home. He got to the village only two days after she had married another man. The poor old chap almost cried when he told me about it. Then, in my sympathy for him, I told him of my feeling for a little girl back here, and he earnestly begged me not to wait another day. It was that talk with him that helped me to make up my mind to come home. But, you see, I am too late, as he was too late. Poor old Duncan! He'd dislike to hear of my failure. But I've lost out, too. Now, I'll go sure. Good-bye, Virginia. I hope you will be happy. I'm going to pray for that."

Leaning against the door-jamb, she saw him pass through the gateway, unhitch his restive horse, and swing himself heavily into the saddle, still holding his hat in his hand. Then he galloped away—away in the still moonlight, the—to her—peaceful, mocking moonlight.

"He thinks he knows," she muttered, "but he doesn't dream the *whole* truth. If he did he would no longer think that way of me. What am I, anyway? He was loving me with that great, infinite soul while I was listening to the idle simpering of a fool. Ah, Luke King shall never know the truth! I'd rather lie dead before him than to see that wondrous light die out of his great, trusting eyes."

She heard Sam coming down the road, and through the silvery gauze of night she saw the red flare of his pipe. She turned into her own room and sat

down on the bed, her little, high-instepped feet on the floor, her hands clasped between her knees.

XXVII

The events which took place at Chesters' that adventurous night had a remarkable effect on the young master of the place. After Ann Boyd had left him he restlessly paced the floor of the long veranda. Blind fury and unsatisfied passion held him in their clutch and drove him to and fro like a caged and angry lion. The vials of his first wrath were poured on the heads of his meddlesome guests, who had so unceremoniously thrust themselves upon him at such an inopportune moment, and from them his more poignant resentment was finally shifted to the woman whom for years he, with the rest of the community, had contemptuously regarded as the partner in his father's early indiscretions. That she—such a character—should suddenly rise to remind him of his duty to his manhood, and even enforce it under his own roof, was the most humiliating happening of his whole life.

These hot reflections and secret plans for revenge finally died away and were followed by a state of mind that, at its lowest ebb, amounted to a racking despair he had never known. Something told him that Ann Boyd had spoken grim truth when she had said that Virginia would never again fall under his influence, and certainly no woman had ever before so completely absorbed him. Up to this moment it had been chiefly her rare beauty and sweetness of nature that had charmed him, but now he began to realize the grandeur of her character and the depths to which her troubles had stirred his sympathies. As he recalled, word by word, all that had passed between them in regard to her nocturnal visit, he was forced to acknowledge that it was only through her absorbing desire to save her mother that she, abetted by her very purity of mind, had been blindly led into danger. He flushed and shuddered under the lash of the thought that he, himself, had constituted that danger.

He went to bed, but scarcely closed his eyes during the remainder of the night, and the next morning was up before the cook had made the fires in the kitchen range. He hardly knew what he would do, but he determined to see Virginia at the earliest opportunity and make an honest and respectful attempt

to regain her confidence. He would give her the money she so badly needed—give it to her without restrictions, and trust to her gratitude to restore her faith in him. He spent all that morning, after eating a hasty breakfast, on a near-by wooded hill-side, from which elevation he had a fair view of Jane Hemingway's cottage. He saw Virginia come from the house in search of the cow, and with his heart in his mouth he was preparing to descend to meet her, when, to his consternation, he saw that she had joined Ann Boyd at the barn-yard of the latter, and then he saw the two go into Ann's house together. This augured ill for him, his fears whispered, and he remained at his post among the trees till the girl came out of the house and hastened homeward. For the next two days he hung about Jane Hemingway's cottage with no other thought in mind than seeing Virginia. Once from the hill-side he saw her as she was returning from Wilson's store, and he made all haste to descend, hoping to intercept her before she reached home, but he was just a moment too late. She was on the road a hundred yards ahead of him, and, seeing him, she quickened her step. He walked faster, calling out to her appealingly to stop, but she did not pause or look back again. Then he saw a wagon filled with men and women approaching on the way to market, and, knowing that such unseemly haste on his part and hers would excite comment, he paused at the roadside and allowed her to pursue her way unmolested. The next day being Sunday, he dressed himself with unusual care, keenly conscious, as he looked in the mirror, that his visage presented a haggard, careworn aspect that was anything but becoming. His eyes had the fixed, almost bloodshot stare of an habitual drunkard in the last nervous stages of downward progress. His usually pliant hair, as if surcharged with electricity, seemed to defy comb and brush, and stood awry; his clothes hung awkwardly; his quivering fingers refused to put the deft touch to his tie which had been his pride. At the last moment he discovered that his boots had not been blacked by the negro boy who waited on him every morning. He did this himself very badly, and then started out to church, not riding, for the reason that he hoped Virginia would be there, and that he might have the excuse of being afoot to join her and walk homeward with her. But she was not there, and he sat through Bazemore's long-winded discourse, hardly conscious that the minister, flattered by his unwonted presence, glanced at him proudly all through the service.

So it was that one thing and another happened to prevent his seeing Virginia till one morning at Wilson's store he heard that Jane Hemingway had, in some mysterious way, gotten the money she needed and had already gone to Atlanta. He suffered a slight shock over the knowledge that Virginia would now not need the funds he had been keeping for her, but this was conquered by the thought that he could go straight to the cottage, now that the girl's grim-faced guardian was away. So he proceeded at once to do this. As he approached the

gate, a thrill of gratification passed over him, for he observed that Sam Hemingway was out at the barn, some distance from the house. As he was entering the gate and softly closing it after him, Virginia appeared in the doorway. Their eyes met. He saw her turn pale and stand alert and undecided, her head up like that of a young deer startled in a quiet forest. It flashed upon him, to his satisfaction, that she would instinctively retreat into the house, and that he could follow and there, unmolested even by a chance passer-by, say all he wanted to say, and say it, too, in the old fashion which had once so potently—if only temporarily—influenced her. But with a flash of wisdom and precaution, for which he had not given her credit, she seemed to realize the barriers beyond her and quickly stepped out into the porch, where coldly and even sternly she waited for him to speak.

"Virginia," he said, taking off his hat and humbly sweeping it towards the ground, "I have been moving heaven and earth to get to see you alone." He glanced furtively down the road, and then added: "Let's go into the house. I've got something important to say to you."

Still staring straight at him, she moved forward till she leaned against the railing of the porch. "I sha'n't do it," she said, firmly. "If I've been silly once, that is no reason I'll be so always. There is nothing you can say to me that can't be spoken here in the open sunlight."

Her words and tone struck him like a material missile well-aimed and deliberately hurled. There was a dignity and firm finality in her bearing which he felt could not be met with his old shallow suavity and seductive flattery. From credulous childhood she seemed, in that brief period, to have grown into wise maturity. If she had been beautiful in his eyes before, she was now, in her frigid remoteness, in her thorough detachment from their former intimacy, far more than that.

"Well, I meant no harm," he found himself articulating, almost in utter bewilderment. "I only thought that somebody passing might—"

"Might see me with you?" she flashed out, with sudden anger. "What do I care? I came out here just now and gave a tramp something to eat. If they see you here, I suppose it won't be the first time a girl has been seen talking to a man in front of her own home."

"I didn't mean to offend you," he stammered, at the end of his resources; "but I've been utterly miserable, Virginia."

"Oh! is that so?" she sneered.

"Yes, I have. I feel awfully bad about what took place. I wanted to give you that money for your mother, and that night when I finally got rid of those meddlesome devils and—"

"In the name of Heaven, stop!" Virginia cried. "I simply will not stand here and talk about that."

"But I have the money still," he said, feebly. "You kept your word in coming for it, and I want to keep mine."

"I wouldn't touch a cent of it to save my life," she hurled at him. "If my mother lay before my eyes dying in agony and your money would save her, I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't take it to save my soul from perdition."

"You are making it very hard for me," he said, desperately; and then, with a frankness she could not have looked for even from his coarsest side, he went on passionately: "I'm only a man, Virginia—a human being, full of love, admiration, and—passion. Young as you are, I can't blame you, and, still you *did* encourage me. You know you did. I'm nearly insane over it all. I want you, Virginia. These meetings with you, and the things you have let me say to you, if you have said nothing yourself, have lifted me to the very sky. I simply cannot bear up under your present actions, knowing that that old woman has been talking against me. I am willing to do anything on earth to set myself right. I admire you more than I ever dreamed I could admire a woman, and my love for you is like a torrent that nothing can dam. I must have you, Virginia. The whole thing has gone too far. You ought to have thought of this before you agreed to come to my house alone at night, when you knew I was—when you knew I had every reason to expect that you—"

"Stop!" she cried, with white lips and eyes flashing. "You are a coward, as well as a scoundrel! You are daring to threaten me. You have made me hate myself. As for you, I despise you as I would a loathsome reptile. I hate you! I detest you! I wake up in the night screaming in terror, fancying that I'm again in that awful room, locked in like a slave, a prisoner subject to your will—waiting for you to bid good-night to your drunken friends—locked in by your hand to wait there in an agony of death. Love you? I hate you! I hate the very low-browed emptiness of your face. I hate my mother for the selfish fear of death which blinded me to my own rights as a woman. Oh, God, I want to die and be done with it!"

She suddenly covered her impassioned face with her hands and shook convulsively from head to foot.

"Oh, Virginia, don't, don't make a mountain out of a molehill," he began, with a leaning towards his old, seductive persuasiveness. "There is nothing to feel so badly about. You know that Ann Boyd got there before I—I—"

"That's all *you* know about it," she said, uncovering eyes that flashed like lightning. "When I went there, with no interest in you further than a silly love of your honeyed words and *to get your money*, I did what I'll never wipe from my memory."

"Virginia"—he tried to assume a light laugh—"this whole thing has turned your head. You will feel differently about it later when your mother comes back

sound and well. Ann Boyd is not going to tell what took place, and—"

"And you and I will have a secret of that nature between us!" she broke in, furiously. "That's got to blacken my memory, and be always before me! You are going to know *that* of me when—when, yes, I'll say it—when another man whose shoes you are unworthy to wipe believes me to be as free from contact with evil as a new-born baby."

Chester drew his brows together in sudden suspicion.

"You are referring to Luke King!" he snapped out. "Look here, Virginia, don't make this matter any more serious than it is. I will not have a man like that held up to me as a paragon. I have heard that he used to hang around you when you were little, before he went off and came back so puffed up with his accomplishments, and I understand he has been to see you recently, but I won't stand his meddling in my affairs."

"You needn't be afraid," Virginia said, with a bitterness he could not fathom. "There is nothing between Luke King and myself—absolutely nothing. You may rest sure that I'd never receive the attentions of a man of his stamp after what has passed between me and a man of your—" She paused.

He was now white with rage. His lower lip hung and twitched nervously.

"You are a little devil!" he cried. "You know you are driving me crazy. But I will not be thrown over. Do you understand? I am not going to give you up."

"I don't know how you will help yourself," she said, moving back towards the door. "I certainly shall never, of my own free will, see you alone again. What I've done, I've done, but I don't intend to have it thrown into my face day after day."

"Look here, Virginia," he began, but she had walked erectly into the house and abruptly closed the door. He stood undecided for a moment, and then, crestfallen, he turned away.

XXVIII

One bright, crisp morning a few days later, after her uncle had ridden his old horse, in clanking, trace-chain harness, off to his field to do some ploughing, Virginia stole out unnoticed and went over to Ann Boyd's. The door of the farm-

house stood open, and in the sitting-room the girl saw Ann seated near a window hemming a sheet.

"I see from your face that you've had more news," the old woman said, as she smiled in greeting. "Sit down and tell me about it. I'm on this job and want to get through with it before I put it down."

"I got a letter this morning," Virginia complied, "from a woman down there who said she was my mother's nurse. The operation was very successful, and she is doing remarkably well. The surgeon says she will have no more trouble with her affliction. It was only on the surface and was taken just in time."

"Ah, just in time!" Ann held the sheet in her tense hands for a moment, and then crushed it into her capacious lap. "Then *she's* all right."

"Yes, she is all right, Mrs. Boyd. In fact, the doctor says she will soon be able to come home. The simple treatment can be continued here under their directions till she is thoroughly restored."

There was silence. Ann's face looked as hard as stone. She seemed to be trying to conquer some rising emotion, for she coughed, cleared her throat, and swallowed. Her heavy brows were drawn together, and the muscles of her big neck stood up under her tanned skin like tent-cords drawn taut from pole to stake.

"I may as well tell you one particular thing and be done with it," she suddenly gulped. "I don't believe in deception of any sort whatever. I hate your mother as much as I could hate anything or anybody. I want it understood between us now on the spot that I done what I did for *you*, not for her. It may be Old Nick in me that makes me feel this way at such a time, but, you see, I understand her well enough to know she will come back primed and cocked for the old battle. The fear of death didn't alter her in her feelings towards me, and, now that she's on her feet, she will be worse than ever. It's purty tough to have to think that I put her in such good fighting trim, but I did it."

"I am afraid you are right about her future attitude," Virginia sighed, "and that was one reason I did not want help to come through you."

"That makes no odds now," Ann said, stoically. "What's done is done. I'm in the hands of two powers—good and evil—and here lately I never know, when I get out of bed in the morning, whether I'm going to feel the cool breath of one or the hot blast of the other. For months I had but one desire, and that was to see you, you poor, innocent child, breathing the fumes of the hell I sunk into; and just as my hopes were about to be realized the other power caught me up like a swollen river and swept me right the other way. Luke King really caused it. Child, since God made the world He never put among human beings a man with a finer soul. That poor, barefoot mountain boy that I picked up and sent off to school has come back—like Joseph that was dropped in a pit—a king among men.

Under the lash of his inspired tongue I had to rise from my mire of hatred and do my duty. I might not have been strong enough in the right way if—if I hadn't loved him so much, and if he hadn't told me, poor boy, with tears in his eyes and voice, that you were the only woman in the world for him, and that his career would be wrecked if he lost you. I let him leave me without making promises. I was mad and miserable because I was about to be thwarted. But when he was gone I got to thinking it over, and finally I couldn't help myself, and acted. I determined, if possible, to pull you back from the brink you stood on and give you to him, that you might live the life that I missed."

Virginia sank into a chair. She was flushed from her white, rounded neck to the roots of her hair.

"Oh, I didn't deserve it!" she cried. "I have remained silent when my mother was heaping abuse upon you. I made no effort to do you justice when your enemies were crying you down. Oh, Mrs. Boyd, you are the best and most unselfish woman that ever lived."

"No, I am not that," Ann declared, firmly. "I'm just like the general run of women, weak and wishy-washy, with dry powder in my make-up that anybody can touch a match to. There is no counting on what I'll do next. Right now I feel like being your stanch friend, but I really don't know but what, if your mammy hemmed me in a corner, I'd even throw up to her what you did that night. I say I don't know what notion might strike me. She can, with one word or look of hers, start perdition's fire in me. I don't know any more than a cat what made me go contrary to my plans that night. It wasn't in a thousand miles of what I wanted to do, and having Jane Hemingway come back here with a sound body and tongue of fire isn't what I saved money to pay for. If forgiveness is to be the white garment of the next life, mine will be as black as logwood dye."

"The pretty part of it all is that you don't know yourself as you really are," Virginia said, almost smiling in her enthusiasm. "Since I've seen the beautiful side of your character I've come almost to understand the eternal wisdom even in human ills. But for your hatred of my mother, your kindness to me would not be so wonderful. For a long time I had only my mother to love, but now, Mrs. Boyd, somehow, I have not had as great anxiety about her down there as I thought I would have. Really, my heart has been divided between you two. Mrs. Boyd, I love you. I can't help it—I love you."

Ann suddenly raised her sheet and folded it in her lap. Her face had softened; there was a wonderful spiritual radiance in her eyes.

"It's powerful good and sweet of you to—to talk that way to a poor, despised outcast like I am. I can't remember many good things being said about me, and when you say you feel that way towards me, why—well, it's sweet of you—that's all, it's sweet and kind of you."

"You have *made* me love you," Virginia said, simply. "I could not help myself."

Ann looked straight at the girl from her moist, beaming eyes.

"I'm a very odd woman, child, and I want to tell you what I regard as the oddest thing about me. You say you feel kind towards me, and, and—love me a little. Well, ever since that night in that young scamp's room, when I came on you, crouched down there in your misery and fear, looking so much like I must 'a' looked at one time away back when not a spark of hope flashed in my black sky—ever since I saw you that way, helpless as a fresh violet in the track of a grazing bull, I have felt a yearning to draw you up against this old storm-beaten breast of mine and rock you to sleep. That's odd, but that isn't the odd thing I was driving at, and it is this, Virginia—I don't care a snap of my finger about my *own* child. Think of that. If I was to hear of her death to-night it wouldn't be any more to me than the news of the death of any stranger."

"That *is* queer," said Virginia, thoughtfully.

"Well, it's only nature working, I reckon," Ann said. "I loved her as a baby—in a natural way, I suppose—but when she went off from me, and by her going helped—child though she was—to stamp the brand on me that has been like the mark of a convict on my brow ever since—when she went off, I say, I hardened my heart towards her, and day after day I kept it hard till now she couldn't soften it. Maybe if I was to see her in trouble like you were in, my heart would go out to her; but she's independent of me; the only thing I've ever heard of her is that she cries and shudders at the mention of my name. She shudders at it, and she'll go down to her grave shuddering at it. She'll teach her children not to mention me. No, I'll never love her, and that's why it seems odd for me to feel like I do about you. Heaven knows, it seems like a dream when I remember that you are Jane Hemingway's child and the chief pride of her hard life. As for my own girl, she's full grown now, and has her natural plans and aspirations, and is afraid my record will blight them. I don't even know how she looks, but I have in mind a tall, stiff-necked, bony girl inclined to awkwardness, selfish, grasping, and unusually proud. But I can love as well as hate, though I've done more hating in my life than loving. There was a time I thought the very seeds of love had dried up in me, but about that time I picked up Luke King. Even as a boy he seemed to look deep into the problems of life, and was sorry for me. Somehow me and him got to talking over my trouble as if he'd been a woman, and he always stood to me and pitied me and called me tender names. You see, nobody at his home understood him, and he had his troubles, too, so we naturally drifted together like a mother and son pulled towards one another by the oddest freak of circumstances that ever came in two lives. We used to sit here in this room and talk of the deepest questions that ever puzzled the human brain. Our reason told us the infinite

plan of the universe must be good, but we couldn't make it tally with the heavy end of it we had to tote. He was rebellious against circumstances and his lazy old step-father's conduct towards him, and he finally kicked over the traces and went West. Well, he had his eyes open out there, and came back with the blaze of spiritual glory in his manly face. He started in to practise what he was preaching, too. He yanked out of his pocket the last dollar of his savings and forked it over to the last people on earth to deserve it. That made me so mad I couldn't speak to him for a while, but now I'm forced to admit that the sacrifice hasn't harmed him in the least. He's plunging ahead down there in the most wonderful way, and content—well, content but just for one thing. I reckon you know what that is?"

Ann paused. Virginia was looking out through the open doorway, a flush creeping over her sensitive face. She started to speak, but the words hung in her throat, and she only coughed.

