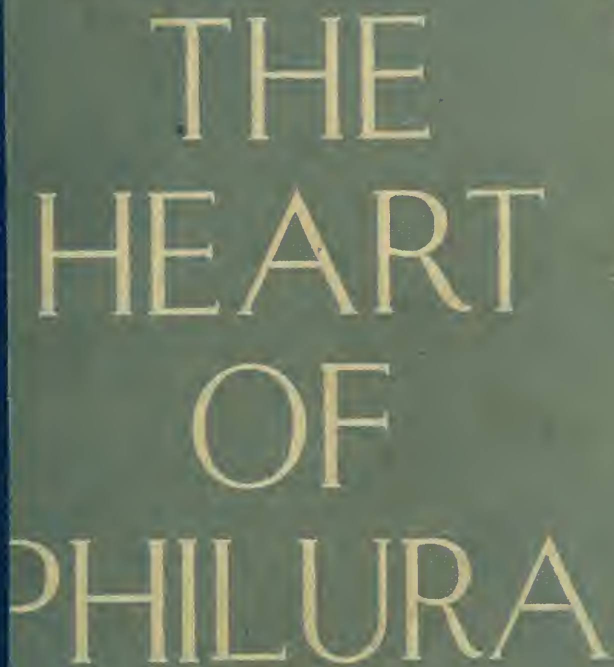
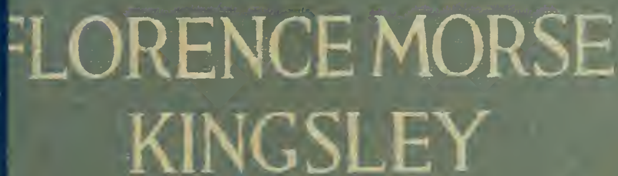

THE
HEART
OF
PHILURA


FLORENCE MORSE
KINGSLEY

East Dennis Asso. Library
No 1861 H

THE HEART OF PHILURA

Quite calmly and simply she found herself thinking of the hidden picture

THE HEART OF PHILURA

By

FLORENCE MORSE KINGSLEY

Author of "The Transfiguration of Miss Philura," "Miss Philura's Wedding Gown," "The Glass House," etc.

FRONTISPIECE BY
ROBERT W. AMICK

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1915

R. H.

Copyright, 1915, by
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Hidden Picture	1
II	Apriling	15
III	Transfiguration	24
IV	"A Spot Where Spirits Blend"	33
V	The Closed Door	46
VI	The Hill Family	57
VII	Malvina Bennett, Dressmaker	70
VIII	The Ornes	82
IX	The Door Ajar	91
X	A Night of Rain and the Morning After	99
XI	A Little Journey in the World	111
XII	Millstones and Opportunities	129
XIII	Not at Home to Visitors	143
XIV	Molly Drives the Cow	155
XV	On the Old Road	163
XVI	Malvina Bennett Points a Moral	171

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVII	Where Is Sylvia?	187
XVIII	Wings of the Morning	201
XIX	Grandma Orne Speaks Her Mind	208
XX	At the Parsonage	221
XXI	The Confession	241
XXII	A Rainy Dawn	252
XXIII	Playing Mother	256
XXIV	Sylvia's Child	271
XXV	" Unto Us a Son Is Born "	290
XXVI	The Parish Hears the News	298
XXVII	The Ladies Aid	317
XXVIII	Miss Philura's Baby	327
XXIX	The Lord Gave	345
XXX	Milly	355

THE HEART OF PHILURA

CHAPTER I

THE HIDDEN PICTURE

April came in on a Monday that year; and Monday being, as all the world knows, the minister's Sabbath, the Reverend Silas Pettibone decided to celebrate it by going to Boston, with the avowed purpose of attending a missionary convention.

"You will—er—of course accompany me, my dear?" he said to his wife, in a tone of perfunctory kindness which did not for a moment deceive her.

She was a small person, with blue eyes under faintly marked, childish brows, and an indeterminate, rosy mouth, like that of a young girl.

At the moment she was industriously employed in cleaning the collar of Mr. Pettibone's best preaching-coat with a bit of black cloth, which she dipped now and then in a cup containing ammonia and water.

"It will look," she said, rather proudly, "almost like new." Then she shook her head. "No; I really couldn't go to Boston to-day. Thank you for asking me, Mr. Pettibone."

"You're welcome, I'm sure, Miss Philura," he replied, a slow smile wrinkling the corners of his kindly eyes.

She looked up at him, and they both laughed, sedately.

" Why won't you come along? " he pursued, with a notable access of eagerness. " I'd really like to have you with me."

But she persisted in her refusal, advancing various housewifely and, therefore, incontrovertible reasons. There was, she said, the study to be cleaned, for one thing.

He frowned slightly at the suggestion.

" Really, my dear Philura, as I think I have said before, I—er—very much prefer not to have you, or anyone, touch that room. Everything is quite as I like it—though I dare say it may appear very untidy to you. Books and papers once arranged to one's hand cannot be disturbed without serious inconvenience. If you don't mind—er—doing something else, my dear; and—ah—leave my study precisely as it is."

She smiled astutely.

" I oughtn't to have mentioned it," she said. " I know you dislike having your room cleaned. Anyway, I have to sweep the parlour to-day, and look after the washwoman."

" Ah, yes," he murmured, " I had quite forgotten the laundress. I suppose you couldn't leave Mrs. Wessels in the house to wait on herself? She would—ah—resent it."

Again that demure smile flitted over Mrs. Pettibone's lips.

"I couldn't think of going," she said, gently. And since the preaching-coat was by this time cleverly freshened and pressed, the minister presently went away in it, quite happy and satisfied, after kissing his wife good-bye at the door.

She stood watching his tall, spare figure as he hurried away down the street. It was a pleasant morning; the sun lay warm and yellow on the rough brown sod, where slender young grass-blades were already pricking greenly to the light. Overhead the big maples tossed their scarlet blooms against a brilliant sky, and from somewhere a great way off came the piercing sweet cry of a meadow lark.

At the precise moment when the rapidly receding figure of the minister disappeared at the far corner of the street, the gate of the parsonage yard clicked, then slammed shut behind the shawled and hooded figure of a woman.

"Good-mornin', Mis' Pettibone," said a sadly resigned voice. "Watchin' him out of sight—uh? Didn't you know that was awful bad luck?"

"Why no, Mrs. Wessels," smiled the minister's wife, "I never heard that it was. Why should it be?"

The woman sighed despondently as she slowly mounted the steps.

"Well, I s'pose it come out the Bible, first er last; most everythin' like that doos. I s'pose mebbe Noah watched the heathen a-goin' away—

him a-standin' in th' door of th' ark—after they'd got through a-laughin' at him fer buildin' it. He didn't see 'em no more. They was all swep' away. An' I remember once I stood on my front stoop—jus' like you was doin'—a-watchin' Wessels goin' to 'is work, an' that very day he fell off the roof an' done somethin' to 'is insides, so he's never been no good fer work sence. My! I no more 'xpected t' be goin' out washin' fer other folks 'an you do this minute! But I'm sure I *hope* our paster'll come home with a hull skin."

Her rebuking glance fastened the responsibility for Mr. Pettibone's needlessly imperilled safety where it belonged.

"Have you had your breakfast, Mrs. Wessels?" the guilty party inquired, as she led the way to the kitchen.

"Well'm, I supped a swaller o' coffee when I give Wessels an' the childern their breakfas'es; but I didn't stop to t' eat nothin'.—No'm, I don't care fer cod-fish; if you've got a strip o' bacon or a slice o' cold meat——"

Mrs. Wessels exhaled a sibilant breath, indicative of profound exhaustion, as she surveyed Mrs. Pettibone's preparations for her refreshment.

"As I says t' Wessels this mornin', 'I dunno,' I says, 'how much longer I'm goin' t' be able t' do other folks' dirty work. I ain't feelin' so well as I did a spell ago.' An' he says t' me, 'Knock on

wood, Louisa,' he says. I had t' laugh. He doos git things mixed so!

"Now I'll set down an' try t' eat a bite. Mebbe I'll get up stren'th t' rub out a few pieces. I s'pose you put the clo'es t' soak, same as usu'l? It's quite a help, if it's done proper."

Having set Mrs. Wessels in the carefully oiled grooves of her morning activities, Mrs. Pettibone betook herself without further delay to the ministerial sanctum. The opportunity was an unusual one and must be improved to the full. Mr. Pettibone was seldom absent from his study for more than an hour or two at a time. He appeared possessed of an uncanny prescience which led him to reappear at unexpected moments in search of an address-book, a pencil, or a fresh supply of enrollment cards for his Sunday school. On at least two occasions he had surprised his wife, arrayed in dust-cap and apron, stealthily removing the accumulated débris of his ministerial labors.

On the first of these occasions, which occurred soon after their marriage, he had bestowed one of his rare caresses upon his bride, as a sort of soothing preliminary; after which, with great gentleness and firmness, he had pointed out to her the totally unnecessary character of her self-appointed task.

"A minister's study, my dear Philura, does not require so-called cleaning," he said. "Cleaning, as you know, involves rearrangement, vicissitude,

change; in a word, disturbance. However desirable, and even useful, such periodic conditions may be in other parts of our home—here they are totally unnecessary and must be—ah—interdicted."

Whereupon he had taken the pains to go into the subject more in detail, pointing out to his wife (who was, as he well knew, the pink of housewifely neatness) how much more serviceable and useful were his various commentaries, concordances, and sacred histories when scattered about the floor in piles convenient to his hand. Arranged in neat, well-ordered rows upon the shelves, the appearance of these volumes might indeed please the eye of a person unacquainted with labors of a literary and religious nature. Order, he pointed out, was unquestionably heaven's first law; but order on the higher planes of mental activity frequently involved what might appear to the uninitiated as a very chaos of disorder. Whereupon, he learnedly illustrated his point by an allusion to the cosmic disintegration incident to the building of a universe, a world, or even so unimportant a sphere as a moon.

Mrs. Pettibone was honestly thrilled by his eloquence; she blushed and smiled, even while she whisked a stray tear from her lashes.

" But the waste-basket," she hesitated, " it was quite full, you know, and the papers were all about the floor. I may empty the basket, mayn't I? and

—and dust just a little—a very little, and quite carefully? Really, the dust was stifling."

But the minister shook his head.

"Decidedly—no!" he said. "Sometimes—that is to say, occasionally—I mislay a paper. Why, only last week I could not, for the moment, lay my hand on the first sheet of my Sunday evening discourse. And where do you think I found it?"

Mrs. Pettibone could not possibly guess.

"On the floor, my dear Philura, where I may casually have dropped it in a moment of abstraction. Now, if, in the meantime, some well-intentioned person—yourself, for example—had entered my room, and had, as you say, tidied it up, I should have been obliged to entirely rewrite that page at great inconvenience to myself."

"How long," inquired Mrs. Pettibone demurely, but with growing hardihood, "were you obliged to hunt for that page?"

"How long? Why—er—really, my dear, I couldn't tell you precisely. I know I went through the entire contents of my waste-basket, and also examined the stray papers on the floor. But I came upon my quarry at last behind the sofa, where I suppose some chance draught had carried it. From this you can see how essentially important, how entirely necessary it is to allow me to care for my own study. I may assure you

that whenever this room really needs cleaning, *I* will clean it!"

And he made a large gesture.

It was more than a month thereafter before she had ventured to disobey these precise commands. To one brought up in the straight and narrow way of New England thrift and order the picturesque confusion of the minister's study was almost more than one could support with outward calm. But when thickly overlaid with dust and the product of the industrious spider it became positively unendurable. With Machiavellian cunning therefore, and dire thoroughness, Mrs. Pettibone swept, cleaned, and dusted her husband's study, sparing not a single cobweb, nor the smallest particle of dust. After which she had restored (as she thought) everything to its accustomed disorder.

But the minister knew better. An experimental morning convinced him that his privacy had again been invaded. Most certainly he had not located Simpkins' Commentary on the Pauline Epistles to the left of his chair, and buried it moreover beneath a staggering load of mediæval histories. Simpkins was a most useful man, always to be kept atop the pile on the armchair at his right. Other subtle, but incriminating evidence cropped up on every hand.

The Reverend Silas gazed narrowly at his wife's unruffled front when he emerged at noon in

response to her cheerful summons to the midday meal.

Did she really suppose she had deceived him?

But the dinner was very good, which might be set down as an extenuating circumstance. He felt his just indignation cooling, as it were, while he partook of a delectable pudding compounded of the humble bread-crumb, to which she was serving him a second time with a shy smile of triumph.

"My dear Philura," he said, "you are a very superior and—er—a very dear little hypocrite. I'm sorry to have to tell you so. But it is quite true, you know."

"Why—Mis-ter Pettibone!" was all she could say. Yet her eyes sank guiltily under his accusing gaze. "I—I can't think what you——"

"Yes; you can,—and you do," he corrected her, calmly. "Didn't I tell you that the stars in their courses must not be interfered with? Didn't I explain how a woman with a broom and dustcloth would doubtless work irremediable havoc in a revolving nebula? And didn't you promise that you would never—never——"

"No, Silas; no!" She shook her head. "I didn't promise you I would never clean your study. How could I?"

"Well," he conceded, "it amounted to the same thing. I forbade it."

She was mute.

"You won't do it again?"

She drew a long, quivering breath.

"I—I'm afraid I'll—have to; if—if—it gets too d-d-dirty!"

She was in his arms the next minute. But, all the same—once she had done crying comfortably on his shoulder—he repeated his former prohibition, with various impressive addenda, calculated to penetrate and suitably influence a mind grown (Mr. Pettibone could not help thinking) somewhat inflexible and unyielding during the years of her solitary maidenhood.

This was the last time the difficult subject of the study had been broached between them. The sacred precincts had remained to the abstracted gaze of the minister in precisely the state of delightful disorder in which, from day to day and from week to week, he had left them. Strangely enough it had not required even the occasional and desultory use of the feather-duster, which he kept hanging on a peg in his closet. A feather-duster, Mr. Pettibone had discovered, speedily and easily restored a fictitious appearance of cleanliness without the devastating processes known and approved by his various housekeepers.

But the initial experience of Adam—to say nothing of countless crucial instances of a later date—has proved conclusively that while man may be the mate of woman he is certainly no

match for her, in her diligent, inexorable, almost unperceived control of the smaller things of life. The Jesuitical quality, as somebody has observed, is essentially feminine. A carefully compiled list of the books to be found in various heaps to the right and left, also at the front and rear of her lord's writing-table; a discreet as well as discriminating elimination of waste paper; and the rest was easy.

To-day, with Mr. Pettibone innocently and safely occupied at the Missionary Convention in Boston, the unprincipled Mrs. Pettibone fairly turned the study inside out. Rugs and curtains fluttered merrily in the wind of the back yard; while learned commentators, hairsplitting theologians, and sober church-historians were unceremoniously shaken, flapped, clapped, and rubbed free from dust. Even the sacred desk itself was dismantled down to its shabby baize cover, and the blotting-pad, originally of a fresh green colour, but long since defaced with the superfluous ink of uncounted sermons came in for a vigorous assault calculated to dislodge the most secretly intrenched particle of the hated dust.

And just here an unkind Fate, Chance—it were an obvious impiety to call it Providence—maliciously (or otherwise) brought Mrs. Pettibone's ardent activities to a sudden halt. For under the impact of her determined little hand a photograph suddenly slipped from its hiding

place. It had been inserted well out of sight between two sheets of blotting-paper.

It was a small card-portrait of a woman, dressed in a gown fashioned after the mode of a previous decade. Mrs. Pettibone picked it up and gazed at it with a mingling of emotions she made no effort to formulate or control. The youthful face which looked back at her from the somewhat dimmed and yellowed card was very sweet and mild; the eyes, large and dark, were shadowed with long lashes, and the mouth, set in wistful curves, seemed to implore the beholder to be kind. About the long, white throat a scarf of lace was knotted loosely, and from behind one ear (the arrangement obviously the careful work of the photographer) hung a long, full curl of dark hair. Beneath was written in the minister's firm, neat hand: "Mary, April 2, 1893."

Like one in a hushed dream, wherein a vague yet aching grief is overlaid with calm, Mrs. Pettibone swiftly and noiselessly restored the writing-table to its wonted condition, with books, pamphlets, papers, and letter-file contesting every available inch of space. She allowed herself no second glance at the picture; but slipped it back at once between the sheets of the blotter, feeling curiously awed—yet, withal, sorry and ashamed, like one who has unwittingly blundered into the presence of the sacred dead in the house of a stranger. Mr. Pettibone had never but once re-

ferred to his dead wife in their talks together. But she knew now what before she had only timidly guessed: he had not—and could not forget the wife of his youth. . . .

Mrs. Wessels was more than unusually loquacious and companionable that noon, while Mrs. Pettibone was preparing the lunch, of a variety and toothsomeness especially calculated to appease that lady's capricious appetite.

"If you're a-fixin' that p'tato fer me," she observed, "leave out the pepper an' put in plenty o' butter. Pepper don't never agree with my stomick. An', as I tell Wessels, if a body's stomick gives out it's all day with 'em.—No; Mis' Pettibone, the clo'es didn't dry a bit good t'day, fer all the wind; so I ain't done a stroke o' ironin.' I c'n rub off some o' the plain pieces this afternoon, if you—Oh, you're goin' out, you say? Why, you look all beat out, what with your sweepin,' and dustin' an' cleanin' all them dirty rugs. I had an awful good mind t' whirl in and help; but, think's I, she'd ruther I'd git this washin' out; so I stuck to m' rubbin'.—Be sure an' have the tea *hot*. Ef there's anythin' I hate an' despise it's *warm tea*. It kind o' turns a body's stomick, same 's it says in Rev'lations: things that's neither hot ner cold, but jest lukewarm, makes a puss'n feel like spittin' 'em right out their mouth. Le' me see, was it th' 'Postle Paul, er the Lord that felt that-a-way? I kind o' ferget. But

whichever of 'em it was, I'm built the very same way. I like my tea *hot!* Where'd you say you was goin' this afternoon? The Ladies' Aid don't meet a Monday—heh?—Oh! An' Mr. Pettibone—where's he gone?—Oh! Well; as I said this mornin', I do hope an' pray he don't git smashed up on the train, er run down by one o' them automobiles. My! ain't they awful! If Wessels hadn't fell off the roof an' hurted 'is insides the way he done, like es not he'd a-been run over an' killed b' now. Then I'd 'a been a lone widow, with four small childern t' look after; 'Louisa,' says Wessels,—whenever I git fretful over him not workin'—'half a 'usban' is better'n no 'usban',' he says. An' I guess that's right. 'Course, Wessels, he ain't no real good, settin' all day an' smokin' 'is pipe b' th' stove. But I guess I'd miss 'im if he wa'n't there. Knock on wood!—You don't believe in it—heh? W'y, Mis' Pettibone, I wouldn't no more neglect knockin' on wood than anythin'! I c'd name hunderds o' times when if I'd fergot t' knock on wood I don't know where I'd 'a be'n. As I was tellin' you, you look all beat out."

She approached her weather-beaten face close to Mrs. Pettibone's. "I'm willin' t' bet," she added, impressively, "you've said er done somethin' reckless 'n' fergot t' knock on wood."

CHAPTER II

APRILING

The clock on the church-tower was striking the hour of three when Mrs. Pettibone locked the door of the parsonage behind her, with a pleasant consciousness of the spotless order reigning within, and of the willow-basket, filled with tidy white rolls against the morrow's ironing. Mr. Pettibone would not arrive from Boston before seven. She had, therefore, three hours of well-earned leisure before her.

What use to make of her brief holiday Mrs. Pettibone had not yet decided, as she hurried down the long street under the tossing maple blossoms. Always there were parish calls to be made, as Mrs. Buckthorn and other influential ladies of the church had kindly pointed out.

"We've done without a paster's wife for seven long years," Mrs. Scrimger reminded her, "and I will say Mr. Pettibone has been *faithful*. But I guess there's some 'at would just as soon he'd stayed single. It made it kind o' interestin' to widows an' single ladies, even if he didn't pay 'em no special attention. I don't know as you've noticed it, but there's several I c'd name that

hasn't darkened the doors of the church since you was married.''

Mrs. Pettibone passed in meditative review two or three old ladies, who had, to use their own forceful phrase, "been housed up all winter.'' Or perhaps she ought to improve the opportunity by calling on the Widow Grover, who had not for more than a year been present at prayer-meeting, where once she had been a conspicuously bright and shining light. It was true that the Widow Grover had not, during a like period, called at the parsonage. But no doubt it was her duty (as the wife of the pastor) to present, as it were, the blameless sacrifice of her shrinking person upon that lady's hair-cloth sofa.

She sighed, as with guilty haste she passed the corner of the street where dwelt the Widow Grover. Then, almost before she was aware of it, the houses of the village, which had appeared to level curious and observant eyes upon her, melted quite away, and she was in the open country, with the wild wind blowing all about her, and brilliant masses of snowy cloud overhead, shining against the intense blue of the sky. There were song-sparrows flitting athwart the brown pastures, and the piercing sweet voices of meadow larks, calling and answering from distant fields, where already the naked earth was upturned to the fruitful sun.

The road wound steeply upward in wide curves

from the lap of the valley, where lay the village of Innisfield, its rows of houses shining warmly amid the leafless trees. Almost at her feet—or so it seemed to the woman on the hillside—the steeple of the Presbyterian church pointed skyward, like a thin, white finger. Near it she could just make out the dull brown walls of the parsonage, half hidden in shrubbery.

Then, quite calmly and simply, she found herself thinking of the hidden picture. He had not meant she should see it. But from henceforth she would be aware of it, like an invisible presence in the room. Did he often take it from its concealment, she wondered? And did he still mourn in secret over the dark, softly-fringed eyes, and the sweet, pensive mouth with its wistful appeal?

She sought diligently among clouded memories of the time when she herself had met and spoken with—*Mary.* She dared to call her this to herself. Once, she remembered, Mrs. Pettibone had come to church wearing a very beautiful blue silk dress, and a hat with a plume of dark blue drooping almost to her shoulder. All during the sermon she had feasted her eyes on the graceful figure. At the close of the service she had hurried down from the choir loft, hoping for an opportunity of speaking to the minister's wife as she passed out of church. But Mrs. Pettibone was already walking away beside her husband, who bent his tall head to listen to something she was saying.

Another time she had ventured to carry a bunch of the earliest arbutus to the parsonage. Mrs. Pettibone was ailing; she had not been to church for a long time. The minister himself had admitted the visitor and conducted her at once to his study, where the invalid was lying on a sofa near the window.

"Just see, Mary, what little Miss Philura has brought you!" he said;—"Arbutus!—and only this morning you were longing for some."

And Miss Philura, blushing very much, and feeling herself very plain and insignificant under the bright dark eyes of the minister's wife, had surrendered the fragrant bunch of pink and white blossoms into fingers almost as fragile and delicate. She remembered still the passion of delight which beamed in the thin face, and the low cry of pleasure, as she inhaled the exquisite wild breath of the flowers,—which, in truth, is unlike and far sweeter than any other sweet odour under the sun.

Was it the memory of this little scene out of her vanished past? Or did she indeed catch the subtle fragrance of the hidden flowers? There were woods near, tall chestnuts and hickories clothing the crest of the hill behind the old Eggleston farm. No one lived in the house now, and there was sure to be arbutus in bloom on the sun-warmed slope beyond the orchard. The sun was still an hour above the horizon; she would

have time, before hurrying home to prepare the late supper.

It was delightfully still and warm under the big trees; the wind had fallen to a low murmur, ineffably peaceful and soothing; under foot the dry leaves rustled pleasantly, sending up clean, penetrating odours of hidden mosses and the good black earth teeming with waking life. Mrs. Pettibone walked slowly, her eyes bent upon the ground; here, perhaps, beneath the shelter of sweeping evergreen boughs; or, yonder, where the sun filtered through tangled branches of beach and hickory. Dropping to her knees she drew aside the warm coverlid nature had spread above her darlings. Then a low cry of rapture burst from her lips. All along the ground lay the arbutus in long, straggling sprays, the small rough leaves of dull green starred with half-open clusters, white as the vanished snows, rosy pink as a baby's crumpled palm.

The true lover is she who gathers arbutus frugally, severing the tough stem with due regard for the shallow, fragile roots; mindful too of the day when the sweetest of all wild flowers will be only a memory. It was no greedy, grasping hand that gathered arbutus on that far hillside. Mrs. Pettibone's work-worn fingers touched the delicate blossoms tenderly, detaching the fragrant sprays with a gentle firmness that destroyed no smallest rootlet. Then, mindful of the reddening

sun, presaging a frosty night, she drew the covering leaves over the unopened buds.

As she rose at last, blossom-laden and meditating swift flight to the kitchen of the parsonage, where (she feared) the fire might be dying, a low sound as of suppressed weeping came to her ears. For an instant her heart beat suffocatingly in her throat. Then all at once she saw coming toward her, between the stems of the trees, a girl.

The youth of the approaching figure was at once apparent. Something in its reckless abandonment to grief; its wild hands beating the air, suggested the futile rage of an angry child, thwarted in some eager desire, or too harshly punished for some trivial fault. Disjointed words mingled with the sobbing came distinctly to the startled listener.

"I'll not bear it—I'll not! I'll not! I can't—I won't! I—I'll run away—anywhere—anywhere! I'll kill myself before I submit——"

Mrs. Pettibone came forward quickly. Obviously this was only a child; but a child in deep trouble.

"My dear," she said, resolutely, though her voice shook a little with the fright of that unlooked-for apparition. "What *is* the matter? What has—happened?"

The girl stopped short, staring with startled eyes at the small grey figure which seemed to

have stepped forth from the greyer boles of the hickories.

"Who are you?" she demanded angrily. "What are you doing? How dare you come here—spying—and—and listening? Did you—did you hear what I said?"

"I heard enough to know that you are in trouble of some sort. Can't I help you—if, perhaps, you have lost your way, or——"

"Lost my way! How could I lose my way? I live there."

She pointed to the house halfway down the slope.

"Oh, I thought the place was unoccupied," faltered the minister's little wife. "It has been for so long, you know. I—was just gathering some arbutus; but I haven't taken it all. Won't you take this?"

The girl refused the flowers with a reckless gesture. Then she turned sharply.

"I supposed I could be alone—up here," she muttered, as she moved away.

"Won't you tell me your name, my dear?" urged Mrs. Pettibone. "Really, I am very sorry—but I only wish you'd tell me—let me—help you. I know how it feels to be—lonesome," she added, with a sudden inspiration. "If you are living in the old Eggleston place you would be sure to find it lonely—just at first. But in summer it is beautiful."

The girl had paused, half turning her head.

" Very soon now the orchards will be all in bloom," went on Mrs. Pettibone, in her gentle voice, " and there are wild flowers—quantities of them all about: violets and pink azalias and columbine and trilliums. Oh, you will be sure to like it; and—if you don't mind telling me your name, my dear? "

The girl gulped down a recurrent sob.

" I—I shall never like it here," she muttered, her red mouth drooping sullenly. " I hate the country. But mother insisted—I say she had no right to bring me here, when I——"

" But surely you'll like it better after a while," persisted Mrs. Pettibone, soothingly. " It isn't far to the village, where there are plenty of young people. You'll be going to school, perhaps, and then——"

The girl's short upper lip lifted, trembled, as if she were on the verge of a laugh.

" School! " she echoed, scornfully. " I see you think I am a child. Well, I'm not."

Mrs. Pettibone sighed vaguely; then smiled.

" You didn't—tell me your name," she murmured.

" My name is Sylvia—Sylvia Cruden, and I'm —married! I was crying because—Oh, because I felt like it! I'd stayed in that stuffy old house till I couldn't stand it another minute! Anybody 'd hate it, and the way mother——"

The girl was halfway down the steep slope, her angry words trailing behind her like sparks from a flying engine.. Mrs. Pettibone watched her perplexedly as she plunged recklessly through the underbrush fringing the orchard fence. A moment later the wild figure had disappeared among the rambling outbuildings at the rear of the farmhouse. . . .

Mr. Pettibone was very cheerful and companionable that night as the two sat over their belated tea. The convention, he told his wife, was more than usually interesting. He had thought of her, while the native missionary from India was describing the marriage customs of that far country, and had really wished he had insisted upon her company to Boston.

"Next time," he concluded, beaming kindly across the space of white table-cloth, "I shall not take 'no' for an answer."

Later, while she cleared away the supper things, she heard him moving about his study. Would he notice the arbutus on the writing table, she wondered; and would he—remember?

She was setting the cups on the pantry shelf, her fingers trembling with an emotion akin to fear, when she heard his swift step behind her.

"Some dear little friend of mine has been Apriling!" he cried gaily. "Was it you, my dear?"

CHAPTER III

TRANSFIGURATION

"Miss Philura,—Heaven bless her!" murmured the minister.

Mr. Pettibone had paused in the slow, meditative progress he found most conducive to logical thought to gaze smilingly out of his study window. Bounding the bleak parsonage yard was a picket fence, innocent of paint these many years, and on its hither side the small, stooping figure of Mrs. Pettibone, clad in the shabbiest of her shabby gowns, appeared exceedingly busy with a garden rake several sizes too large. The minister could already see the green shoots of daffodils and tulips, aspiring hopefully to the unfriendly April skies, while the pile of sodden leaves at one side of the narrow border increased with every vigorous motion of the awkward tool.

The smile faded from Mr. Pettibone's lips; he even sighed, vaguely, as he resumed his steady pacing of the study floor—down a badly worn breadth of carpet, past his desk, heaped with reference books and littered with the loose leaves of an incomplete discourse; from thence, avoiding the crammed waste-paper basket and with a wide detour around the ugly structure of cast-iron,

truthfully called base-burner, to the equally worn breadth on the opposite side of the room.

Here, in front of the high, narrow shelves, stained in imitation of black walnut and infelicitously decorated with scalloped strips of red "leatherette" affixed with rows of brass-headed nails—the work of the minister himself in odd moments—his abstracted gaze fell upon a sort of oasis of fresh red and black carpet. It marked the spot where Mrs. Pettibone (she of the garden rake) had thoughtfully spread a rag rug of chastened and inconspicuous tints. The missing rug was airing in the back yard; but of course the minister hadn't noticed. He surveyed the vivid patch of carpet beneath his slippered feet with vague discomfort. The staring colours in close juxtaposition appeared singularly disturbing to his present line of reasoning. He stared frowningly at the jumble of geometric figures of brilliant red on their black background—or stay, could not the design be interpreted as black figures on a red ground? Either, he concluded, was, if possible, more objectionable than the other.

The Ladies' Aid Society (always written with capital letters) had bought the carpet, "taking money from the unsaved in heathen lands," to quote the fervid protest of Mrs. Deaconess Buckthorn; had sewed the breadths in solemn conclave. After which Mrs. Buckthorn, still piously protestant, had helped Electa Pratt to nail it firmly to

the floor. All this had taken place on the occasion of the pastor's marriage to Philura Rice, last November. And now here was the red and black carpet, betraying the minister's idle pedestrian habits to every keen-eyed parishioner.

"If Mr. Pettibone wants t' tromp," Mrs. Scrimger had observed acidly to Electa Pratt, "why in creation don't he tromp 'round the parish? He's fallen off in his pastoral visitin' somethin' scand'lous sence he got married t' Philura Rice!"

Whereat Miss Pratt had giggled disagreeably.

"Us church members oughtn't t' expect *too* much of Mr. Pettibone," she pointed out. "I guess he's kind of busy 'round the house most the time."

She nodded her befrizzled head in face of shocked incredulity.

"You don't mean t' tell me?"

"Uh-huh! Ma saw him shakin' the parlour rugs last Friday; an' only yeste'day I saw him through the window waterin' *her* house plants!"

"Well, I never! Somebody 'd ought to speak t' Philura."

"That's what I sez t' ma. But ma sez t' me, 'I'd let somebody else do it, Lecty, if I was you.'"

By now the minister in his peregrinations had again reached the study window, from whence he had so whimsically apostrophised the lady with the rake. "Miss Philura" indeed! It wasn't

even proper. After a brief period of indecision the minister removed his doublegown—that is what he called it; and it was double, being composed of faded maroon-coloured flannel within and sprawling palmleaves of divers colours on its outer surface. Having divested himself of this priestly garment, Mr. Pettibone clad his spare person in his third-best preaching-coat, clapped an ancient felt hat, plucked from the top of the book-case, on his rumpled hair, and flung open the door, which connected his sanctum with the outer world.

"Well, my dear?"

The small person with the big garden-tool paused in her labours, turning toward him a smiling face, pinkened with the rude buffetings of the April wind.

"The daffodils are all in bud!" she told him.

He bent his short-sighted gaze upon the sparse border, where clustered green spears were piercing the half-frozen mould.

"Budded?" he repeated, unbelievingly. "Isn't it too early to be looking for flowers, my dear?"

She vouchsafed him a pitying glance.

"Look!" she cried and parted the thick dark leaves with her reddened fingers. "Do you see, way down deep, those little pointed buds?"

Such a passion of suppressed eagerness shook the low voice, that involuntarily he turned puzzled, examining eyes upon her. She was still stooping over the inchoate daffodils, her mouth, faintly red,

set in wistful curves. Mrs. Pettibone was not in her first youth, as everyone in Innisfield knew, being well into her thirties when she married the minister. Electa Pratt, indeed, had been heard to declare that Philura Rice was thirty-six, if she was a day. But Silas Pettibone was not thinking of the delicate lines about his wife's down-drooped eyes, nor of the threads of silver in the soft waves of her brown hair. He was wondering, in dazed, helpless man-fashion, if, after all, Philura was unhappy. It had been something of an experiment, this marriage of theirs. Nobody, it seemed, had approved of it. This much had become increasingly apparent since the day of their return to the parsonage of the Innisfield Presbyterian church.

Philura Rice, living quietly alone in the dilapidated little dwelling of her dead and gone forbears, had attracted neither praise nor blame from the busy maids and matrons of the parish.

She was only "Miss Philura," willing—even anxious to work on committees, pass refreshments at church teas, labour uncomplainingly as teacher of badly-behaved children in Sunday school. But all this had been changed, and by his own deliberate act.

The minister was listening abstractedly to what his wife was saying:

"I couldn't help thinking, Silas, those little round buds are like—like tiny babies cuddled

close and wrapped warm next to their mother's heart."

"Yes, yes; my dear," he assented, "a very pretty idea; and you are quite right; I think we may count on an earlier spring than usual. Let me see, this—er—is the tenth; isn't it?"

"No, dear; it is the twelfth," she corrected him, gently.

The she raised herself with a sigh.

"I must go in," she said. "There is a meeting of the Mothers' Club at the public school this afternoon."

"But why a Mothers' Club?" he asked, a slight frown gathering between his brows. "I should think you had enough to do without——"

"The women asked me to join," she told him, "and I—— Really, Silas, I like to go. There are questions of—of interest to be discussed."

"To mothers of school children—yes," he agreed. "But you, of course——"

Something in her look halted his words, expressive as they were of simple, unquestioned fact. A flood of hot colour surged into her averted face.

"Oh, of course, I——" she echoed faintly. "But, you see, dear, I thought I ought to be interested, since so many of the children from our parish are in the school. And on that account——"

"H'm," he commented dubiously. "Well; if

you like it, my dear, there's nothing more to be said. But I cannot consent to have you running hither and yon at everybody's beck and call. You must remember, Miss Philura, you married me, not the parish."

She smiled up at him—he was a tall man and she a little woman—the hot colour in her face slowly subsiding into the delicate wild-rose flush he loved to see there.

"It would certainly be dreadful to marry the parish," she declared. "I'd rather live and die an old maid."

The mirth suddenly dropped out of his face. He looked down at her anxiously.

"If you should ever really think that," he mused in a low voice. "If you should be sorry—I've been wondering lately——"

"About me?" she queried. "You've been wondering?——"

"If you are really quite happy. If, after all, I wasn't wholly selfish to bring you here. This isn't an easy parish; and, collectively, I believe it has an ogreish notion it has married you—blood, bones, and body."

Her blue eyes, full of gentle raillery, met his.

"You know you're talking nonsense!" she accused him. "I was just a lonely, unhappy old maid, when you—wonderful you—came to me, right out of the Encircling Good. Oh, what a sur-

prise you were!—And happy? Of course I'm happy;—living with you, seeing you every day——"

"Yes, and working for me like a slave," he interrupted ruefully. "Cooking and scrubbing for me, patching and darning and the rest; it's no sinecure. I know that much, and often you look very tired. And besides all this, the endless meetings and committees and——"

"Stop!" she cried, a wonderful rose of love blooming in her face. He had witnessed that subtle transfiguration of its gentle commonplace twice before; once when he told her he loved her, and again on the day of their marriage.

"Don't you know," she said; "it is just that—the work, the—being tired, yes; even the parish—*for you*—that makes me happy? Oh, if I could only be something greater, grander, more worth while—for *you!*"

A swift lightning flash from the shy virginal depths of her soul to unplummeted deeps of his passed between them.

"Do you mean?" he asked, his voice suddenly shaken and eager; "Am I to understand, my dear, that you——"

She shook her head. The light and colour, so suddenly kindled within her, subsided as swiftly, leaving her middle-aged face quiet, even dull, like a sober landscape from which the sun has withdrawn itself.

"No," she said, without pretence of misunderstanding his agitated look and gesture. "There is no hope of that, I fear."

Her small, roughened fingers closed across her breast, as if she could no longer bear his gaze, bent to scrutinise its unveiled secret.

CHAPTER IV

"A SPOT WHERE SPIRITS BLEND"

"I WONDER," said Mrs. Pettibone timidly, "if you would tell me something, honest and truly, black and bluely, as the children say. Or at least," she corrected herself, "as they used to say when I was a child. It was a long time ago, and perhaps——"

"Come, come, Miss Philura," protested the minister, who was in the act of struggling into his greatcoat, a very shabby coat, by the way. "You're not old, and you never will be! And I'll tell you anything and everything you want to know, up to the limit of my knowledge, cross my heart an' hope t' die, as they used to say when I was a boy, 'way back in the last century."

He stooped and kissed his wife, who stood waiting for him, clad in her waterproof and second-best hat. She coloured becomingly, as her husband surveyed her with smiling eyes. In truth those delicate, girlish blushes, and the trick she had of lowering her lashes before his direct gaze lent a perennially youthful look to her small face.

It was Thursday evening, and as the two stepped from the shelter of their porch large blobs of wet snow, like pallid hands reaching down out

of the darkness, smote against their faces. Two or three church bells, unattuned as the rival doctrines they strove to voice, were tolling dismally.

"I'm afraid we shan't have many out to meeting to-night," the minister was saying.

Mrs. Pettibone sighed. Faint as the sound was, he heard it.

"You must be tired after all that gardening, dear," he protested. "Why not go back and stop by the fire?"

"No—oh, no! I'm not a bit tired. I was only wondering——"

"Ah, I had forgotten. Out with it, little woman!"

She hesitated, and he felt her fingers tighten upon his arm.

"Perhaps I'm dreadfully wicked to even think of such a thing; but—do you—really like—prayer-meeting?"

"Do I—really like prayer-meeting? Isn't that—er—rather what one might call a leading question to put to your pastor?"

"Yes; it is," she acknowledged, with what she felt to be almost brazen calm. "But you said you'd tell me."

"H'm," mused the minister, smiling to himself under cover of the darkness; "why, so I did. And the question is, do I like——"

"Yes; do you?"

" I ought to, Heaven knows! If I don't, isn't it my own fault? "

" No," she said, still calm and bold beyond her wont. " No," she repeated, still more firmly; " it is not your fault. Now I——"

She paused, as if to choose her dreadful words with scrupulous care.

" I — dislike and — dread — prayer - meeting. There! I've said it! "

" My *dear!* " cried the minister, honestly aghast. " You don't really mean——"

" Yes; I do! I've been thinking for a long time —ever since we were married. I didn't mind it so much before. Do forgive me. I oughtn't to have said it! "

The minister had unconsciously quickened his long stride so that the little woman at his side was half running to keep up.

" Please forgive me! " she entreated breathlessly.

" I'm not angry," he assured her. " I'm only surprised and—er—ashamed. But what shall I do? We've got to have a prayer-meeting; and——"

He cleared his throat argumentatively.

" The upper room in Jerusalem," he went on, " where the disciples were gathered, with one accord, in one place, furnishes the example, my dear. The church is bound to follow it. Don't you see, Miss Philura, it would never do to give it up? "

"They *wanted* something," murmured the lady he persisted in miscalling. "They wanted something real—perhaps they didn't know exactly what it was; but they wanted it. Besides they were afraid."

"Of the hostile Jews; yes," he approved, "and they received their reward in the shape of cloven flames of fire, the gift of tongues, and all the rest. It was a magnificent demonstration and—ah—example."

"But we don't get anything," persisted the gentle, carping voice at his elbow. "Elder Trimmer and Deacon Buckthorn and Sister Salter——"

"Be careful, my dear," warned the minister. "Somebody might be coming behind us."

"They *tell* God things when they pray, as if he never even heard of Innisfield," she pursued *sotto voce;* "and when Mrs. Buckthorn prays for the pastor, I——"

"Good-evening, Mr. Pettibone," interrupted a majestically nasal voice out of the darkness, and a large figure loomed up in the immediate foreground. "I was just comin' out of my house, and I thought to myself: seems to me I hear Philura Rice's voice. How are you this evening, Philura?"

Thus invoked, the minister's wife, all pink and trembling, confessed to a degree of health as if it were a crime.

" I really can't bring myself yet to call you *Missis Pettibone,* when I recall the many, many years you sat under my instruction in the Sabbath school as Philura Rice. I little thought in those days that I was a chosen vessel for sowing the good seed in our pastor's second wife. No, indeed, how little do we realize our responsibilities. The first Mrs. Pettibone was living at that time, I recall; quite a different type of woman from yourself, Philura. Mary Pettibone was too good for this wicked world, as I've often and often remarked to Mr. Buckthorn."

The lady heaved a windy sigh, as she slowly descended the steps leading to the basement room where the prayer-meetings were held. There was a subtle air of reproof in Mrs. Buckthorn's manner, as she shook the clinging snow from her garments in the dimly-lighted vestibule.

" Yes-s-s, my dear Philura," she went on sibilantly, with a final comprehensive clash of her jetted cape, " more than once of late I have wr-wrestled before the Throne of Grace in your behalf. It has been borne in on me that you stand in special need at this time."

Mrs. Buckthorn was a tall, stout person, of a cast of features the minister's wife had more than once compared with the dreadfully fascinating portrait of the Pharaoh of the Oppression as depicted in the back of her teacher's Bible.

Mrs. Buckthorn's resemblance to the mummy

of Rameses II. was more strongly marked than common as she turned to the pastor, who was in the act of depositing his umbrella in a remote corner. Grown sadly wise during a long pastorate he had observed that parishioners, even of the most sanctified type, sometimes appropriate the ministerial umbrella.

"I learned to-day, Mr. Pettibone, that you have not yet called upon an influential family which has recently moved into the old Eggleston place. I was *sorry* to hear it."

"Ah?" said Mr. Pettibone urbanely. "But I was not aware——"

"If you had asked *me,*" anticipated Mrs. Buckthorn, "I could have told you the very day they came to town."

Her large wagging forefinger pointed, as it were, the moral.

"Two weeks ago yesterday—in all that rain!—You may recall the storm we had, Philura?—the expressman called at our house for a package. I make it a rule to send our outworn winter garments to the Salvation Army at this time of the year. And, as I was saying, John Snider had six trunks on the wagon. I counted them myself. Six trunks marked C. But Snider insists the name is Hill. I do hope and trust you'll not delay to visit them, Mr. Pettibone. If the Methodists——"

But the minister, turning a troubled, though benevolent smile, upon the wife of his senior

deacon, was holding wide the door for the two ladies to precede him.

" All in good time, my dear Mrs. Buckhorn," he said. " And thank you for letting me know."

His quick eye took in at a glance the sparse sprinkling of men and women on the wooden benches. He knew them well; the " Faithful Few," he was accustomed to apostrophise them in his opening prayer, making mention also of the familiar promise relating to the gathering of the two or three and the mystic, unseen presence in their midst.

The cracked bell overhead ceased its complaining; the minister mechanically reached for his hymn-book. Electa Pratt was already in her place before the wheezy little cabinet organ.

" Let us sing hymn five hundred and twenty-eight, omitting, if you please, the second stanza," he heard himself saying, in his usual forensic voice.

Then like one in a dream, wherein many braided streams of thought mingle confusedly, he listened to the weak discordant singing, with his wife's thin, clear soprano striving through it.

> " From every stormy wind that blows,
> From every swelling tide of woes,
> There is a calm, a sure retreat;
> 'Tis found beneath the mercy seat! "

A sudden gust of sleet pattered against the tall uncurtained windows; one of the malodorous gas-jets flared up in a stealthy draft. Deacon Scrimger rose stiffly and tiptoed across the room to turn it down.

"There is a spot where spirits blend
Where friend holds fellowship with friend."

Mrs. Buckthorn was singing loudly, nasally, her pious glance upturned to the dingy ceiling. Mr. Pettibone sighed, his troubled eyes resting for an instant on the small, meek figure of his wife. Her face under the unfashionable hat-brim looked unnaturally pale and delicate in the flickering yellow light. Resolutely he took up his Bible and turned to the passage he had selected and marked an hour ago in his study. That was before he knew Philura "disliked and dreaded" prayer-meeting. Then, with entire unexpectedness, a sick distaste for the ugly, ill-lighted room, for the stout complacent matron in the front row of seats, for the hawk-nosed old man, with his shifty eyes, sitting behind her, for Electa Pratt, and the battered instrument at which she presided, surged up within him. He read the familiar words coldly, stiffly, aware of his wife's timidly repentant gaze upon his face, and more remotely of Electa Pratt in the act of absorbing a cough-drop, while she stealthily turned the pages of the hymnal, in

search of a tune devoid of supernumerary flats and sharps.

At his pastor's formal request, Elder Trimmer, arose to lead in prayer. Mr. Trimmer was the enterprising proprietor of Innisfield's largest store: The Trimmer Dry Goods Emporium, to make use of its owner's chosen designation. In just what manner Mr. Trimmer had been led to entertain the belief that the continued prosperity of the Emporium as well as the length of his days depended in some unexplained manner upon the regularity of his attendance at the stated meetings of the church, his pastor only vaguely understood. But this appeared to be the case. Mr. Trimmer was setting forth the matter circumstantially and at great length, in phraseology borrowed indiscriminately from Milton's Paradise Lost, the Psalms and the Pauline Epistles. He spoke of his miraculous " conversion from the way of sinners," of his " blessed experiences since he first met the Lord," of his " godly sorrow over lost souls;" passing on after a brief but pointed allusion to the heathen in foreign lands to the condition of the Presbyterian church in Innisfield. This particular outpost of Zion, Mr. Trimmer confidentially informed Deity, was in a most lamentable condition. The Saints (presumably excepting the proprietor of the Emporium) were languishing; the walls were broken down, and there appeared (with one notable exception) to be

no one who felt a flaming zeal in the subject of their upbuilding. Meanwhile the wicked flourished like a green bay-tree, and the Devil went about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour, with no one to let or hinder. In view of this untoward condition of affairs, Mr. Trimmer, in a loud and truculent voice, demanded that the pastor of the church might be "visited from on high;" that his lips might be "touched with a live coal from off the altar," and that he might be more faithful in the performance of his duty. Then evidently fearing misapprehension, either on the part of the Most High or Mr. Pettibone, the fervid petitioner kindly enumerated these duties, as he (Mr. Trimmer) saw them.

It was a masterly effort, even for Elder Trimmer. Mrs. Buckthorn heaved a pious sigh, as she murmured in the ear of the pastor's wife, "My! what a beautiful prayer!"

Mr. Pettibone, pilloried in the leader's seat, nervously fingered his hymn-book, while Electa Pratt suggested a number in her loud, buzzing whisper.

> "Bles-st be-e the tie-i that bi-in's,
> Our hear-rts in Chri-istian love!"

bleated the discordant chorus. But the voice of all others he listened for and loved no longer pierced the weak clamour with its pure, sweet note.

They were walking soberly homeward in the quiet starlight, which April-wise had followed rain and snow and sleet, like the sound of the still small voice.

" I wish," he said, almost roughly, " that I had learned the art of brick-laying, or house-building, or—anything useful and—honest. I fear I'm a complete failure as a minister of Christ's gospel. That prayer-meeting, now; it was no worse than common, I suppose. But I—somehow I never thought it could be anything else."

" It is all my fault," she murmured, contritely. " I ought not to have spoken as I did."