"Yes, you know as well as I do," Ann went on, gently. "He come over here the other night after he left your house. He hitched his horse at the gate and come in and sat down. I saw something serious had happened, and as he was not due here, and was overwhelmed with business in Atlanta, I thought he had met with money trouble. I made up my mind then and there, too, that I'd back him to the extent of every thimbleful of land and every splinter of timber in my possession; but it wasn't money he wanted. It was something else. He sat there in the moonlight that was shining through the door, with his head on his breast plumb full of despair. I finally got it out of him. You'd refused him outright. You'd decided that you could get on without the love and life-devotion of the grandest man that ever lived. I was thoroughly mad at you then. I come in an inch of turning plumb against you, but I didn't. I fought for you as I'd have fought for myself away back in my girlhood. I did it, although I could have spanked you good for making him so miserable."

"You know why I refused him," Virginia said, in a low voice. "You, of all persons, will know that."

"I don't know as I do," Ann said, with a probing expression in her eyes. "I don't know, unless, after all, you have a leaning for that young scamp, who has no more real honor than a convict in his stripes. Women are that way, except in very rare cases. The bigger the scoundrel and the meaner he treats them the more they want him. If it's that, I am not going to upbraid you. Upbraiding folks for obeying the laws of nature is the greatest loss of wind possible. If you really love that scamp, no power under high heaven will turn you."

"Love him? I loathe him!" burst passionately from Virginia's lips.

"Then what under the sun made you treat Luke King as you did?" asked Ann, almost sternly.

"Because I could not marry him," said the girl, firmly. "I'd rather die than accept the love and devotion of a man as noble as he is after—after—oh, you know what I mean!"

"Oh, I see—I see," Ann said, her brows meeting. "There comes another law of nature. I reckon if you feel that way, any argument I'd put up would fall on deaf ears."

"I could never accept his love and confidence without telling him all that took place that night, and I'd kill myself rather than have him know," declared the girl.

"Oh, *that's* the trouble!" Ann exclaimed. "Well, I hope all that will wear away in time. It's fortunate that you are not loved by a narrow fool, my child. Luke King has seen a lots of the world in his young life."

"He has not seen enough of the world to make him overlook a thing of that kind, and you know it," Virginia sighed. "I really believe the higher a man becomes spiritually the higher his ideal of a woman is. I know what he thinks of me now, but I don't know what he would think if he knew the whole truth. He must never be told that, Mrs. Boyd. God knows I am grateful to you for all you have done, but you must not tell him that."

Ann put down her sheet and went to the fireplace, and with the tip of her coarse, gaping shoe she pushed some burning embers under a three-legged pot on the stone hearth. With her tongs she lifted the iron lid and looked at a corn-pone browning within, and then she replaced it. Her brow was deeply wrinkled.

"You told me everything that happened that night, if I remember right," she said, tentatively. "In fact, I know you did."

Virginia said nothing; her thoughts seemed elsewhere.

Leaning the tongs against the fireplace, Ann came forward and bent over her almost excitedly.

"Look here, child," she said, "you told me that—that I got there in time. You told me—"

"I told you all I thought was necessary for you to understand the situation," said Virginia, her eyes downcast, "but I didn't tell you all I'd have to tell Luke King—to be his wife."

"You say you didn't." Ann sat down heavily in her chair. "Then be plain with me; what under the sun did you leave out?"

"I left out the fact that I was crazy that night," said Virginia. "I read in a book once that a woman is so constituted that she can't see reason in anything which does not coincide with her desires. I saw only one thing that night that was worth considering. I saw only the awful suffering of my mother and the chance to put an end to it by getting hold of that man's money. Do you understand now? I went there for that purpose. I'd have laid down my life for it. When those men

came he urged me to run and hide in his room, as he and I stood on the veranda, and it was not fear of exposure that drove me up the stairs holding to his hand. It was the almost appalling fear that the promised money would slip through my fingers if I didn't obey him to the letter. And when he whispered, with his hot breath in my ear, there in his room, as his friends were loudly knocking at the door below, that he would rid himself of them and come back, and asked me if I'd wait, I said yes, as I would, have said it to God in heaven. Then he asked me if it was '*a promise*,' and I said yes again. Then he asked me, Mrs. Boyd, he asked me—"

Virginia's voice died out. She fell to quivering from head to foot.

"Well, well, go on!" Ann said, under her breath. "Go on. What did he ask you?"

Virginia hesitated for another minute, then, with her face red with shame, she said: "He asked me to prove it by—kissing him—kissing him of my own free will. I hesitated, I think. Yes, I hesitated, but I heard the steps of the men in the hall below at the foot of the stairs. I thought of the money, Mrs. Boyd, and I kissed him."

"You did?"

"Yes. I did—there, *in his room*!"

"Well, I'm glad you told me that," Ann breathed, deeply. "I think I understand it better now. I understand how you feel."

"So you see, all that's what I'd have to tell Luke King," Virginia said; "and I'll never do it—never on this earth. I want him always to think of me as he does right now."

Ann locked her big hands in her lap and bent forward.

"I see my greatest trouble is going to lie with you," she said. "You are conscientious. Millions of women have kept worse things than that from their husbands and never lost a wink of sleep over them, but you seem to be of a different stripe. I think Luke King is too grand a man to hold that against you, under all the circumstances. I think so, but I don't know men any better than they know women, and I'm not going to urge you one way or the other. I thought my easy-going husband would do me justice, but he couldn't have done it to save his neck from the loop. In my opinion there never will be any happy unions between men and women till men quit thinking so much about the weakness of women's *bodies* and so little of the strength of their *souls*. The view you had that night of the dark valley of a living death, and your escape from it, has lifted you into a purity undreamt of by the average woman. If Luke King's able to comprehend that, he may get him a wife on the open mountain-top; if not, he can find her in the bushes at the foot. He'll obey his natural law, as you and I will ours."

XXIX

In dire dread of facing the anger of his father, who was expected back from Savannah, for having sold the horse which the Colonel himself was fond of riding, and being in the lowest dregs of despondency and chagrin over the humiliating turn his affair with Virginia had taken, Langdon Chester packed his travelling-bag and hurried off to Atlanta.

There he had a middle-aged bachelor cousin, Chester Sively, who was as fair an example as one could well find of the antebellum Southern man of the world carried forward into a new generation and a more active and progressive environment. Fortunately for him, he had inherited a considerable fortune, and he was enabled to live in somewhat the same ease as had his aristocratic forebears. He had a luxurious suite of rooms in one of the old-fashioned houses in Peachtree Street, where he always welcomed Langdon as his guest, in return for the hospitality of the latter during the hunting season on the plantation.

"Another row with the head of the house?" he smiled, as he rose from his easy-chair at a smoking-table to shake hands with the new arrival, who, hot and dusty, had alighted from a rickety cab, driven by a sleepy negro in a battered silk top-hat, and sauntered in, looking anything but cheerful.

"Why did you think that?" Langdon asked, after the negro had put down his bag and gone.

"Why? Oh, because it has been brewing for a long time, old chap," Sively smiled; "and because it is as natural for old people to want to curb the young as it is for them to forget their own youth. When I was up there last, Uncle Pres could scarcely talk of anything but your numerous escapades."

"We didn't actually have the *row*," Langdon sighed, "but it would have come if I hadn't lit out before he got back from Savannah. The truth is"—the visitor dropped his eyes—"he has allowed me almost no pocket-money of late, and, getting in a tight place—debts, you know, and one thing and another—I let my best horse go at a sacrifice the other day. Father likes to ride him, and he's going to raise sand about it. Oh, I couldn't stand it, and so I came away. It will blow over, you know, but it will do so quicker if I'm here and he's there. Besides, he is

always nagging me about having no profession or regular business, and if I see a fair opening down here, I'm really going to work."

"You'll never do it in this world." Sively laughed, and his dark eyes flashed merrily as he pulled at his well-trained mustache. "You can no more do that sort of thing than a cat-fish can hop about in a bird-cage. In an office or bank you'd simply pine away and die. Your ancestors lived in the open air, with other people to work for them, and you are simply too near that period to do otherwise. I know, my boy, because I've tried to work. If I didn't have private interests that pin me down to a sort of routine, I'd be as helpless as you are."

"You are right, I reckon." Langdon reached out to the copper bowl on the table and took a cigar. "I know, somehow, that the few business openings I have heard of now and then have simply sickened me. When I get as much city life as is good for me down here, I like to run back to the mountains. Up there I can take my pipe and gun and dog and—"

"And enjoy life right; you bet you can," Sively said, enthusiastically. "Well, after all, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. My life isn't all it's cracked up to be by men who say they are yearning for it. Between you and me, I feel like a defunct something or other when I hear these thoroughly up-to-date chaps talking at the club about their big enterprises which they are making go by the very skin of their teeth. Why, I know one fellow under thirty who has got every electric car-line in the city tied to the tips of his fingers. I know another who is about to get Northern backing for a new railroad from here to Asheville, which he started on nothing but a scrap of club writing-paper one afternoon over a bottle of beer. Then there is that darned chap from up your way, Luke King. He's a corker. He had little education, I am told, and sprang from the lowest cracker stock, but he's the sensation of the hour down here."

"He's doing well, then," Langdon said, a touch of anger in his tone as he recalled Virginia's reference to King on their last meeting.

"Well? You'd think so. Half the capitalists in Atlanta are daft about him. They call him a great political, financial, and moral force, with a brain as big as Abraham Lincoln's. I was an idiot. I had a chance to get in on the ground-floor when that paper of his started, but I was wise—I was knowing. When I heard the manager of the thing was the son of one of your father's old tenants, I pulled down one corner of my eye and turned him over to my financial rivals. You bet I see my mistake now. The stock is worth two for one, and not a scrap on the market at that. Do you know what the directors did the other day? When folks do it for you or me we will feel flattered. They insured his life for one hundred thousand dollars, because if he were to die the enterprise wouldn't have a leg to stand on. You see, it's all in his big brain. I suppose you know something about his boyhood?"

"Oh yes," Langdon said, testily; "we were near the same age, and met now and then, but, you know, at that time our house was so full of visitors that I had little chance to see much of people in the neighborhood, and then he went West."

"Ah, yes," said Sively, "and that's where his boom started. They are circulating some odd stories on him down here, but I take them all with a grain of salt. They say he sold out his Western interests for a good sum and gave every red cent of it to his poor old mother and step-father."

"That's a fact," said Langdon. "I happen to know that it is absolutely true. When he got back he found his folks in a pretty bad shape, and he bought a good farm for them."

"Well, I call that a brave thing," said the older man—"a thing I couldn't do to save my neck from the halter. No wonder his editorials have stirred up the reading public; he means what he says. He's the most conspicuous man in Atlanta to-day. But, say, you want to go to your room, and I'm keeping you. Go in and make yourself comfortable. I may not get to see much of you for two or three days. I have to run out of town with some men from Boston who are with me in a deal for some coal and iron land, but I'll see you when I return."

"Oh, I can get along all right, thanks," Langdon said, as Pomp, Sively's negro man-servant, came for his bag in obedience to his master's ring.

Three days later, on his return to town from a trip to the country, Sively, not seeing anything of his guest, asked Pomp where he was.

"Don't know whar he is now, boss," the negro said, dryly. "I haint seed 'im since dis mawnin', when he got out o' bed an' had me shave 'im up an' bresh his clothes. I tell you, Marse Sively, dat man's doin' powerful funny. He's certainly gone wrong somehow."

"Why, what do you mean?" the bachelor asked, in alarm. "He looked all right when he got here."

"Huh, I don't know what ails 'im, suh," the negro grunted, "but I kin see he's actin' curious. Dat fust mawnin' when I went in his room to clean up an' make de baid I come in easy like to keep fum wakin' 'im, but, bless you, he was already up, standin' at de window lookin' out in de street an' actually groanin' to hisse'f like some'n' was wrong wid his insides. I axed 'im what was de matter, an' if he wants me to telephone fer de doctor, but he lit in to cussin' me at sech a rate dat I seed it wasn't any ailment o' de flesh, anyway. He ordered me to go to de café fer his breakfast, an' I fetched 'im what he always did fancy—fried chicken, eggs on toast, an' coffee wid whipped cream—but, bless you, he let 'em get stone cold on de table, an' wouldn't touch a thing but what was in yo' decanter."

"You don't tell me," Sively said, anxiously. "What has he been doing of evenings? Did he go to the Kimball House dance? I had Colville send him tickets. The Williamsons asked him to their card-party, too. Did he go?"

"Not a step," Pomp replied. "He had me lay out his claw-hammer coat an' get it pressed at de tailor-shop dat fust night, and stirred around considerable, wid several drinks in 'im. He even had me clean his patent-leather pumps and ordered a cab fum de stable. Said he wasn't goin' to ride in one o' dem rickety street hacks wid numbers on 'em an' disgrace you. But, suh, de cab come an' I had everything out clean on de baid even to a fresh tube-rose for his button-hole. He sat around smokin' and runnin' fer de decanter ever' now and den, but wouldn't take off a rag of his old clothes, an' kept walkin' de flo', fust to de winder an' den back to de lounge, whar he'd throw hisse'f down at full length an' roll an' toss like he had de cramps. I went to 'im, I did, at ten o'clock, an' told 'im he was gwine to miss de grand promenade an' let all de rest of 'em fill up de ladies' cards, but he stared at me, suh, like he didn't know what I was talkin' about, an' den he come to his senses, an' told me he wasn't goin' to no dance. He went to de window an' ordered de cab off. De next mawnin' he had all his nice dress-suit stuffed in a wad in his valise. It was a sight, I'm here to tell you, an' he was settin' on de baid smoking. He said he'd had enough o' dis town, an' believed he'd take de train home; but he didn't, suh. De next night I was sho' oneasy, an' I watched 'im de best I could widout makin' 'im mad. He et a bite o' de supper I fetched 'im, and den, atter dark, he started out on foot. I followed 'im, kase I 'lowed you'd want me to ef you was here."

"Yes, of course," Sively said; "and where did he go?"

"Nowhar, suh—dat is, he didn't stop a single place. He just walked and walked everywhar and anywhar. It didn't make no odds to him, jest so he was movin' his laigs. He must 'a' covered five good miles in de most zigzag travellin' you ever seed—went clean to de gate o' de Exposition grounds, an' den back, an' plumb round de Capitol and out Washington Street, wid me on his scent like a blood-hound after a runaway nigger; but dar wasn't much danger o' me bein' seen, fer he didn't look round. Well, he finally turned an' come home an' tumbled in baid about two in de mawnin'. Yesterday de Williamson ladies an' deir maw driv' up to de do' an' axed about 'im. Dey said he was down on de list fer dinner at dey house, an', as he didn't come or send no word, dey 'lowed he was laid up sick. De lawd knows, I didn't know what to tell 'em. I've got myse'f in trouble befo' now lyin' fer white men widout knowin' what I was lyin' about, an' I let dat chance slide, an' told 'em I didn't know a blessed thing about it. Dey driv' off in a big huff; all three dey backs was as straight as a ironin'-board."

"Have you any idea where he is now?" Sively inquired, anxiously.

"I think he's over at de club, suh. De waiters in de café told me dat he makes a habit o' loungin' round de back smokin'-room by hisse'f."

"Drinking?"

"No, suh—dat is, not any mo'n he kin tote. He walks straight enough, it jest

seems like it's some'n' wrong in his mind, Marse Sively," and Pomp touched his black brow significantly.

"Well," Sively said, after a moment's reflection, "order the horses and trap. If I can find him I'll take him out to the Driving Club. I'm glad I got back. I'll take him in hand. Between me and you, Pomp, I think he's had bad news from his father. I'm afraid my uncle has really laid down the law to him, cut off his spending-money, or something of the kind."

XXX

In the darkest corner of the quietest room in the club, Sively found his cousin gloomily smoking a cigar, a bottle of brandy on a table near him, and a copy of Luke King's paper on the floor at his feet. As he looked up his eyes had a shifting glare in them, and there was an air of utter dejection on him, though, on recognizing his cousin, he made a valiant effort to appear at ease.

"Oh, you are back, are you?" he said, awkwardly, flicking the ashes of his cigar over a tray.

"Yes, just in, old boy, and I've got my horses out for a spin to the Driving Club. Come along. The whole town is out on wheels; the afternoon is perfect. The idea of your sitting cooped up here, in smoke thick enough to cut with an axe, when you ought to be filling your lungs with ozone and enjoying life!"

Langdon hesitated, but it was evident that he could formulate no reasonable excuse for declining the invitation, and so he reluctantly gave in. "Let me get my hat," he said, and together they strolled down the wide entrance-hall to the hat-rack.

"I felt rather uneasy when I missed you at my rooms," Sively remarked, as they were approaching the trap at the door. "Pomp could give no account of you, and I didn't know but what you'd skipped out for home. Have a good time while I was away?"

"Oh yes, yes," Chester answered, as he got into the vehicle and began to adjust the lap-robes about him. "I got along all right. You see, old man, I'm sort of getting on the social retired-list. Living in the country, where we have few formalities, has turned me somewhat against your teas, dinners, and dances. I

never go without feeling out of it somehow. You Atlanta men seem to know how to combine business and society pretty well; but, having no business when I'm here, I get sick of doing the other thing exclusively."

"Oh, I see," said Sively, who was too deeply versed in human nature to be misled.

As they sped along the smooth asphalt pavement of Peachtree Street, dodging trolley-cars and passing or meeting open vehicles filled with pleasure-seekers, Sively's hat and arm were in continual motion bowing to friends and acquaintances. The conversation languished. Sively found it very difficult to keep it going as he noted the deep lines of care which marked his cousin's face. He was quite sure something of a very serious nature had happened to Langdon, and his sympathies were deeply stirred.

After twenty minutes' brisk driving, they reached the club-house and entered the throng of fashionably dressed men and women distributed about at the numerous refreshment-tables under the trees. The club was on a slight elevation, and below them stretched the beautiful greensward of the extensive Exposition grounds. Several of the liveried servants, recognizing Sively, approached and offered chairs at their respective tables, but, sensing his cousin's desire not to be thrown with others, he led the way through the laughing and chattering assemblage to a quiet table in a little smoking-room quite in the rear of the building.

"There," he smiled, "this will suit you better, I know."

"Yes, I think it will, if it's all the same to you," Chester admitted, with a breath of relief. "The Lord only knows what I'd talk about out there in that chattering gang."

Sively ordered cigars, and, when the waiter had gone for them, he said, lightly: "No more liquor for you to-day, my boy. You hold your own all right, but you are too nervous to take any more."

"Nervous? Do you think so? Do I look it?" Chester asked.

"Oh yes, a little," said Sively. He was taking a bunch of cigars from the waiter, and, when he had signed his name to the accompanying slip of paper, he said, "Harry, pull the door to after you, and see that we are not disturbed."

"Certainly, sir."

Langdon, with widening eyes, watched the negro as he went out and closed the door, then he glanced at his cousin inquiringly.

"I want to be alone with you, my boy," Sively said, with ill-assumed ease. "You can trust me, you know, and—well, the truth is, my boy, I want to know what you are in trouble about."

"Me? Good gracious!"

"Oh, don't begin that!" Sively said, firmly, as he struck a match and held it to the end of his cigar. "I won't stand it. You can't keep your feelings from

me. At first, when Pomp told me about your not going out to those affairs when I was away, I thought your father had thrown you over for good and all, but it isn't that. My uncle couldn't do it, anyway. You are in trouble, my boy; what is it?"

Langdon flushed and stared defiantly across the table into the fixed eyes of his cousin for a moment, and then he looked down.

"No, my father is all right," he said. "He's found out about the horse, but he didn't take it so very hard. In fact, he went to Darley and bought him back for only a slight advance on what I sold him for. He is worried about me, and writes for me to come on home."