" What you said was entirely just," he told her firmly. " But The Presence in the midst—how could it remain there a single instant to-night? "

" Oh! " she breathed, with the impetuous little gesture he knew so well. " It is everywhere! It is the All-Encircling Good. We couldn't escape it even if we tried! "

" So we declare in our creeds," he sighed; " but I am so utterly unimaginative—so dull, I fear I forget sometimes."

" Everything we need—yes, or want is in the Encircling Good," she went on dreamily. " You were there, and I didn't even know it. It was only when I asked—and believed—that you came."

Silas Pettibone did not attempt a reply; instead he absent-mindedly patted the hand that rested on the sleeve of his shabby greatcoat. At the moment he was very far from understanding his wife's changing mood.

"We must make a round of visits to-morrow, my dear," he said, after a lengthening pause. "If a family has moved into the old Eggleston place, somebody must show themselves friendly, and that much we can do."

"There is a young woman there," his wife informed him unexpectedly.

"Ah? When did you——"

"I met her walking in the grove back of the house the other day. I was looking for arbutus. She had been crying, I think. At least her eyes——"

"H'm!" mused the minister.

"She was a tall, handsome girl; and she seemed angry because I—at least I thought it was because I met her all of a sudden, when she supposed herself to be quite alone. Of course I apologised and told her I thought the house was unoccupied. It has been for so long, you know."

"And you made some inquiries, my dear? I hope you let her know who you were. It might serve to introduce us."

"I'm afraid I forgot about being the minister's wife; I'm not very used to it yet. I tried to comfort her. But she wouldn't listen. She said she

hated the place.—And it is lonesome up there, you know. Then I asked her if she wouldn't tell me her name, and she said it was Sylvia—Sylvia Cruden, and she was married. But I'm sure she looked more like a child in her teens."

CHAPTER V

THE CLOSED DOOR

The old Eggleston place, as it had been called through three generations of that name, lay well back from the town in a lap of the hills, commanding a view of the village embowered in trees and of the more distant river glassing the sky in long, lazy reaches between its low green banks. Miss Minerva Eggleston, the only surviving daughter of the Squire, had lived in the old house for more years than any one of her neighbours cared to count, cultivating its impoverished acres, with the aid of a superannuated farm-hand, who had worked on the place since his early youth. Some thirty years previous there had been a persistent rumour to the effect that Nathan Shedd was madly in love with his employer's daughter, and that Miss Minerva, a handsome, robust girl, with two years of boarding-school to her credit, had very properly flouted him, but with unmerited scorn and contumely.

Yet the years avenged Nathan. Miss Minerva, despite her accomplishments and the undeniable comeliness of her face, remained unwed. One by one her kith and kin died and were buried under the pointing shadow of the tall Eggleston monu-

ment; till at the last Miss Minerva found herself on the downhill road from her forty-ninth birthday and only the quasi-possessor of the big shabby house, in the midst of its heavily mortgaged acres. This much is sober history.

What follows might well be the highly embellished tale of a coterie of country gossips; but it is said that on the morning after the old Squire's funeral Nathan Shedd walked into the kitchen, where Miss Minerva Eggleston was washing up the dishes, slow tears dropping down her faded cheeks. Not, it may be supposed, out of grief for the old Squire, who had died to all intents and purposes more than a year before of a stroke of paralysis; but because she thus tardily realized herself alone and lonely on a long and dismal road of life.

There were only those two in the big farm kitchen, and neither of them ever spoke of what happened. So it must have been the chickadee who told. She was perched on the lilac bush just outside the window, her wise brown head cocked to one side, her bright eyes fixed on the pair inside the kitchen.

Nathan Shedd stood staring at Miss Minerva without saying a word, while she polished and polished the old knives and forks. After a while he cleared his throat.

"I've been thinkin'," he said, "I've been thinkin' things over, since yeste'day."

" Have you, Nate? " said Miss Minerva, wiping her tears on the corner of her apron.

Nathan's voice sounded curiously hard to Miss Minerva, and she looked at him beseechingly out of the corner of her wet, reddened eyes. He was dressed (she noticed) in a new suit of blue serge, she'd never laid eyes on before, and his shirt and his collar and his necktie were all new. He was shaved, too, although it was only the middle of the week. But that she laid to the funeral being the day before.

" I've been thinkin'," he said, still in that slow, hard voice, " about you, Minerva."

" Well? " she murmured, dull and heavy with crying.

" You ain't so rich as you was once, Minerva," he went on, numbering the counts of his indictment on the fingers of his left hand. " An' you ain't so young as you was—by thirty years, say."

" I'm forty-nine," she told him, defiantly.

" You ain't so han'some as you ust t' be, not by a long chalk," he persisted, like a boy who has learned his piece and is bound to speak it.

Two big tears dropped into the dishpan. No woman likes to hear the sort of thing he was saying in that hard voice of his.

" Your folks are all dead," he reminded her, with unnecessary cruelty. " An' I'm goin' West. I thought mebbe I'd better tell you."

At that she burst right out crying, and turned to

run out of the room. But somehow, being all blind with tears, she ran into Nathan's arms which were outspread to catch her.

They were married the next week. Then it came out that Nathan Shedd had been steadily growing richer, all the while Miss Minerva, by slow and painful degrees, was slipping into poverty. During the thirty-odd years he had worked on the old Eggleston place (enduring as best he might the scorn in Miss Minerva's eyes) he had thriftily saved many dollars, investing them all in Western farm lands.

The Rev. Silas Pettibone and his wife, jogging along the country road behind the minister's old sorrel horse, were talking over this sober romance.

"I always felt so sorry for Miss Minerva because Nathan insisted on going West," said the minister's wife, sentimentally, as they turned in at the big ivy-covered gate-posts. "She must have loved this old place."

"I think Nathan did exactly right," differed the minister, with some positiveness. "Don't you see, my dear, if they had remained here Miss Minerva's pride would always have stood between them like a barrier. She would have been secretly ashamed to the end of the chapter to think that, after all, she had married the old Squire's hired man.

"Out in Oregon she is merely the wife of that prosperous land-owner, Nathan Shedd. Nobody

knows or cares that she was once the handsomest girl in Innisfield, and the daughter of a rich man. No, my dear, it is sometimes best to wash the slate clean and begin the problem all over again."

He helped his wife from the old-fashioned buggy with a careful hand, having an eye to the muddy wheel and the shining folds of her best gown.

"How nice you look, Miss Philura," he said, gently, "that—er—black and purple stuff is quite becoming, after all."

The little lady blushed and smiled.

"I haven't worn it often," she said, shaking out the heavy brocade. "It is almost too rich and handsome for church socials, and we have so few weddings in the parish."

"Let me see, wasn't that almost a wedding gown?" he inquired, with gentle jocularity.

Mrs. Pettibone had turned her head and was looking at the big house, half hid in overgrown shrubbery.

"Do you know," she said, "I thought for a moment I saw a face at the window looking at us. But it disappeared directly."

The minister was brushing a few hairs, strayed from the old sorrel's back, off his second-best preaching-coat.

"Well, my dear, that wouldn't be so very surprising, would it? I don't suppose many people have called on the family as yet."

He walked deliberately, yet with a certain kindly authority, toward the front door, withdrawn under its deep pillared portico with an air of dignified reserve.

"It doesn't look as if anybody lived here," said his wife, glancing about half timidly.

"I have Mrs. Buckthorn's testimony to the contrary—to say nothing of your own, my dear," quoth the minister, cheerfully.

He had already pulled the rusted bell-handle, and now stood, a tentative smile on his lips, confidently awaiting the opening of the tall, heavily pannelled door. There were narrow windows of leaded glass on either side, and Mrs. Pettibone's bright eyes dwelt meditatively on the grey cobwebs, swinging like tattered curtains in the April air. High up in the tops of the dense evergreens a lonely little wind was sighing, and from a long way off the cawing of a flight of crows against the clouded blue of the sky came faintly to the ear.

The smile slowly faded from the minister's face. He appeared to be listening with bent head to the intermittent dropping of water from a broken leader-pipe into the depths of a subterranean cistern.

"Perhaps," ventured Mrs. Pettibone, under her breath, "the door-bell——"

She stopped short, her face assuming the discreetly cheerful look of one about to greet a stranger.

" Did you hear——" she whispered, after a lengthening pause.

" A step? " he finished. " I fancied I heard a board creak inside. But——"

He applied his knuckles smartly to the door.

" If there is anyone at home, I imagine they will hear that," he observed.

But the door remained fast. The sound from within, whatever its nature, was not repeated. A dark cloud passed overhead.

" Well," said the minister, doubtfully, " I am afraid we are wasting valuable time."

" And it looks like a shower," murmured his companion. " I really wish I'd worn my alapaca."

But Mr. Pettibone was not attending. He stepped off the portico with an air of fresh resolve.

" You might wait here, my dear," he suggested; " I'll go 'round the house. I remember in Miss Minerva's day we always used the side entrance."

Left to herself, Mrs. Pettibone perched her small person gingerly on the edge of a wooden bench, built into the side of the porch in more hospitable days. The wind in the tree-tops had by now deepened into a soft, all-pervasive roar. Mrs. Pettibone smoothed down the folds of her gown, gathered providently from a too intimate contact with the brick floor. There were piles of damp leaves under the opposite bench, she ob-

served, and decided that, for once, the omniscient Mrs. Buckthorn had been mistaken. But, on the other hand, she had certainly met a girl walking in the woods behind the house, only the week before. She recalled once more the tall, hurrying figure; the stormy beauty of the face under its wind-blown tresses. The girl was bare-headed; Mrs. Pettibone had noticed particularly the heavy reddish hair hanging in a long untidy braid. For the rest the stranger had appeared like a schoolgirl in her blue serge frock, with its sailor blouse and short skirt. She had been crying,—with homesickness, no doubt. Mrs. Pettibone recalled the big dark eyes, reddened and brimming with arrested tears.

"Really, I don't know when I've ever felt so embarrassed," the minister's wife told herself, as she absent-mindedly smoothed and patted the large black leaves sprawled vaguely upon the dim purple background of the brocade across her knee.

How curiously everything linked itself to something else! The black and purple brocade, almost before she was aware of the transition, had carried her thoughts quite away from the vivid presence of the strange girl under the wind-blown trees to other and more intimate scenes of her own past. How distinctly she remembered the morning when the expressman left the flat oblong package. It had come from Boston—from Cousin Caroline Van Duser, as she guessed at

once. She had written to Cousin Caroline, informing her of her contemplated marriage to Mr. Pettibone, and here was the reply, in tangible form. She knew of course that it was something to make over.

Mrs. Van Duser, like some stately galleon sailing over life's stormy sea, trailed behind her a frothing wake of dresses, cloaks, and bonnets, all of the choicest and most expensive materials. Many women of Mrs. Van Duser's acquaintance unblushingly sold their cast-off finery, haggling viciously behind the closed doors of their boudoirs with certain shrill-voiced, hook-nosed women from dubious shops in East Boston. Others, less avaricious or more indolent, abandoned the flotsam and jetsam of a fashionable career to their maids. But not so Mrs. Van Duser. This estimable lady, while piously recognising the decrees of a Providence which saw fit to array her own ample person with a magnificence akin to that of Solomon in all his glory, was disposed to regard her outworn clothing in the light of a sacred obligation to those less richly provided for. No one could realise more deeply than Mrs. Van Duser the incalculable detriment wrought by unthinking gifts of finery to those destined by the same discreet Providence to a lowly station in life. Upon Philura Rice she had been in the habit of bestowing certain substantial garments, mostly of woollen materials and sober, inconspicuous hues; saved,

moreover, from a too recent and fashionable appearance by a ripening sojourn in Mrs. Van Duser's attic. Philura Rice was a distant—a very distant—relative of Mrs. Van Duser; and an entirely worthy person in her own plane of existence. A plane, be it understood, far removed from the orbit in which Mrs. Van Duser revolved in majestic splendour.

Mrs. Van Duser had not approved of Philura Rice's marriage to the Rev. Silas Pettibone. Philura, she felt, had been guilty of climbing up some other way—to make use of a scriptural phrase—somehow outwitting Providence, which had plainly indicated the humbler path of solitary spinsterhood. Still, since Philura appeared bent upon rushing in where angels fear to tread, she would look over the contents of her wardrobe of the year before last, with a view to the approaching event.

Mrs. Pettibone, still gently and absent-mindedly patting the skirt of her gown as she listened to the rising wind in the tree-tops, recalled once more the agitated and hopeful beating of her heart as she painstakingly unknotted the stout string which tied the package from Boston. She was hoping, foolishly, almost sinfully (she told herself), that Cousin Caroline had sent her a white dress,—or at the least a soft grey, of the shimmering satin, coloured like the breast of a dove, which Mrs. Van Duser had elected as her favorite garb

of state. The garment within, as she had already been apprised by letter, was, in Mrs. Van Duser's estimation, a most suitable dress for the occasion of the marriage.

When at last the cover was off, and the string carefully rolled into a neat ball, Miss Philura had lifted the shrouding folds of tissue paper to find —this! She could never forget the shock of surprise and disappointment when at last she found courage to lift the stiff, heavy brocade from its wrappings. Tears there had been, in those first moments; then determined revolt.

"I will not be married in a black and purple dress!" she had declared to the surrounding silence, which later had revealed itself as both intelligent and beneficent, though at the moment it was voiceless of inspiration, or even hope.

The sound of steps and the creaking of the heavy door on its hinges roused Mrs. Pettibone from a happy vision of herself, clad all in bridal white, soming slowly down the aisle of the crowded church on the arm of the minister.

Hurriedly she rose to her feet, the thrill of that realised dream flooding her face with radiance. In the doorway stood the tall, stout figure of a woman, regarding her fixedly out of dark, dull eyes.

CHAPTER VI

THE HILL FAMILY

"You are Mrs. Pettibone," the woman said quickly; "won't you come in? I hope you'll pardon the condition of our door-bell. It was broken when we arrived, and we haven't been able, so far, to find anyone to fix it."

Rather dazedly the minister's wife found herself being piloted into the tall, dark parlour at the left of the hall. The woman's voice—a soft, monotonous voice—ran on:

"I'm afraid you have been waiting rather longer than you found pleasant on our inhospitable doorstep. But you see we weren't looking for visitors, and so——"

She paused as she indicated a chair.

The minister, who had seated himself on the opposite side of the hearth, where a low fire was smouldering, smiled professionally. It was a pleasant smile, expressive of genuine kindness and simplicity of heart, upon which his wide pastoral experience had superimposed sad knowledge of a sinful and dying world in all its manifold needs and complexities.

"You understand, Mrs.—er—Hill, that we—Mrs. Pettibone and myself—endeavour to see all

the new comers to the parish," he began rather stiffly. "We—ah—hope that we may be able to be of service, either in the way of directing those who may desire a church home, or——"

His hostess was smiling, too; yet the minister felt himself vaguely uncomfortable under the scrutiny of those curiously opaque eyes beneath their drooping lids.

"You are very kind, I'm sure," murmured the woman.

Mrs. Pettibone, quite unnoticed in the deep chair to which she had been consigned, fell to examining the room with a child's eager curiosity. It was furnished much as it had been in Miss Minerva Eggleston's day. Nathan Shedd had not approved his wife's desire to transport her ancestral belongings to their new home.

"The's no use o' carting all that old stuff out West," he had stated. "We c'n buy a plenty more where we are going. I mean to have everythin' new!"

Mrs. Pettibone recognised one by one Miss Minerva's antique chairs and sofas; but they had been curiously transformed by a rich Oriental covering here, and a pile of embroidered cushions yonder. There was a gay little work basket on the table by the fire, and a heap of books and magazines littered the top of the big square piano, which had been dragged from its dark corner to a position near the pendant lamp. Then her eyes

wandered to the windows, hung with fresh muslin, and the pot of crocus, gay with purple and yellow blooms, which brightened the high mantel-shelf.

"You have one or more children, I understand?" Mr. Pettibone was saying, still professionally. "I believe my wife met your daughter, quite—er—by accident, not long ago."

Mrs. Hill darted a keen glance of inquiry at the minister's wife.

"My son and his wife are with me for the present," she said, coldly. "Possibly—you saw Mrs. Walter Hill."

"Oh!" murmured Mrs. Pettibone in a surprised voice.

Her blue eyes scanned the woman's face with undisguised interest.

"You are thinking perhaps that my daughter-in-law resembles me," Mrs. Hill said, dryly. "It is easily explained; my son and his wife are cousins."

"Oh!" commented Mrs. Pettibone again; this time with a falling inflection. "She seemed very —young," she added, hurriedly. "At least I—have that impression."

Mrs. Hill's curiously disconcerting gaze was levelled full upon her. It seemed impossible not to go on talking—explaining.

"I was out looking for arbutus," the minister's little wife went on, stealing a look at her husband, who smiled back encouragement. "The arbutus

is always earliest and pinkest in Miss Minerva's woods, you know."

"Miss—Minerva?"

The woman's voice expressed a polite, yet chilling curiosity.

"Perhaps I should have said Miss Eggleston, or—Mrs. Shedd. This is her place, of course you know,—or was. Perhaps they have sold it. But I hadn't heard that you—— It is really *very* pleasant here, especially in warm weather."

Mrs. Pettibone, all pink and agitated, gazed beseechingly at her hostess. But Mrs. Hill was apparently blind to her discomfort.

"You were speaking of my daughter-in-law," she said, getting up rather quickly for so large a person. "I will see if she is at home. You—met her, you say?"

"In the woods—yes. She was walking there quite alone, and—I—I couldn't help thinking she might be feeling—a little homesick." Mrs. Pettibone was forced to tilt her chin upward, in order to meet the woman's penetrating gaze. She felt curiously shamed and confused, like a child detected in some flagrant bit of mischief. Yet she could not help noticing Mrs. Hill's dress, which was of rich material, but stained and spotted down the front breadth, as if (Mrs. Pettibone thought) she had washed dishes in it, without an apron.

"We keep no servant," Mrs. Hill informed her

abruptly. "And we rent the place. I shall not —buy it, for the present, till we see if we are going to like it."

She turned and walked swiftly to the door, her feet making no sound on the old velvet carpet with its large dim roses.

"I should like you to meet my son," she added, pausing with her hand on the knob to look steadily at the minister; "—if you will excuse me for a moment, while I call him, and Mrs. Walter Hill,—I believe I told you she is my niece."

The minister and his wife sat motionless in their places, listening to the sound of the woman's receding footfalls, as she ascended the uncarpeted stair. The roar of the wind in the evergreens penetrated the stillness that followed like a solemn voice. Mrs. Pettibone stole a timid glance at her husband. He was looking fixedly out of the window, his lips firmly compressed, his dark brows drawn over thoughtful eyes. She feared he had disapproved her unthinking remarks to their prospective parishioner.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have spoken of her daughter-in-law as being young or—homesick," she reflected. "But it is a lonesome sort of place for a young girl, even if she is married."

She wondered vaguely how it would seem to have one's aunt for a mother-in-law, and for no assignable reason decided that it would not be at all nice.

Then her eyes were drawn once more to the gay, beribboned basket on the table almost within reach of her hand. Someone had been working there, a handsome gold thimble had rolled to the edge of the table, and a spool of fine cotton lay on the floor. There was a mass of filmy white stuff in the basket. Mrs. Pettibone could see a strip of narrow lace, partly sewed to the frill of a tiny sleeve. She leaned forward impulsively in her chair, the soft colour flooding her cheeks.

"Silas!" she murmured.

The minister turned his abstracted gaze upon her.

"Well, my dear?" he replied, in the voice of one whose mind is filled with alien thoughts.

"Oh, I—— Do—do you think it is going to rain?"

"Not immediately," he answered. He glanced frowningly at his watch. "We shall have ample time to reach home, I think, if we are not detained too long."

It seemed a long time to both of them before they heard the sound of steps in the passage.

"I had some difficulty in finding my young people," apologised Mrs. Hill. She was breathing heavily and spots of purplish colour had flamed up under her dull skin. "My son is so fond of outdoor life," she went on, her quick, determined eyes darting from the minister to his wife, then to the door which she had thrown wide. "And as

for Sylvia—— Come in, my dear; never mind your ruffled hair. Mrs. Pettibone, let me present my daughter, Mrs. Walter Hill. I believe you and Sylvia have met before—in the woods, wasn't it? But you haven't been fortunate enough to find any arbutus, my dear Sylvia. Mr. Pettibone, my son, Walter—Hill."

Thus urged, the two young people who had slowly followed the older woman into the room—quite like sulky children, Mrs. Pettibone was thinking—came forward. The girl, her handsome mouth set in rebellious curves, barely touched with limp cold fingers the friendly hands outstretched to greet her. But the boy—he was barely twenty, Mr. Pettibone decided—smiled pleasantly, almost eagerly as he shook hands man-fashion with the minister.

"Yes, I hope we're going to like it here," he said, in response to Mr. Pettibone's stereotyped inquiry. "It's a great house; isn't it? But—lonesome—eh? I——"

He stopped short, with a sidelong glance at his mother, who had stepped softly to his side.

"Mother, here, will tell you how we were always teasing to live in the country; I'm fond of shooting, you know, and all that sort of thing; and Sylvia——"

"Such children as they both are," smiled Mrs. Hill, laying her plump white hand caressingly on her son's shoulder. "We are both hoping the

good country air will bring dear Sylvia back to health.''

Still smiling, she lowered her smooth, full lids; and the minister, revolving various quasi-professional inquiries as to the Hills' former home, their recent church connection and the hoped-for opportunity of enrolling the young people in his Christian Endeavour Society, suddenly bethought himself of the fact that all in the room were standing and their hostess had not asked them to resume their chairs.

It was the friendly custom of the countryside to pursue one's visitors quite to the verge of the outer world, the tide of conversation rising to its flood, at the front door. Mr. Pettibone was patiently accustomed to parochial confidences reserved for the shadowy regions of the passage; and persisted in, while he stood hat in hand and ankle-deep in unswept snow on the doorstep. But on the present occasion he found himself dismissed at the parlour door by the older Mrs. Hill, with a practised ease and aplomb which left no opportunity for valedictory remarks on the part of the minister or his agitated little wife.

"Really, I don't know when I've ever felt so—queer," Mrs. Pettibone confided to her husband, when the clumsy hoofs of the sorrel were once more spattering the mud of the highway over the shabby lap-robe her husband had carefully tucked about her.

"H'm," commented the minister non-committally. "I'm not sure we were altogether welcome."

"That young Mrs. Hill is really handsome; don't you think so?" persisted his wife. "But, oh, I'm sure she—isn't happy. Do you suppose that—that woman could be unkind to her? I don't like her face."

"Unkind?" echoed Mr. Pettibone. "I suppose you refer to the older Mrs. Hill. Why should she be unkind? But personally I don't believe in the marriage of near relatives."

He shook his head, as he slapped the reins provocatively over the old sorrel's back. Mrs. Pettibone was not paying her usual meek attention; she leaned suddenly forward, her face lighted with a smile; then waved her small gloved hand vigorously.

"It's Milly," she cried, "—Milly Orne. The child is working among her flowers. And, oh, look, Silas, she has a whole row of daffodils in blossom!"

The minister's abstracted gaze followed his wife's eager gesture.

"Ah, yes," he murmured. "—Er—perhaps we might stop for just a moment, and inquire for the old people. Orne was pretty well crippled with lumbago the last time I called."

The girl had dropped her trowel and hurried forward, as the reluctant feet of the sorrel scuffled

to a standstill. She was a pretty girl, with quantities of yellow-brown hair wound closely about her small head. As she stood beside the mud-bespattered vehicle, her face upturned to its occupants, Mrs. Pettibone observed with a secret pang of the envy peculiar to middle age the unblemished pearl and rose of her softly rounded cheek and the way the glistening hair curled about the delicate ears. The girl's eyes were as blue as corn-flowers, and the softly parted lips revealed the edges of flawless teeth.

"Isn't she—beautiful?" breathed Mrs. Pettibone, with a gentle sigh of resignation, as the indignant sorrel resumed his interrupted progress.

The minister was gazing at the animal's bobbing ears with knit brows. He shook his head with a suggestion of sadness.

"The child is quite as good as she is pretty," he said, slowly. "But——"

He was silent for a space, while Mrs. Pettibone pensively regarded the bunch of daffodils Milly Orne had given her at the moment of parting.

"Ah, well!" he said at last; "the best any of us can do is to trust the hand that spares the bruised reed.—And—er—speaking of the Hills, my dear, I was about to remark that in my opinion the marriage of the two cousins explains the whole matter: the aunt, who is also the mother-in-law, probably objected to the marriage; and quite right, too. The boy is too young. Well; we must

see what we can do. They'll want to see some company of their own age. You can't safely bottle up young life in a lonesome old place like that. It's bound to break out somewhere."