"Then, as I supposed, it is *not* your father," said Sively.

There was a pause. Langdon, with bloodless fingers, nervously broke his cigar half in two. He took another and listlessly struck a match, only to let its flame expire without using it.

"What's the trouble, my boy?" pursued Sively. "I want to befriend you if I can. I'm older than you."

"Well, I *am* in trouble," Langdon said, simply. Then, in a low tone, and with frequent pauses, he told all about his acquaintance with Virginia. Once started, he left out no detail, extending his confidence till it had included a humble confession even of his humiliation by Ann Boyd and the girl's bitter words of contempt a few days later. "Then I had to come away," Langdon finished, with a sigh that was a whispered groan. "I couldn't stand it. I thought the change, the life and excitement down here, would make me forget, but it's worse than ever. I'm in hell, old man—a regular hell."

Sively leaned back in his chair. There was an expression of supreme disgust about his sensitive nose and mouth, and his eyes burned with indignant, spirit-fed fires.

"Great God!" he exclaimed; "and it was *that* girl—that particular one—Jane Hemingway's daughter!"

"You've seen her, then?" Langdon said, in awakening surprise.

"Seen her? Great Heavens, of course, I've seen her, and, now that I know all this, her sweet, young face will never go out of my mind—never as long as life is in me."

"I don't exactly see—I don't understand—" Langdon began, but his cousin interrupted him.

"I had a talk with her one day," he said, feelingly. "I had been hunting with your gun and dogs, and stopped at her mother's house to get a drink of water. Virginia was the only one at home, and she brought it to me in the little porch. I've met thousands of women, Langdon, but her beauty, grace, intelligence, and dazzling purity affected me as I never was before. I am old enough to be her

father, but do you know what I thought as I sat there and talked to her? I thought that I'd give every dollar I had for the love and faith of such a girl—to leave this rotten existence here and settle down there in the mountains to earn my living by the sweat of my brow. It was almost the only silly dream I ever had, but it was soon over. A thousand times since that day, in the midst of all this false show and glitter, my mind has gone back to that wonderful girl. She'd read books I'd never had time to open, and talked about them as freely and naturally as I would about things of everyday life. No doubt she was famished for what all women, good or bad, love—the admiration of men—and so she listened eagerly to your slick tongue. Oh, I know what you said, and exactly how you said it. You've inherited that gift, my boy, but you've inherited something—perhaps from your mother—something that your father never had in his make-up—you've inherited a capacity for remorse, self-contempt, the throes of an outraged conscience. I'm a man of the world—I don't go to church, I play cards, I race horses, I've gone all the gaits—but I know there is something in most men which turns their souls sick when they consciously commit crime. *Crime!*—yes, that's it—don't stop me. I used a strong word, but it must go. There are men who would ten thousand times rather shoot a strong, able-bodied man dead in his tracks than beguile a young girl to the brink of doom (of all ways) as you did—blinding her to her own danger by the holy desire to save her mother's life, pulling her as it were by her very torn and bleeding heart-strings. God!"

"Oh, don't—don't make it any worse than it is!" Langdon groaned. "What's done's done, and, if I'm down in the blackest depths of despair over it, what's the use to kick me? I'm helpless. Do you know what I actually thought of doing this morning? I actually lay in bed and planned my escape. I wanted to turn on the gas, but I knew it would never do its work in that big, airy room."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Langdon!" Sively said, suddenly pulled around. "Never think of such a thing again. When a man that *is* a man does a wrong, there is only one thing for him to do, and that is to set it right."

"Set it right? But how?" Langdon cried, almost eagerly.

"Why, there are several ways to make a stab at it, anyway," Sively said; "and that is better than wiping your feet on a gentle creature and then going off and smoking a gas-pipe. What I want to know is this: do you *love* that girl, really and genuinely *love* her?"

"Why, I think I do," said Langdon; "in fact, I now *know* it; if I didn't, why should I be here miserable enough to die about what has happened and her later treatment of me?"

"I couldn't take your diagnosis of your particular malady." Sively puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. "You'd be the last person, really, that could decide on that. There are some men in the world who can't tell the difference between love

and passion, and they are led to the altar by one as often as the other. But the passion-led man has walked through the pink gates of hell. When his temporary desire has been fed, he'll look into the face of his bride with absolute loathing and contempt. She'll be too pure, as a rule, to understand the chasm between them, but she will know that for her, at least, marriage is a failure. Now, if I thought you really loved that pretty girl—if I thought you really were man enough to devote the rest of your days to blotting from her memory the black events of that night; if I thought you'd go to her with the hot blood of hell out of your veins, and devote yourself to winning her just as some young man on her own social level would do, paying her open and respectful attentions, declaring your honorable intentions to her relatives and friends—if I thought you were man enough to do that, in spite of the opposition of your father and mother, then I'd glory in your spunk, and I'd think more of you, my poor boy, than I ever have in all my life."

Langdon leaned forward. He had felt his cousin's contemptuous words less for the hope they embodied. "Then you think if I did that, she might—"

"I don't know what *she'd* do," Sively broke in. "I only know that when you finally saw her after that night and made no declarations of honorable intentions, that you simply emphasized the cold-blooded insult of what had already happened. She saw in your following her up only a desire to repeat the conduct which had so nearly entrapped her. My boy, I am not a mean judge of women, and I am afraid you have simply lost that girl forever. She has lowered herself, as she perhaps looks at it, in the eyes of another woman—the one who saved her—and her young eyes have been torn open to things she was too pure and unsuspecting even to dream of. However, all her life she has heard of the misfortune of this Mrs. Boyd, and she now realizes only too vividly what she has escaped. It might take you years to restore her confidence—to prove to her that you love her for herself alone, but if I stood in your shoes I'd do it if it took me a lifetime. She is worth it, my boy. In fact, I'm afraid she is—now pardon me for being so blunt—but I'm afraid she is superior to you in intellect. She struck me as being a most wonderful woman for her age. Given opportunity, she'd perhaps out-strip you. It is strange that she has had so little attention paid to her. Has she never had an admirer before?"

Langdon exhaled a deep breath before replying. "That is something I've been worried about," he admitted. "From little things she has dropped I imagine this same Luke King used to be very fond of her before he left for the West. They have met since he got back, and I'm afraid she—"

"Good gracious! that puts another face on the business," said Sively. "I don't mean any disparagement to you, but if—if there ever was any understanding between them, and he has come back such a success, why, it isn't unlikely that you'd have a rival worth giving attention to. A man of that sort rarely ever makes

a mistake in marrying. If he is after that girl, you've got an interesting fight ahead of you—that is, if you intend to buck against him. Now, I see, I've made you mad."

"Do you think I'd let a man of his birth and rearing thwart me?" Langdon cried—"a mountain cracker, a clodhopper, an uncouth, unrefined—"

"Stop! you are going too far," said Sively, quickly. "Our old idea that refinement can only come from silk-lined cradles is about exploded. It seems to me that refinement is as natural as a love of art, music, or poetry. And not only has that chap got refinement of a decided sort, but he's got a certain sort of pride that makes him step clean over a reverence for our defunct traditions. When he meets a scion of the old aristocracy his clear eye doesn't waver as he stares steadily into the face as if to see if the old régime has left a fragment of brains there worth inspecting. Oh, he gets along all right in society! The Holts had him at the club reception and dinner the other night, and our best women were actually *asking* to be introduced to him, and—"

"But why are you telling all this stuff to me?" Langdon thundered, as he rose angrily to signify that he was ready to go.

"Why do I?" Sively said, pacifically. "Because you've simply got to know the genuine strength of your rival, if he *is* that, and you have to cross swords with him. If the fellow really intends to win that girl, he will perhaps display a power in the undertaking that you never saw. I'd as soon fight a buzz-saw with bare hands as to tackle him in a fight for a woman's love. Oh, I've got started, my boy, and I'll have to reel it all off, and be done with it. There is one thing you may get mad and jealous enough to do—that is, in case you are this fellow King's rival—"

"What do you mean? What did you start to say?" Langdon glared down at his cousin.

"Why, you might—I say might—fall low enough to try to use the poor girl's little indiscretion against her. But if you do, my boy, I'll go back on you. I'll do it as sure as there is a God in heaven. I wish you luck with her, but it all depends on you. If you will be a man, you may be happy in the end, get a beautiful, trusting wife, and wipe the mire off your soul which is making you so miserable. Go straight home and set about it in the right way. Begin with a humble proposal of marriage. That will show your intentions at the outset. Now, let's get out in the open air."

They walked through the gay throng again to the carriage, and as they were getting in Langdon said, almost cheerfully: "I'm going to take your advice. I know I love her, honestly and truly, for I want her with every nerve in my body. I haven't slept a single night through since the thing happened. I've simply been crazy."

"Well, the whole thing lies with you," said Sively. "The girl must have cared

something for you at one time, and you must recover your lost place in her estimation. A humble proposal of marriage will, in my judgment, soften her more than anything else. It will be balm to her wounded pride, too, and you may win. You've got a fair chance. Most poor mountain girls would be flattered by the opportunity to marry a man above them in social position, and she may be that way. Be a man, and pay no attention to your father's objections. When the proper time comes, I'll talk to him."

XXXI

After leaving Atlanta, with only her normal strength and flesh to regain, Jane Hemingway returned to her mountain home in most excellent spirits. She had heartily enjoyed her stay, and was quite in her best mood before the eager group of neighbors who gathered at her cottage the afternoon of her return.

"What *I* can't understand," remarked old Mrs. Penuckle, "is why you don't say more about the cutting. Why, the knife wasn't going into *me* at all, and yet on the day I thought the doctors would be at work on you I couldn't eat my dinner. I went around shuddering, fancying I could feel the blade rake, rake through my vitals. Wasn't you awfully afraid?"

"Bless your soul, no!" Jane laughed merrily. "There wasn't a bit more of a quiver on me than there is right now. We was all talking in a funny sort of way and passing jokes to the last minute before they gave me ether. They gave it to me in a tin thing full of cotton that they clapped over my mouth and nose. I had to laugh, I remember, for, just as he got ready, Dr. Putnam said, with his sly grin, 'Look here, I'm going to muzzle you, old lady, so you can't talk any more about your neighbors.'"

"Well, he certainly give you a bliff there without knowing it," remarked Sam Hemingway, dryly. "But he's a fool if he thinks a tin thing full o' drugs would do that."

"Oh, go on and tell us about the cutting," said Mrs. Penuckle, wholly oblivious of Sam's sarcasm. "That's what *I* come to hear about."

"Well, I reckon getting under that ether was the toughest part of the job," Jane smiled. "I took one deep whiff of it, and I give you my word I thought the pesky stuff had burnt the lining out of my windpipe. But Dr. Putnam told me

he'd give it to me more gradual, and he did. It still burnt some, but it begun to get easy, and I drifted off into the pleasantest sleep, I reckon, I ever had. When I come to and found nobody in the room but a girl in a white apron and a granny's cap, I was afraid they had decided not to operate, and, when I asked her if there'd been any hitch, she smiled and said it was all over, and I wouldn't have nothing to do but lie still and pick up."

"It's wonderful how fine they've got things down these days," commented Sam. "Ten years ago folks looked on an operation like that as next to a funeral, but it's been about the only picnic Jane's had since she was flying around with the boys."

The subject of this jest joined the others in a good-natured laugh. "There was just one thing on my mind to bother me," she said, somewhat more seriously, "and that was wondering who gave that money to Virginia. Naturally a thing like that would pester a person, especially where it was such a big benefit. I've been at Virginia to tell me, or give me some hint so I could find out myself, but the poor child looks awfully embarrassed, and keeps reminding me of her promise. I reckon there isn't but one thing to do, and that is to let it rest."

"There's only one person round here that's *got* any spare money," said Sam Hemingway, quite with a straight face, "and it happens, too, that she'd like to have a thing like that done."

"Why, who do you mean, Sam?" His sister-in-law fell into his trap, as she sat staring at him blandly.

"Why, it's Ann Boyd—old Sister Ann. She'd pay for a job like that on the bare chance of the saw-bones making a miss-lick and cutting too deep, or blood-pizen settin' in."

"Don't mention that woman's name to me!" Jane said, angrily. "You know it makes me mad, and that's why you do it. I tried to keep a humble and contrite heart in me down there; but, folks, I'm going to confess to you all that the chief joy I felt in getting my health back was on account of that woman's disappointment. I never mentioned it till now, but that meddlesome old hag actually knew about my ailment long before I let it out to a soul. Like a fool, I bought some fake medicine from a tramp peddler one day, and let him examine me. He went straight over to Ann Boyd's and told her. Oh, I know he did, for she met me at the wash-hole, during the hot spell, when water was scarce, and actually gloated over my coming misfortune. She wouldn't say what the ill-luck was, but I knew what she was talking about and where she got her information."

"I never thought that old wench was as black as she was painted," Sam declared, with as much firmness as he could command in the presence of so much femininity. "If this had been a community of men, instead of three-fourths the other sort, she'd have been reinstated long before this. I'll bet, if the Scriptural

injunction for the innocent to cast the first stone was obeyed, there wouldn't be no hail-storm o' rocks in this neighborhood."

"Oh, she would just suit a lot of men!" Jane said, in a tone which indicated the very lowest estimation of her brother-in-law's opinion. "It takes women to size up women. I want to meet the old thing now, just to show her that I'm still alive and kicking."

Jane had this opportunity sooner than she expected. Dr. Putnam had enjoined upon her a certain amount of physical exercise, and so one afternoon, shortly after getting back, she walked slowly down to Wilson's store. It was on her return homeward, while passing a portion of Ann's pasture, where the latter, with pencil and paper in hand, was laying out some ditches for drainage, that she saw her opportunity.

"Now, if she don't turn and run, I'll get a whack at her," she chuckled. "It will literally kill the old thing to see me walking so spry."

Thereupon, in advancing, Jane quickened her step, putting a sort of jaunty swing to her whole gaunt frame. With only the worm fence and its rough clothing of wild vines and briers between them, the women met face to face. There was a strange, unaggressive wavering in Ann's eyes, but her enemy did not heed it.

"Ah ha!" she cried. "I reckon this is some surprise to you, Ann Boyd! I reckon you won't brag about being such a wonderful health prophet now! I was told down in Atlanta—by *experts*, mind you—that my heart and lungs were as sound as a dollar, and that, counting on the long lives of my folks on both sides, I'm good for fifty years yet."

"Huh! I never gave any opinion on how long you'd live, that I know of," Ann said, sharply.

"You didn't, heigh? You didn't, that day at the wash-place when you stood over me and shook your finger in my face and said you knew what my trouble was, and was waiting to see it get me down? Now, I reckon you remember!"

"I don't remember saying one word about your cancer, if that's what you are talking about," Ann sniffed. "I couldn't 'a' said anything about it, for I didn't know you had it."

"Now, I know *that's* not so; you are just trying to take backwater, because you are beat. That peddler that examined me and sold me a bottle of medicine went right to your house, and you pumped him dry as to my condition."

"Huh! he said you just had a stiff arm," said Ann. "I wasn't alluding to that at all."

"You say you wasn't, then what was you talking about? I'd like to know."

"Well, that's for me to know and you to find out," Ann said, goaded to anger. "I don't have to tell you all I know and think. Now, you go on about your business, Jane Hemingway, and let me alone."

"I'll never let you alone as long as there's a breath left in my body," Jane snarled. "You know what you are; you are a disgrace to the county. You are a close-fisted, bad woman—as bad as they make them. You ought to be drummed out of the community, and you would be, too, if you didn't have so much ill-gotten gains laid up."

There was a pause, for Jane was out of breath. Ann leaned over the fence, crushing her sheet of paper in her tense fingers. "I'll tell you something," she said, her face white, her eyes flashing like those of a powerful beast goaded to desperation by an animal too small and agile to reach—"I'll tell you one thing. For reasons of my own I've tried to listen to certain spiritual advice about loving enemies. Jesus Christ laid the law down, but He lived before you was born, Jane Hemingway. There isn't an angel at God's throne to-day that could love you. I'd as soon try to love a hissing rattlesnake, standing coiled in my path, as such a dried-up bundle of devilment as you are. Could I hit back at you now? *Could* I? Huh! I could tell you something, you old fool, that would humble you in the dust at my feet and make you crawl home with your nose to the earth like a whipped dog. And I reckon I'm a fool not to do it, when you are pushing me this way. You come to gloat over me because your rotten body feels a little bit stronger than it did. I could make you forget your dirty carcass. I could make you so sick at the soul you'd vomit a prayer for mercy every minute the rest of your life. But I won't do it, as mad as I am. I'll not do it. You go your way, and I'll go mine."

Jane Hemingway stared wildly. The light of triumph had died out in her thin, superstitious face. She leaned, as if for needed support, on the fence only a few feet from her enemy. Superstition was her weakest point, and it was only natural now for her to fall under its spell. She recalled Ann's fierce words prophesying some mysterious calamity which was to overtake her, and placed them beside the words she had just had hurled at her, and their combined effect was deadening.

"You think you know lots," she found herself saying, mechanically.

"Well, I know what I *know*!" Ann retorted, still furious. "You go on about your business. You'd better let me alone, woman. Some day I may fasten these two hands around that scrawny neck of yours and shake some decency into you."

Jane shrank back instinctively. She was less influenced, however, by the threat of bodily harm than by the sinister hint, now looming large in her imagination, that had preceded it. Ann was moving away, and she soon found herself left alone with thoughts which made any but agreeable companions.

"What can the woman mean?" she muttered, as she slowly pursued her way. "Maybe she's just doing that to worry me. But no, she was in earnest—dead in earnest—both times. She never says things haphazard; she's no fool, either. It must be something simply awful or she wouldn't mention it just that way. Now,

I'm going to let *this* take hold of me and worry me night and day like the cancer did."

She paused and stood in the road panting, her hand, by force of habit, resting on her breast. Looking across the meadow, she saw Ann Boyd sturdily trudging homeward through the waist-high bulrushes. The slanting rays of the sun struck the broad back of the hardy outcast and illumined the brown cotton-land which stretched on beyond her to the foot of the mountain. Jane Hemingway caught her breath and moved on homeward, pondering over the mystery which was now running rife in her throbbing brain. Yes, it was undoubtedly something terrible—but what? That was the question—what?

Reaching home, she was met at the door by Virginia, who came forward solicitously to take her shawl. A big log-fire, burning in the wide chimney of the sitting-room, lighted it up with a red glow. Jane sank into her favorite chair, listlessly holding in her hands the small parcel of green coffee she had bought at the store.

"Let me have it," Virginia said. "I must parch it and grind it for supper. The coffee is all out."

As the girl moved away with the parcel, Jane's eyes followed her. "Should she tell her daughter what had taken place?" she asked herself. Perhaps a younger, fresher mind could unravel the grave puzzle. But how could she bring up the matter without betraying the fact that she had been the aggressor? No, she must simply nurse her new fears in secret for a while and hope for—well, what could she hope for, anyway? She lowered her head, her sharp elbows on her knees, and stared into the fire. Surely fate was against her, and it was never intended for her to get the best of Ann Boyd in any encounter. Through all her illness she had been buoyed up by the triumphant picture of Ann Boyd's chagrin at seeing her sound of body again, and this had been the result. Instead of humiliating Ann, Ann had filled her quaking soul with a thousand intangible, rapidly augmenting fears. The cloud of impending disaster stretched black and lowering across Jane Hemingway's horizon.