Mrs. Pettibone looked up wistfully into the minister's strong, kindly face. . . . Sometimes she almost forgot she was his wife. Mr. Pettibone's "Mary" had been dead for full seven years and all that time she had been just "Miss Philura," —a shabby, timid little spinster. Twice a year, in the spring and fall, her pastor had called upon her in the course of his regular parochial rounds, and she had received him in her shabby, lonely little parlour in a state of trepidation bordering on awe. He had looked so grand, so wise, she had scarcely dared utter her carefully worded little commonplaces about the weather, the choir, or even the latest social—at which she had passed cake, in one of Cousin Caroline Van Duser's made-over dresses. . . .

But now,—she drew a long breath of wonder, as she strove for the hundredth time to realize how it had all come about. It had begun early in the spring two years ago, when she visited Cousin Caroline, stopping a whole week in the big, gloomy Beacon Street mansion. And almost the last day of her stay Cousin Caroline had taken her to hear a lecture at the Ontological Club. Suppose she had never heard that lecture? What if dear Cousin Caroline had chosen to leave her at home

that day, or consented to send her, under convoy of the coachman, to visit the wax-works. Mrs. Pettibone remembered distinctly that she had wished very much to see the wax-works, which Electa Pratt had described to her in dreadful detail. Of course she would have declined to witness an actual murder. But a murder in wax, however realistic, was something different. Anyone might view it with pleasure. Electa had said it made icy-cold shivers run up and down her spine like anything.

She had mentioned the wax-works to Cousin Caroline, with what she felt to be almost brazen temerity, and had been properly punished by that lady's cold disapproving stare centred upon her small, shrinking person through the large lenses of a lorgnette.

"Wax-works," stated Mrs. Van Duser, "are vulgar, immoral, pernicious. They cater to an essentially depraved appetite, totally demoralizing to the higher faculties of the soul. I am *surprised,* Philura, that you should experience any desire to so stultify yourself; and I beg that you will, instead, accompany me to a lecture on 'Thought Forces and the Infinite,' which will, I trust, lift you to a somewhat higher plane of realisation than you at present appear to occupy."

How could she have secretly rebelled—almost to the point of disliking dear Cousin Caroline? Wax-works, indeed! What were wax-works and

their resultant thrills, however pleasurable, to becoming aware of one's real powers? It was actually right to want things! Nay, desire itself was Infinite Good knocking at the door of one's consciousness—seeking, almost demanding, entrance.

She had gone away from the Ontological Club singularly uplifted, tremulously happy, and conscious for the first time of a vast unexplored ocean of good; viewless, but no less real and beneficent—surging, as it were, all about the barren shores of her life.

Out of it had come, with inconceivable promptness, a hat with plumes, two becoming gowns, a silk petticoat, a feather boa, and—her husband! How had she dared? Was it, after all, merely chance? Did he really and truly love her?

She stole a second swift glance at the Rev. Silas Pettibone. How beautiful was the stern, clear-cut outline of his brow, nose, and chin! What wonderful eyes he had; deep and somber yet kind as love itself.

Then, without at all meaning to do so, she called back Mrs. Buckthorn's words of the night before—and more reluctantly, more timidly still, the first Mrs. Pettibone's sweet, wistful face, of a type totally different from her own.

CHAPTER VII

MALVINA BENNETT, DRESSMAKER

The dressmaking establishment of Miss Malvina Bennett had become a sort of clearing-house for general and miscellaneous information. Seated in Miss Malvina's little parlour, in close juxtaposition to the ornate base-burner, the votaries of fashion (as represented by a pile of highly coloured magazines) might learn many things concerning the world at large, but more particularly of Innisfield. Miss Malvina herself would have repudiated the title of gossip with entirely just indignation.

"Ef there's *one* thing more'n *another* I hate an' *de*spise," she was wont to declare, with deep feeling, "it's tale-bearin' an' gossipin'. I min' my business, an' I expect my customers to min' theirs, the hull endurin' time. Anybody 'at sews has got to watch out fer their tongues. As I sez t' Mother, 'the's somethin' about settin' an' sewin',' I sez, '—more especial bastin'—that doos somehow tempt a body t' tittle-tattle.' But the' ain't anybody c'n say I was ever known t' repeat what comes t' my years in the shop. An' I ain't sayin' I don't know 'bout 's well as most folks what's goin' on in this town."

With which tacit admission Miss Malvina invited fresh confidences of the sort one makes to a discreet person, whose mouth is filled with pins, while with a pair of sharp scissors she deftly clips about the circle of one's neck in dangerous nearness to the jugular vein, or with the same shining implement snips suddenly and with apparent recklessness under one's arm-pit.

Miss Bennett was a wiry little person who had never looked young, even in the days when she toddled solemnly about her grandmother's kitchen in sedate and unsuccessful pursuit of an elderly kitten. By the time she was eight Malvina could overcast a seam "es neat es a pin;" at ten she was sewing her own flannel petticoats, without manifesting a single carnal desire to run out of doors and frolic with other children.

"I guess the Lord created me 'special t' be a dressmaker," was Miss Malvina's pious comment on the workings of a Providence which appeared to have closed every other avenue of usefulness save the one the little seamstress trod so cheerfully. And having never been young—meaning that Miss Malvina was never in the least rosy, nor pretty, nor idle, nor imprudent; and that in consequence of all these negative virtues she never had a beau—so, likewise, she did not grow old the way other and more fortunate people did. No one remembered just when Malvina had taken to wearing glasses, because the large, steel-bowed

spectacles (bequeathed to her from her grandmother) appeared so eminently fitting an addition to her somewhat nipped and wintry little nose. So also the adoption of a much befrizzed black hair front—also an heirloom; but every bit as good as new—made little or no change in Miss Malvina's everyday aspect; even when the frizzed front became, in certain exigencies, pushed rakishly to one side, revealing sparse grey hair combed neatly back to join the rigid pepper-and-salt knob at the back of her head.

"Here's a han' glass, Mis' Puffer," exhorted Miss Malvina, pressing upon her customer a small cracked mirror. "I want you should look at your back. There! Ain't that a neat fit? It couldn't lay no smoother ner set no snugger, I don't care who done it! Land! I do hope an' pray you'll git a chance t' wear this dress while it's stylish. Last year, I remember, no sooner did I git that velveteen skirt fitted down to you, than you had t' lay it aside, and now I s'pose it's too narrer. You seem t' be some stouter since the last baby was born."

"I think I hear him crying," interrupted Mrs. Puffer, resignedly; "I left him outside in his go-cart asleep."

"Don't you das t' stir," warned the dressmaker, with a threatening gesture; "I jest got them goods pinned onto you in a real stylish draped effect. You know; like the one you was

admirin' 'n the Arts an' Modes. I'll take a peek at the baby. Anyhow, you couldn't move if you was to try."

Mrs. Puffer, a stout matronly person, with a perpetual pucker of anxiety between her mild blue eyes, relaxed obediently in the swaddling folds of her inchoate gown.

"As long's he don't get under the strap an' choke himself to death," she sent after Miss Malvina's retreating steps. "Dr. Holt says it don't hurt 'em any to cry.—An' you might turn him over, and give him his pacifier; it's round his neck on a pink cord."

Miss Malvina returned presently, her face wreathed in smiles.

"You don't need t' worry a mite about the baby," she said. "Who d' you s'pose has got him?—takin' care of him like she was his mother f'om 'way back."

Mrs. Puffer didn't know, she was sure; and became restive once more under Miss Bennett's formative hand.

"Now you jest stan' still, Mis' Puffer, or I can't do nothin'. These 'ere pernickity folds is the very dickens, ef you don't get 'em right, first off.—I was jest a-goin' t' tell you, if you'll quit prancin', Philura Rice—I mean Mis' Pettibone—was comin' along, an' she heard him. Sure 'nough he was down in under the strap, his face 's red 's a beet. My! you'd ought t' 'a' seen her.

'Who's baby is it?' she sez t' me, all pink an' excited. 'I've got Mis' Puffer all pinned up in ten yards o' dress-goods inside,' I sez, an' begun t' hunt in his blankets fer his pacifier. But, land, Philura she had him out before you c'd say Jack Robinson! 'I'll take care of him,' she sez. 'I'd love to.'"

Mrs. Puffer sighed a transient relief.

"Well, now, that's real kind of Miss Philura," she said, twisting her head to gaze at the reflection of her large person in the glass. "But I do hope she won't drop him."

Miss Bennett cackled appreciatively as she took another pin from between her closed teeth.

"She won't drop him," she hazarded; "but it wouldn't s'prise me none if she run off with him fer a spell. Philura always had a hankerin' after babies."

Outside in the warm April sunshine the minister's wife was talking confidentially to the new parishioner. Upon being extricated from his perilous position, young Master Puffer had instantly ceased his half-strangled cries for maternal aid, and was gazing in round-eyed wonderment at the new and interesting phenomenon of a hat with nodding plumes and a pink rose in front. The face under the hat was almost as pink as the rose, and two blue eyes gazed at him soulfully. The unfamiliar voice, too, had a pleas-

ing cadence, and the stranger's embracing arms held his small, plump person as he liked to be held.

After a period of reflection the baby opened his rosy mouth in a puckered circle and a sound came out. It wasn't just what he meant to say; but it served the purpose.

"You darling!" cried the minister's little wife. "You s-w-e-e-t, pr-r-ecious la-amb!"

Then she buried her hungry little mouth in his warm, fat neck.

The new parishioner betrayed no resentment. He was, in fact, used to such demonstrations. He continued to gaze delightedly at the pink rose and the pink cheeks and the blue shining eyes of his captor, waving his small, dimpled hands uncertainly toward the objects of his desire.

"I'd like to carry you off," were the traitorous words the lady whispered in his ear. "You'd like me for a mother just as well as Mrs. Puffer; wouldn't you, sweetness? And, oh, I'd love you—love you so!"

At this bold speech the baby blinked dazedly; then closed his eyes, as if the better to consider her audacious proposal.

"You're sleepy, precious," inferred his self-appointed guardian.

Somewhat awkwardly she stowed him among his blankets and pillows. With a sigh of content the new parishioner tucked a small, but useful

thumb into his mouth and resigned himself to blissful slumber.

"If you were mine," murmured the unprincipled person who had thus deliberately broken the tenth commandment, "I should never, never leave you outside to cry, while I was being fitted for a stupid dress."

Then she began wheeling the perambulator slowly up and down the sidewalk, though she might better have gone about her business which chanced to be a meeting of the Ladies' Aid and Missionary Society.

"If I should stop wheeling him for a single minute," Mrs. Pettibone excused herself, mendaciously, "he would certainly wake up and cry. And if Malvina Bennett has pinned a draped skirt on Mrs. Puffer, she'll insist on basting it before she lets her go."

There was a shabby, mud-bespattered motor-car standing before the next house but one. Mrs. Pettibone eyed it with passing interest. There were very few automobiles in the conservative village of Innisfield. This one, she knew, belonged to Dr. North; and its presence before a house usually betokened sickness within. She wondered vaguely if Mrs. Salter was suffering with another of her "spells," and whether it was her duty (as the pastor's wife) to stop and inquire.

Just then the door flew open, as if under the urge of an impatient hand, and Dr. North

emerged, in the act of pulling on his driving gloves. He was a tall stout man, with a weather-beaten face half hidden by a great grey beard.

"The doctor," complained certain of his patients, "was always in a hurry." He had abandoned his overworked grey cob in favor of an automobile, in a day when the latter means of locomotion was no less than an extravagance; and thereafter appeared always in the act of hastily entering houses, from which he as abruptly emerged; the periods between being wholly negligible.

To Mrs. Pettibone's great astonishment this energetic practitioner stopped short at sight of her, one foot already in his car.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Philura," he hailed her in his big, hearty voice—a voice, be it said, which had more than once recalled a trembling soul from the very brink of a new and untried existence to the dear, familiar duties of a mundane life—"that your baby?"

Mrs. Pettibone blushed becomingly.

"He's Mrs. Puffer's baby," she explained, with an unconscious sigh. "I'm just taking care of him, while his mother has a dress fitted at Malvina Bennett's."

Dr. North gazed thoughtfully at the rather shabby perambulator, exuding pink and blue woolly things; then at the little lady who grasped its handle. There was no mistaking the look of

wistful eagerness in her face. The doctor had seen it many times before in the course of a longish practice, most of which had concerned itself with women.

"He—he's a lovely baby," murmured Mrs. Pettibone, curiously embarrassed.

She stopped to tuck a pink blanket under a blue one, and pat the rotund little bunch beneath with a gentle hand.

"Of course—of course!" agreed the doctor cheerfully. "The Puffer children are a fine healthy lot. Pity there aren't more like 'em. Well, I must be off. Good-day!"

The car leapt forward; then paused obediently under the doctor's masterful hand.

"Oh, I say, Miss Philura!—er—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Pettibone—Can't seem to get used to the change—why don't you adopt one?"

"Adopt?—You don't mean—a—a baby?"

"Yes, certainly; just that. You're fond of children; and heaven knows there's plenty of poor little things that need a mother. Think it over."

He was gone in a spatter of liquid mud, leaving the dazed and agitated recipient of his counsels to consider his surprising suggestion.

Plenty of children without mothers; and—yes, plenty of mothers without children. That was what he meant. Could this in any wise satisfy the secret longing which of late had begun to clamour more loudly than ever within her?

Mrs. Pettibone recalled stealthy moments spent in the seclusion of her mother's attic caressing a battered doll, once the joy and solace of her childhood. On her twelfth birthday the doll had been summarily relegated to the garret. "Big girls in their teens," she was told rebukingly, "did not play with doll-babies." But the bereaved little mother bedewed her patchwork with more than one bitter tear, before she ceased to mourn the pink and white image which had been "just the right size to hug."

But there had always been something: a stray kitten, sick with hunger; a puppy with a broken leg; a forlorn chicken, hatched in the middle of winter by a fatuous old hen who refused to mother her offspring; even a rose-bush, rooted out from a neighbouring garden and doomed to ignominious death in the ash-barrel, because, forsooth, its cheerful blossoms were "a common shade of red,"—all these bits of almost unnoticed wreckage on the tide of life had Miss Philura painstakingly rescued and loved back into life and beauty. The starving kitten had developed into the big maltese cat, which now patrolled the ministerial precincts with a magnificent air of condescension. The puppy, in due course, recovered, and thereafter trotted on four good legs after the butter-woman's wagon; while the lone chicken, grown to a lordly cock, reigned paramount over a flock of silly hens with stern masterfulness. As for the

disgraced rose-bush; planted in Miss Philura's little garden, enriched and watered and guarded from encroaching insects, it had become a glory and a delight. The "common red" of its despised blossoms had deepened and brightened into a crimson splendour which drew even the eyes of the disdainful person next door. He came; he saw; he leaned across the fence with an ingratiating smile.

"Miss Philura, won't you tell me the name of that wonderful rose of yours?" he entreated. "I don't think we have anything like it in our rose-garden."

Then, oh, then was the moment of rare triumph which crowned the work of many months.

"I call this the ash-barrel rose," quoth Miss Philura, very bright-eyed and demure.

Something of all this—memory and retrospect and vague forecasting of the future flitted through Mrs. Pettibone's thoughts, as she continued to wheel the Puffer baby up and down the sunshiny street. Then, quite breathless and exuberantly apologetic, descended Mrs. Puffer.

"I am so sorry! What *must* you think of me? But really, dear Mrs. Pettibone, you needn't have bothered; his pacifier—Oh, naughty boy; he has his thumb in his mouth! I never allow him to suck his thumb. It ruins the shape of the mouth, dwarfs the thumb, and causes adenoids.—You didn't know it? Of course not! How could you?

I'll take him now; and I *do* hope you're not *all* tired out!"

How complacent and self-satisfied she looked, and with what scarifying indifference she bounced the perambulator over the curb in her haste to depart. Mrs. Pettibone stood watching the mother of many children with undefined resentment, for a fleeting moment, which yet marked a momentous resolve. . . . Then she walked sedately toward the church, where "The Ladies" were diligently sewing calico blouses for "the Mountain Whites."

CHAPTER VIII

THE ORNES

Censorious persons—of whom there were a select few in the neighbourhood of Innisfield—annually criticised the Ornes' dooryard. There were too many flowers, they said, of too many varieties growing in the rounds and squares and crescents Caleb Orne had pridefully laid out for his young wife back in the fifties. That sort of thing was well enough, they pointed out, when one had plenty of money and could afford the time necessary to the cultivation of a large flower-garden. But, as everybody knew, the Ornes had little to depend upon except the vegetables old Orne raised in the half-acre plot behind the house and the milk of the two cows pastured in the dwindling orchard. Grandma Orne—as people called the apple-cheeked old woman—owned a loom, and eked out the family livelihood by converting myriad balls of carpet rags into sober, substantial breadths of floor-covering, justly esteemed by all thrifty housewives.

Then there was Milly. It was Milly who worked among the flowers, rising often in the earliest flush of summer dawns to weed and water and dig about the old-fashioned shrubs and perennials,

which had grown and flourished and multiplied exceedingly since the day Grandfather Orne planted them there. Grandfather used to joke Milly about her gardening, declaring that she stole the fresh colour in her cheeks from the pinks and roses, long before anybody was up to "ketch her at it." As for her eyes, no flowers-de-luce, larkspurs, bachelor's buttons or johnny-jump-ups could "show a purtier blue." He always ended, did Grandfather, with a chastening comparison of Milly's "looks" with the superlative charms of Grandmother, in her younger days:

"The' ain't no use o' talkin', ye can't hold a candle t' yer Gran'ma, when I married her!" the old man would chuckle gleefully. "Tell ye what, Gran'ma an' me was one of the finest lookin' couples anywheres around; wa'n't we, Gran'ma? Fer all I'm s' bent over an' wrinkled-up now I was the tallest, straightest, best-lookin' chap ye'd want t' see. Had m' pick of all the girls. Tell ye, ye don't see no more like I was in them days; ain't that so, Gran'ma?—Clean es a whistle an' strong.—Say, I'll bet I c'd 'a' lifted two o' them little whipper-snappers 'at comes buzzin' round Milly, here, an' throwed 'em clean over the barn. Yes, sir! Yer Gran'pa wa'n't no slouch of a man."

But if the girl ventured ever so timidly to touch upon later family history, with questions concerning her father and mother—both of whom

had died in her infancy—the old man would stamp away, pretending not to hear, his wrinkled old face drawn into folds and puckers of wrathful grief.

"I wouldn't pester Gran'pa no more, ef I was you, honey," counseled her grandmother soothingly. "It makes him kind o' crabbity an' out-o'-sorts t' hark back t' th' time when you was little. Y'u see, honey, your mother was all the child we had; so your gran'pa nach'ally set a lot o' store by her. An' our Milly—she—died when you was born. That's why I wouldn't ask Gran'pa no more questions about them days, if I was you."

"Was my mother pretty, like me?" inquired little Milly, innocently.

"Did you ever hear th' like o' that!" commented Mrs. Orne, rebukingly. "Who said you was pretty, I'd like t' know? You don't want t' pay no 'tention t' Gran'pa, when he's gassin' about your looks. . . . He can't see s' very well without his specs; most anybody 'd look pretty t' him. . . . 'Pretty is, as pretty doos'—you want t' remember that. . . . But—yes; you do favour our Milly consid'able. She was a mite taller, an' her hair was—some yellower 'n yours. It come clear down t' her knees, a-curlin' all the way. . . . My! I r'member how I used t' comb it fer her, out in the sun. . . . She liked it done that way.—Her a-settin' in one o' th' kitchen cheers under the apple tree, an' me a-coaxin' that beautiful, soft, shinin' hair through a big comb

I'd bought a-purpose. Land! a fine-tooth comb, sech es me an' Gran'pa always used, couldn't get down t' her head nohow. . . ."

The old woman's faded eyes shone with sudden tears. She wiped them stealthily on her gingham apron.

"Our Milly was light-complected, like you," she added, softly, after a long pause.

"And my father," entreated little Milly. "Won't you tell me?—Was he—do I look like——"

"We wa'n't neither of us willin' you should bear his name," the old woman said, stiffly. "Me an' Gran'pa 'dopted you right after our Milly died. . . . You was a poor little wailin' mite of a thing. I never 'xpected t' raise you in them days. . . . Now you run along, honey; an' mind, you don't worry your Gran'pa no more. Like enough he'd git right up on his year, an' scold real hard, ef you was t' try it."

So little Milly had weeded her flowers and wiped the dishes for Grandma, and combed Grandpa's thin grey hair with the fine-tooth comb of a Sunday afternoon, while he dozed peacefully in his chair—all under the luminous cloud of romantic mystery, which in truth was no mystery at all; but only one of those melancholy commonplaces people bury out of sight with their dead. The short, woful story of the first Millicent Orne was no secret to many;—but few ever spoke of it, ex-

cept by way of whispered comment on the fresh young beauty of the girl who was growing into blooming womanhood under the guardianship of the two old people.

They hoped she wouldn't go the way of her mother, and wondered, in discreet whispers, what had become of the handsome young stranger who had come to Innisfield one summer to recover the health shattered by a long illness. He had gone away in the autumn, and the following spring Millicent Orne died. That was all. And even the more censorious could see no reason why little Milly should know. Grief and shame had left their mark on the two old people. But they bore the ever recurrent smart of the old wound with patience. And sometimes—for thus benignantly do the passing years soothe and ameliorate mortal agonies—they almost forgot the green mound, once a gaping grave, in the exquisite renaissance of Milly.

Quite simply and openly Mrs. Orne cherished a single ambition for her grand-daughter.

"I want Milly should get married," she would say to Grandfather, as the two watched the girl flitting about among the flowers. "I want she should marry—young. It'll be a heap better for her."

At this straightforward avowal on the part of his wife Grandfather Orne would scowl and clear his throat querulously.

" The' ain't no young fellow 'round these parts good enough fer our Milly," he would declare, obdurately. " I don't see why you talk the way you do, Mother. Milly's all right, jes 's she is, a-livin' with us. I don' wan' t' part with her, 'n' I ain't a-goin' to, neither."

Maybe Grandpa was losing his memory, reflected Mrs. Orne, her faded eyes fixed on vacancy. She guessed it would be a blessing if he did. . . .

None the less she began, when Milly was little more than sixteen, to set cunningly baited traps for the honest young farmers of the countryside. Spicy cakes, shining twists of molasses taffy, or big, fat crullers, suited to lusty young appetites, and flanked by pitchers of raspberry " shrub " or new cider were always forthcoming when " Milly had a beau."

" You can't never tell," Grandma would murmur mysteriously, as she passed her grand-daughter's admirers in keen-eyed review through a crack of the door. " I'm a-goin' t' keep m' eye on 'em—an' on her! "

To Milly, uneasily conscious of the old lady's espionage, she would say:

" You can't be too pertic'lar, honey, when it comes t' dealin' with men-folks. The' ain't a girl alive that rightly understan's 'em. But I'll tell you one thing "—lowering her voice and nodding her wise old head—" don't you never let one of 'em kiss you; ner s' much as lay a finger on

you, till you're engaged t' be married, an' me an' Gran'pa 's gi'n our blessin'. Now you mind what I say.—Yes, I know the's plenty of foolish girls as 'll tell you different; an' like 's not you think your Gran'ma's too old t' know what's what. But I reckon men-folks 's 'bout the same 's they was when I was young; in fact, styles ain't changed much, es fur es they're concerned, since Bible days. . . . 'Course I wouldn't want t' say anythin' 'gainst the Patriarchs; but I sh'd think they'd reelly hate t' have accounts o' some o' their doin's handed down f'om generation to generation, 'n' nice women a-readin' of 'em in course; 'n' hevin' t' skip chapters in Sunday-school, 'n' all. But I want you sh'd git married, Milly, an' have a good, honest husban' t' take keer of you, when me an' Gran'pa 's laid away."

But at this Milly would stop the old woman's mouth with one of the kisses forbidden to men, crying out that she didn't want any husband. Why should she—when she was perfectly happy as she was?

A sentiment loudly applauded by Grandfather, but over which Mrs. Orne shook her head dubiously.

"This ain't no kind of a world for a lone woman," was her disparaging opinion. "Not that I think much o' men-folks; th' most of 'em 's a pretty poor lot—f'om the Patriarchs, down."