Sam came in with a bundle of roots in his arms, and laid them carefully on a shelf. "I've dug me some sassafras of the good, red variety," he said, over his shoulder, to her. "You folks that want to can spend money at drug stores, but in the fall of the year, if I drink plenty of sassafras tea instead of coffee, it thins my blood and puts me in apple-pie order. But I reckon you don't want *your* blood any thinner than them doctors left it. Right now you look as flabby and limber as a wet rag. What ails you, *anyway*?"

"I reckon I walked too far, right at the start," Jane managed to fish from her confused mind. "I'm going to be more careful in the future."

"Well, you'd better," Sam opined. "You may not find folks as ready to invest

in your burial outfit as they was to prevent you from needing one."

XXXII

The following morning, in her neatest dress and white sun-bonnet, Virginia walked to Wilson's store to buy some sewing-thread. She was on her way back, and was traversing the most sequestered part of the road, where a brook of clear mountain water ran rippling by, and an abundance of willows and reeds hid the spot from view of any one approaching, when she was startled by Langdon Chester suddenly appearing before her from behind a big, moss-grown bowlder.

"Don't run, Virginia—for God's sake don't run!" he said, humbly. "I simply *must* speak to you."

"But I told you I didn't want to meet you again," Virginia answered, sternly. "Why won't you leave me alone? If I've acted the fool and lowered myself in my estimation for all the rest of my life, that ought to be enough. It is as much as I can stand. You've simply got to stop following me up."

"You don't understand, Virginia," he pleaded. "You admit you feel different since that night; grant the same to me. I've passed through absolute torment. I thought, after you talked to me so angrily the last time I saw you, that I could forget it if I left. I went to Atlanta, but I suffered worse than ever down there. I was on the verge of suicide. You see, I learned how dear you had become to me."

"Bosh! I don't believe a word of it!" Virginia retorted, her eyes flashing, though her face was deathly pale. "I don't believe any man could really care for a girl and treat her as you did me that night. God knows I did wrong—a wrong that will never be undone, but I did it for the sake of my suffering mother. That's the only thing I have to lessen my self-contempt, and that is little; but you—you—oh, I don't want to talk to you! I want to blot it all—everything about it—from my mind."

"But you haven't heard me through," he said, advancing a step nearer to her, his face ablaze with admiration and unsatisfied passion. "I find that I simply can't live without you, and as for what happened that awful night, I've come to wipe it out in the most substantial way a self-respecting man can. I've come to ask you to marry me, Virginia—to be my wife."

"To be your wife!" she gasped. "Me—you—*we* marry—you and I? Live together, as—"

"Yes, dear, that's what I mean. I know you are a good, pure girl, and I am simply miserable without you. No human being could imagine the depth of my love. It has simply driven me crazy, along with the way you have acted lately. My father and mother may object, but it's got to be done, and it will all blow over. Now, Virginia, what will you say? I leave it all to you. You may name the place and time—I'm your slave from now on. Your wonderful grace and beauty have simply captured me. I'll do the best I can to hold up my end of the thing. My cousin, Chester Sively, is a good sort of chap, and, to be frank, when he saw how miserable I was down there, he drew it out of me. I told him my folks would object and make it hot for me, but that I could not live without you, and he advised me to come straight home and propose to you. You see, he thought perhaps I had offended you in not making my intentions plainer at the start, and that when you knew how I felt you would not be so hard on me. Now, you are not going to be, are you, little girl? After all those delicious walks we used to have, and the things you have at least let me believe, I know you won't go back on me. Oh, we'll have a glorious time! Chester will advance me some money, I am sure, and we'll take a trip. We'll sail from Savannah to New York and stay away, by George, till the old folks come to their senses. I admit I was wrong in all that miserable business. I ought to have given you that money and not made you come for it, but being a mad fool like that once doesn't prove I can't turn over a new leaf. Now, you try me."

He advanced towards her, his hand extended to clasp hers, but she suddenly drew back.

"I couldn't think of marrying you," she said, almost under her breath. "I couldn't under any possible circumstances."

"Oh, Virginia, you don't mean that!" he cried, crestfallen. "You are still mad about being—being frightened that night, and that old hag finding out about it. No woman would relish having another come up at just such an awkward moment and get her vile old head full of all sorts of unfair notions. But this, you see—you are old enough to see that marriage actually puts everything straight, even to the bare possibility of anything ever leaking out. That's why I think you will act sensibly."

To his surprise, Virginia, without looking at him, covered her face with her hands. He saw her pretty shoulders rise as if she had smothered a sob. Hoping that she was moved by the humility and earnestness of his appeal, he caught one of her hands gently and started to pull it from her face. But, to his surprise, she shrank back and stared straight and defiantly in his eyes.

"That's the way *you* look at it!" she cried, indignantly. "You think I hope-

lessly compromised myself by what I did, and that I'll have to tie myself to you for life in consequence; but I won't. I'd rather die. I couldn't live with you. I hate you! I detest you! I hate and detest you because you've made me detest myself. To think that I have to stand here listening to a proposal in—in the humiliating way you make it."

"Look here, Virginia, you are going too far!" he cried, white with the dawning realization of defeat and quivering in every limb. "You are no fool, if you *are* only a girl, and you know that a man in—well, in my position, will not take a thing like this calmly. I've been desperate, and I hardly knew what I was about, but this—I can't stand this, Virginia."

"Well, I couldn't marry you," she answered. "If you were a king and I a poor beggar, I wouldn't agree to be your wife. I'd never marry a man I did not thoroughly respect, and I don't respect you a bit. In fact, knowing you has only shown me how fine and noble, by contrast, other men are. Since this thing happened, one man—" She suddenly paused. Her impulse had led her too far. He glared at her for an instant, and then suddenly grasped her hand and held it in such a tight, brutal clasp that she writhed in pain, but he held onto it, twisting it in his unconscious fury.

"I know who you mean," he said. "I see it all now. You have seen Luke King, and he has been saying sweet things to you. Ann Boyd is his friend, too, and she hates me. But look here, if you think I will stand having a man of that stamp defeat me, you don't know me. You don't know the lengths a Chester will go to gain a point. I see it all. You've been different of late. You used to like him, and he has been talking to you since he got back. It will certainly be a dark day for him when he dares to step between me and my plans."

"You are going entirely too fast," Virginia said, grown suddenly cautious. "There's nothing, absolutely nothing, between Luke King and myself, and, moreover, there never will be."

"You may tell that to a bigger fool than I am," Chester fumed. "I know there is something between you two, and, frankly, trouble is brewing for him. He may write his long-winded sermons about loving mankind, and bask in the praise of the sentimental idiots who dote on him, but I'll draw him back to practical things. I'll bring him down to the good, old-fashioned way of settling matters between men."

"Well, it's cowardly of you to keep me here by brute force," Virginia said, finally wresting her hand from his clasp and beginning to walk onward. "I've said there is nothing between him and me, and I shall not repeat it. If you want to raise a fuss over it, you will only make yourself ridiculous."

"Well, I'll look after *that* part of it," he cried, beside himself with rage. "No mountain razor-back stripe of man like he is can lord it over me, simply because

the scum of creation is backing up his shallow ideas with money. *I'll* open his eyes."

And Langdon Chester, too angry and disappointed to be ashamed of himself, stood still and allowed her to go on her way. A boy driving a drove of mules turned the bend of the road, and Chester stepped aside, but when they had passed he stood still and watched Virginia as she slowly pursued her way.

"Great God, how am I to stand it?" he groaned. "I want her! I want her! I'd work for her. I'd slave for her. I'd do anything under high heaven to be able to call her my own—all my own! My God, isn't she beautiful? That mouth, that proud poise of head, that neck and breast and form! Were there ever such eyes set in a human head before—such a maddening lip, such a—oh, I can't stand it! I wasn't made for defeat like this. Marry her? I'd marry her if it impoverished every member of my family. I'd marry her if the honeymoon ended in my death. At any rate, I would have lived awhile. Does Luke King intend to marry her? Of course he does—he has *seen* her; but *shall* he? No, there is one thing certain, and that is that I could never live and know that she was receiving another man's embraces. I'd kill him if it damned me eternally. And yet I've played my last and biggest card. She won't marry me. She would *once*, but she won't *now*. Yes, I'm facing a big, serious thing, but I'll face it. If he tries to get her, the world will simply be too small for both of us to live in together."

XXXIII

The following morning, after spending a restless, troublous night in reflecting over the protestations and threats of Langdon Chester, Virginia went frequently to the rear door of the house and looked out towards Ann Boyd's domicile in the hope of seeing her new friend. It was a cool, bleak day. The skies were veiled in thin, low-hanging, gray clouds which seemed burdened with snow, and sharp gusts of wind bore the smoke from the chimney down to the earth and around the house in lingering, bluish wisps. Finally her fitful watch met its reward, and she saw Ann emerge from her house and trudge down towards the cotton-field between the two farms. Hastily looking into the kitchen, and seeing that her mother was busily engaged mashing some boiled sweet-potatoes into a pulpy

mixture of sugar, butter, and spices, with which to make some pies, Virginia slipped out of the house and into the cow-lot. Here she paused for a moment, her glance on the doorway through which she had passed, and then, seeing that her leaving had not attracted her mother's attention, she climbed over the rail-fence and entered the dense thicket near by. Through this tangle of vines, bushes, and briers she slowly made her way, until, suddenly, the long, regular rows of Ann's dead cotton-stalks, with their empty boles and withered leaves, stretched out before her. And there stood Ann, crumbling a sample of the gray soil in her big, red hand. She heard Virginia's approach over the dry twigs of the wood, and looked up.

"Oh, it's you!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know but what it was another catamount that had got out of its beat up in the mountains and strayed down into civilization."

"I happened to see you leave your house and come this way," Virginia said, somewhat embarrassed, "and so I—"

"Yes, I came down here to take one more look at this field and make up my mind whether to have it turned under for wheat or try its strength on cotton again. There was a lots of fertilizer put on this crop, child. I can always tell by the feel of the dirt. That's the ruination of farming interests in the South. It's the get-a-crop-quick plan that has no solid foundation. An industrious German or Irishman can make more off of an acre than we can off of ten, and be adding value to the property each year. But did you want to see me about—anything particular?"

"It seems like I'm born to have trouble," Virginia answered, with heightening color and a studious avoidance of the old woman's keen glance.

"I see; I reckon your mother—"

"No, it's not about her," Virginia interrupted. "In fact, it's something that I could not confide in her."

"Well, you go ahead and tell me about it," Ann said, consolingly, as she threw the sample of soil down and wiped her hand on her apron. "I think it's powerful odd the way things have turned around, anyway. Only a few days ago if anybody had told me I'd ever be half-way friendly with a daughter of Jane Hemingway, I'd have thought they was clean off their base. I'm trying to act the impartial friend to you, child, but I don't know that I can. The trouble is, my flesh is too weak. It's only fair to tell you that I come in the breadth of a hair the other day of betraying you outright to your mammy. She met me down the road and drove me too far. She caught me off my guard and came at me in her old, catlike way, spitting and snarling—a thing I'm not proof against. She was gloating over me. I'm ashamed to say it to a sweet, trusting face like yours, but she came charging on me at such a rate that she drove away my best intentions

and made me plumb forget what I was trying to do for you."

Ann hung her head for a moment, almost sheepishly kicking a cotton-stalk from its mellow hill with the toe of her shoe.

"Don't bother about that," Virginia said, sweetly. "I know how she can exasperate any one."

"Well, I'm satisfied I won't do to trust in the capacity of a friend, anyway," Ann said, frankly. "I reckon I would be safe with anybody but that woman. There is no use telling you what I said, but I come in an inch of giving you plumb away. I come that nigh injuring a pure, helpless little thing like you are to hit her one sousing lick. As it was, I think I cowed her considerable. She's superstitious, and she broods as much over an imaginary trouble as a real one. The Lord knows I've been busy enough in my life tackling the genuine thing."

"I wanted to tell you," Virginia said, "that ever since Langdon Chester got back from Atlanta he has been trying to meet me, and—"

"The dirty scamp!" Ann broke in, angrily. "I told him if he ever dared to—"

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Boyd!" Virginia put out her hand and touched the old woman's arm. "He seems awfully upset over what has happened. I never saw any one change so completely. He looked very thin, his eyes were bloodshot, and he shook all over like a man who has been on a long spree. Mrs. Boyd, he came—and I'm sure he was serious—to ask me to marry him."

"Marry him? Why, child, you don't mean *that*—surely you don't mean—"

"I only know what he said," Virginia declared. "He says he is absolutely miserable over it all and wants me to marry him. His cousin, Chester Sively, advised him to propose to me, and he did. He says he loves me, and that nothing else will satisfy him."

"Well, well, well!" Ann exclaimed, as her great, astonished eyes bore down on Virginia's face. "I thought he was a chip off of the old block, but maybe he's got a little streak of good in him, and yet, let me study a minute. Let's walk on down to the spring. I want to see if it doesn't need a new gum—the old one is about rotted out. Well, well, well!"

They strolled along the fence, side by side, neither speaking till the spring was reached. There was a rustic bench near by, and Ann sat down on it, putting out her hand and drawing the girl to a seat at her side.

"Yes, there may be a streak of good," she went on. "And yet that may be just another phase of bad. You must be very careful, child. You have no idea how beautiful you are. He may mean what he says, all right enough, but maybe he isn't being led by the best motive. I know men, I reckon, about as well as any other woman of my age. Now, you see, it may be like this: Langdon Chester brought to his aid all the *foul* means he could command to carry his point and failed. Maybe, now, he's just reckless enough and his pride is cut deep enough to make him

resort to fair means rather than be plumb beat to a finish. If that's so, marrying him would be a very risky thing, for as soon as his evil fires smouldered he'd leave you high and dry. He'd convince himself he'd married below his standard, and go to the dogs—or some other woman. Sometimes I think there isn't no real love, like we read about in story-books. I believe a man or a woman will love their own offspring in a solid, self-sacrificing way, but the sort of love that makes a continuous happy dream of marriage is powerful rare. It's generally one-sided and like a damp fire that takes a lot of fanning and fresh kindling-wood to keep going. But what did you tell him, I wonder?"

"Why, I refused him," Virginia answered.

"You did? You don't tell me! And how did his high and mighty lordship take that, I wonder?"

"It made him awfully mad. He almost swore at me, and took hold of my hand roughly. Then, from something I happened to say, he imagined that I was in love with—with some one else, and he made awful threats of what he might do."

"Ah, I see, I see, I see!" Ann muttered, as if to herself, her slow, thoughtful glance on her broad lands, which stretched out through the murky atmosphere. "It's wonderful how much your life is like mine used to be. The other night, lying in bed, I got to studying over it all, and it suddenly flashed on me that maybe it is the divine intention that I was to travel that rough road so I'd know how to lead you, that was to come on later, over the pits I stumbled in. And with that thought I felt a strange sort of peaceful contentment come over me. You see, I'm nearly always in a struggle against my inclination to treat Jane Hemingway's daughter half decent, and such thoughts as those kind o' ease my pride. If the Lord is making me pity you and like you, maybe it's the devil that is trying to pull me the other way. That's why I'm afraid I won't do to trust, wavering about like I am. In this fight I haven't the slightest idea which influence is going to win in the end. In a tight pinch I may be tempted to use our very friendship to get even with your mammy. When she faces me with that confident look in her eye and that hateful curl to her lip, I loose my grip on all that's worth a red cent in me."

"You couldn't do a wrong thing to save your life," said Virginia, putting out her hand and taking that of her companion.

"Don't you bet too high stakes on that," Ann replied, deeply touched. "I'm no saint. Right now I'm at daggers' points with nearly every neighbor I've got, and even my own child over the mountain. How I ever got this way with you is a mystery to me. You certainly were the last one I'd 'a' lifted a finger to help, but now—well, well—I reckon I'd worry a lots if you met with any further misfortune. But you are keeping back something, child. Did Langdon Chester seem to think

that other '*somebody*' could possibly be Luke King?"

Virginia flushed and nodded. "He seemed to think so, Mrs. Boyd."

Ann sighed. She was still holding Virginia's hand, and she now began timidly to caress it as it lay on her knee.

"I don't like the way it's turned out a bit," she said. "The Chester stock can't stand being balked in anything; they couldn't bear to be beat in love by a poor, self-made man like Luke, and great, big trouble may be brewing. Langdon might push a row on him. Luke is writing all sorts of things against the evil of war and fighting and the like, but under pressure he'd resent an insult. I'd hate to see him plumb mad. Then, again, Langdon might sink low enough to actually throw that imprudence of yours at him. If he did, that would be a match to powder. If Luke was a preacher and stood in the pulpit calling up mourners, he'd step down and act on that sort of an invitation. Virginia, if ever a man loved a woman, he loves you. His love is one of the exceptions to the rule I was talking about just now, and it seems to me that, no matter how you treat a man like that other scamp, you won't have a right to refuse Luke King. The truth is, I'm afraid he never could stand it. He's set his great, big, gentle soul on having you for his helpmeet, and I don't believe you will let any silly notion ruin it all. He's got brain enough to tackle the biggest human problems and settle them, but he'll never give his heart out but once."

Virginia withdrew her hand and swept it across her face, as if to brush away the flush upon it.

"I can never be his wife," she faltered. She paused, turned her face away, and said, in a low tone: "I am not good enough. I deliberately flirted with Langdon Chester. I used to love to have him say sweet things to me, and I led him on. I've no excuse to make. If I had been good enough to be the wife of a man like Luke King, I'd never have been caught in that trap, even to save my mother, for if I'd acted differently he'd never have done what he did. It's all my fault. If Langdon Chester is upset and bent on trouble, I'm the cause of it. If it results in unhappiness to the—to the noblest and best man I ever knew, it will all be my fault. You needn't try to comfort me, Mrs. Boyd. I tell you I'd rather die than have Luke King know all that has happened, and God knows I'd never be his wife otherwise. So that is the end of it."

Ann was silent for several minutes, then she said: "I feel like you are wrong somehow, and yet I don't exactly know how to make you see it my way. We must both study over it. It's a problem, and no little one. There is one thing certain: I'll never advise you to start married life on deception of any kind. I tried that, with the best intentions, and it was the worst investment I ever made."

XXXIV

During this conversation Sam Hemingway had returned to the house from his field. He had an armful of white, silky, inside leaves of cornhusks closely packed together, and these he submerged in a washtub full of water, in the back-yard, placing stones on them to hold them down.

"What are you about now?" his sister-in-law asked, as she appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Now, what could a body be about when he's wetting a passle of shucks?" he answered, dryly. "I'm going to make me some stout horse-collars for spring ploughing. There ain't but one other thing a body could make out of wet shucks, and that's foot-mats for town folks to wipe their feet on. Foot-mats are a dead waste of money, for if fewer mats was used, women would have to do more sweeping and not get time to stand around the post-office watching men as much as they do. I reckon it's the way old daddy Time has of shifting women's work onto men's shoulders. I'll bet my hat that new-fangled churn that fellow passed with yesterday was invented by a man out o' pure pity for his sex."

"I was wondering where Virginia went to," Jane said, as if she had not heard his philosophical utterances. "I've been all round the house looking for her, even to the barn, but she's disappeared entirely."

Sam shrugged his shoulders significantly. He placed the last stone on the submerged husks and drew himself up erect. "I was just studying," he drawled out, "whether it ud actually do to tell you where she is at this minute. I'd decided I'd better not, and go on and finish this work. From what I know about your odd disposition, I'd expect one of two solitary things: I'd expect to see you keel over in a dead faint or stand stock-still in your tracks and burn to a cinder from internal fires."

"Sam, what do you mean?" The widow, in no little alarm, came towards him, her eyes fixed steadily on his.

"Well, I reckon you might as well know and be done with it," he said, "though you'll be sure to let them pies burn afterwards. Jane, your only child is right now a-sitting on the bench at the gum spring, side by side with Ann

Boyd. In fact, as well as I could see from the rise I was on in my potato-patch, I'd 'a' took my oath that they was holding hands like two sweethearts."

"I don't believe a word of it," Jane gasped, turning pale. "It might have been Virginia with somebody else, but not *that* woman."

"I wouldn't mistake Ann Boyd's solid shape and blue linsey frock ten miles off," was the cold comfort Sam dispensed in his next remark. "If you doubt what I say, and will agree not to jump on Ann and get yourself drawed up at court for assault and battery, with intent to *get killed*, you may go look for yourself. If you'll slip through the thicket, you can come up on 'em unbeknownst."

With a very grave look on her emaciated face, Jane Hemingway, without wrap for her thin shoulders or covering for her gray head, strode across the yard and into the bushes. Almost holding her breath in dire suspense and with a superstitious fear of she knew not what, she sped through the wood, briers and thorn-bushes clutching at her skirt and wild grape-vines striking her abreast and detaining her. Presently she was near enough to the spring to hear voices, but was, as yet, unable to see who was speaking. Then she became fearful lest the dry twigs with which the ground was strewn, in breaking under her feet, would betray her presence, and she began, with the desperate caution of a convict escaping from prison, to select her way, carefully stepping from one patch of green moss to another. A few paces ahead of her there was a group of tall pines, and the earth beneath their skeleton boughs was a veritable bed of soft, brown needles. She soon gained this favorable point of progress, and sped onward as noiselessly as the gentle breeze overhead. Suddenly, through the bushes, she caught a gleam of color, and recognized the dark-blue skirt Ann Boyd wore so constantly, and—her heart stood still, for, massed against it, was the light gray of Virginia's dress. Ah, there could be no shadow of a doubt now. Sam was right, and with bowed head and crouching form Jane gave bewildered ear to words which caused her blood to stand still in her veins.

"Yes, I've thought a lots about it, child," she heard Ann saying. "I can't make it out at all, but I really love you more than I do my own daughter. I reckon it was the divine intention for me and you to have this secret between us, and pity one another like we do. I can't help it, but when you tell me you love me and think I'm good and the best friend you've got on earth, why, it is the sweetest sound that ever fell on human ear."

There was a pause. Jane Hemingway held her breath; her very soul hung on the silence. Then, as if from the dun skies above the shaft descended, as if dropped from the lips of the Avenging Angel. It was the child of her own breast uttering sounds as inexplicable, as damning to her hopes, as if the gentle, tractable girl had approached her bed in the dead hours of night and said: "Mother, I've come to kill you. There is no way out of it. I must take your life. I am stronger than

you. You must submit. Ann Boyd has willed it so. Mother, I am Retribution!"

"Yes, I do love you, with all my heart," were the words Jane heard. "I can't help it. You have been kinder to me, more considerate of my feelings, than my own mother. But I will make amends for all her cruelty towards you. I'll love you always. I'll go to my grave loving you. You are the best woman that ever lived. Suffering has raised you to the skies. I have never kissed you. Let me now—*do, do* let me!"

As if in a horrible dream, Jane Hemingway turned back homeward. Without knowing why, she still moved with the same breathless caution. Hers was a dead soul dragging a body vitalized only by sheer animal instinct to escape torture. To escape it? No, it was there ahead—it was here, encompassing her like a net, yonder, behind, everywhere, and it would stretch out to the end of time. She told her benumbed consciousness that she saw it all now. It was not the cancer and its deadly effect that Ann had held over her that hot day at the wash-place. No wonder that Ann had not told her all, for that would have marred her comprehensive and relentless plans. Ann's subtle plot had been to rob her enemy of the respect and love of her only child. Jane had succeeded in tearing from Ann Boyd's arms her only offspring, and Ann, with the cunning of her great, indefatigable brain, had devised this subtle revenge and carried it through. She had won over to herself the love and respect, even reverence, of her enemy's child. It had been going on in secret for a long time, and even now the truth was out only by sheer accident. Jane Hemingway groaned aloud in agony and self-pity as, with her gray head down, she groped homeward. What was there to do now? Nothing! She was learning her final grim lesson in the realization that she was no possible match for her rival. How well she now recalled the fierce words Ann had hurled at her only a few days since: "Could I hit back at you now? Could I? Huh! I could tell you something, Jane Hemingway, that would humble you to the dust and make you crawl home with your nose to the earth like a whipped dog." Ah, it was true, only too true! Humbled? It was more than that. Pride, hope, even resentment, was gone. She now cowered before her enemy as she had so recently before death itself. For once she keenly felt her own supreme littleness and stood in absolute awe of the mighty personality she had been so long and audaciously combating.

Reaching the fence which bounded her own property, Jane got over it with difficulty. She seemed to have lost all physical strength. She saw Sam behind the house, under the spreading, leafless boughs of an apple-tree, repairing a break in the ash-hopper. She could not have explained what impulse prompted it, but she paused in front of him, speaking in a tone he had never heard from her before. "Sam," she said, a stare like the glaze of death in her eyes, "don't you mention this to my child; do you hear me? Don't you tell Virginia what we've found out. If

you do you'll get your foot into something you'll be sorry for. Do you hear me, man? This is my business—*mine*, and not a thing for you to treat lightly. If you know what's good for you, you'll take my hint and not meddle."

"Well, I never!" Sam exclaimed. "Good Lord, woman, what have them two folks done to you down there. I never saw you look so plumb flabbergasted in my life."

"Never you mind about that," Jane said. "You remember what I said and don't meddle with what doesn't concern you."

"Well, she kin bet I won't," Sam mused, as he stood looking after her, as she disappeared through the doorway into the kitchen. "This is one of the times, I reckon, that I'll take her advice. Some'n' big has taken place, or is about to take place, if I'm any judge."

Jane sank into a chair in the kitchen and softly groaned as she cast her slow eyes about her. Here all seemed sheer mockery. Every mute object in the room uttered a cry against her. The big, open fireplace, with its pots and kettles, the cupboard, the cleanly polished table, with the row of hot pies Sam had rescued from the coals and placed there to cool, the churn, the milk and butter-jars and pans, the pepper-pods hanging to the smoked rafters overhead—all these things, which had to do with mere subsistence, seemed suddenly out of place among the things which really counted. Suddenly Jane had a faint thrill of hope, as a thought, like a stray gleam of light penetrating a dark chamber, came to her. Perhaps, when Virginia was told that Ann Boyd had only used her as a tool in a gigantic and subtle scheme of revenge against her own flesh and blood, the girl would turn back to her own. Perhaps, but it was not likely. Ann Boyd had never failed in any deliberate undertaking. She would not now, and, for aught Jane knew to the contrary, Virginia might be as confirmed already in her enmity as the older woman, and had long been a dutiful and observant spy. It was horrible, but—yes, Jane was willing to admit that it was fair. The worm had turned, and its sting was equal to the concentrated pain of all Ann Boyd's years of isolated sufferings.

XXXV

In about half an hour Virginia returned home. She passed Sam under the apple-tree, where he now had a big pot full of shelled corn and lye over an incipient fire preparing to make whole-grained hominy, and hastened into the kitchen, where Jane sat bowed before the fire.

"Is there anything I can do, mother?" she inquired.

There was a pause. Mrs. Hemingway did not look up. In some surprise, Virginia repeated her question, and then Jane said, calmly and deliberately:

"Yes; there is something you can do. You can get out of my sight, and *keep* out of it. When I want anything from you, I'll call on you."

Virginia paused, dumfounded, and then passed out into the yard and approached her uncle.

"Can you tell me," she asked, "if anything has gone wrong with mother?"

Sam gave her one swift glance from beneath his tattered, tent-shaped wool-hat, and then, with his paddle, he began to stir the corn and lye in the pot.

"I reckon," he said, after a momentary struggle over a desire to tell the plain truth instead of prevaricating, "if you don't know that woman by this time, Virgie, it's your own fault. I'm sure I don't try to keep up with her tantrums and sudden notions. That woman's died forty-seven times in her life, and been laid out and buried ten. Maybe she's been tasting them pies she was cooking, and got crooked. You let a body's liver be at all sluggish and get a wad o' sweet-potato dough lodged inside of 'em, and they'll have a sort of jim-jams not brought on by liquor. I reckon she'll cough it down after a while. If I was you, though, I'd let her alone."

Jane was, indeed, acting strangely. Refusing to sit down to the mid-day meal with them, as was her invariable custom, she put on her bonnet and shawl and, without a word of explanation, set off in the direction of Wilson's store. She was gone till dusk, and then came in with a slow step, passed through the sitting-room, where Sam had made a cheerful fire, and went on to her own room in the rear of the house. Virginia rose to follow her solicitously, but Sam put out a detaining hand, shifting his pipe into the corner of his mouth.

"I'd let her alone if I was in your place," he said. "Let her go to bed and sleep. She'll get up all right in the morning."

"I only wanted to see if there was anything I could do for her," Virginia said, in a troubled tone. "Do you suppose it is a relapse she is having? Perhaps she has discovered that the cancer is coming back. The fear of that would kill her, actually kill her."

"I don't think that's it," said Sam, impulsively; "the truth is, Virginia, she—" He pulled himself up. "But maybe that *is* it. Anyway, I'd let her alone."

Darkness came down. Virginia spread the cloth in the big kitchen and put the plates and dishes in their places, and then slipped to the door of her mother's room. It was dark and still.

"Supper is on the table, mother," she said; "do you want anything?"

There was a sudden creaking of the bed-slats, a pause, then, in a sullen, husky voice, Jane answered, "No, I *don't*; you leave me alone!"

"All right, mother; I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Good-night."

Sam and his niece ate alone in the big room by the wavering light of the fire. The wind had risen on the mountain-top, and roared across the fields. It sang dolefully in the pines near by, whistled shrilly under the eaves of the house, and scurried through the open passage outside. After the meal was over, Sam smoked a pipe and thumped off to bed, carrying his shoes in his hand. Virginia buried the remains of the big back-log in the hot ashes, and in the darkness crept into her own room, adjoining that of her mother, and went to bed.

Jane Hemingway was not sleeping; she had no hope of a respite of that sort. She would have doubted that she ever could close her eyes in tranquillity till some settlement of the life-crushing matter was reached. What was to be done? Only one expedient had offered itself during her aimless walk to the store, where she purchased a spool of cotton thread she did not need, and during her slow return along the road and the further hours of solitude in her darkened chamber, and that expedient offered no balm for her gashed and torn pride. She could appeal to the law to protect her innocent daughter from the designing wiles of a woman of such a reputation as Ann Boyd bore, but, alas! even Ann might have foreseen that ruse and counted on its more deeply stirring Virginia's sympathies and adding to her faith. Why she had not at once denounced her child for her filial faithlessness she could not have explained, unless it was the superstitious dread of having Virginia's infidelity reconfirmed. Of course, she must fight. Yes, she'd have to do that to the end, although her shrewd enemy had already beaten her life-pulse dead in her veins and left her without a hope of adequate retaliation. Going to law meant also that it was her first public acknowledgment of her enemy's prowess, and it meant, too, the wide-spread and humiliating advertisement of the fact that Virginia had died to her and been born to the breast of her rival; but even that must be borne.

These morose reflections were broken, near midnight, by a step in the passage outside. The door was opened softly, and Virginia, in her night-robe, came in quietly and approached the bed.

"I know you are not asleep, mother," she said, tremulously. "I've heard you rolling and tossing ever since I went to bed."

Jane stared from her hot pillow for an instant, and then slowly propped herself up on her gaunt, quivering elbow. "You are not asleep either, it seems," she said, hollowly.

"No, I couldn't for thinking about you," Virginia replied, gently, as she sat down on the foot of the bed.

"You couldn't, huh! I say!" Jane sneered. "Huh, *you*! It's a pity about you!"

"I have reason to worry," Virginia said. "You know the doctors told you particularly not to get depressed and downhearted while you are recovering your strength."

"Huh! what do they mean by prescribing things that can't be reached under the sun? They are idiots to think I could have peace of mind after finding out what I did this morning. I once had a cancer in the flesh; I've got one now in my heart, where no knife on earth can reach it."

There was a pause. The eyes of the mother and daughter met in the half-darkness of the room. There was a lull in the whistling of the wind outside. Under the floor a hen with a brood of chickens was clucking uneasily and flapping her wings in the effort to keep her brood warm. Across the passage came the rasping sound of Sam's snoring, as unconscious of tragedy as he had been in his cradle, and yet its creeping shadow lay over his placid features, its bated breath filled the air he was breathing. Virginia leaned forward wonderingly, her lips parted and set in anxiety.

"You are thinking about the debt on the farm?" she ventured. "If that's it, mother, remember—"

"The debt on this paltry shack and few acres of rocky land? Huh! if that was all I had to complain about I'd bounce out of this bed and shout for joy. Oh, Lord, have mercy on me!"

"Then, mother, what—" Virginia drew herself up with a start. Her mother, it now struck her, had said her trouble was due to a discovery she had made that morning. What else could it be than that her mother had accidentally seen her in company with Ann Boyd? Yes, that was it, and Virginia hastily told herself that some satisfying explanation must be made, some plausible and pacifying reason must be forthcoming that would allay her mother's anger, but it was hard to lie, in open words, as she had been doing in act. The gentle girl shuddered before the impending ordeal and clinched her hands in her lap. Yes, it was hard to lie, and yet the truth—the *whole* truth—was impossible.

"Mother," she began, "you see—I suppose I'll have to confess to you that Mrs. Boyd and I—"

"Don't blacken your soul with lies!" her mother hurled at her, furiously. "I slipped up in a few feet of you both at the spring and saw you kissing her, and heard you tell her you loved her more than anybody in the world, and that she'd treated you better than I ever did, and that she was the best woman that ever lived. Explain all that, if you can, but don't set there and lie to me who gave you what life you've got, and toiled and stinted and worked my hands to the bone to raise, you and let you hold your own with others. If there's a speck of truth in you, don't deny what I saw with my own eyes and heard with my two ears."

"I'll not deny it, then," Virginia said. She rose and moved to the small-paned window and stood with her face turned away. "I have met Mrs. Boyd several times and talked to her. I don't think she has ever had justice done her by you and her neighbors; she is not rightly understood, and, feeling that you have been all along the chief influence against her, and have always kept her early trouble stirred up, I felt like being her friend as well as I could, and at the same time remain true to you."

"Oh, you poor, poor little sniffling idiot!" Jane said, as she drew her thin legs out from the coverings and rested her feet on the floor and leaned forward. "All this time you've been thinking, in your grand way, that you were doing a kindness to her, when she was just using you as a tool, to devil me. Huh! didn't she throw it up to me once at the wash-place where she and I met? She told me to my teeth that something was coming that would bring my face to the earth in shame. I thought she knew about the cancer, and was gloating over it; but she wasn't speaking of that, for when I came back from Atlanta, sound and whole, she hurled her hints at me again. She said she knew nothing about the cancer at that time, but that she still knew something that would make me slink from the faces of men and women like a whipped hound. I discovered what she meant to-day. She meant that because my testimony had something to do with Joe Boyd's leaving with *her* child, she had won over *mine* to herself. That's been her mean and sneaking plot all this time, in which she has been decoying you from a respectable roof and making you her easy tool—the tool with which she expected to stab at my pride and humble me in the eyes of everybody."

"Mother, stop!" Virginia turned and sat down again on the bed. "That woman shall not have another—not one other—*false* charge piled up around her. God knows I don't see how I can tell you *all* the truth, but it is due to her now. It will more than justify her, and that's my duty. Listen, and don't interrupt me. I want to go straight through this, and when I have finished you may turn from me and force me to go to her for a home. You have never dreamed that I could do what I am about to confess I did. I am not going to excuse myself, either. What I did, I did. The shame of it, now that I see clearly, is killing me. No, stop! Let me go on. I have been receiving the attentions of Langdon Chester in secret. After the first time you saw us together and objected so strongly, I told him not to come to the house again; but, like many another silly girl, I was hungry for admiration, and met him elsewhere. I loved to hear the nice things he said, although I didn't always believe them. He—he tried to induce me to do a number of imprudent things, which, somehow, I was able to refuse, as they concerned my own pleasure alone; but then you began to worry about the money to go to Atlanta on. Day by day you grew more and more despondent and desperate as every effort failed, and one day, when you were down at the lowest ebb of hope,

he told me that he—do you understand, mother?—Langdon Chester told me that he thought he could get up the money, but that no one must know that he—"

"Oh, my God, don't, don't, don't!" Jane groaned. "Don't tell me that you—"

"Stop! let me go on," Virginia said, in a low, desperate tone. "I'm going to tell the whole horrible thing and be done with it forever. He said he had sent his best horse to Darley to sell it, and that the man would be back about ten o'clock at night with the money. He told me, mother, that he wanted me to slip away from home after you went to sleep and come there for the money. I didn't hesitate long. I wanted to save your life. I agreed. I might have failed to go after I parted with him if I'd had time to reflect, but when I came in to supper you were more desperate than ever. You went to your room praying and moaning, and kept it up till you dropped asleep only a few minutes before the appointed time. Well, I slipped away and—*went*."

"Oh, God have mercy on me—mercy, mercy, mercy!" Jane groaned. "You went there to that man!"

Virginia nodded mutely and then continued her recital. Jane Hemingway's knees bent under her as she stood holding to the bedpost, and she slowly sank to the floor a few feet away. With a low, moaning sound like a suffering dumb brute, she crawled on her hands and knees to her daughter and mutely clutched the girl's cold, bare ankles. "You say he locked you in his *bedroom*!" she said, in a rasping whisper. "*Locked* you—actually *locked* you in! Oh, Lord have mercy!"

"Then, after a long wait," the girl went on, "in which I was praying only for the money, mother—the money to save your life and put you out of agony—I heard steps, first on the stairs and then at the door. Somebody touched the latch. The door held fast. Then the key was turned, and as I sat there with covered face, now with the dread of death upon me for the first time, somebody came in and stood over me."

"The scoundrel! The beast!" Jane's hands slipped from their hold on the girl's ankles and fell; her head and shoulders sank till her brow touched the floor.

"A hand was laid on my head," Virginia went on. "I heard a voice—"

"The fiend from hell!" Jane raised her haggard face and glaring eyes. "Don't, don't tell me that he dared to—"

"It was Mrs. Boyd, mother—Ann Boyd," said Virginia.

"Ann Boyd!" Jane groaned. "I see it now; *she* was at the bottom of it; it was all *her* doing. *That* was her plot. Ah, God, I see it now!"

"You are mistaken," the girl said. "She had accidentally overheard my agreement to go there, and came for no other reason than to save me, mother—to save me."

"To save you?" Jane raised herself on her two hands like a four-footed animal looking up from its food. "Save your" she repeated, with the helpless glare

of insanity in her blearing eyes.

"Yes, to save me. She was acting on impulse, an impulse for good that she was even then fighting against. When she heard of that appointment she actually gloated over it, but, mother, she found herself unequal to it. As the time which had been set drew near, she plunged out into the night and got there only a few minutes before—"

"In time—oh, my God, did you say *in time*?" Jane gasped, again clutching her daughter's ankles and holding desperately to them.