"All but me," Grandpa would crow, with a

prodigious wink at Milly. A proceeding which invariably elicited a dignified reproof from Grandma, to the effect that no reel gen'l'man ever opened and shut one eye that-a-way; and, say what one would, a conceited, uppity man was enough to make a body wish t' die single.

Milly Orne was eighteen when the daffodils came into bloom, (Grandmother couldn't bear the sight of a daffodil) and by that token she was prettier than ever, as Mrs. Pettibone had observed. Yet she was neither safely married, nor even engaged, a fact which Mrs. Orne took sadly to heart.

But when the old lady cited the warning prophecy concerning "woods" and "crooked sticks," with pungent comments of her own, the girl put her pretty head on one side, her eyes scattering blue sparkles of mirth.

"They're all crooked sticks, Gran'ma," she laughed, "and when I've come quite through the wood I'll see a fairy prince, riding toward me, and then——"

"For God's sake, don't say that, Milly!" cried Mrs. Orne, shrilly. All the colour dropped out of her old face, leaving it grey and twisted and gaunt, like a dead tree in the wind. "Don't—don't say it! I—I guess mebbe I ain't feelin' s' well—this mornin'. Get me a swaller o' tea, honey, 'n'—don't say nothin' t' Gran'pa."

She still sat bowed over, shivering a little and

murmuring to herself, when the girl brought her the cup of hot tea she had hastened to prepare.

"You—didn't mean it, did you, honey?" she asked, raising herself to peer into the girl's face.

"Mean what?—What did I say to worry you, Gran'ma?" entreated Milly. "I didn't mean——"

"About the—the—you ain't met no strange man lately; have you?—Somebody me an' Gran'pa don't know? I'm kind o' feared of—strangers, honey."

The girl soothed her with tears and laughter and denials, and presently, when the steady, thump-thump-thump of the loom proclaimed the old woman's restored equanimity, she stole away on pretence of carrying flowers to the minister's wife.

CHAPTER IX

THE DOOR AJAR

Milly Orne had known Mrs. Pettibone for as many years as she could well remember. It was "Miss Philura," indeed, who had taught the girl many a floral secret when Milly was a faithfully visited member of that conscientious lady's Bible Class. In her new estate the wife of the minister appeared as if mysteriously translated to another plane of existence. Milly gazed at her with respectful admiration as she replied with brief sentences to various gentle inquiries:

"Yes 'm, thank you, Gran'father's pretty well —only his back. He won't let me dig all the garden, and the loam's stiff and heavy in the spring. Gran'mother is making some carpet for Mrs. Buckthorn.—Yes 'm, I've learned to weave; but Mrs. Buckthorn's so particular, Gran'ma dassent let me weave her carpet. I can't make it quite so even yet."

Mrs. Pettibone, sitting opposite her young visitor in the cool light of the shaded parlour, marvelled anew at the fresh loveliness of the girl's face.

"But you're a great help and comfort to the old people, Milly," she said, encouragingly.

" Mr. Pettibone and I were speaking of it only the other day."

The girl leaned forward in her chair, her hands gripping each other in her lap.

" It—it is that I wanted to ask you about," she murmured, " I'm afraid I'm not—so very much help. I—wondered if you could advise me? "

Mrs. Pettibone's mind reverted for a swift instant to the tragedy of eighteen years back. She hoped no one had told the child.

" You'll tell me all about it, won't you? " she said, trembling a little under the weight of her responsibilities. " Then, if I can't advise you, I'll ask Mr. Pettibone when he comes in."

She straightened herself rather proudly.

" Mr. Pettibone," she repeated, " will be sure to know."

The girl drew a deep breath.

" I want to work," she said, abruptly.

" But you do, my dear,—all those lovely flowers, and——"

The girl made a disparaging gesture.

" I want to earn money," she said. " I must! "

Mrs. Pettibone looked distressed.

" I do hope," she began, " you'll let me consult Mr. Pettibone. The deacons' fund——"

" Oh, I don't mean we are cold or hungry," cried the girl, with a proud upflinging of her

pretty head. "We're not in need of charity—yet."

"My dear Milly," protested the minister's wife, very pink and agitated, "I didn't——"

"Won't you let me tell you?" the girl interrupted. "Of course it isn't the same now as when I was a little girl. I didn't think very much then; nor—nor notice how different I was to other girls——"

Mrs. Pettibone gasped involuntarily.

"Oh, I hope no one has been so thoughtless," she murmured. "Go on, please."

Milly gazed at her in some perplexity.

"Other girls had fathers and mothers," she explained. "I had neither; and I didn't realise that Gran'father an' Gran'mother would grow old and feeble while I—before I was——"

Mrs. Pettibone nodded understandingly.

"You were always a good girl, Milly," she said. "You've been a comfort to them, my dear, indeed, you don't know how much. And—everything will come right, if you'll only be patient and —trust. Perhaps you think I'm saying this just because I'm the minister's wife.—You do think so; don't you?"

"No'm, I don't," the girl said, politely. "An' I've tried—I do try. But Gran'father can't work so hard much longer. Yesterday when he was planting the garden his hands trembled so the seeds spilled all over the ground. He didn't want

me to see, and I pretended not to. And the roof leaks so the rain comes right down through the kitchen ceiling. Gran'pa's fixed it the best he could; but nearly all the shingles are rotten. It'll be a lot worse b' next winter."

Mrs. Pettibone was instant with breathless expressions of sympathy and hope. One shouldn't ever expect misfortune, she reminded herself and Milly; but only the good, which was everywhere, ready to become one's very own, if one would only take it.

"But not a roof?" inquired Milly, doubtfully, "and new flannels for Gran'mother, and——"

"Everything!" affirmed Mrs. Pettibone, stoutly.

Her blue eyes became rather wistful, as she repeated "Everything!" in a voice so low Milly could scarcely hear it.

"It must be nice to think so," sighed the girl, unbelievingly.

She had been playing with her handkerchief, rolling it into a tight ball at which she gazed unseeingly.

"I wanted to work in the mills last winter," she said at last; "but they wouldn't let me."

"I don't wonder," Mrs. Pettibone said, warmly. "That would never do!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't work in the mills," persisted Milly. "I ought to work—to

take care of them. What will become of them if I don't?"

She gazed at the minister's wife from under puckered brows.

Mrs. Pettibone, thinking of that other Millicent Orne, was silent, striving to share the girl's perplexities from the vantage ground of her sadder knowledge.

Presently Milly spoke again.

"I—I'd like to tell you something else," she said, her lashes lowered upon pink cheeks. "If you—if you won't think me silly?"

"No, indeed, my dear," promised Mrs. Pettibone, surreptitiously whisking a tear from her lashes.

"Gran'mother wants me to—to be married," Milly confessed hurriedly. "She—talks to me about it. But—but, Miss Philura, how can I be married, when—I don't love anyone?"

"You can't, of course—certainly not," murmured the minister's wife, aware of Mrs. Orne's ambitions for her grand-daughter, as well as the pitiful reason for them. "But, perhaps—sometime—— One doesn't always know of all the beautiful things in store——"

The misused handkerchif was being swiftly rolled into a slim white rod under the girl's busy fingers. Mrs. Pettibone watched them absently.

"That's what I said to Gran'mother this

morning,'' said Milly. '' She was telling me I'd go through the woods and pick up a crooked stick at last.''

Mrs. Pettibone made a slight gesture of impatient dissent.

'' But I can't help it,'' the girl went on. '' I couldn't marry—just to be married, and I've never seen anyone—around here—— Perhaps, as you say, someone will come, some day,—somebody I haven't always known. . . .''

Her eyes, suddenly lifted from their trivial task, surprised a look of poignant distress on the older woman's face.

'' Oh, you do think me silly! '' she cried, with sudden sharp resentment. '' You are looking at me just as Gran'ma does when I——''

'' No, no, my dear. You are quite mistaken,'' Mrs. Pettibone denied, hurriedly. '' And—that reminds me of something I had forgotten: I wonder if you chance to know anything about the family who have taken the old Eggleston place for the summer? ''

Milly shook her head dejectedly. She was thinking she must go; and that, after all, her visit to the parsonage had been useless.

'' Only this morning,'' Mrs. Pettibone said, with some eagerness, '' I received a note from Mrs. Hill. I was very much surprised; but Mr. Pettibone says it was because we called on them. . . . We had just come from the farm the day

we stopped at your house and you gave me the daffodils. You remember?"

Milly was drawing on her cotton gloves. She wished she had not come.

"They seemed like nice people—the Hills, I mean—but—different, somehow—not used, perhaps, to doing their own housework. Young Mrs. Hill is hardly more than a child, and not—I imagine she may find it rather lonely up there. . . . They want someone to help in the house, and Mrs. Hill mentioned thirty dollars a month."

The girl drew a sudden breath.

"Do you mean that I—are you thinking——"

Mrs. Pettibone wrinkled her forehead perplexedly.

"It just occurred to me that possibly—Yet I'm not sure that it would do. Really, I ought to have consulted Mr. Pettibone before speaking of it to you."

"I could earn over a hundred dollars before fall," cried Milly, her face shining with joy.

"But you would be a—servant in their house. I'm afraid they're the sort of people who would think of you in just that way; besides——"

Mrs. Pettibone was vaguely uneasy, as she recalled the older Mrs. Hill's opaque eyes.

"I fear your grandmother would object," she finished. "There would be hard work to do, and——"

Milly Orne lifted her blond head proudly.

"I'm not afraid of work," she said, "nor of what they might think of me."

In the end, she went away carrying one of Mrs. Pettibone's small sheets of note-paper, folded into a neat triangle, after a fashion obtaining in Mrs. Pettibone's girlhood for correspondence of a polite but informal nature, and directed to Mrs. Hill.

"I'm afraid I oughtn't to have done it, without consulting you," Mrs. Pettibone told the minister at supper that night. "But poor Milly was so eager, and the opportunity was an unusual one."

"Milly is quite right in wanting to put her young shoulder to the wheel," pronounced Mr. Pettibone, whose nerves had been calmed by a long afternoon spent in the open.

"But we know so little about the Hills," objected his wife, timorously.

"We know nothing amiss," he reminded her. "Really, my dear, for a person who professes to believe that Good is All and All-Encircling, you——"

"I know—I know," she acknowledged, humbly. "I'm always forgetting. One gets so in the habit of suspecting and—and being afraid—more for other people than for oneself."

The minister smiled, understandingly.

"Nevertheless, one shouldn't hang mill-stones of fear about other people's necks," he commented.

CHAPTER X

A NIGHT OF RAIN AND THE MORNING AFTER

As for Milly Orne, she had fairly flown homeward on the wings of hope and ambition. Already she beheld in imagination a new roof of shining yellow shingles replacing the moss-green expanse so deceitfully picturesque under its sheltering apple-boughs. But there was Grandmother Orne to be reckoned with.

"Work out?" cried the old woman, dropping her dish-cloth and staring at the girl over her spectacles. "That's what it amounts to, in spite of all your pretty words, Milly. No; I ain't a-goin' t' allow it. We've got along all these years, an' took care of you b'sides; an' I guess we c'n contrive 's long 's the Lord spares us."

"Please, Gran'mother," entreated the girl, "don't say no till we've been to see Mrs. Hill. It wouldn't be like working out in the village, and I could earn——"

"I'd work my fingers t' the bone," the old woman declared, "before I'd see my Milly's child a-workin' in another woman's kitchen!"

But when Grandfather came in from the barn his weather-beaten old face was drawn into myriad folds and puckers of distress. He had

found the dun cow lying dead in the corner of the pasture, her tongue protruding from her mouth.

"She must 'a' et somethin'," the old man surmised, heavily, "though I don't know what in creation 'twas. She was all right this mornin', fur's I c'd see; but she's dead now."

He sat down by the stove, though it was a warm evening, and spread his shrivelled hands over the griddles.

"Yes; she's dead, all right," he repeated, in a mumbling monotone, "an' she was the best milker o' the two. Th' red heifer, she's a-gittin' old. . . . I dunno—I dunno. . . ."

Mrs. Orne had wrapped her head in her checkered apron at the first word and hobbled out to the orchard, where the red cow, peacefully oblivious of the tragedy, was chewing her cud under the budding apple-trees. She came in presently, her glasses pushed high above her forehead, a little angry spot of colour on either cheek.

"'Twas them russet apples, Gran'pa," she said, shrilly. "I tol' you not t' give 'em t' the cows. She got one stuck in her throat an' choked t' death. Plain es a pike-staff!"

"Them russets wa'n't no good," the old man objected, feebly. "I sez t' you——"

"Yes; I know you did, Gran'pa, an' I tol' you——"

"Now, wife, you let me speak fer once, can't ye?" The old voice rose tremulous but deter-

mined. " I sez t' you, ' Mother,' I sez, ' the cows 'll relish these 'ere apples,' I sez, ' an' they ain't no good fer cookin' any more,' an' you——"

" I gin in t' you, es us'al," the woman said, bitterly. " Once you git an idee in yer head the' can't nobody on airth——"

" Please, Gran'mother," interrupted Milly, winding her young arms about the old woman's neck, " don't scold poor Gran'pa. He only wanted to give the cows a little treat."

" But I told him they was likely to choke on them apples. Ef he'd a-took the pains t' cut 'em in two——"

" You might 'a' done that fur me, ef you was s' blamed smart an' knowin'," put in Grandfather, bitter in his turn, " I was tryin' m' best t' git the beets an' peas int' the ground afore it rained. Lord! I dunno what we're goin' t' do 'thout that cow. She was th' best milker o' th' two; the red heifer's gittin' old. . . . Gittin' old. Tha's what's the matter with all of us, I guess—gittin' old an' foolish."

" I'm not getting old, Gran'father," cried little Milly, her pink cheek pressed softly against his withered one. " And I'll not allow you to say you're foolish. You're the wisest man I know."

" Think so, honey? "

He shook his head, despondently.

" Nope, I ain't. I ain't never really held up my head since your mother died. I'd ought t' 'a' suspicioned that young feller——"

" Gran'pa! "

Mrs. Orne's voice was sharp with fear.

" Yes, Mother; tha's so. I fergot. But I ain't a-goin' t' say no more."

He lay down presently on the old lounge and Milly covered him warmly with the crazy-quilt she had pieced the winter before.

" I guess he'll feel better when he wakes up," the girl said, as she tucked the gay covering tenderly about the bent shoulders.

Her lips were set in firm, sweet curves as she hurried the remaining dishes to the pantry shelf and made all tidy for the night. Mrs. Orne did not appear to notice the girl's movements. She had dropped into a chair by the window, her withered lips moving soundlessly, her faded eyes fixed on vacancy. More and more often of late Milly had come upon her thus. To-night, something in the aspect of the dim, little room—the old man, already stertorously asleep, and the grandmother's white head, silhouetted against the sombre reds and purples of sunset—stirred, poignant—intolerable, in the young girl's breast. It was as though for once she saw them through other eyes—other, but not alien. . . . A great aching tenderness possessed her. She fell upon her knees at her grandmother's side.

"You will let me help!" she cried, in a passion of self-giving. "You must let me help!"

The day following that night of sorrowful revelation, marked the vernal moment when the chill conjecture of Spring gives place to the shining certainty of Summer. A warm rain had fallen during the dark hours before dawn, and the first faint beams of morning shone upon a world marvellously transfigured: gnarled apple-boughs, where only the day before crisp, pinkish buds had shone dimly among the small pale leaves, flung scented garlands of lavish bloom to the wind, and amid the fresh green of the young grass dark violets and purple-pink wild geraniums unfolded myriad blossoms to the light.

For the first time in her young life Milly Orne had lain long awake in her little chamber under the roof. How could she have been so blind—so selfish all these years, she asked herself. How they had worked and sacrificed for her—Grandmother toiling late into the night at her loom, that Milly might wear a new dress to the country dance; Grandfather carrying milk to his customers on cold mornings in winter and laughing at Milly's offers of help. "No, no," he would say, "this ain't no kind o' work fer a little gal like you. You stay home with yer Gran'ma an' keep warm b' th' stove."

Once, she remembered, Grandfather had been stiff with rheumatism for a week and Grand-

mother had insisted upon taking the milk. "Me an' Gran'pa don't want you should peddle milk," the old woman had protested. "We ain't a-goin' t' allow it, neither. You stay home an' wait on yer Gran'pa."

It had been the same with all the heavier tasks about the house and garden. Grandmother never allowed Milly to wash the clothes of a Monday. She might pin them to the line if she must do something, "But the' ain't no sense," said Grandmother, briskly, "in your spilin' your pretty han's when mine's all wrinkled an' out o' shape, anyhow." Likewise and for similar reasons, she had been forbidden to milk, to scrub the floors, to dig the vegetables.

It was all clear to Milly now. As she lay wide-eyed in the darkness, listening to the soft patter of the rain above her head, she beheld herself, always shielded, indulged, idolized by the two old people, growing strong and beautiful, while year by year their bent shoulders stooped lower beneath the burden. . . . Then her quickened thoughts hovered about Grandfather, crouched over the fire, his distorted old hands with their blackened and broken nails shaking a little, as he described the disaster which had befallen the dun cow. "I ain't held up my head since your mother died," he had said, and—"I ought to ha' suspicioned that young feller——"

Did he mean her father? . . .

Once, when she was a small child, Grandmother had taken her to the churchyard, where in a distant corner, sheltered from unfriendly winds and prying eyes by a row of thrifty young pines, was a solitary grave. At its head a simple white stone bore the name "Milly," with the dates of birth and death. Milly remembered how she had chased a butterfly in the sun, while Grandmother cleared the encroaching lichens from the stone and made the narrow mound bright with pansies fetched from the garden at home. She had captured the butterfly at last with a shout of triumph, bringing it all spoiled and broken to Grandmother. . . . Never had she forgotten the look on the grief-stained old face. "That's just what happened to her," Grandmother said, in a voice not her own. Then, with sudden harshness:—"Go away, child; you've got his look in your eyes." . . .

All this, while the sound of the rain on the roof deepened to a steady roar. Then, somehow, the churchyard with its gleaming stones, and the wind in the pines and the gravely bright faces of the pansies, set in prim rows on the narrow mound, became confused; Grandmother's voice came to her from a great way off—not harsh now, but cadenced with patient grief—"You've got his look in your eyes, child—his look in your eyes." . . .

It was broad daylight when Milly awoke, and already the bees were busy among the apple-

blossoms under her window. As the girl hurriedly made her simple toilet she heard sounds from below; the clash of stove-lids and the click of cups and saucers.

" I'm so ashamed, Gran'ma! " was her greeting, as she surprised the old woman in the act of cutting thick slices from a brown loaf. " Why didn't you call me? "

" 'Cause I'd ruther you'd sleep," replied Grandmother, defiantly. " The' ain't no call fer you 't be up at five in the mornin', as I know of."

She set the thick slices in order on a blue-edged plate.

" They've took the cow away a'ready," she added. " Gran'pa, he seen t' it first thing. We'll git a good bit fer the hide and taller, 'n' I guess th' ain't no call fer anybody to worry. I c'n stan' it 'ithout s' much milk t' look after, fur 's I'm concerned."

Milly said nothing, but after she had cleared away the breakfast things and made everything tidy about the little house she pinned a hat of blue straw over her blond braids, and crossed the room to where her Grandmother already sat at the loom, busy " tying on."

" I'm—going, Gran'ma," she said, trying hard to keep a quiver out of her voice.

The old woman glanced up sharply from her task.

" Going? " she echoed. " Going where? This

ain't no time o' day t' gad; it's too early fer the mail. 'Sides, Gran'pa——"

"I'm going," said Milly, firmly, "to see Mrs. Hill. If she will hire me at thirty dollars a month I can——"

She had expected sharp expostulation, even denial; but to her surprise the old woman burst into a loud cackle of laughter.

"Set down," she ordered, "an' git busy pickin' out all the blue in that there basket."

"But, Gran'mother," expostulated the girl, glancing at the small nickel clock which shamed with its noisy activities the silent, dignified old timepiece in the corner. "It's late. I'm afraid she'll find somebody else——"

"Let her," quoth Mrs. Orne. "You set down, deary, an' le' me talk t' you a spell. You got money in the bank, an' never knowed it all these years."

"I—— Money in the bank?"

Milly gazed incredulously at the old face, hard twisted in a look of strangely blended pain and triumph.

"Uh-huh," the old woman nodded. "It's been there since b'fore you was born, in—in your name, too. Me an' Gran'pa 'd never touch it. But it's yours, honey. You don't hev t' work in nobody's kitchen."

"But—but how did I come to have any money?"

Milly was industriously sorting the blue rags from the mass of heterogeneous material in the basket. She pulled out a long strip of figured cotton stuff and began to wind it upon the ball in her lap.

"Don't put in that striped gingham!" snapped Mrs. Orne. "That goes in th' other basket; don't you see? I dunno 's it makes any differ'nce t' you where the money come from, s' long 's it's yourn."

"Is there enough for Gran'father to buy another cow with, and—and fix the roof?"

Mrs. Orne snipped off a bit of warp with a loud clash of her big shears.

"Redic'lous," she exclaimed, sharply. "'Tain't ourn t' use."

"If it's mine——" began Milly.

"It's yourn, jus' 's I said," Mrs. Orne pronounced, in a hard voice; "but you can't spend it the way you said. It—it's fur—— . . . Lord! I wisht you'd go out an' work in yer posies. The flowers-de-luce is all in blow this mornin'. Run out an' see 'em, honey. I got t' git these 'ere breadths out th' loom b' this aft'noon.——G' on; you hender me!"

Milly had put her arms about the old woman's neck from behind.

"I won't go a step," she said, firmly, "till you tell me. How much money have I got?"

" I knew you'd pester the life out o' me," scolded her grandmother. " I tol' Gran'pa so. But he was set. ' Ef she's bound on goin' out t' work,' he sez——"

" You told Gran'father? "

Mrs. Orne nodded. Then she turned suddenly and faced the girl.

" ' We don't know nothin' 'bout them Hill folks," she said, shrilly. " An' why in creation should you go off an' leave me and Gran'pa, fer a fool notion? I'll give Mis' Pettibone a piece o' my mind nex' time I see her. She ain't got no call t'——"

" I asked her," interrupted Milly. " I must do something to help. Can't you see, Gran'ma, I—I—can't live here and do nothing. You say I have money. If you——"

" No—no! " cried Mrs. Orne. She threw her apron over her head with the tragic gesture of the countryside. Milly listened to her sobbing in perplexed silence.

Presently Mrs. Orne lowered the apron from her face, and it was seen that within its familiar sanctum she had regained something of her lost composure.

" Losin' th' cow an' all kind o' upset me," she muttered. Then, with sudden sharpness, " We don't want you sh'd use that money for us. We'd a-gin it back long ago, if we'd knowed where it come f'om. . . . But it ain't as if you didn't

have nothin'. An' I guess, when it comes t' that, you've got the right——"

"Did—my father give me the money?" asked Milly in a clear, distinct voice.

Her blue eyes, narrowed slightly, gazed straight at her grandmother.

"I think I'm old enough to know," she added, slowly.

Mrs. Orne stared at the girl, her mouth dropping open a little.

"I never thought you favoured him," she said, under her breath,—"you're like our Milly. But—the' 's times when you put me in mind——"

She stopped suddenly.

"I'm a-goin' t' tell you," she went on, after a lengthening pause. "It was your father. He sent two hundred dollars t'—t' Milly, with a letter. 'N' after she died, it—'course 'twas yourn by rights. Me 'n' Gran'pa wouldn't a-touched a penny of it—not ef we was starvin'. It's been in the bank ever since, drawin' interest. . . ."

Milly's fair young face had grown very pale. She walked toward the door, her head with its mass of blond braids, topped by the small blue hat, thrown slightly back.

"I'm going, now," she said, gently. "But I'll be home before dark."

CHAPTER XI

A LITTLE JOURNEY IN THE WORLD

The road leading to the Eggleston farm might—for the sheer wild loveliness of it—have conducted one straight to Paradise. But Milly, walking swiftly between myriads of fluttering leaves and blossoms, jewelled thick with the lavish splendours of rain and sun, paid scant heed to its beauty. She was painfully conscious of old Mrs. Orne, sitting alone before the loom; its steady thump-thumping marking the heavy rhythm of her thoughts. And the money—of which she had never been told, and which had been drawing interest all these years.—Why should the mere memory of it kindle so strange a fire in those mild eyes? Athwart the crystal pool of Milly's mind an ominous shadow had fallen. But she had not sufficient knowledge of the world, of either books or men, to guess the truth. Something strange had befallen her father and mother—this much was clear. Had he deserted her in her hour of need, sending the money in lieu of his presence? Such cruelty was unthinkable. Yet her grandmother's words had clearly implied it. And afterward—what could have become of him? She had always supposed herself orphaned of both father

and mother. And yet—now that she considered the matter—Grandmother had never said so. The thought of a father, cold and unloving, perhaps not even aware of her existence, dimmed the warm rose of her cheek, and her blue eyes—lifted suddenly at the sound of a horse's hoofs in the road behind her—were full of vague trouble.