"Yes, in time to save me from all but the life-long consciousness of my awful indiscretion. She brought me away, and after that how could I be other than a grateful friend to such a noble creature?"

"In time—oh, my God, in *time*!" Jane exclaimed, as she sat erect on the floor and tossed her scant hair, which, like a wisp of tow, hung down her cheek. Then she got up stiffly and moved back to the bed as aimlessly as if she were wandering in her sleep.

"There is no use in my saying more, mother." Virginia rose and turned to the door. "I'm going back to my room. You can think it all over and do as you please with me. I deserve punishment, and I'm willing to take it."

Jane stared at her from her hollow eyes for a moment, then she said: "Yes, go! I never want to see you again; Ann Boyd saved you, but she is now gloating over *me*. She'll call it heaping coals of fire on my head; she'll brag to me and others of what she's done, and of what I owe her. Oh, I know that woman! You've escaped one thing, but have made me face another worse than death. Go on away—get clear out of my sight. If you don't I'll say something to you that you will remember all your life."

"Very well, mother." Virginia moved to the door. Her hand was on the latch, when, with a startled gasp, her mother called out:

"Stop!—stop! For God's sake don't you dare to tell me that I went to Atlanta and bought back my life with that young scoundrel's money; if you do, as God is my Judge, I'll strike you dead where you stand."

"No, I refused to take it," Virginia said. "He came to me afterwards and begged me to accept it, but I refused."

"Then how under the sun—" Jane began, but went no further.

Virginia turned in the doorway and stood still; a look of resigned despair was on her. "You may as well know *all* the truth," she said. "I promised not to tell, but you really ought to know this, too. Mother, Ann Boyd, gave me the money. The woman you are still hounding and hating earned the money by the sweat of her brow that saved your life."

"Ann Boyd! Oh, my God, and to think you can stand there and tell me that! Get out of my sight. You have acted the fool all along, and humiliated me in the

dust by your conduct. You are no child of mine. It was all a plot—a dirty, low plot. She has used you. She has used me. She is laughing at us both right now. Oh, I know her! Get out of my sight or I'll forget myself and—go, I tell you!"

XXXVI

The next morning Jane did not come out to breakfast. Virginia had it ready on the table and went to her mother's room to call her. There was no response. Opening the door, she saw Jane, fully dressed, standing at the window looking out, but she refused to speak when gently informed that breakfast was ready. Then Virginia went back to the kitchen, and, arranging some delicacies, a cup of coffee, and other things on a tray, she took it in and left it on her mother's table and retired, closing the door after her.

For a week Jane refused to leave her room or speak to her daughter. Three times a day Virginia took her mother's food to her, always finding the window-shade drawn and the chamber dark.

One morning, about this time, Virginia happened to see Ann in her peanut-patch, a rich spot of ground below the old woman's barn-yard, and, seeing that she would be quite unobserved, she put on her bonnet and shawl and joined Ann, who, with a long, narrow hoe, was carefully digging the peanuts from the hills, and pulling them out by the brown, frost-bitten vines, and shaking the earth from their roots and leaving them to dry and season in the open air.

"I never saw goobers to beat these," Ann said, proudly, as she held up a weighty bunch. "I reckon this patch will turn out a good hundred bushel. I hit it just right; they tell me in town that they are bringing a fine price. I've been wondering what was the matter with you, child. You've been keeping powerful close in-doors."

Then, as Ann leaned on her smooth hoe-handle, Virginia told her frankly all that had taken place, leaving out nothing, and ending with her mother's self-incarceration and sullen mood.

"Well," Ann exclaimed, her brow ruffled with pained perplexity, "I hardly know what to say in the matter. I don't blame you for letting out the whole business after you once got started. That was just natural. But don't worry about

her. She'll pull through; she's tough as whitleather; her trouble's not of the body, but the mind. I know; I've been through enough of it. Mark my prophecy, she'll come out one of these days feeling better. She'll crawl out of her darkness like a butterfly from its dead and useless husk. She'll see clearer out in the open light when once she strikes it. Look here, child. I don't want to look like a sniffling fool after all the hard rubs I've had in this life to toughen me, but I'm a changed woman. Reading Luke's wonderful articles every week, and remembering the things the boy has said to me off and on, had something to do with it, I reckon, and then this experience of yours on top of it all helped. Yes, I'm altered; I'm altered and against my natural inclination. That very woman is *the* one particular human thorn in my flesh, and yet, yet, child, as the Lord is my Master, I mighty nigh feel sorry for her. I mighty nigh pity the poor, old, sin-slashed creature housed up there in solitary darkness with her bleeding pride and envy and hate. I pity her now, I reckon, because the way this has turned out hurts her more than any open fight she could have with me. I'd 'a' died long ago under all the slush and mire that was dabbed on me if I hadn't amused myself making money. I didn't have the social standing of some of these folks, but I had the hard cash, and the clink of my coin has been almost as loud as their taunts. But your ma—she's had very little substance all along, and that little has been dwindling day by day, till she finds herself without a dollar and owing her very life to a woman she hates. Yes, her lot is a hard one, and I'm sorry for her. I pity your mammy, child."

XXXVII

For two weeks longer Jane Hemingway, to the inexplicable sorrow of her gentle and mystified daughter, kept the seclusion of her room. The curtains of the single window looking out on the yard in the rear were constantly drawn, and, though the girl sometimes listened attentively with her ear to the wall, she heard no sound to indicate that her mother ever moved from her bed or her chair at the fireplace, where she sat enveloped in blankets. She had allowed Virginia to push a plate containing her meals three times a day through the door, but the things were promptly received into the darkness and only sullen silence was the invariable response to the frequent inquiries the girl made.

One morning Sam stopped his niece in the yard near the well, a droll, half-amused expression on his face. "Do you know," he said, "that I believe I'd 'a' made a bang-up detective if I'd given time to it."

"Do you think so?" Virginia said, absently.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "Now, I'm going to give you an instance of what a body can discover by sticking two and two together and nosing around till you are plumb sure you know what a certain thing means. Now, you are a woman—not an old one, but a woman all the same—and they are supposed to see what's at the ends of their noses and a heap beyond, but when it comes to detective work they are not in it. I reckon it's because they won't look for what they don't want to see, and to make a good detective a body must pry into everything that is in sight. Well, to come down to the case in hand, you've been sticking grub through that crack in the door to your mammy, who put herself in limbo several weeks ago, but in all that time you haven't seen the color of her cheeks to know whether the fare is fattening her or thinning her down to the bone. In fact, you nor me, on the outside, hain't supposed to know a blasted thing about what's going on in there. But—and there's where detective work comes in—one morning—it was day before yesterday, to be accurate—I took notice that all the stray cats and ducks and chickens had quit basking on the sunny side of the house and was staying around your mammy's window. Now, thinks I, that's odd; that's not according to the general run; so I set in to watching, and what do you reckon? I found out that all them Noah's Ark passengers, of the two and four footed sort, had assembled there to get their meals. Your mammy was regularly throwing out the dainty grub you fixed for her. I laid in wait nigh the window this morning and saw her empty the plate. I went close and took a look. She had just nibbled a bit or two, like the pecking of a sparrow, out of the centre of the bread-slices, but she hadn't touched the eggs nor the streak-o'-lean-streak-o'-fat you thought she set such store by. Good Lord, Virgie, don't you think the thing's gone far enough—having a drove of cats fed on the fat o' the land, when me and you are living on scraps?"

"Uncle"—Virginia's startled eyes bore down on him suddenly—"what does it mean?"

"Mean? Why, that there'll be a passle of cats on this place too fat to walk, while me 'n' you'll be too lean to cast a shadow if we stood side by side in the sun."

"Oh, uncle, do you suppose she is worse?" Virginia asked, in deep concern.

"I don't know," Sam said, seriously, "my Pinkerton job ended with the discovery of them cat banquets, but I've about reached *one* opinion."

"And what is that?" the girl asked, anxiously, as she bent towards her uncle.

"Why, I think maybe she's so mad and set back by all that's happened that she's trying to starve herself to death to get even."

"Oh, uncle, don't say that!" Virginia cried—"don't! don't!"

"Well, then, you study it out," he said. "It's too much for me."

That morning Virginia quietly slipped over to Ann Boyd's and confided the new phase of the situation to her sympathetic friend, but Ann could not account for Jane's strange conduct, and Virginia returned home no wiser than she had left. However, at the fence she met Sam. His face was aglow with excitement.

"What you reckon?" he said. "The bird has flown."

"Mother, you mean?"

"Yes, she's skipped clean out. It was this way: Pete Denslow drove past about twenty minutes ago in his empty two-horse wagon, and I hollered out to him and asked him where-away. He pulled up at the gate and said he was going over the mountain to Gilmer after a load of ginseng to fetch back to Darley. Well, sir, no sooner had he said that than your mammy piped up from her dungeon, where she stood listening at a crack, and said, said she, sorter sheepish-like: 'Sam, ask him if he will let me go with him; I promised to go see Sally Maud Pincher over there the first time any wagon was passing, and I want to go.' Well, I told Pete, and he looked at the sun and wanted to know how long it would take her to get ready. She heard him, and yelled out from the door that she'd be out in five minutes, and, bless you, she was on the seat beside him in less time in her best clothes and carpet-bag in hand. She was as white in the face as a convict out taking a sunning, and her gingham looked like it was hanging from a hook on her neck, she was that thin. She never said a word to me as she went by. At first I thought she was plumb crazy, but she had the clearest eye in her head I ever saw, and she was chattering away to Pete about the weather as if he was an unmarried man and she was on the carpet."

"Oh, uncle, what do you think it means?" Virginia sighed, deeply worried.

"Why, I think it's a fine sign, myself," said Sam. "I'm not as good a judge of women as I am of mules—though a body ought to know as much of one as the other—but I think she's perhaps been wanting to get a breath of fresh air for some time and didn't like to acknowledge she was tired of cave-life. Over there at Pincher's, you see, she can slide back into her old ways without attracting attention by it."

"And she didn't leave a word of directions to me?" the girl said, sadly.

"Not a word," was the droll reply. "I didn't say good-bye to her myself. To tell the truth, I had noticed that she'd forgot to put up a snack for her and Pete to eat on the way, and I was afraid she might remember it at the last minute and take what little there was left for you and me."

But Jane evidently had something to attend to before paying her promised visit to Sally Maud Pincher, for on their arrival at the village of Ellijay, the seat of the adjoining county, she asked her obliging conveyer to put her down at the

hotel, where she intended to spend the night. It was then about five o'clock in the afternoon, and she went into the little office, which looked like a parlor in a farm-house, and registered her name and was given a room with a sky-blue door and ceiling and whitewashed walls, at the head of the stairs. She sat after that at the window, looking out upon the dreary street and the lonely, red-clay road leading up the mountain, till it grew dark. She went down to the dining-room when the great brass bell was rung by a negro boy who shook it vigorously as he walked through the hall and around the house, but she had no appetite—the long, jolting journey over the rough road had weakened rather than stimulated her faint physical needs, and so she took only a glass of milk, into which she had dropped a few morsels of bread, eating the mixture with a spoon like a child.

"If I'm going to do this thing," she mused, as she sat on her bed in her night-dress and twisted her hair in a knot, "the quicker it's over the better. When I left home it seemed easy enough, but now it's awful—simply awful!"

She slept soundly from sheer fatigue, and was up the next morning and dressed before the hotel cook, an old woman, had made a fire in the range. She walked down-stairs into the empty hall and out on the front veranda, but saw no one. The ground was white with frost and the mountain air was crisp and cutting, but it seemed to have put color into her cheeks. Going through the office, where she saw no one, she went into the dining-room just as the cook was coming in from the adjoining kitchen.

"Good-morning," Jane said. "I've got about four miles to walk, and, as I've lately been down sick in bed, I want to sorter take it slow and get an early start. I paid my bill before I went to bed last night, including breakfast, and if you could give me a slice of bread-and-butter and a cup of coffee that will be all I want."

"Well, I can get them ready in a minute," said the woman, "but I'd hate to do a four-mile walk on as little as that."

"I've been sort of dieting myself," Jane said, perhaps recalling her past bounty to the cats and chickens at the window of her room, "and I don't need much."

"Well, all right," said the cook, spreading a napkin at one end of a long table; "you set down here and I'll supply you in a few minutes. The landlord leaves me in charge here till he gets up. He's a late sleeper; he was out last night at the trial of the moonshiners. You say you paid for breakfast in your bill. I think it's a shame. If he wasn't so easy to make mad, I'd go shake him up and get some of your money back. I don't happen to tote the key to the cash-drawer. I reckon you paid seventy-five cents for supper, bed, and breakfast—'s., b., and b.,' we call it for short—and you are entitled to a full round—meat, eggs, fish (in season), batter-cakes or waffles, whichever it is. Our waffle-irons are split right half in two, and we just give batter-cakes now; but folks know the brand clean

to Darley. You ought to see the judge tackle 'em during court week; him and the district-attorney had a race the other night to see which could eat the most. I had three pans running, and such a smoke of burning lard in the kitchen you couldn't have seen a white cat in an inch of your nose. The whole jury and a lots of witnesses under guard of the sheriff was allowed to look on. The judge beat. The lawyer got so full he couldn't talk, and that was the signal to call a halt. I was glad, for old Mrs. Macklin was waiting in the kitchen to try to hear if there was any chance to save her son, who was being tried for killing that feller in the brick-yard last summer. Ever' time I'd come in for fresh cakes she'd look up sorter pitiful-like to see if I'd heard anything. They'd already agreed to send 'im up for life, but I didn't know it. Yes, you ought to have a quarter of that money back, *anyway*. Unless a knife and fork is used, I make a habit, when it's left to me, not to charge a cent, and you don't look like you are overly flush."

"No, but I'm satisfied as it is," Jane said, as she finished her bread and milk. "I didn't expect to get it for any less."

XXXVIII

A few minutes later, with her flabby carpet-bag on her sharp hip, Jane fared forth on the mountain road, which led farther eastward. She walked slowly and with increased effort, for the high altitude seemed to affect her respiration, and, light as it was, the carpet-bag became cumbersome and she had to pause frequently to rest.

"Yes, if I'm going to do it, I'll have to plunge in and do it, and be done with the matter," she kept saying. "I reckon it isn't the first time such a thing has been heard of." She passed several humble mountain houses, built of logs, on the way, but stopped at none of them. The sun was near the zenith when she came to a double log-cabin standing back on a plot of newly cleared land a hundred yards from the rocky road. A tall, plain-looking girl, with a hard, unsympathetic face, stood in the doorway, and she stepped down to the ground and quieted a snarling dog which was chained to a stake driven into the earth.

"I reckon you are Nettie Boyd, ain't you?" Jane said.

"I used to be," the young woman answered. "I married a Lawson—Sam

Lawson—awhile back."

"Oh yes, I forgot that. I'd heard it, too, of course, but it slipped my memory. I'm a Hemingway, from over in Murray County—Jane Hemingway. I used to be acquainted with your pa. Is he handy?"

"Yes, he was here just a minute ago," Ann Boyd's daughter answered. "He's around at his hay-stack pulling down some roughness for the cow. Go in and take a seat and I'll call him. Lay your bonnet on the bed and make yourself at home."

Jane went into the cabin, the walls of which were unlined, being only the bare logs with the bark on them. The cracks where the logs failed to fit closely together were filled with the red clay from the hills around. There was not a picture in sight, not an ornament on the crude board shelf over the rugged mud-and-stone fireplace. From wooden pegs driven in auger-holes in the walls hung the young bride's meagre finery, in company with what was evidently her husband's best suit of clothes and hat. Beneath them, on the floor, stood a pair of new woman's shoes, dwarfed by contrast to a heavier and larger masculine pair. Jane sat down, rolling her bonnet in her stiff fingers. The chair she sat on was evidently of home make, for the rockers were unevenly sawed, and, on the unplaned boards of the floor, it had a joggling, noisy motion when in use. There were two beds in the room, made of rough, pine planks. The coverings of the beds were not in order and the pillows were soiled.

"If she'd 'a' stayed on with Ann she would 'a' made a better house-keeper than that," Jane mused. "She's a sight, too, with her hair uncombed and dress so untidy so soon after the honeymoon. I can see now that her and Ann never would get on together. Anybody could take one look at that girl and see she's selfish. I wonder what that fellow ever saw in her?"

There was a sound of voices outside. With a start, Jane drew herself erect. The carpet-bag on her knees threatened to fall, and she lowered it to the floor. Her ordeal was before her.

"Why, howdy do?"

Joe Boyd, in tattered shirt, trousers patched upon patches, and gaping shoes through which his bare toes showed, stood in the doorway. That the old beau and the once most popular young man of the country-side could stand looking like that before her, even after the lapse of all those trying years, and not feel abashed, was one of the inexplicable things that rushed through Jane Hemingway's benumbed brain. That she, herself, could be looking at the very husk of the ideal of manhood she had held all those years and not cry out in actual pain over the pitiful evidences of his collapse from his high estate was another thing she marvelled over. Joe Boyd! Could it actually be he? Could those gaunt, talon-nailed members, with their parchment-like skin, be the hands she used to think so shapely? Could those splaying feet be the feet that had tripped more lightly

in the Virginia Reel than those of any other man for miles around? Could those furtive, harsh-glancing eyes be the deep, dreamy ones in which she had once seen the mirage of her every girlish hope? Could that rasping tone come from the voice whose never diminishing echo had rung in her ears through all those years of hiding her secret from the man she had married out of "spite," through all her long tooth-in-flesh fight with the rival who had temporarily won and held him?

She rose and gave him her hand, and the two stood facing each other, she speechless, he thoroughly at his indolent ease.

"Well, I reckon, Jane, old girl," he laughed, as he wiped a trickling stream of tobacco-juice from the corner of his sagging mouth, "that you are the very last human being I ever expected to lay eyes on again. I swear I wouldn't 'a' known you from Adam's cat if Nettie hadn't told me who it was. My, how thin you look, and all bent over!"

"Yes, I'm changed, and you are too, Joe," she said, as, with a stiff hand beneath her, she sought the chair again.

"Yes"—he went to the doorway and spat voluminously out into the yard, and came back swinging a chair as lightly in his hand as if it had been a baseball bat with which he was playing—"yes, I reckon I am altered considerable; a body's more apt to see changes in others than in himself. I was just thinking the other day about them old times. La me! how much fun we all did have, but it didn't last—it didn't last."

He sat down, leaning forward and clasping his dry-palmed hands with a sound like the rubbing together of two pieces of paper. There was an awkward silence. Nettie Lawson came to the door and glanced in inquiringly, and then went away. They heard her calling her chickens some distance from the cabin.

"No, I wouldn't have recognized you if I'd met you alone in the big road," he said, "nor you wouldn't me, I reckon."

"Joe"—she was looking about the room—"somehow I had an idea that you were in—in a little better circumstances than—than you seem to be in now."

"Well, that wouldn't be hard to imagine, anyway," he said, with an intonation like a sigh, if it wasn't one. "If a body couldn't imagine a better fix for a man to be in than I am in, they'd better quit. Lord, Lord, I reckon I ought to be dead ashamed to meet you in this condition when you knew me away back in them palmy days, but, Jane, I really believe I've sunk below that sort of a feeling. You know I used to cut a wide swath when I had plenty of money and friends, but what's the use of crying over spilt milk? This is all there is left of me. I managed to marry Nettie off to a feller good enough in his way. I thought he was a fine catch, but I don't know. I was under the impression that his folks had some money to give him to sorter start the two out, but it seems they didn't have, and

was looking for a stake themselves. Since they married he just stays round here, contented and about as shiftless as anybody could be. I thought, for instance, that he never got in debt, but a store-keeper in town told me the other day that he owed him for the very duds he was married in."

"That's bad, that's powerful bad," Jane said, sympathetically. Then a fixed look took possession of her eyes, and her fingers tightened on her bonnet in her lap, as she plunged towards the thing with which she was burdened. "Joe," she continued, "I've come all the way over the mountain in my delicate health to see you about a particular matter. God knows it's the hardest thing I ever contemplated, but there is no other way out of it."

"Well, I think I know what you are going to say," he answered, avoiding her eyes.

"You do, Joe?" she exclaimed. "Oh no, surely, you can't know that."

"Well, I think I can make a good guess," he said, awkwardly twirling his fingers round and round. "You see, I always make a habit, when I happen to meet anybody from over your way, of asking about old acquaintances, and I heard some time back that you was in deep trouble. They said you had some high-priced doctoring to do in Atlanta, and that you was going from old friend to old friend for what little help they could give. I'm going to see what I can do towards it myself, since you've taken such a long trip, though, Jane, to tell you the truth, I haven't actually seen a ten-cent piece in a month. I've gone without tobacco when I thought the desire for it would run me distracted. So—"

"I didn't come for help—Lord, Lord, I only wish it was that, Joe. I've already had the operation, and I'm recovering. I've come over here, Joe, to make an awful confession."

"A—a—what?" he said.

There was a pause. Jane Hemingway unrolled her bonnet and put it on, pulling the hood down over her line of vision.

"Joe, I've come to tell you that I've been a bad woman; I've been a bad, sinning woman since away back there when you married Ann. Things you used to say to me, I reckon, turned my silly head. You remember when you took me to camp-meeting that night, and we sat through meeting out in the buggy under the trees. I reckon, if it was all to do over you wouldn't have said so much. I reckon you wouldn't if you'd known you were planting a seed that was going to fructify and bear the fruit of hate and enmity that would never rot; but, for all I know, you may have been saying the same things to other girls who knew better how to take them than I did."

"Oh, Jane, I was a fool them days," Joe Boyd broke in, with an actual flush of shame in his tanned face.

"Well, never mind about that," Jane went on, with a fresher determination

under his own admission. "I reckon I let it take too strong a hold on me. I never could give up easy, and when you got to going with Ann, and she was so much prettier and more sprightly than me, it worked against my nature. It hardened me, I reckon. I married soon after you did, but I won't tell about that; he's dead and gone. I had my child—that was all, except—except my hate for Ann. I couldn't stand to see you and her so happy together, and you both were making money and I was losing what I had. Then, Joe, we all heard about—we all learned Ann's secret."

"Don't—for the love of mercy—don't fetch that up!" Boyd groaned.

"But I *have* to, Joe," Jane persisted, softly. "At first I was the happiest woman that the devil ever delighted by flashing a lying promise with his fire on a wall. I thought you were going to scorn her, but I saw that day I met you at the meeting-house that you were inclined to condone the past, and that drove me wild; so I—" Jane choked up and paused.

"I remember that day," Joe Boyd said, with a deep breath. "I'll never forget it as long as I live, for what you said dropped me back into the bottomless pit of despair. I'd been trying to think she'd been straight with me *since* we married, but when you—"

"What I told you that morning, Joe, was a cold, deliberate lie!"

"A—a—" he stammered. "No, no, you don't mean that—you can't mean—"

"Every—single—thing—I—told—
you—that—day—was—a—lie!" Jane said, with an emphatic pause between each word.

"I can't understand. I don't see—really, Jane, you can't mean that what you said about Chester's going there day after day when my back was turned, and that you saw them together in the woods below your house that day when I was—"

"Everything I told you was a lie from the devil, out of the very fumes of hell," Jane said, pulling off her bonnet and looking him squarely in the face. "A lie—a lie, Joe."

"Oh, my God!" Boyd cried. "And I, all these years I have—"

"You've been believing what I said. But I'm not through yet. I've been in a dark room fasting and praying for a month to overcome my evil inclination not to speak the truth, and I finally conquered, so I'm going to tell the whole thing. Joe, Ann Boyd is the best woman God ever let live. She was as true as steel to you from the day she married till now. I have been after her day and night, never giving her a moment's rest from my persecutions, and how do you reckon she retaliated? She paid me back by actually saving my worthless life and trying to keep me from knowing who did it. She did something else. She did me the greatest favor one woman could possibly do another. I don't intend to say what

that particular thing was, but she must have the credit. Now I'm through. I'm going back home."

Boyd drew his ill-clad feet towards him. He spread out his two arms wide and held them so, steadily. "Look at me—just look at me," he said. "Woman, before you go back, take one good look at me. You come to me—a mere frazil of what I once was—when there is no hope of ever regaining my youth and self-respect—and tell me—oh, my God!—tell me that I believed *you* instead of *her*! She said, with tears in her eyes, on her knees before me, that that first mistake was all, and I told her she lied *in her throat*, and left her, dragging from her clinging arms the child of her breast, bringing it up and raising it to what you see she is. And now you come literally peeping into my open coffin and telling *this* to my dead face. Great God, woman, before Heaven I feel like striking you where you set, soaked in repentance though you are. All these misspent years I've been your cowardly tool, and her—her—"

"I deserve it—talk on!" Jane Hemingway said, as she rose and clutched her carpet-bag and held it tremblingly.

But Joe Boyd's innate gentleness had been one of the qualities many women loved, and even before the cowering creature who had wrecked his life he melted in manly pity.

"No," he said, stretching out his hand with something like one of his old gestures—"no, I'm going too far, Jane. We are all obedient to natural laws, as Ann used to say. Your laws have made you do just as you have, and so have mine. Away back there in the joy-time of youth my laws made me say too much to you. As you say, I planted the seed. I did; I planted the seed that bore all the fruit; I planted it when I kissed you, Jane, and said them things to you that night which I forgot the next day. Ann could have made something out of me better than this. As long as I had her to manage me, I did well. You see what I am now."

"Yes, I see; and I'm as sorry as I know how to be." Jane sighed as she passed out into the open sunlight. "I'm going home, Joe. I may never lay eyes on you again in this life. If you can say anything to make me feel better, I'd be thankful."

"There isn't anything, except what I said just now about our natural laws, Jane," he said, as he stood shading his eyes from the glare of the sun. "Sometimes I think that nobody hain't to blame for nothing they do, and that all of this temporary muddle is just the different ways human beings have of struggling on to a better world beyond this."

"I thought maybe you might, in so many words, say plain out that you'd forgive me, Joe." She had turned her face towards the road she was to travel, and her once harsh lip was quivering like that of a weeping child.

"The natural law would come in there, too," Boyd sighed. "Forgiveness, of the right sort, don't spring to the heart in such a case as this like a flash of powder

in the pan. If I'm to forgive, I will in due time, I reckon; but right now, Jane, I feel too weak and tired, even for that—too weak and heartsick and undone."

"Well, I'm going to pray for it, Joe," she said, as she started away. "Good-bye. May the Lord above bless you."

"Good-bye, Jane; do the best you can," he said, "and I'll try to do the same."

XXXIX

The following Sunday afternoon Mrs. Waycroft hastened over to Ann Boyd's. She walked very rapidly across the fields and through the woods rather than by the longer main road. She found Ann in her best dress seated in her dining-room reading Luke King's paper, which had come the day before. She looked up and smiled and nodded to the visitor.

"I just wish you'd listen to this," she said, enthusiastically. "And when you've heard it, if you don't think that boy is a genius you'll miss it by a big jump. On my word, such editorials as this will do more good than all the preaching in Christendom. I've read it four times. Sit down and listen."

"No, you've got to listen to me," said the visitor. "That can wait; it's down in black and white, while mine is fairly busting me wide open. Ann, do you know what took place at meeting this morning?"

"Why, no, how could I? You know I said I'd never darken that door again, after that low-lived coward—"

"Stop, Ann, and listen!" Mrs. Waycroft panted, as she sank into a chair and leaned forward. "You know I go seldom myself, but by some chance I went this morning. I always feel like doing the best I can towards the end of a year. Well, I had hardly got my seat and Brother Bazemore had just got up to make some announcements, when who should come in but Jane Hemingway. Instead of stopping at her usual place, nigh the stove, she walked clean up to the altar-railing and stood as stiff as a post, gazing at the preacher. He was busy with his notes and didn't see her at first, though every eye in the house was fixed on her in wonder, for she was as white as a sheet, and so thin and weak that it looked like the lightest wind would blow her away. 'Brother Bazemore,' she said, loud enough to be heard, in her shrill voice, clean out to the horse-rack, 'I want to say

something, and I want to say it out before all of you.'"

"Huh!" Ann grunted—"huh!"

"Well, he looked good surprised," Mrs. Waycroft went on, "but you know he's kind o' resentful if folks don't show consideration for his convenience, so he looked down at her over his specks and said:

"'Well, sister, I reckon the best time for that will be after preaching, and then them that want to stay can do so and feel that they got what they waited for.'

"'But I can't wait,' said she. 'What I've got to say must be said now, while I'm plumb in the notion. If I waited I might back out, and I don't want to do it.'

"Well, he give in; and, Ann, she turned around facing us all and took off her bonnet and swung it about like a flag. She was as nigh dead in looks as any corpse I ever saw. And since you was born, Ann, you never heard the like. Folks was so interested that they stared as if their eyes was popping out of their sockets. She said she'd come to confess to crime—that's the way she put it—*crime!* She said she'd been passing for half a lifetime in this community as a Christian woman, when in actuality she had been linked body and soul to the devil. Right there she gulped and stood with her old head down; then she looked at us like a crazy person and went on. She said away back when she was a girl she'd been jealous of a certain girl, and that she'd hounded that girl through a long life. She had made it her particular business to stir up strife against that woman by toting lies from one person to another. She turned sort o' sideways to the preacher and said: 'Brother Bazemore, what I told you Ann Boyd said about you that time was all made up—a lie out of whole cloth. I told you that to make you denounce her in public, and you did. I kept telling her neighbors things to make 'em hate her, and they did. I told her husband a whole string of deliberate lies that made him leave her and take her child away. I spent half my life at this thing, to have it end like this: Men and women, the woman that I was doing all that against was the one who came up with the money that saved my worthless life and tried to hide it from me and the rest of the world. She not only done that, but she done me even a greater favor. I won't say what that was, but nobody but an angel from heaven, robed in the flesh of earth, could have done that, for it was the very thing she had every right to want to see visited on me. That act would have paid me back in my own coin, and she wanted to count out the money, but she was too much of heaven to go through it. Instead of striking at me, she saved me suffering that would have dragged me to the dust in shame. I've come here to say all this because I want to do her justice, if I can, while the breath of life is in me. I've just got back from Gilmer, where I went and met the man whose life I wrecked—her husband. I told him the truth, hoping that I could do him some good in atonement, but the poor, worn-out man seemed too utterly crushed to

forgive me.'"

"Joe—she went to Joe!" Ann gasped, finding her voice. "Now, I reckon, he believes me. And to think that Jane Hemingway would say all that—do all that! It don't seem reasonable. But you say she actually—"

"Of course she did," broke in the narrator. "And when she was through she marched straight down the middle aisle and stalked outside. Half the folks got up and went to the windows and watched her tottering along the road; and then Brother Bazemore called 'em back and made 'em sit down. He said, in his cold-blooded way, hemming and hawing, that the whole community had been too severe, and that the best way to get the thing settled and smooth-running again was to agree on some sort of public testimonial. Ann, I reckon fully ten men yelled out that they would second the motion. I never in all my life saw such excitement. Folks was actually crying, and this one and that one was telling kind things you had done to them. Then they all got around me, Ann, and they made a lots over me, saying I was the only one who had acted right, and that I must ask you to forgive them. That was the motion Bazemore put and carried by a vote of rising. Half of them was so anxious to have their votes counted that they climbed up on the benches and waved their hats and bonnets and shawls, and yelled out, 'Here! here!' Bazemore dismissed without preaching; it looked like he thought nothing he could say, in any regular line, would count in such a tumult. And after meeting dozens of 'em slid up to me and snatched my hands and told me to speak a good word for them; they kept it up even after I'd got outside, some of 'em walking part of the way with me and sending messages. Wait till I catch my breath, and I'll tell you who spoke and what each one said, as well as I can."

"Never mind," said Ann, an absent look in her strong face. "I believe I'd rather not hear any more of it; it don't make one bit of difference one way or another."

"Why, Ann, surely you won't entertain hard feelings, now that they all feel so bad. If you could only 'a' been there, you would—"

"Oh, it isn't that," Ann sighed, and with her closed hand she pounded her heavy knee restlessly. "You see, Mary—oh, I don't know—but, well, I can't possibly be any way but the way the Lord made me, and to save my life I can't feel grateful. They all just seem to me like a lot of spoilt children that laugh or cry over whatever comes up. Somehow a testimonial from a congregation like that, after a lifetime of beating me and covering me with slime, seems more like an insult than a compliment. They think they can besmirch the best part of my life, and then rub it off in a minute with good intentions and a few words. Why, it was the same sort of whim that made them all follow Jane Hemingway like sheep after a leader. I don't hate 'em, you understand, but what they do or say simply don't alter my feelings a speck. I have known all along that I had the right kind

of—character, and to listen to their sniffling testimony on the subject would seem to me like—well, like insulting my own womanhood."

"You are a powerful strange creature, Ann," Mrs. Waycroft said, reflectively, "but, I reckon, if you hadn't been that way you wouldn't be such a wonderful woman in so many ways. I was holding something back for the last, but I reckon you'll sniff at that more than what I've already told you. Ann, when I got home, and had just set down to eat a snack before running over to you, who should come to my back gate and call me out except Jane herself. She stood leaning against the fence like the walk had nearly done her up, and she refused to come in and set down. She said she wanted me to do her a favor. She said she knew I was at meeting and heard what she said, but that she wanted me to come to you for her. As God is my final Judge, I never felt such pity for a poor rotten shred of humanity in all my life. She looked like she was trying to cry, but was too dry inside to do anything but wheeze; her very eyes seemed to be literally on fire; she looked like a crazy person talking rationally. She said she wanted me to tell you how sorry and broke up she was, that she'd pay back that hundred dollars if she had to deed away her dead body to some medical college. She said she could do anything on earth to make amends *except* go to you face to face and apologize—she'd walk from door to door all over the country, she said, and tell her tale of shame, but she couldn't say it to you. She said she had tried for weeks to do it, but she knew she'd never have the moral strength."

"She talked that way?" Ann said, looking steadily out into the sunshine through the open doorway.

"Yes; and I reckon you have as little patience with her message as you have with the balance," said the visitor.

"No, she's different, Mary," Ann declared. "Jane Hemingway is another proposition altogether. She's fought a long, fierce fight, and God Almighty's forces have whipped her clean out. She was a worthy foe, and I respect her more now than I ever did. She was different from the rest. *She* had a cause. *She* had something to fight about. She loved Joe Boyd with all the heart she ever had, and when I married him she couldn't—simply couldn't—let it rest. She held on like a bull-dog with his teeth clamped to bone. She's beat; I won't wait for her to come to me; I may take a notion and go to her."

XL

It was a crisp, clear day in December. Langdon Chester had gone to Darley to attend to the banking of a considerable amount of money which his father had received for cotton on the market. It happened to be the one day in the year in which the town was visited by a mammoth circus, and the streets were overflowing with mountain people eager to witness the grand street-parade, the balloon ascension, the side-shows, and, lastly, the chief performance under the big tent. From the quaint old Johnston House, along Main Street to the grain warehouses and the throbbing and wheezing cotton compress, half a mile distant, the street was filled with people afoot, in carts, wagons, and buggies, or on horseback. All this joy and activity made little impression on Langdon Chester. His face was thin and sallow, and he was extremely nervous. His last conversation with Virginia and her positive refusal to consider his proposal of marriage had left him without a hope and more desperate than his best friend could have imagined possible to a man of his supposedly callous temperament. And a strange fatality seemed to be dogging his footsteps and linking him to the matter which he had valiantly attempted to lay aside, for everywhere he went he heard laudatory remarks about Luke King and his marvellous success and strength of character. In the group of lawyers seated in the warm sunshine in front of Trabue's little one-storied brick office on the street leading to the court-house, it was a topic of more interest than any gossip about the circus. It was Squire Tomlinson's opinion, and he had been to the legislature in Atlanta, and associated intimately with politicians from all sections of the state, that King was a man who, if he wished it, could become the governor of Georgia as easy as falling off a log, or even a senator of the United States. The common people wanted him, the squire declared; they had worshipped him ever since his first editorial war-whoop against the oppression of the political ring, the all-devouring trusts, and the corrupt Northern money-power. The squire, blunt man that he was, caught sight of Langdon among his listeners and playfully made an illustration out of him. "There's a chap, gentlemen, the son of a good old friend of mine. Now, what did money, aristocratic parentage, family brains, and military honors do for him? He was sent to the best college in the state, with plenty of spending-money at his command, and is still hanging onto the strap of his daddy's pocket-book—satisfied like we all were in the good old days when each of us had a little nigger to come and put on our shoes for us and bring hot coffee and waffles to the bed after we'd tripped the merry toe on somebody's farm all night. Oh, you needn't frown, Langdon; you know it's the truth. He's still a chip off the old block, gentlemen, while his barefoot neighbor, a scion of po' white stock, cooked his brain before a cabin pine-knot fire in studying, like Abe Lincoln did, and finally went forth to conquer the world, and *is* conquering it as fast as a dog can trot. It's enough, gentlemen, to make us all take our boys from school, give 'em a good paddling,

and put 'em at hard toil in the field."

"Thank you for the implied compliment, Squire," Langdon said, angrily. "You are frank enough about it, anyway."

"Now, there, you see," the squire exclaimed, regretfully. "I've gone and rubbed him the wrong way, and I meant nothing in the world by it."

Langdon bowed and smiled his acceptance of the apology, though a scowl was on his face as he turned to walk down the street. From the conversation he had learned that King was expected up that day to visit his family, and a sickening shock came to him with the thought that it really was to see Virginia that he was coming. Yes, he was now sure that it had been King's attentions to the girl which had turned her against him—that and the powerful influence of Ann Boyd.

These thoughts were too much for him. He went into Asque's bar, at the hotel, called for whiskey, and remained there for hours.

Langdon was in the spacious office of the Johnston House when the evening train from Atlanta came into the old-fashioned brick car-shed at the door, and King alighted. His hand-bag was at once snatched by an admiring negro porter, and the by-standers crowded around him to shake hands. Langdon stood in the office a moment later, his brain benumbed with drink and jealous fury, and saw his rival literally received into the open arms of another eager group. Smothering an oath, the young planter leaned against the cigar-case quite near the register, over which the clerk stood triumphantly calling to King to honor the house by writing the name of the state's future governor. King had the pen in his hand, when, glancing up, he recognized Langdon, whom he had not seen since his return from the West.

"Why, how are you, Chester?" he said, cordially.

Langdon stared. His brain seemed pressed downward by some weight. The by-standers saw a strange, half-insane glare in his unsteady eyes, but he said nothing.