The horse, a bright bay, sidled by with a wild glance at the girl's slim blue figure, in its little fluttering cape. His rider spoke to him sharply, touching spurred heels to the animal's glossy flank. They had passed in an instant—the man hastily touching his cap with a muttered word of apology. Milly watched the two figures—man and horse seeming like one—as they topped the rise just ahead. She did not remember to have seen either before. In the flashing moment of their encounter she had noticed his keen, dark eyes and his riding clothes, of a fashion unfamiliar to the country roads about Innisfield. The single look he had cast in her direction appeared to question her presence on the narrow road leading to the Eggleston farm.

Yet, such are the intricacies of the human heart, Milly Orne ceased to think further of her mysterious father, who had somehow managed to earn Grandmother's undying hatred, and of the money, which nobody wanted, drawing interest in the Innisfield Savings Bank. It should continue to draw interest, for all of her, thought Milly,

with a spirited toss of her pretty head. If none of it could be spent to bring comfort to the two old people, it was useless to her. She was strong and could earn money, which she would spend as she liked. Once more Milly beheld in imagination the rows upon rows of yellow shingles, shining in the sun; and this time she added a dun cow to her picture—a young and beautiful dun cow, peacefully chewing the safe cud of contentment in Grandfather's pasture.

There were fresh hoof-prints in the moist gravel of the drive winding between the stately gate-posts of the old Eggleston place. As Milly rounded a curve in the road densely masked with flowering shrubs she beheld the bay horse, standing meekly enough with trailing bridle before the side entrance of the house. The young man who had ridden him was talking with a woman under the shelter of the portico. Neither of them appeared to notice Milly's timid approach. She paused and drew back a little at sight of the man's passionate gesture of denial. He was evidently angry at something the woman was saying in an indistinguishable voice.

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" Milly heard him say loudly. "I'll be hanged if I will! You push a fellow too hard, Mother."

Then both turned, suddenly conscious of the girl's shrinking presence.

" What are you doing here? " the woman said, sharply.

The young man had already flung himself upon the horse and ridden violently away. Everything about him seemed violent, Milly thought. The woman repeated her question in a more conventional tone.

" What do you wish? "

Her cold, imperturbable eyes were busy with the girl's face and figure.

" I came—to see Mrs. Hill," Milly replied, timidly. " Mrs. Pettibone—I have a note from her."

" I am Mrs. Hill," the woman said, and extended her hand for the triangular message bearing her name.

" Have you read this? " she demanded, raising her eyes from its swift perusal.

" Read it? " echoed Milly, her colour rising. " No'm; certainly not."

" It seems from this you are not an ordinary servant," commented Mrs. Hill, sweeping the girl's slim figure with an appraising stare. " I don't know whether you'll do. I should prefer an elderly woman—with experience. Still—— Can you cook? "

" I've never cooked except at home," hesitated Milly, very pink and trembling under the scrutiny of the woman's eyes; " perhaps I oughtn't to say I can. I know how to prepare vegetables, and

cook them; and—and meat. I can make pies, too; —Gran'father likes my pies better than Gran'-mother's. I—I am strong, and—I can make plain cake, molasses cake and——"

"You look healthy," the woman conceded, harshly.

She sighed heavily, yet with a touch of impatience.

"If you'd try me—just to-day," the girl went on, timidly. "I should like to go home nights."

"Where do you live?"

Milly pointed vaguely.

"It's not far," she said, "down the road a piece."

"In the village?"

"No'm; Gran'father's house is quite a ways this side of the village."

Mrs. Hill considered the girl's reply in a silence which appeared to connect itself with Mrs. Pettibone's modest communication. Milly watched the strong white fingers tear the paper into strips, then twice across, in a bewilderment which presently deepened into resentment. Grandmother (she thought) would not like her to stand here begging for work, when, after all, there was money, which belonged to her by right. . . .

"I think I'll try you," Mrs. Hill announced, looking up suddenly from her work of demolition.

She allowed the bits of paper to escape negligently from her plump white hands.

" You may come in—I see you're dressed for work."

" Yes'm," said Milly Orne, meekly.

" I've never been without a servant before," Mrs. Hill observed, as she piloted Milly into a large disorderly kitchen.

She turned and faced the girl before a table covered with soiled dishes.

" Perhaps Mrs. Pettibone has already told you of us," she said, interrogatively.

Her eyes demanded instant reply.

Milly shook her head.

" She said you were—that you had only lived here a little while."

" We came here for my daughter's—for Mrs. Walter Hill's health," the woman said, slowly. "—Kindly pay attention to what I tell you.—I shall not repeat it—nor must you. Do you understand? You are not to talk to anyone of what you see or hear in my house, while you are employed here."

She paused, her eyes under gathered brows gazing opaquely at the girl.

" Of course I shouldn't think of——" began Milly, proudly.

Mrs. Hill cut her short with an impatient gesture.

" Not that there is anything in the least peculiar, or even interesting in our living here. My daughter-in-law, soon after her marriage to my

son, fell into a nervous, almost hysterical condition. Our physician advised country air and a complete change of climate and environment. Through my agent I learned of this place, and took it for a year. There are only the three of us—my son, his wife and myself. Now I think you know all that is necessary to know."

The flow of words, spoken in a low, hurried voice, suddenly ceased. But the woman still stood, one plump hand resting on the table, her eyes riveted upon the girl's listening face.

"Perhaps," she resumed, suddenly, "I ought to reassure you on one point: my son's wife, while exceedingly nervous and unstrung, is perfectly rational except on one or two points. She had a—a strange fancy concerning her husband, which—our physician assures us—will disappear in due time. Her mental condition, in short, is not wholly unnatural in view of the facts in the case. I am telling you this, so that in case Sylvia—Mrs. Hill—should say anything to you—— If she should even attempt to talk to you, kindly report the circumstance at once to me. Your failure to do so might involve us all in great trouble. Do you understand?"

Milly was looking down, feeling very hot and uncomfortable.

"I—should not talk to anyone," she said, coldly. "I wish to earn money; that is why I came. I should do my work."

"Oh, as to wages," Mrs. Hill observed, after a slight pause. "You would hardly expect more than twenty dollars?"

Milly gazed at the woman with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Mrs. Pettibone told me you would pay thirty," she said, slowly.

"I mentioned thirty dollars in my note to Mrs. Pettibone," conceded Mrs. Hill. "An experienced servant would be worth that much. You are merely an untrained girl. It is not at all likely you can cook anything we could eat, to say nothing of waiting on table, or fine laundry work. I shall have to show you everything."

These were incontrovertible facts. Milly turned them over slowly in her mind. Then she put forward a fact quite as incontrovertible.

"There are no experienced servants in Innisfield," she asserted. "You will not find any. Nearly everyone is busy at home, or in the mills."

She looked toward the door which stood open, revealing a stretch of unshorn grass and a weedy flower-border beyond. She was thinking she would go home, and beg Grandmother to let her work in the mills. Perhaps, now that the cow was dead, Grandmother would give her consent.

"Well; I will give you thirty dollars," Mrs. Hill said, sharply. "I'm obliged to have someone, at once. Take off your hat and go to work. This

kitchen must be put to rights, first. We have luncheon at one, and dinner——"

She broke off suddenly at sound of an opening door. Milly saw her face change queerly. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and purring.

"Sylvia, my dear; this is our new maid.—By the way, what is your name? Oh, Milly—Milly Orne. That is a very pretty name and odd, for a maid. Milly, this is Mrs. Walter Hill, my son's wife. I believe you saw Mr. Hill; he was talking with me when you came. Really, your sudden appearance quite startled me. I wasn't expecting such good fortune."

Milly turned and saw a tall girl standing in the door-way, staring at her with a mixture of curiosity and sullen defiance in her dark face. Her eyes were slightly swollen and discoloured, as if with recent tears, and her mouth drooped dispiritedly at the corners. Mrs. Hill walked resolutely toward the door and attempted to pass her arm about the girl's waist.

"Come, Sylvia, my dear," she said, coaxingly, "suppose we leave Milly to her work and go for a ramble in the woods. It will do you good."

The girl's mutinous face quivered as she threw off the caressing hand.

"Don't, Mother!" she exclaimed, irritably; "you know I can't bear it."

But she turned to follow with seeming docility.

Milly heard the door close behind the two women and the sound of their retreating steps in the uncarpeted passage.

Left quite alone in the midst of the untidy kitchen, Milly looked around for a nail on which to hang her hat; then she invested her slim person in the clean checkered apron she had brought with her. The fire had gone out in the cook-stove and the water in the old-fashioned reservoir was cold, there was neither wood nor kindling to be found in the box behind the stove. After a moment of indecision, Milly opened one of several doors in search of the woodshed. There were steps descending to a brick-floored room, its one cobwebbed window opening upon the green gloom of a grassy bank overgrown with rampant lilac shoots. "The milkroom," decided Milly, looking about the rows of dusty shelves, and the pails and pans, once shining silver-bright, but now dim with the rust of long disuse. There was the sound of running water in the cold greenish gloom, where a sparkling spring gushed from a wooden pipe, falling with a musical drip and gurgle into a rude trough, thence disappearing through a hole in the floor. A second door, half-open, disclosed to Milly's inquiring gaze a pantry of ample proportions, well-stocked with ancient crockery and utensils. The shelf before the open window bore a heterogeneous collection of grocer's supplies; a pot of butter, melting in the sun, a tumbler of jam

besieged by darting flies; a baker's loaf, cut crookedly across; sugar, spilled from a broken bag and already under convoy of a procession of industrious ants; a tin pail half-filled with milk, in which divers of the besieging force had met ignominious defeat. . . . She found the woodshed at last, and the sight of its ordered rows of hickory sticks and the plentiful supply of "chips," bespeaking former days of thrift and industry, somehow restored her drooping spirits. A competent fire soon crackled in the rusty stove; then Milly attacked the piled-up dishes on the table, wondering a little how three people could possibly have employed so many plates, cups, and utensils in the course of a single breakfast. There were other things over which to wonder: a quantity of silver spoons and forks, thrown negligently into an iron saucepan in which milk had been burned; a broken plate of delicate porcelain containing a fragment of yellow soap; a silent clock on the mantel pointing to the hour of six. Milly searched for and found the key. She did not know the hour but guessed it to be ten.

The clock struck busily, its harsh, rasping voice seeming to rebuke the desolating disorder of the old kitchen. Then Milly bethought her once more of the butter melting in the sun. Obviously the milkroom, with its penetrating coolness, was the place for perishable foods. What might a trained servant do, under existing circumstances, she

wondered—one really worth the thirty dollars a month she had so boldly exacted? Still pondering this question she plunged the pot of butter in the cool water of the spring; undertook salvage work on the milk pail and sugar bag; then fell to washing the dishes, tables, shelves—everything in sight. A step on the newly cleansed floor caused her to look up from a rueful contemplation of a drawer in the kitchen cupboard, crammed to bursting with soiled table-linen.

The tall young man whom she had last seen riding violently away on his bay horse stood near the door looking about him with an air of astonishment. He still wore his riding clothes, spattered with the mud of fast and furious travel. He glanced at Milly with a certain lighting of his somber young face remotely suggesting a smile.

"Are you here to stay?" he propounded.

"I don't know," Milly replied. "If I suit, perhaps——"

"Suit? You mean——"

"I'm not an experienced——"

She hesitated, with a slight pucker of her white forehead.

"I've never worked out before."

"You don't look in the least like a servant," he said, with a brusqueness which suggested his mother. "Rummy old hole—this kitchen. I've done my best; but it's not exactly in my line. I'm not—er—experienced, either."

Milly was silent, her eyes bent upon the mass of soiled linen she was sorting. He did not go away, however, but reached for a glass on the table.

"I came in for a drink of that bully water," he stated. "Best thing about the place."

He came back presently, whistling under his breath.

"Clever idea of yours to put the butter and milk in the water," he commented. "There seems to be no iceman about, and no refrigerator. We didn't happen to think of your little scheme."

Still Milly did not reply. Mrs. Hill, she could not help reflecting, appeared to have bestowed scant attention upon her kitchen and everything connected with it.

The singular young man stared at her with gathered brows.

"I suppose I ought to have tackled these dishes yesterday, or the day before," he broke out, after a lengthening pause. "Mother—er—you see she's—busy, most of the time, and Sylvia—well; none of us were exactly prepared for the life here. It appears to keep one comfortably busy just to exist, doesn't it?—To exist and—er—clear away the débris. Where is Mother, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Milly.

She walked across to the stove and replenished the fire. Then she looked at the clock.

"If you would kindly tell me the time. I set the clock by guess."

He assisted the old clock to a more exact performance of its duties with an almost eager air of friendliness.

"Couldn't we have something to eat pretty soon?" he asked, over his shoulder.

Milly stole a bewildered glance at him.

"Mrs. Hill said dinner—no, luncheon,"—she hesitated over the seldom-used word—"was to be at one. But she didn't tell me——"

"Well," he said, "luncheon hath a pleasant sound. Suppose I help you a bit. Mother ought to be doing it; but I know where some of the stuff is. What can you cook?"

"Baked potatoes," Milly suggested, doubtfully.

"Baked potatoes—excellent! What else? Can you toss up a good omelet?"

"You mean—eggs?"

"Of course. I attempted it one day; it didn't sound hard in the cook-book—there's a cook-book, you know—but when it came to the tossing—— Did you ever try it?"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't know what you mean, even," she said. "But I can cook eggs different ways."

"Good! Eggs different ways it shall be. There's bread—if that's what you call the curious stuff the grocer brings."

"Do you eat—out here?" asked Milly, timidly. "I might set the table."

"It's the most cheerful spot in the house—now you're in it," he said, with a short laugh. "But so far we've observed the rules of the game to the extent of eating in the dining-room."

He flung open a door and glanced in, with an impatient exclamation.

"I see Mother left it to you; and you—just look here!"

Milly beheld a large sparsely furnished room with open windows. In the middle of the floor stood a disordered table, covered with the remains of a meal eaten several hours before.

"I—I didn't know," she said, with desperate courage. "Mrs. Hill said I wasn't trained. Well, I'm not. I didn't think about a dining-room."

"Mother's fault, if she didn't show you," was his brusque comment. "Never mind,—you didn't tell me your name?"

His handsome, boyish eyes looked straight into hers.

Milly shook her head.

"I'm afraid I won't do, Mr. Hill. You're very kind; but——"

"I'm not kind. I want you to stay. Come, I'll help you hustle these things to the kitchen. It won't take a minute."

She obeyed him in perplexed silence. Where could the mistress of this disjointed household be? And the husband of the handsome, sullen-browed

girl—why should he concern himself with neglected breakfast things and the proper way to cook eggs? She resented his half-defiant manner, his boyish eyes, and the jingling spurs upon his heels. Nevertheless she prepared the potatoes he brought her from some unexplored corner; laid the dismantled table with fresh linen and china under his direction, and was in the act of setting a pan of hastily compounded biscuit in the oven, when the door opened and Mrs. Hill glided smoothly in.

"Did you think I had quite forgotten you?" was her initial question.

Her dull eyes glanced frowningly from the girl's flushed face to that of her son, who stood surveying his mother with a deepening of his defiant air.

"Hard at it, as usual, Mother," he said. "Somebody had to help, you know."

"I think Sylvia would like to see you, Walter," she replied, with a significant lifting of her brows.

Mrs. Hill stood for some moments looking blankly about the kitchen. She did not appear to notice what had been accomplished.

"I had intended to return sooner," she said stiffly. "You—found what was needed? Or did Walter—Mr. Hill——"

Milly opened her lips to reply. But the woman went on, a sudden, almost apologetic smile overspreading her features.

"Of course you've noticed that everything is out of order in the house. I thought at first we should be able to live quite simply, without a servant. But there is really so much one does not think of; and being unaccustomed——"

"Yes'm," said Milly, with down-dropped eyes. "Shall I scramble the eggs?"

"The eggs—oh, yes. Mrs. Hill is fond of omelet. I think there are some in a bag, or——"

Milly began breaking eggs into a bowl. She set a saucepan over the fire and put a lump of butter in it.

Mrs. Hill watched her movements speculatively.

"You appear to know what to do," she murmured. "But . . ."

The rasping voice of the clock told the hour of one.

"I am sorry to be late," said Milly, in a small, meek voice.

"That is no matter. But . . ."

Milly tested the potatoes with a practised thumb and finger, and turned the pan of biscuit. They had puffed to a fabulous lightness and were beginning to take on a tempting golden brown. She was thinking determinedly of the thirty dollars. It helped to steady her under the gaze of those singular eyes. She felt vaguely that Mrs. Hill was displeasd.

"The kitchen floor," she ventured, timidly,

"will look better after another cleaning. So will the tables."

The eggs in the saucepan required instant attention. Milly began lifting spoonfuls of the creamy mixture to the top.

Into Mrs. Hill's opaque gaze had crept a sudden gleam of appetite. She appeared to abandon for the moment the train of thought she had been pursuing.

"I must have some coffee," she said, abruptly. "Serve luncheon at once; then make some."

CHAPTER XII

MILLSTONES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the minister's perfectly just remark concerning millstones of fear as related to the necks of other and innocent persons, Mrs. Pettibone continued to indulge small, fluttering anxieties regarding Milly Orne, whom she had undoubtedly helped to precipitate into a new and untried way of life. That Milly had actually gone to work for the Hills she had heard from that well-nigh omniscient person, Mrs. Buckthorn. Mrs. Buckthorn, as was entirely natural for a person athirst for general information, had learned of the circumstance from the grocery-man in the village, who had actually seen Milly at work in Mrs. Hill's kitchen.

Mr. Obed Salter, in the act of wrapping up a quarter of a pound of mixed tea and a tin can of baking-powder, just purchased by the excellent matron, averred that he was "some s'prised to see the girl, down on her han's an' knees scrubbin' up the floor." He didn't suppose the Ornes was that bad off,—though they hadn't bought no bill of groceries to speak of for a spell back. Mr. Salter's position enabled him to keep, as it were, a sort of commercial barometer, which

apprised him (and other persons in his confidence) very exactly of the varying rises and falls in the finances of his customers. If the wife of the local undertaker, for example, bought lavishly and paid promptly for provisions of the better sort kept in stock by Mr. Salter, that astute gentleman "guessed the' was consid'able sickness an' death 'round." So, likewise, items occupying several debit pages of his ledger devoted to the household consumption of Tifson, the jeweller, indicated the fact that "folks wa'n't buyin' nothin' the' didn't hev to hev these days."

"Yes'm," said Mr. Salter, addressing himself to Mrs. Buckthorn, with philosophical seriousness, "this 'ere 's a queer world, any way you c'n look at it. Settin' right here in my store, I c'n tell which way the cat 's goin' t' jump nine times out o' ten. But the tenth time 's got me guessin'."

He smiled darkly into his change-drawer.

Mrs. Buckthorn dropped two nickels and a penny into her purse.

"Do you go out there often?" she propounded, intelligently linking Mr. Salter's metaphor with an earlier statement.

"You mean t' th' old Eggleston place? Well; I git out there 'bout three times a week reg'lar. 'We don't d'liver goods, es a rule,' I sez to Mis' Hill, 'an' we don't run no bills.' 'Es t' that,' she sez, 'I don't mind. I'll pay when you bring the stuff.' They got a horse, an' the' seems t' be

a young feller hangin' round there with nothin' to do.—No! They ain't doin' nothin' with th' farm; ain't even planted a garden-patch. Can't make 'em out exactly. Seem t' hev money a-plenty. I fetch 'em butcher's meat, days the cart ain't due. But she's hard t' suit, Mis' Hill is—wants things I never heard of b'fore; an-chovies 'n' pap-riky 'n' I-talian oil in tins, 'n' I dunno what all. 'Mis' Hill,' I sez, 'the' ain't no call for them goods in this 'ere town; but if you want 'em,' I sez, ''n' c'n pay for 'em, I guess I c'n git 'em for you. Plain, honest vittles,' I sez, 'is good enough for the run o' my customers.'"

"What they here for, anyhow?" inquired Mrs. Buckthorn, with a comprehensive sniff of disapproval, but an eye intent on the crux of the matter.

The strange articles of food, particularised by Mr. Salter, inspired in her an active suspicion embracing the persons who exhibited such unnatural appetites and desires. "Fleshly lusts," Mrs. Buckthorn characterised them, rolling the Pauline phrase under her tongue with pious unction.

Mr. Salter leaned across his counter upon confidential elbows.

"Well, now, that's what I'd like t' know; 'n' I put it up to Milly Orne kind o' p'intedly, only yiste'day. 'What sort o' folks be they,' I sez t' Milly, 'now 'at you come to know 'em intimate?'"

"What 'd Milly say?"

" 'I don't know 'em intimate,' she sez."

"H'h!" commented Mrs. Buckthorn, acidly. "She must know whether or not they're Chr-ristian people."

"That's what I sez t' Milly. 'Ask the blessin' reg'lar at th' table?' I sez. An' what d' you think she sez t' that?"

Mrs. Buckthorn shook her head, which sustained a massive structure bristling with sharp-pointed feathers of excellent wearing qualities and fearsome aspect.

"I'm sure I can't imagine, Mr. Salter," she replied, in a tone which while anticipating the worst was piously prepared for it.

" 'I don't eat with 'em,' she sez; 'so I can't tell you!' That's what she sez."

Mr. Salter's face expressed a subtle enjoyment of Mrs. Buckthorn's astonishment.

"Milly Orne—eatin' at second table?—Well, I never! Many 's the time she's 'et at sociables in the church parlour an' at Sunday-school picnics right along with my own children—for all what 's past and gone."

"Milly don't eat at no second table, neither," supplemented Mr. Salter, still enjoyably. "She was havin' her dinner in the kitchen when I got there. Not that I don't eat in th' kitchen m'self. 'What's th' use,' I tell m' wife, 'a-mussin' up two rooms with vittles.' B'sides, griddle-cakes tastes better right smack off the griddle. Y'u

can't beat m' wife's buckwheats, n' matter what y'u do."

Mrs. Buckthorn turned to depart. The boasting reference to Mrs. Salter's buckwheats jarred upon her sensibilities. Everybody knew Jane Salter couldn't cook anything fit to eat.

"I'm afraid the Hills ain't my kind o' folks," she observed, moving majestic toward the door, her brown paper bag clasped in both hands.

"It's a rule o' my life,"—she stated to her pastor's wife, when recounting the substance of her conversation with Mr. Salter—"to say no more than that about anybody. Folks are either my kind; or else they ain't. Ef they ain't; I can't help it. All I c'n do is t' pray for 'em. That's what I tell the deacon."

Mrs. Pettibone's ingenuous blue eyes expressed a resigned interest in this Buckthornian view of one's duty to one's neighbours.

"So you think," she hesitated, "that Milly isn't—happy with the Hills?"

"Happy?" echoed Mrs. Buckthorn, sonorously. "Happy? No, my dear Philura, I said nothing with regard to Milly Orne's *happiness*. Why should she be happy? You and I know a girl of Milly's antecedents ought to consider only her duty."

"That's what she's trying to do," Mrs. Pettibone made haste to reply. "She's working to earn money for her grandparents."

"I guess they need it," conceded Mrs. Buckthorn, with severity; "I don't take milk of 'em no more."

In reply to Mrs. Pettibone's surprised inquiries she stated that the Ornes had lost their best cow; and that, for her part, she would never encourage anyone to put water in their milk, however needy. She added, darkly, that she would "say no more."

Mrs. Pettibone did not report the matter in detail to Mr. Pettibone. He appeared to expect an exalted philosophy of life from her which she was very far from constantly practising. Old habits of thought, like miasmatic mists, were always closing blindly about her; and it was often difficult, if not impossible, to remember that the only reality in the universe was the All-Encircling Good.