"Why, surely you remember me," Luke exclaimed, in honest surprise. "King's my name—Luke King. It's true I have not met you for several years, but—"

"Oh, it's King, is it?" Langdon said, calmly and with the edge of a sneer on his white, determined lip. "I didn't know if you were sure *what* it was. So many of your sort spring up like flies in hot weather that one can't tell much about your parentage, except on the maternal side."

There was momentous silence. The crowded room held its breath in sheer astonishment. King stared at his antagonist for an instant, hoping against hope that he had misunderstood. Then he took a deep breath. "That's a queer thing for one man to say to another," he said, fixing Chester with a steady stare. "Are you aware that a remark like that might reflect on the honor of my mother?"

"I don't care who it reflects on," retorted Chester. "You can take it any way you wish, if you have got enough backbone."

As quick as a flash King's right arm went out and his massive fist landed squarely between Chester's eyes. The blow was so strong that the young planter reeled back into the crowd, instinctively pressing his hands to his face. King was ready to strike again, but some of his friends stopped him and pushed him back against the counter. Others in the crowd forcibly drew his maddened antagonist away, and further trouble was averted.

With a hand that was strangely steady, King registered his name with the pen the clerk was extending to him.

"Let it drop, King," the clerk said. "He's so drunk he hardly knows what he's doing. He seems to have it in for you, for some reason or other. It looks like jealousy to me. They were devilling him over at Trabue's office awhile ago about his failure and your big success. Let it pass this time. He'll be ashamed of himself as soon as his liquor dies out."

"Thank you, Jim," King replied. "I'll let it rest, if he is satisfied with what he's already had."

"Going out home to-night?" the clerk asked.

"If I can get a turnout at the stable," King answered.

"You will have to take a room here, then," the clerk smiled, "for everything is out at the livery. I know, because two travelling men who had a date with George Wilson over there are tied up here."

"Then I'll stay and go out in the morning," said King. "I'm tired, anyway, and that is a hard ride at night."

"Well, take the advice of a friend and steer clear of Chester right now," said the clerk. "He's a devil when he's worked up and drinking. Really, he's dangerous."

"I know that, but I'll not run from him," said King. "I thought my fighting day was over, but there are some things I can't take."

XLI

It was dusk the following evening. Virginia was at the cow-lot when her uncle

came lazily up the road from the store and joined her. "Well," he drawled out, as he thrust his hands into his pocket for his pipe, "I reckon I'm onto a piece o' news that you and your mother, nor nobody else this side o' Wilson's shebang, knows about. Mrs. Snodgrass has just arrived by hack from Darley, where she attended the circus and tried to get a job to beat that talking-machine they had in the side-show. It seems that this neighborhood has furnished the material for more excitement over there than the whole exhibition, animals and all."

"How is that, uncle?" Virginia asked, absent-mindedly.

"Why, it seems that a row has been on tap between Langdon Chester and Luke King for, lo, these many months, anyway, and yesterday, when the population of Darley turned out in as full force to meet Luke King as they did the circus parade, why it was too much for Chester's blood. He kept drinking and drinking till he hardly knew which end of him was up, and then he met Luke at the Johnston House face to face. Mrs. Snod says Langdon evidently laid his plans so there would have to be a fight in any case, so he up and slandered that good old mammy of King's."

"Oh, uncle, and they fought?" Virginia, pale and trembling, gasped as she leaned for support on the fence.

"You bet they did. Mrs. Snod says the vile slander had no sooner left Chester's lips than King let drive at him right between the eyes. That knocked Langdon out of the ring for a while, and his friends took him to a room to wash him off, for he was bleeding like a stuck pig. King was to come out here last night, but Mrs. Snod says he was afraid Chester would think he was running from the field, and so he stayed on at the hotel. Then, this morning early, the two of them come together on the street in front of the bank building. Mrs. Snod says Chester drawed first and got Luke covered before he could say Jack Robinson, and then fired. Several shots were exchanged, but the third brought King to his knees. They say he's done for, Virginia. He wasn't dead to-day at twelve, but the doctors said he couldn't live an hour. They say he was bleeding so terrible inside that they was afraid to move him. I'm here to tell you, Virgie, that I used to like that chap; and when he got to coming to see you, and I could see that he meant business, I was in hopes you and him would make a deal, but then you up and bluffed him off so positive that I never could see what it meant. Why, he was about the most promising young man I ever—But look here, child, what's ailing you?"

"Nothing, uncle," Virginia said; and, with her head down, she turned away. Looking after her for a moment in slow wonder, Sam went on into the farmhouse, bent on telling the startling news to his sister-in-law. As for Virginia, she walked on through the gathering dusk towards Ann Boyd's house. "Dead, dying!" she said, with a low moan. "It has come at last."

Farther across the meadow she trudged, unconscious of the existence of her physical self. At a little stream which she had to cross on stepping-stones she paused and moaned again. Dead—actually dead! Luke King, the young man whom the whole of his state was praising, had been shot down like a dog. No matter what might be the current report as to the cause of the meeting, young as she was she knew it to be the outcome of Langdon Chester's passion—the fruition of his mad threat to her. Yes, he had made good his word.

Approaching Ann's house, she entered the gate just as Mrs. Boyd came to the door and stood smiling knowingly at her.

"Virginia," she called out, cheerily, "what you reckon I've got here? You could make a million guesses and then be wide of the mark."

"Oh, Mrs. Boyd!" Virginia groaned, as she tottered to the step and raised her eyes to the old woman's face, "you haven't heard the news. Luke is dead!"

"Dead?" Ann laughed out impulsively. "Oh no, I reckon not. Come in and take a chair by the fire; you've got your feet wet with the dew."

"He's dead, he's dead, I tell you!" Virginia stood still, her white and rigid face upturned. "Langdon Chester, the contemptible coward, shot him at Darley this morning."

"Oh, *that's* it, is it?" A knowing look came into Ann Boyd's face. She stroked an impulsive smile from her facile lips, but Virginia still saw its light in the twinkling eyes above the broad, red hand. "You say he's dead? Well, well, that accounts for something I was wondering about just now. You know I am not much of a hand to believe in spiritual manifestations like table-raising folks do, but I'll give you my word, Virginia, that for the last hour and a half I'd 'a' sworn Luke King *himself* was right here in the house. Just now I heard something like him walking across the floor. It seemed to me he went out to the shelf and took a drink of water. I'll bet it's Luke's spirit hanging about trying to tell me goodbye—that is, if he really *was* shot, as you say." Ann smiled again and turned her face towards the inside of the room, and called out: "Say, Ghost of Luke King, if you are in my house right now you'd better lie low and listen. This silly girl is talking so wild the first thing you know she will be saying she don't love Langdon Chester."

"Love him? what's the matter with you?" Virginia panted. "I hate him. You know I detest him. I'll kill him. Do you hear me? I'll kill him as sure as I ever meet him face to face."

Ann stared at the girl for a moment, her face oddly beaming, then she looked back into the room again. "Do you hear that, Mr. Ghost? She now says she'll kill Langdon Chester on sight. She says that after sending *you* about your business for no reason in the world. You listen good. Maybe she'll be saying after a while that she loved you."

"I *did* love him. God knows I loved him!" Virginia cried. "I loved him with every bit of my soul and body. I've loved him, worshipped him, adored him ever since I was a child and he was so good to me. He was the noblest man that ever lived, and now a dirty, sneaking coward has slipped up on him and shot him down in cold blood. If I ever meet that man, as God is my Judge, I'll—" With a sob that was almost a shriek Virginia sank to the door-step and lay there, quivering convulsively.

A vast change swept over Ann Boyd. Her big face filled with the still blood of deep emotion. She heaved a sigh, and, turning towards the interior of the room, she said, huskily:

"Come on, Luke; don't tease the poor little thing. I wouldn't have carried it so far if I could have got it out of her any other way. She's yours, dear boy—heart, soul, and body."

Hearing these words, Virginia raised her head in wonder, just as Luke King emerged from the house. He bent over her, and tenderly raised her up. He was drawing her closer to him, his fine face aflame with tender passion, when Virginia held him firmly from her.

"Don't! don't!" she said. "If you knew—"

"I've told him everything, Virginia," Ann broke in. "I had to. I couldn't see my dear boy suffering like he was, when—"

"You know—" Virginia began, aghast, "you know—"

"About you and Chester?" King said, with a light laugh. "Yes, I know all about it, and it made me think you the grandest, most self-sacrificing little girl in all the world. So you thought I was dead? That was all gossip. It was only a quarrel that amounted to nothing. I understand, now that he is sober, that Chester is heartily ashamed of himself."

Half an hour afterwards Ann stood at the gate and saw them walking together towards Virginia's home. She watched them till they were lost from her sight in the dusk, then she went back into the house. She stood over the low fire for a moment, then said: "I won't get any supper ready. I couldn't eat a bite. Meat and bread couldn't shove this lump out of my throat. It's pretty, pretty, pretty to see those two together that way. I believe they have got the sort of thing the Almighty really meant love to be. I know *I* never got that kind, though, as a girl, I dreamt of nothing else—nothing from morning till night but that one thing, and yet here I am this way—*this way*!"

XLII

The next morning the weather was as balmy as spring. Ann had taken all the coverings from her beds and hung them along the fence to catch the purifying rays of the sun. Her rag-carpet was stretched out on the ground ready to be beaten. She was occupied in sweeping the bare floor of her sitting-room when a shadow fell across the threshold. Looking up, she saw a tall, lean man, very ill-clad, his tattered hat in hand, his shoes broken at the toes and showing the wearer's bare feet.

"It's me, Ann," Boyd said. "I couldn't stay away any longer. I hope you won't drive me off, anyway, before I've got out what I come to say."

She turned pale as she leaned her broom against the wall and began to roll her sleeves down her fat arms towards her wrists. "Well, I wasn't looking for you," she managed to say.

"I reckon not, Ann," he returned, a certain wistful expression in his voice and strangely softened face; "but I had to come. As I say—I had to come and speak to you, anyway."

"Well, take a chair," she said, awkwardly. "I've got the windows up to let the dust drive out, and I'll close them. It's powerful draughty. I don't feel it, working like I am, but you might, coming in from the outside."

He advanced to one of the straight-backed chairs which he remembered so well, and laid an unsteady hand on it, but he did not draw it towards him nor sit down. Instead, his great, hungry eyes followed her movements, as she bustled from one window to another, like those of a patient, offending dog.

"Well, why don't you sit down?" She had turned back to him, and stood eying his poor aspect with strange misgivings and pity. In her comfort and luxury, he, with his evidences of poverty and despair, struck a strangely discordant note.

He drew the chair nearer, and with quivering knees she saw him sink into it, with firmness at the beginning and then with the sudden collapse of an invalid. She went to a window and looked out. Not seeing his horse hitched near by, she came back to him.

"Where did you hitch?" she asked, her voice losing firmness.

"I didn't have no horse," he said; "I walked, Ann. Lawson was hauling wood with the horse. He wouldn't have let me take it, anyway. He's got awfully contrary here lately. Me 'n' him don't get along at all."

"Do you mean to tell me—do you mean to tell me you walked all that way, in them shoes without bottoms, and—and you looking like you've just got up from a long sick spell?"

"I made it all right, Ann, stopping to rest on the way." A touch of color seemed to have risen into his wan cheeks. "I had to come to-day—as I did awhile back—to do my duty, as I saw it. In fact, this seems even more my duty. Ann, Jane Hemingway came over to Gilmer awhile back. She come straight to my house, and, my God, Ann, she come and told me she'd been at the bottom of all our trouble. She set right in and acknowledged that she lied; she said she'd been lying all along for spite, because she hated you."

"And loved you," Ann interposed, quickly. "Yes, she came back here, so I've been told, and stood up in meeting and said she'd been to see you, and she confessed it all in public. I can't find it in my heart to be hard with her, Joe. She was only obeying her laws of nature, as you have obeyed yours and I have mine, and—and as our offspring is now obeying hers. Tell me the straight truth, Joe. I reckon Nettie still feels strange towards me."

Joe Boyd's mild eyes wavered and sought the fire beyond the toes of his ragged shoes.

"Tell me the truth, Joe," Ann demanded. "I'm entitled to that, anyway."

"She's always been a queer creature," Boyd faltered, evasively, without looking up, and she saw him nervously laving his bony hands in the sheer, unsuggestive emptiness about him. "But you mustn't think it's just *you* she's against, Ann. She's plumb gone back on me, too. The money you furnished cleared the place of debt and bought her wedding outfit, and she got her man; but not long back she found out where the means come from, and—"

Ann's lips tightened in the pause that ensued. Her face was set like a grotesque mask of stone. She leaned over the fire and pushed a fallen ember back under the steaming logs with a poker.

"She couldn't stomach that, I reckon?" Ann said, in assumed calmness.

"Well, it made her mad at me. I won't tell you all she done or said, Ann. It wouldn't do no good. I'm responsible for what she is, I reckon. She might have growed up different if she'd had the watchful care of—of a mother. What she is, is what any female will become under the care of a shiftless man like I am."

"No, you are wrong, Joe," Ann said. "Why it is so I don't intend to explain, but Nettie would have been like she is under all circumstances. Money and plenty of everything might have glazed her character over, but down at bottom she'd have been what she is. Adversity generally brings out all the good that's in a

person; the reason it hasn't fetched it out in her is because it isn't there, nor never has been. You say you and her don't get on well?"

"Not now," he said. "She just as good as driv me from home yesterday. She told me point-blank that there wasn't room for me, and that when the baby comes they would be more crowded and pinched than ever. She actually sent Lawson to the Ordinary at Springtown to see if there was a place on the poor-farm vacant. When I dropped onto that, Ann, I come off. For all I know, they may have some paper for vagrancy ready to serve on me. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm not going back to them two, never while there is a lingering breath left in my body."

"The poor-farm!" Ann said, half to herself. "To think that she would consent to that, and you her father."

"I think his folks is behind it, Ann. They've got a reason for wanting to get rid of me."

"A reason, you say?" Ann was staring at him steadily.

Joe Boyd's embarrassment of a moment before returned. He twisted his hands together again. "Yes; it's like this, Ann," he went on, awkwardly: "a short time back Lawson's mother and father got onto the fact that you were in good circumstances, and it made the biggest change in them you ever heard of. They talked it all over the settlement. They are hard up, and they couldn't talk of anything but how much you was worth, and what you had your money invested in, and the like. After they got onto that, they never—never paid no attention to what had been—been circulated—your money covered all that as completely as a ten-foot snow. Instead of turning up their noses, as Nettie was afraid they would do, it only made them brag about how well their boy had done, and what a fool I was. They tried all sorts of ways to get Nettie interested in some scheme to attract your attention, but Nettie would just cry and take on and refuse to come over here or to write to you."

"I understand"—Ann stroked her compressed lips with an unsteady hand—"I understand. I've never been a natural mother to her; she couldn't come to me like that. But you say they turned against you."

"Yes. You see, the Lawsons got an idea—the old woman did, in particular, from something she'd picked up—that it was *me* that stood between you and Nettie. They thought you and me had had such a serious falling-out that a proud woman like you never would have anything to do with Nettie as long as I was about, and that the best thing was to shove me off so the reconciliation would work faster. The truth is, they said that would please you."

"I see, I see," Ann said. "And they set about putting you at the poor-farm."

"Yes; they seemed to think that was as good a place as any. And they could get all the proof necessary to put me there, for I hadn't a cent to my name nor a

whole rag to my back; and, Ann, for the last three months I haven't been able to do a lick o' work. I've had a strange sort of hurting all down my left side, and my right ankle seems affected in the same way."

Ann Boyd suddenly turned away. Through the window she had seen the wind blowing one of her sheets from the fence, and she went out and put it in place. He limped out into the sunlight and stood at the little, sagging gate a few yards from her. Something of his old dignity and gallantry of manner was on him: he still held his hat in his hand, his thin, iron-gray hair exposed to the warm rays of the sun.

"Well, I'd better be going, Ann," he said. "There is no telling when somebody might come along and see me here, and start the talk you hate so much. I come all the way here to tell you how low and mean I feel for taking Jane Hemingway's word instead of yours, and how plumb sorry I am. You and me may never meet again this side of the Seat of Judgment, and I'll say this if I never speak again. Ann, the only days of perfect happiness I ever had was here with you, and, if all of it was to do over again, I'd suffer torture by fire rather than believe you anything but an angel from heaven. Oh, Ann, it was just my poor, weak inferiority to you that made me misjudge you. If I'd ever been a *real* man—a man worthy of a woman like you—I'd have snapped my fingers at all that was said, but I was obeying my laws, as you say. I simply wasn't deep enough nor high enough to do you justice."

He drew the little gate ajar and dragged his tired feet through the opening. The fence was now between them. She looked down the road. A woman under a sun-bonnet and little shawl was coming towards them. By a strange fatality it was Jane Hemingway, but she was not to pass directly by them, as her path homeward turned sharply to the left a hundred yards below. They both recognized her.

"I don't know fully what you mean, Joe," Ann said, softly, "but if you mean by what you just said that you'd be willing now to—to come back—if *that's* what you mean, I'd have something to say that maybe, in justice to myself, I ought to say."

"*Would* I come back? Would I? Oh, Ann, how could you doubt that, when you see how miserable and sorry I feel. God knows I'd never feel worthy of you; but if you would—if you only could—let me stay, I—"

"I couldn't consent to *that*, Joe—that's the point," Ann answered, firmly. "Anything else on earth but *that*. I expect to provide for Nettie in a substantial way, and I expect to have a lawyer make it one of the main conditions that her income depends on her good treatment of you as long as you and she live. I expect to do that, but the other matter is different. A woman of my stamp has her pride and her rights, Joe. I've been through a lot, but I can endure just so

much and no more. If—if you *did* come back, and we was married over again, it would go out to the world that you had taken *me* back, and I couldn't stand that. My very womanhood rises up and cries out against that in a voice that rings clear to the end of truth and justice and woman's eternal rights. Joe, I'm too big and pure in *myself* to let the world say a man who was—was—I'm going to say it—was little enough to doubt my word for the best part of my days had at last taken *me* back—taken me back when my lonely life's sun was on the decline. No, no, never; for the sake of unborn girl infants who may have to meet what I fell under when I was too young to know the difference between the smile of hell and the smile of heaven, I say No! We'd better live out our days in loneliness apart—you frail and uncared for, and me on here without a friend or companion—than to sanction such a baleful thing as that."

"Then I'll tell you what you let *me* do," Boyd said, with a flare of his old youthful adoration in his face. "Let me get down on my knees, Ann, and crawl with my nose in the dust to everybody that we ever knew and tell them that I'd begged and begged for mercy, and at last Ann had taken *me* back, weak and broken as I am—weak, ashamed, and unworthy, but back with her in the place I lost through my own narrowness and cowardice. Let me do that, Ann—oh, let me do that! I can't go away. I'd die without you. I've loved you all, all these years and had you in my mind night and day."

Ann was looking at the ground. The blood had mounted red and warm into her face. Suddenly she glanced down the road. Jane Hemingway was just turning into the path leading to her home; her eyes were fastened on them. She paused and stood staring.

"Poor thing!" Ann said, her moist, glad eyes fixed upon Jane. "She is as sorry and repentant as she can be. Her only hope right now, Joe, is that we'll make it up. She used to love you, too, Joe. You are the only man she ever did love. Let's wave our hands to her so she will understand that—we have come to an understanding."

"Oh, Ann, do you mean—" But Ann, with a flushed, happy face, was waving her hand at her old enemy. As for Boyd, he lowered his head to the fence and sobbed.

THE END

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