As she walked quite alone in the direction of the Orne cottage she was striving to bring vividly into the foreground of consciousness the wonderful truth, as it had first dawned upon her bewildered mind that day in Boston. It had seemed to her then so astoundingly simple, so sweetly natural that a wayfaring man, though a fool, might not err therein. Well; she was not a wayfaring man, nor yet a fool; and perhaps that was the root of the trouble. A fool would not be troubled with doubts, perplexities, vain hopes—nor even with the knowledge of a faded photo-

graph well hidden from view between the leaves of a blotter.

Mrs. Pettibone, walking sedately in her second-best alpaca, thought with a little pang of her husband whom she had left at his writing-table, busily engaged upon his Sunday evening sermon for young people. She had become increasingly scrupulous and painstaking of late, whenever it became necessary to disturb the ministerial privacy with calls from the outside world, pausing before the study-door with a gentle cough of warning, or a cautious and prolonged fumbling with the door-knob. If he should chance to be looking at the picture—she felt that she could not bear it. . . .

Old Mrs. Orne was a little stiff in her demeanour to her pastor's wife, when she opened the door of the cottage to Mrs. Pettibone's knock. She had remarked more than once to Grandfather that Milly had no call to go to the parsonage for advice and counsel, so long as *she* was above ground, and had pointedly announced her intention of giving Mrs. Pettibone " a good piece of her mind," whenever opportunity offered. But Opportunity, when it finally arrived, wore so sweet and patient a smile, was so gentle and sympathetic in manner, with eyes so blue under childish brows, and small feet scarce touching the floor from the height of Mrs. Orne's best rush-bottomed chair,

that the old woman's simmering resentment somehow vanished into thin air.

"I'm glad you come," Mrs. Orne said, "I've been wantin' t' talk t' you 'bout Milly. You know she's—but mebbe you put it int' her head t' work out? I kind o' got that idee."

"Not exactly," she said. "Milly came to tell me that she was most anxious to——"

She paused to choose her words with guileless duplicity.

"Dear Milly felt that now she was quite grown-up she wanted to help. And so"—smiling timidly—"I spoke to her of—Mrs. Hill. She seemed in great need of someone to—to assist, and Milly is such a——"

"Milly's a smart girl, an' she's a good girl," declared Grandma Orne, nodding her head. "The' don't nobody need t' tell me that. But—I wanted she should stay right here along o' Gran'pa an' me—till she got married."

Mrs. Pettibone murmured sympathy and assent.

"She ain't got no lack o' beaux," the old woman went on boastfully. "Two or three of 'em 's b'en here this week pesterin' me 'bout Milly; 'n' I didn't want to tell 'em she was workin' out. 'Twould sp'ile her chance with sech likely young fellers as Seth Marvin an' Ben Buckthorn an'——"

Mrs. Pettibone coughed, deprecatingly.

" But if Milly isn't—if she doesn't.—A girl like Milly can't marry without——"

" Well, now, I hope you didn't go an' encourage her in *that,"* Mrs. Orne interrupted, shrilly. " ' Fallin' in love '—' takin' a fancy '—Land! I'd ruther she'd marry some good honest feller with a few acres o' land in his own right. Nate Scrimger wants t' build her a house with a porch acrost th' front an' a sink in th' kitchen; I heerd him tell her so. But Milly, she didn't take no *fancy* t' Nate; so he's quit comin'."

" But you—fell in love with Mr. Orne," suggested Mrs. Pettibone, pacifically, " didn't you? "

" That ain't neither here ner there," said Mrs. Orne, with dignity. " You don't come acrost no young fellers like Gran'pa was in his young days. Seems 's'o' 'twas only yiste'd'y he come ridin' up on his horse t' see me,—me a-wearin' m' new blue calico, trimmed with ruffles—b'cause I suspicioned he was comin' that day. The yellow roses was all in blow. I r'member I'd picked a big posy of 'em an' put it in th' winder. Thinks s'I, mebbe he'll notice it. He was always fond o' flowers—Caleb was. But he didn't even look at 'em. He jumps off his horse an' comes straight t' where I was sittin' pertendin' not t' take notice an' overhandin' a seam like all possess. ' Millicent,' he sez . . ."

The old voice quavered into a silence Mrs. Pettibone did not break. Through the small-paned

window she could see Grandfather Orne's stooped figure in its patched blue shirt, busy among the ordered rows of vegetables. Perhaps he, too, was thinking of the day when, straight and tall, he had leaped off his horse and come straight to the girl shyly intent upon her sewing, with the words of a masterful wooing upon his lips.

Mrs. Orne sighed presently. . . .

"I've b'en up there," she said, fretfully.

"To see Milly?"

"I wanted t' find out what kind o' folks they was."

Mrs. Pettibone's eyes expressed a gentle interest mingled with doubt.

"Well?" she murmured.

The old woman leaned forward, her knotted hands resting on her knees.

"I dunno," she said, and shook her head. "I dunno."

"You mean you didn't——"

"I seen 'em—all three of 'em. The woman was out in th' yard when I come. She an' th' girl was walkin' 'round kind of aimless-like. An' the young feller—her husban'; ain't he?"

"Mr. Walter Hill is Mrs. Hill's son. He married his cousin—the young lady you saw," Mrs. Pettibone explained. Then she added doubtfully, "He seemed a very pleasant young man."

"He doos," agreed Mrs. Orne, promptly. "Mighty pleasant an' soft-spoken. The woman

sez t' me when I asked fer Milly, ' You'll find her in th' kitchen, my good woman,' she sez. ' Go 'round back an' tell Milly t' give you a cup of tea.' The girl, she never looked at me 't all, no more 'n 's if I was a hop-toad. So I walks 'round back, like I was a beggar-woman—but first I tol' her I didn't want no tea; I had m' tea 't home, an' plenty of it, thank God! "

Mrs. Pettibone stirred uneasily in her chair.

" I'm sure Mrs. Hill meant—to be kind," she said, after a little silence, during which the nickel clock on the shelf over her head seemed to tick angrily.

" Smooth words butter no parsnips," quoth the old woman, oracularly. " I wouldn't 'a' cared nothin' 'bout her airs. But when I come 'round th' house I seen *him* a-standin' bare-headed outside th' kitchen winder—right in a bed o' flowers-de-luce he was—his arms on the winder-sill. I stopped right in th' middle o' m' tracks t' see what was up. An' purty soon 'long comes Milly with a tumbler o' water an' han's it out t' him. Her hair was all curlin' 'round her face, like she'd b'en all het up or flustered 'bout somethin', 'n' her cheeks was pink es apple-blows. . . . Lord! "

" Milly is such a pretty girl," the minister's wife said, softly.

" Pretty? " echoed Mrs. Orne. "—Pretty ain't no name fer it! I guess I know. But I wisht t'

th' Lord she was humbly es a hedge-fence. I wisht she was all pitted up with smallpox—I've seen it spile many a han'some face in my young days."

"Oh, Mrs. Orne!" deprecated the little lady, in the rush-bottomed chair.

The old woman gave her a powerful look.

"I guess you ain't fergot a'ready," she said, "n' more hev I."

"But Mr. Hill is married, and his wife——"

"The' ain't no love lost betwixt them two, else he'd a-b'en out walkin' round with her, 'stead o' talkin' t' my Milly."

"But you said Milly brought him a glass of water. Surely there was no harm in that," Mrs. Pettibone insisted. "And Milly—I'd trust Milly to know what was right and——"

Mrs. Orne gave vent to a great groaning sigh, which seemed to tear its way painfully from her breast.

"Mebbe I'm an old fool," she muttered. "I guess I be—after all that's come an' gone. But I'm awful feared o' strangers. . . . I'm awful —feared. . . ."

There followed a heavy silence in the room which the nickel clock on the shelf laboured to fill with its anxious ticking. Outside long sprays of bridal wreath, just coming into snowy perfection of bloom, blew against the pane. Beyond the good brown earth of the garden with its rows of sprout-

ing green was the orchard, dimly pink against a sky mottled with snow-white clouds. A bluebird flitted past, like a flash of mid-heaven, his musical gurgle streaming far behind him.

Philura Pettibone roused herself. There was an All-Encircling Good. Everything in nature proclaimed it. The certainty of it stirred once more strong and sweet within her breast.

"Milly is safe," she pronounced, slowly. "You mustn't be afraid. She is quite—quite safe."

The old woman stared, with a dull air of resentment.

"You mean—r'ligion, I s'pose," she said, sullenly.

"I mean—God," half whispered the minister's little wife. "Your Milly lives and moves and has her being in—God—Love. Love will—not—lose—her. . . ."

Mrs. Orne was rocking her bent old figure from side to side. "That's all very well—nice r'ligious kind of talk—fer them that ain't seen trouble. I us't t' be awful r'ligious when my Milly was little. Every night I made her say her little prayer, a-kneelin' down by me. 'N' every night reg'lar, I said my prayers, askin'—God—t'—t' take care o' my little girl. But th' come a night when—when I could 'a' cursed Him t' His face! He didn't take no care o' my little girl. She was let t' be—crushed—like one o' them white flowers—in the

mud. . . . Since I stood b' her coffin—with—Milly, a little wailin' mite in my arms—I ain't prayed. . . ."

"But—but it's true—only we—we don't—understand." Mrs. Pettibone's troubled face had blanched almost to the colour of the bridal flowers tapping softly on the pane.

"We—don't know," she repeated. "We—can't, somehow. But God—understands. And we must—believe—God. If we don't—oh! Mrs. Orne, life isn't worth living—if we don't—believe!"

Her voice rose, filling every corner of the silent old room, like a clear wind, sent forth to penetrate and scatter dull masses of leaden fog.

Milly's grandmother moved a little in her chair, as if the breath of that wind had reached and stirred her heavy thoughts.

"'Tain't often I go on this way," she apologised, weakly. "I know 'tain't right t' be so—r'bellious. But Milly—Milly's all we got left; 'n' I—I'm awful feared o' strangers."

CHAPTER XIII

NOT AT HOME TO VISITORS

The sun was still an hour above the horizon when Mrs. Pettibone—somewhat shaken and pale of face, after her half-hour alone with grief—came forth into the soft light of the afternoon. She would have time, she thought, to walk the scant mile which separated her from the scene of Milly Orne's new activities. Mrs. Pettibone was not a very astute person, being amiably inclined to take everyone at his own valuation. In place of worldly wisdom, however, she was often aware of intuitions—familiarly known as "feelings," not to be denied or otherwise put down; and these "feelings" (she found) were timidly, but no less stubbornly arrayed against the higher dicta of an idealistic philosophy, as she proceeded resolutely on her way. She decided that since she had herself assisted in bringing about the change in Milly Orne's life, she must, somehow, control its consequences. Not knowing that consequences, like other seemingly blind forces in nature, cannot be controlled.

But her resolution, however futile, served to give poise and even a degree of boldness to her manner, as in due time she mounted the steps in

front of the old Eggleston mansion. Milly herself, prettier than ever in a fresh blue gingham and frilly white apron, opened the door.

The ladies, she said, were not at home.

Then she blushed very prettily.

"She told me to say it," she whispered. "It means—they don't want to see anybody. Mrs. Hill says it's perfectly proper."

"But I may come in and see you, Milly?"

The girl hesitated, gazing at her pastor's wife from under her long, curved lashes.

"I—I might walk with you a piece," she said, doubtfully. "But if you come in I should have to take you to the kitchen. You see I'm being—trained."

Mrs. Pettibone frowned quite portentously for a person with no eyebrows to speak of.

"I see you are," she said, while the recalcitrant "feelings" surged up very strong indeed within her.

After a moment of natural hesitation she added:

"I'm coming 'round to the kitchen, my dear. It won't hurt me in the least, and now that I think of it I've often visited with Miss Minerva Eggleston in the kitchen, when she happened to be busy. I know the place very well."

Milly thought that was "different." But she obediently closed the door while Mrs. Pettibone picked her way through the long grass to the rear entrance. Of the closeted ladies within there

was no sign, though she fancied she detected the low murmur of voices floating out from an open window.

"This is a real nice kitchen," Milly said, with faint embarrassment, as she set forth a well-scrubbed chair for her visitor.

"Yes; it is," agreed Mrs. Pettibone, glancing around the old room, the scene of Miss Minerva Eggleston's slow metamorphosis from defiant youth to resigned middle age. "You—I hope you find it—pleasant here?"

The girl hesitated, looking down at her reddened fingers.

"There is a great deal of hard work to do," she said. "But—I don't mind that. I'm all the time thinking about the nice new roof we'll have next winter, and the cow—I can buy the cow for Gran'father before long."

"And you don't mind—Mrs. Hill is—considerate?"

Milly looked up quickly, her lips parting in a doubtful smile.

"It isn't as if I had to stay always," she said. "I couldn't do that. But just this summer I don't mind—very much."

Mrs. Pettibone reflected soberly. It would not be right, she was thinking, to instill the poison of evil suspicion into the girl's mind. And what, indeed, was there to suspect?

Milly was gazing at her intently.

" You've been to see my Gran'mother; haven't you?"

Mrs. Pettibone did not deny it.

" And she is worried about me; and now you are wondering whether I—— But you see, Gran'mother has always been worried about me—ever since I can remember. Of course it's foolish."

Milly smiled, revealing the edges of her pretty teeth.

" She'll be glad next winter though; won't she?"

" I'm sure I hope so," murmured the minister's wife, mechanically.

She was skirting her way about the difficult subject of which she wished to speak, timidly intent upon her duty.

" Are you—have you become better acquainted with Mrs. Walter Hill?" she propounded, after a pause. " She seems very young—about your own age, I should say."

Milly shook her head. She was still smiling, as if she already guessed what her visitor was thinking and found it faintly amusing.

" Young Mrs. Hill doesn't notice me at all," she said, frankly. " I never see her to speak to her."

Mrs. Pettibone's childish eyes expressed disappointment.

" I'm sorry for that," she said. " I thought per-

haps a cheerful young girl like yourself might—And Mrs. Hill—the mother—you are naturally with her a good deal?"

"Mrs. Hill is always with her daughter. Of course I see her, mornings sometimes, out here, or when—when she tells me things, like to-day."

A conscious flush rose to Mrs. Pettibone's faded cheek.

"You must be very—lonely here," she concluded, with what she felt to be machiavelian duplicity.

"I should be, if it were not for Mr. Hill," said Milly. "He is very kind."

"Kind!" echoed the minister's wife, very pink and agitated. "Kind?"

"Well, you see Mrs. Hill seems to forget that I am here, sometimes," explained Milly, "and if it were not for Mr. Hill—I shouldn't know what to do always—where to find things, I mean, and what to have for dinner, and——"

"Isn't that just a little odd, my dear?" questioned the minister's wife, her voice trembling. "Hasn't Mr. Hill anything to do—any business,—or, one would think he might be very much occupied with his wife."

Milly again shook her head, a troubled pucker appearing between her brows.

"I don't pretend to understand anything, here," she said, under her breath. "But—oughtn't I to do my work as well as I can and—

not try to understand? These people will go away in the fall, and I shall never see them any more. But just now I can help them—cooking their meals and keeping everything tidy, and—Oh, I'm not old or wise, like Gran'mother; but why should I be afraid of—anything or anyone—as long as I do the best I can—to help? "

The girl's face as she said this wore a look so innocently sweet and strong that Mrs. Pettibone felt suddenly ashamed of her little horde of worldly wisdom. She took the rough little hand in both her own.

" You are a good girl, Milly," she said, warmly. " If you will just trust God to guide you—and keep on helping——"

The girl's expression changed subtly, and Mrs. Pettibone, suddenly aware of an unfriendly presence in the room, turned to face the mistress of the house.

Mrs. Hill advanced a few steps, her face twisted in an odd smile, her plump hands moving slowly the one over the other.

" I thought I heard voices," she said, blandly. " In the country, it seems, one must secure one's privacy behind locked doors."

Mrs. Pettibone's eyes, opened very wide and blue, suddenly blinked as if she had received a dash of cold water full in the face.

" I had no—thought of—intruding," she said, with surprising dignity. " I came to call upon

you and your daughter; but I meant to ask for Milly. Indeed, I came chiefly to see whether she was happy in her position here; since I—in a way—am responsible for her presence in your house."

Mrs. Hill moved her large shoulders deprecatingly.

"You quite misunderstand me, my dear Mrs. Pettibone. I beg to assure you we fully appreciate your interest in our affairs. Won't you—I think I should like to speak to you for a moment."

Her gesture peremptorily remanded the small person in drab alpaca to the room from which she had so quietly emerged a moment before.

Mrs. Pettibone remained standing after two doors had closed noiselessly behind them. She was swiftly reviewing the conversation she had just had with Milly Orne and wondering what she ought to have said, in view of the facts.

Mrs. Hill pointed to a chair.

"Kindly be seated," she said, coldly. "It occurs to me that since I am employing a servant in whom so many persons appear to take an interest——"

Mrs. Pettibone's eyes conveyed an indignant question, which Mrs. Hill proceeded at once to answer.

"I am not referring altogether to yourself, Mrs. Pettibone; your own solicitude for the girl is certainly natural; I might say in a way, professional. But there are others—the trades-people,

and the girl's relatives. Really, it is quite extraordinary."

"I think you must have misunderstood what I said to you about Milly," began Mrs. Pettibone. "She is not——"

Mrs. Hill waved her hand.

"We'll not go into that," she said, dryly. "Granted the girl is what persons of her class call 'a perfect lady'; she nevertheless possesses a tongue, and doubtless forms opinions."

"She has told me nothing," began Mrs. Pettibone.

"Yet you were cross-questioning her with considerable adroitness. What do you want to know?"

The minister's wife suddenly bethought herself of the Presbyterial dignities which she represented. Her manner as she rose to her feet conveyed a rebuke commensurate to the offence.

"I can see very little use in talking with you," she said, slowly. "You are not——"

"You would like to tell me that I am not a lady," smiled Mrs. Hill. "—No; don't go. There is something I want you to hear—from me."

Mrs. Pettibone had drawn her little figure to its full height, looking down at the woman, who remained seated, with grave dignity.

"We came here," Mrs. Hill went on, without apparent perturbation, "in order that we might be quite alone and unnoticed. One would suppose

that in a remote country place, like this, one might—— Don't interrupt me, if you please. I acknowledge that I am beaten. And so I shall tell you something of ourselves, and you will oblige me by repeating it to the persons in your parish, who may be interested."

"I think I should prefer not to——"

Mrs. Hill smiled, disagreeably.

"Oh! But I insist. Kindly understand that I am taking you into my confidence, Mrs. Pettibone, because you are the wife of the local clergyman; and I very much prefer to have you tell people about us—quite naturally, you know, at an afternoon tea perhaps, or a church social—to having Salter, the grocer, or the old woman who comes to see my maid, retail the impressions of that worthy young woman. Of course, I understand that personally you feel no curiosity—er—take no interest, as you call it,—in us, or our affairs. But you do take an interest in the girl, Milly, as you have proved this afternoon."

Mrs. Pettibone took two steps toward the door, an indignant exclamation escaping her lips.

The woman sat quite motionless, watching her narrowly.

"If I should tell you I am in deep trouble, you would listen; wouldn't you?—I thought so. Now, sit down—there's a good creature, and let me tell you."

But she did not speak further for a long minute,

during which Mrs. Pettibone nervously examined the tips of her shabby gloves. It was her duty, she thought, to hear what the woman had to say.

"When you met my—son's wife, in the woods some weeks ago," resumed Mrs. Hill, with dry deliberation, "did she impress you as being quite —rational?"

Mrs. Pettibone hesitated, recalling the wild looks and gestures of the tragic young figure.

"She seemed to be in deep trouble of some kind," she said, slowly, "—like one who has kept something hidden for so long, that it bursts out as a kind of relief."

The woman's lashes lifted with a jerk.

"Then she told you—— What did she say?"

"She did not know that I was anywhere about —at first, and I did not understand. It was all incoherent."

"You spoke to her?"

"I asked her to tell me what was the matter. I was very much surprised to meet anyone in those woods. We had not heard the place was let."

"Well? You asked her, and she told you——"

"I thought at first she was a mere child—her hair was hanging in a long braid, and——"

The woman made an impatient gesture.

"She likes it best that way. She told you—what?"

"She said she was married, and that her name was Sylvia Cruden."

"Is that all?"

"All that I think of."

Mrs. Pettiborne looked directly at her inquisitor. "I can think of nothing else," she repeated.

Mrs. Hill was staring at her with curious intentness.

"That is Sylvia's illusion," she said. "She thinks she is married to another man. Of course it is very painful for me to speak of this—very painful for my son. She will recover, of course, in due time. On that score we have no anxiety—no anxiety whatever."

The woman's voice rang flat and insincere.

"Why do you tell me this?" asked the minister's wife.

"Because I want you to know it. You can explain, if anyone asks you, that we do not receive visitors, and that we are not in need of popular sympathy—which is merely another word for officious curiosity."

Mrs. Pettibone stood up, her little figure still panoplied in Presbyterial dignity.

"I am sorry—for your daughter," she murmured—"and for you. I am not—curious, as you seem to think; I only wanted to help."

Mrs. Hill's face twisted painfully, as if the words had touched a hidden spring of violent emo-

tion. Then her features composed themselves into their usual expressionless calm.

"In a case of this kind nothing can be done by an outsider," she said, in a slow, cold voice. "I shall do for Sylvia—what must be done. No one can help."

Mrs. Pettibone moved quietly toward the door. When she had reached it, she turned and looked at the woman, who still sat stolidly in her chair by the window, her face, in the waning afternoon light, curiously resembling a mask of old ivory, with motionless eyes of jade.

"I shall not come again," said Mrs. Pettibone, "unless you send for me. And—I shall not speak of what you have told me. I can see no reason for doing so. As for Milly, I think you can trust her. She may not be a lady, after your way of thinking; but she is true and good. She will do what she can to make things easier for you."

CHAPTER XIV

MILLY DRIVES THE COW

The narrow country road, hardly more than a wagon-track between opposing walls of greenery, was pleasantly cool and moist with a recent shower. Here and there a sun-warmed puddle reflected the dazzling blue of the sky, and furnished a playground for innumerable butterflies, white and pale yellow, which fluttered and lifted before the sedate steps of a dun cow, only to settle again, their gay wings moving gently like wind-blown blossoms. Wild roses in their first frail bloom painted the wayside with splashes of pink, and tall bull thistles, beloved of flying things, lifted their mailed heads of purple and white among the twinkling leaves. There was a warm sweet smell of newly unfolded ferns and wild strawberries hiding in the tall grass. The dun cow would have paused to munch and consider, but the girl walking behind gently urged her forward with light flicks of the leafy branch she carried.

And so in due time the cow, thinking her bovine thoughts of grass and sweet-smelling clover in the meadows beyond, and the girl, smiling with joyous anticipation, covered the scant mile of their journey.

Grandfather Orne was weeding the onions, a task requiring concentrated attention, when the eyes of the worker can scarcely distinguish betwixt the slender onion shoots and the thrifty young weeds crowding close and greedy. His dull ears failed to apprise him of the deliberate footfalls of the dun cow, as she was skilfully induced by the combined action of the girl and the leafy bough to pass through the deftly drawn bars. Here were shade and stretches of green grass and the sound of water running over smooth stones; the dun cow gazed about her with placid eyes of contentment. The girl stood watching the cow for a gleeful moment; then, gathering her skirts about her, slipped through the hedge and across the garden, her light feet making no sound on the soft earth.

" Gran'father! "

The old man raised himself with a grunt.

" Eh!—What? Why, Milly!—Where'd you come f'om, I'd like t' know? "

" From the pasture, Gran'father."

" Come cross lots.—Eh? Well, well! you sure are growin'; seems t' me you look taller 'n' bigger every time I see you. Seen your Gran'ma? "

" Not yet."

The girl's demure face conveyed a subtle sense of mystery; her blue eyes danced under the wind-blown tendrils of her blond hair. She put up her hand to push them away.

"I bet you b'en up t' something 'er other," chuckled the old man, sitting back on his haunches and peering up with an air of superior sagacity. "I always knowed when you was gittin' ready fer mischief. I ust' t' tell yer Gran'ma, 'Keep an eye on her,' I sez, 'th's somethin' doin' when Milly gits that spark in her eye.' 'Member how you upset the bee-hive one day t' see if the' was any honey? We didn't hev t' smack ye fer that. The bees seen to it you was 'tended to, good an' proper."

The girl's laugh rang out.

"I remember," she said. "It isn't bees this time."

"Not bees—eh? Well, I guess you'd better go in an' find yer Gran'ma. She's always talkin' 'bout you, f'om mornin' till night. 'N' I guess she dreams 'bout you 'most every night. I had t' shake her good las' night t' wake her up. She was a-whinin' an' cryin' in her sleep. 'What on airth 's the matter with you, Mother?' I sez. An' come t' find out she'd b'en dreamin' some fool thing er other 'bout you."

Milly's smile faded.

"I wish Gran'mother wouldn't worry about me," she said, soberly.—"Can't you make her stop, Gran'father? You see, I'm grown up, now, and know how to take care of myself."

The old man blew his nose a resounding blast on his red bandanna handkerchief.

"Shucks!" he said, defiantly. "Y'u might es well try t' keep th' ol' red cow f'om chewin' on her cud. I guess yer Gran'ma enjoys worryin' full es much, an' doos it as constant."

The girl laughed outright. Then she caught the old man by the sleeve. "Look!" she commanded, pointing to the pasture, where the dun cow was making leisurely survey of her new domain.

"Heh?—What in creation? Where'd that critter come f'om? Blowed if it don't look like—— Say! I knowed you'd b'en up t' somethin'. Can't fool yer Gran'pa!"

"She's part Jersey, Gran'father.—Wait! I'll run and get Gran'mother. She's all yours—yours an' Gran'mother's."

But Grandmother was already pushing past the unpruned rose-bushes, which stood guard over the vegetable patch, scattering showers of pale pink leaves from their lavish bloom. She took the girl in her arms with a little tender cry of joy.

"I dreamed las' night you was in some sort o' trouble," she quavered. "An' thinks I, I'll go up t' the farm this aft'noon an' see Milly. But you're all right; ain't you, deary? Land; I b'en so worried all th' mornin'."

"Now you see how foolish it is," chided the girl. "I'm as right as right can be."

"What'd I tell ye," crowed the old man. "Chewin' the cud o' trouble all th' endurin' while. Come on out t' th' pastur', Mother, an' le's see

what we c'n find. Ye'll hev t' look close; yer eyesight ain't what it was a spell back.''

And thus the chief conspirator and her gleeful coadjutor guilefully baited the credulous old lady. The dun cow had '' got in t' th' pastur' somehow er other.'' Did Gran'mother think she looked like one of Farmer Craddock's herd? And how was she ever to be restored to her proper owner?

'' I bet Milly, here, couldn't drive a cow t' save her life,'' piped Grandfather. '' Anyway, not a frisky young heifer like that. Say, she looks like some Jersey t' me. Come on, Gran'ma, le's take a good squint at her. I got a good mind t' milk her. It 'd be a charity.''

'' I would, Gran'father,'' chimed in Milly. '' I'll go get your stool an' th' pail.''

'' You'll do nothin' of the kind,'' cried the scandalised old woman.—'' She'd ought t' be driv' home right off; it's full early fer milkin' yet.''

'' I don't see how in creation that critter got int' th' pastur','' cogitated Grandfather, scratching his head. '' Bars is up—b'en up all day. By cracky! She must 'a' jumped clean over the fence! Fetch that stool here, Milly. I'm goin' t' milk her, sure es you're a foot high; 'n' I'll bet I get sech a pail full es you ain't seen in one good while. Got plenty clean pans, Gran'ma? ''

But here Milly, being soft-hearted, told Grandmother, between laughing and crying, how she had

bought the cow the evening before and paid for her with the wages she had earned.

Grandmother wiped her eyes and kissed the girl's glowing cheek. "Dear, dear!" she murmured. "It's awful nice t' hev th' cow. But, honey, I don't like your livin' up there along o' them strange folks. Mebbe they're all right.—Yes, I know you say they be. But they're strange t' me, 'n' I don't like the looks o' that woman."

"They're going away in November," Milly said, soothingly.

"Goin' where?" demanded Mrs. Orne, suspiciously.

"Back where they came from, I suppose. They're only here for the summer."

"Where'd they come from? I sh'd think some of 'em 'd name the place by now."

But Milly didn't know. She thought it didn't matter, anyway.

"'Tain't natural," contradicted Mrs. Orne. "Y'u needn't tell me. Ef I was t' go 'way some place fur the summer don't you s'pose I'd tell folks where I come from? Well, I guess! Wouldn't wait fer 'em t' ask, neither."

Milly pulled a pink rose from the bush, her white forehead puckered thoughtfully. "Oh, well, we're—different," she said, slowly; "we don't like—hiding things or having secrets. Some people make a secret of 'most anything. I guess

they're that kind. They don't want to be friends with the people 'round here."

" J'rus'lem crickets! " cried Grandfather, who had just returned from a jubilant inspection of the new cow. " That there critter's more 'n half Jersey, er I'm a liar! We c'n make butter, Mother. I bet you c'd beat them creamery folks all holler."

Mrs. Orne smiled, tolerantly, her eyes on her grand-daughter.

" Goin' t' stay t' supper, ain't you, deary? " she asked, wistfully.

But Milly shook her head. She must hurry home, she said, to get dinner.

The two old folks stood watching the girl's slim figure till it was on the point of disappearing behind a clump of trees.

" Y'u don' want t' stand an' watch her out o' sight," warned Grandmother, carefully averting her eyes.

" Don't ye s'pose I know that? " retorted Grandfather, indignantly. " Anyhow, you've tol' me 'nough times. Blame fool notion, I say! "

" Well, I s'pose I'd feel some easier 'bout Milly ef them folks didn't eat their dinner at night," quavered Grandmother, plaintively. " It don't seem Christian-like."

" Dinner er supper, can't see's it's goin' t' hurt Milly none," spluttered Grandfather. " Ef folks

want t' name their meals up differ'nt, what d' you care?"

"An' ef they'd only say, right out, they was f'om some place er other we knowed 'bout——"

"Durn it!" cried Grandfather. "—Jes' 's I was feeling good 'bout the cow.—Yes! I will say it! Makes me feel a sight better. Double durn! S' there!"

"I guess I'd better be goin' in th' house," commented Grandmother, quite pink with righteous anger.

She turned after a few steps, her round old face aglow with the light of a fresh purpose.

"Seein' we got the new cow," she said, with fine forgetfulness, "how'd you like some nice batter-cakes fer supper, Gran'pa? I c'n afford th' milk, now."

"How'd I like 'em?" piped Grandfather. "Well, you jes' fry up a good dish of 'em, Mother, an' see what'll ketch 'em—once I git through milkin'."

CHAPTER XV

ON THE OLD ROAD

A LARGE round moon, coloured like the pale wings of the butterflies, floated in the soft rose of the eastern sky as Milly Orne walked swiftly along the road. She was thinking happily of the two old people she had left behind, and of the dun cow, with her pretty sleek head and large mild eyes. Grandfather would be milking her now. She wished she might have waited to see the first foaming pail carried into the kitchen. But there was the dinner to finish and serve. Being quick-witted and, moreover, of an acquisitive mind, Milly had studiously applied herself to the study of Miss Minerva Eggleston's old-fashioned cook-book, and thereby learned many strange combinations and permutations of the familiar "potatoes 'n' meat" served at Innisfield tables. Cooking, she had learned, was a science, not to be disdained or thought lightly of; and since the strangers she served appeared increasingly appreciative of the fruits of her newly acquired knowledge, Milly continued to study and experiment with ever growing pleasure in her work.

She was thinking doubtfully of a certain delicate pudding, compounded for the first time, and at

present awaiting its destined hour in the cool seclusion of the spring-room. Had she beaten the eggs sufficiently, she wondered; and was the méringue which topped the confection overbrown?

She stepped daintily about the edges of a puddle, her blue eyes bent upon the ground, when, as once before, she heard the swift tread of hoofs behind her and looked back to meet Walter Hill's dark gaze. Mindful of her freshly-starched skirts and the threatening mud-puddle, Milly hastily took refuge amid the leafy growth of the roadside till the rider should pass.

But the young man pulled his horse to a standstill, and slipped from his saddle. Milly watched him with surprise as he walked toward her, the bay horse at his heels.

"You've been home?" he asked, his face lighted with a boyish smile. "Do you know I thought I might overtake you?"

Milly said nothing, being vaguely troubled by his presence and the look in his eyes.

"I happened to see you start out from Craddock's," he went on, easily. "How did my lady Jersey behave? And what did they say to her?"

"You mean Gran'father and Gran'mother?" inferred Milly, walking very fast, her eyes on the distant glimmer of white which represented the old Eggleston house. "They—they were glad, of course."

He put out his hand as if to guide her past a particularly deep puddle. But she drew back, a quick flush staining her cheek.

"You didn't seem to be looking," he apologised. "Another instant and you'd have been in over your shoe-tops, you know. It—it's rather wet along here, in spots."

"Yes," she admitted, coldly, "but I've walked in muddy roads all my life."

He studied her averted face, with a slight clouding of his dark good looks.

"What have I done that you won't even look at me, Milly?" he asked, after a lengthening pause. "This morning you were as jolly as could be, only you wouldn't let me beat the eggs."

His tone was slightly aggrieved.

"If you please, Mr. Hill, I'd rather you wouldn't wait for me," she said, determinedly. "I'm late, I know, but——"

"You're not late," he contradicted her; "and besides, it's—beautiful! Look at that moon; will you? . . . It's—somehow, like you, Milly—all soft rose and pale gold and——"

The girl hurried on faster than before, but his long stride kept him abreast of her.

"Don't be angry," he begged. "That bit of foolishness slipped out before I thought. But—see here; I want to tell you something."

She shook her head.

"I haven't time to listen," she objected.

"There's no real reason why we shouldn't be friends."

"You are mistaken," she said, proudly. "Besides, I don't wish to be friends with you. It is absurd even to speak of it."

"But, why?" he urged. "Is it because I—because of Sylvia? Can't a man have friends, even if——"

"It's — because of everything. . . . You oughtn't to be talking to me at all. Mrs. Hill would be displeased."

His face had grown suddenly dark.

"Granted that we cannot be friends," he said, doggedly. "I'm going to tell you one thing. I was on the point of bolting, when you came. I couldn't have stood it another day. . . . Oh, you don't know! Don't judge me—not knowing——"

She was looking at him, her blue eyes wide with unconcealed scorn.

"You are telling me you would have left your wife—and your mother, alone in that lonely house?"

"Oh, I suppose I should have come back. . . . Don't look at me that way, Milly; I'm not as bad as you think."

"Have you no—pity?" she asked, her voice breaking a little. "No—love?"

"Yes," he said, sullenly. "That's why I'm here. But I didn't know what it was going to be like. . . ."

He shook his head, his brows knit over gloomy eyes.

"No; I swear I didn't grasp the situation. How could I? . . . Well, you saved the day, Milly, whether you meant to, or not. I didn't bolt; and for your sake I won't. I'll stick it out, even if Sylvia—— But I mustn't speak to you of her. You wouldn't understand. You couldn't. . . ."

She turned and faced him with sudden courage.

"Why don't you stay with her more?" she demanded. "Surely you ought to be able to comfort her—help her as no one else can."

"It's entirely natural you should think so," he admitted, a tinge of bitterness in his tone. "But —Sylvia doesn't happen to want me. My presence irritates her. Did you ever hear of a marriage of convenience—which is no marriage at all?"

His short laugh held no mirth.

"I can't expect you to be sorry for me," he went on, in face of her troubled silence. "I don't ask it. But—sometime I may be able to explain. Till that hour comes, promise me you will, at least, give me the benefit of the doubt. Don't pass sentence—in the dark."

Her candid eyes searched his face swiftly. If she read truth there and a desperate struggle with some unknown emotion, the girl made no sign. She hesitated for a moment, her face with its delicate pure outlines pale in the softly lighted dusk.

"I certainly have no right to judge you, or anyone, harshly," she said, at last. "If I seem to have done so—forgive me."

He did not attempt to follow her, as she went swiftly from him into the gathering night. As she fled up the long drive she heard the thud of hoofs growing fainter on the road below.

Mrs. Hill's large presence confronted the girl at the door of the kitchen.

"You are late," she said, with a rebuking glance at the clock. "I had begun to wonder if I must prepare the dinner myself."

"I am—very sorry," Milly apologised, quite breathless with haste and the shock of her late encounter.

"Where have you been?" demanded Mrs. Hill, darting a quick look into the luminous dusk without.

Milly, somewhat accustomed by now to her mistress' sharp, incisive questions, answered without embarrassment.

"Did you see no one besides your grandparents?"

The girl hesitated for the space of a frightened heart-beat or two.

"I saw—Mr. Hill," she murmured, her eyes intent upon the potatoes she had hurriedly begun to peel.

"You saw Mr. Hill? . . . Where?"

"On the road, as I was coming home."

" Do you mean he passed you? I haven't heard him come in."

The girl was conscious of the woman's probing eyes upon her face.

" I—I think he went by the other road," she stammered. " The—moon—— It is very light and pleasant out of doors."

Her hands shook over their task.

Mrs. Hill's mouth twisted in a wry smile.

" So I see," she said, dryly. She stood for a moment, watching the girl's nervous fingers with cold interest.

" You may serve dinner," she ordered, " as soon as possible. We will not wait for Mr. Hill."

Milly heard the retreating rustle of her gown with a sigh of relief. But when she ventured to lift her abashed eyes, she was startled to see the tall stout figure standing motionless by the door, as if lost in deep thought.

" You are a very pretty girl," Mrs. Hill observed harshly. " Quite unusually so for a person of your class. But let me remind you that your position in my house depends entirely upon your discretion. You understand me, I am sure."

The leaping colour in Milly's face and the indignant flash of her blue eyes appeared to satisfy the woman. Checking with an imperious gesture the girl's half-uttered exclamation, she swept from the room.

Left to herself, Milly Orne dropped her knife and started toward the door.

"I will not stay in this house," she told herself, with sudden passion. "I will go home!"

There would be a joyful welcome awaiting her there, she knew. But how explain her unlooked-for change of mind? And the leaky old roof—Only this afternoon she had thought happily of the heavy rains sure to come in late autumn, and of the tight new shingles which would shelter the two ailing old people.

Slowly she walked back to the table; slowly took up her knife and went on peeling the potatoes. Afar off, echoing from some distant fold of the hills, came the rhythmic beat of a galloping horse.

CHAPTER XVI

MALVINA BENNETT POINTS A MORAL

Miss Malvina Bennett transferred a pin from her mouth to the heart-shaped cushion on the front of her gown with a quick, darting motion of her right hand, while with her left she gently propelled the lady she was fitting to a proper position before the mirror.

"There now, Mis' Salter," cried the little dressmaker, "how d' you like the set o' that waist? Ain't that bias drape over the left shoulder stylish? It's th' very latest from Paris!"

Mrs. Salter was a thin, stooped woman, with a lavender-tinted complexion, lightly shaded with red about the tip of her pinched nose and the edges of her sparsely-furnished eyelids. She sighed heavily as she surveyed the inchoate garment she was wearing.

"Seems t' me," she murmured, "the's a pucker, right under the left shoulder-blade."

"Course the' is," confirmed Miss Bennett, with professional superiority. "I ain't put no paddin' in there yet. Y' see, you holler right in where some folks bulges out."

"I know I do," acknowledged Mrs. Salter, with

mournful pride. "I ain't got no lung t' speak of on that side. Ain't had fer years an' years; the doctor says it's a *perfec' mericle* I've lived 's long 's I have."

"'Tis wonderful," chirped Miss Bennett, her head, with its second-best false front, very much to one side. "Anyway, you've lasted out lots o' big strong-lookin' folks, I c'd name. . . . Say, I'm a-goin' t' drape the skirt, back an' front like they make 'em this year. It's awful becomin' t' thin folks. But land! I do hope reg'lar bunched overskirts ain't comin' in ag'in. I ust t' pretty nigh go crazy over some o' th' goods that come in th' shop—gettin' 'em t' loop jes' so—talk about loopin' the loop! . . . An' basques with eight seams in back, all boned! R'member how we ust t' make 'em, Mis' Salter? I'd jes' got ont' a secret way o' shapin' th' darts in front when—pouf!—they went out o' style, like you'd blow out a candle. . . . Jes' a second, Mis' Salter, till I stick a pin in under the arm an' cut out th' neck a mite. . . . Yes, low necks is goin' t' be wore this season, an' elbow sleeves. . . . I'll make 'em that way, if you say so. But don't you think—seein' you're so kind o' boney——"

"Anyway, my bones is small," said Mrs. Salter, with an acrimonious sniff. "'N' that's more'n some folks c'n say."

"So they be—awful small an' delicate," conceded Miss Bennett, soothingly. "I hardly ever

fit anybody with your waist-measure. There! now I'll git you out o' this, right off."

Mrs. Salter sank into a chair with a dismal moan.

"You got it off me jest in time, Malvina," she announced, weakly. "One minute more 'n' I'd a-keeled right over! Now when c'n I expect this dress? I'm in kind of a hurry, because Mr. Salter's first wife's aunt is comin' t' visit, an' of course I want t' look nice fer her."

Miss Bennett was setting long basting stitches, her thin lips puckered over a mouthful of pins.

"Le' me see," she mumbled, a glint of anticipatory joy in her eyes. "T'-morrow I'm goin' out t' sew. I hadn't any idee o' doin' sech a thing. Es a rule, I only take in; but t' accommydate——"

"Well, I want t' know," commented Mrs. Salter, acidly. "An' me a-trudgin' over here t' be fitted, with my weak heart——"

"It come b' letter, in th' mail," Miss Bennett went on, pausing to restore the pins to her cushion in full enjoyment of the dramatic interval.

"Well; you was sayin' it come in th' mail," prompted Mrs. Salter, with a hacking cough, indicative of suppressed exasperation.

"You c'd 'a' knocked me down with a feather!" stated Miss Bennett, searching busily among the properties on her table. . . . "Did you bring over any hooks-'n'-eyes, Mis' Salter?"

" Yes, I did; a full card. They was the new kind you can't undo unless you try real hard."

" Oh, yes; here they be. . . . But the' seems t' be two gone."

Mrs. Salter pinned her collar with an indignant glance at the dressmaker.

" It was a full card," she repeated, " right out th' store."

" Oh, I r'member; I sewed two of 'em on your waist a'ready. Now le' me see; I'll work on your dress t'-day—when I ain't busy with fittin's. . . . Mis' Reveren' Pettibone's comin' in this aft'noon. She's b'en there o' course; so she c'n tell me. I always hate t' sew fer strangers, unless I know somethin' 'bout 'em, good er bad."

Mrs. Salter put on her hat, jabbing home the large rhinestone pins with the effect of skewers.

" Who under th' canopy be you talkin' about, Malvina Bennett? " she inquired, with acrimony. " You run on so kind of wild an' ramblin' a body might think you was losin' your mind."

Miss Bennett smiled complacently, but her black eyes snapped.

" Oh, I guess I got my faculties, all right," she said, demurely. " But speakin' o' crazy folks; hev you heared whether the woman that lives up to th' old Eggleston place is in her right mind? I dunno 's I'd want t' go, if——"

" My grief! You ain't goin' there t' sew? "

" M-m-huh," murmured Miss Bennett, rendered once more temporarily speechless with pins.

Mrs. Salter gently chafed the end of her thin nose with a highly-starched and perfumed pocket handkerchief, which she slowly unfolded from a rigid blue-white square.

" Well, of course, Mr. Salter hes been goin' up there reg'lar ever sence they come, so I don't s'pose the's anybody in town knows any more about 'em 'an I do, when it comes t' that."

" M-m-m? " interrogated Miss Bennett, gazing at her customer over the top of her spectacles.

" They buy quite a bill o' groceries every week," pursued Mrs. Salter, moving toward the door. " Well, I guess I'll be going now. When you git my dress done——"

" Don't be in sech a hurry, Mis' Salter, I was goin' t' tell you, you'll hev t' come in th' last o' th' week t' try on that waist ag'in after I put in th' paddin'. A mite too much or too little makes an awful sight o' difference in th' set."

" I s'pose you've heard Milly Orne's helpin' out up there t' th' farm? " vouchsafed Mrs. Salter, her hand on the door. " They treat her like a common hired-girl; Obed says, she eats off the kitchen-table. Ef I was you, I'd——"

" You don't hev t' worry none about her," chirped Miss Bennett. " Me 'n' Milly gits along first rate. Th' ain't a nicer girl in this town."

"Well, you'll find Milly Orne won't hev nothin' t' say 'bout th' folks she works for," sniffed Mrs. Salter. "She ain't hardly said aye, yes er no t' Mr. Salter, fer all he goes there s' constant, an' him takin' an int'rest, an' like that. But Obed he ain't no kind of hand t' notice what folks wear. 'Can't you tell me!' I sez, patient, 'what Mis' Hill had on when she come out in th' kitchen t' giv' you th' order?' 'N' Obed, he shakes his head. 'I think it was somethin' kind o' drab,' he sez, uncertain, 'with white on it, er black—I disremember which.' But the' was one thing he did take notice of; the young lady give him a letter t' mail last Monday, jes' 's he was goin' out the gate. She was standin' there, hid b'hind a big bush waitin' fer him t' come out. Obed says her eyes was big an' scared-lookin', an' she kep' a-twistin' her head back toward th' house, 's if she expected somebody might be lookin'."

"Did he take the letter?' 'inquired Miss Bennett, with breathless interest.

"Yes; he did. But no sooner had he driv' out the gate, with the letter in his pocket 'an he heard somebody a-hollerin' after him. It was Mis' Hill. She's kind of fleshy, Obed says, but fer all that she run like a deer. 'I fergot somethin',' she says, pantin' like she'd hev a stroke. It was a bottle of some queer kind of sauce. They certainly do eat the most outlandish vittles. I don't see how Milly Orne c'n do their cookin'."

" Well? " murmured Miss Bennett, with a touch of impatience.

Mrs. Salter sucked in her thin lips with an air of virtuous reserve. " I guess I'd better say no more. It ain't none o' our business, es Obed says, if she did want t' git the letter back."

" But the' can't nobody help takin' an int'rest," broke in the little dressmaker, eagerly. " The's one thing about me, I don't never gossip. Es I tell Mother, I won't hev no gossipin' in my shop. But the's a big differ'nce b'tween gossipin' malicious an' takin' a deep int'rest in folks. A body might's well be a buried corp, an' done with it, ef we didn't open our mouths t' say a word."

" That's th' way I feel," approved the grocer's wife. " Well, what she'd really come after was that letter. She smiled pleasant, 'n' told Obed it wa'n't directed right, so she'd take it up t' the house an' fix 't. He couldn't do nothin' but give it to her, of course."

" Who was it d'rected to? " breathed the little dressmaker.

" I wish 't I c'd tell you," said Mrs. Salter, resentfully. " Ef it'd been me, I'd 'a' seen t' that b'fore I put th' letter in my pocket. But Obed, he said he was figgerin' on lookin' at it keerful after he'd got out o' sight o' th' house. Ain't that jes' like a man? "

" Eggs-ac'ly! " agreed Miss Bennett, warmly. " Well, ef she was to ask me t' mail a letter, I'd

pr'tend I'd lost it, afore I'd give it up. I dunno why but I always feel like takin' th' part o' th' young folks. Mebbe it's because I feel young inside, fer all I lost m' teeth an' most o' m' hair."

"You might mention casual you'd pass the post-office on th' way home," suggested Mrs. Salter. "But don't, fer mercy' sake, let on I told you. She might lay it t' me an' stop orderin' off Obed."

"You don't hev to worry none. I guess I'd ought t' know how t' manage all kin's o' folks b' now. Seems 's 'o' men an' women ain't no differ-'nt from hooks 'n' eyes; often an' often I've thought about it, settin' here alone in m' shop. You got t' know how t' match 'em up right, fer one thing,—'n' it doos seem 's 'o' th' Lord made mistakes that-a-way; puttin' two hooks op'site 'at won't gibe, n' matter what you do; 'r else sewin' on an eye two sizes too big fer the hook, er——"

Mrs. Salter tossed her head, with matronly arrogance.

"I s'pose an unmarried female does git queer notions, a-livin' alone s' constant," she said, as she opened the door. "But th' can't nobody understand men-folks, 'nless they're married t' one of 'em."

"I thank th' Lord I ain't, every night o' my life, on bended knee!" retaliated the little dressmaker, with spirit. "When I look 'round this 'ere town

an' see the poor, speritless critters, some of 'em actu'ly drove t' drink b' their wives, an' others of 'em not earnin' th' vittles they put in their mouths——"

But Mrs. Salter was already halfway to the gate, her rasped nose uplifted to an outraged heaven.

Miss Bennett stood on her door-step with a pleasing sense of victory, her faded eyes roving up and down the quiet street. It was pleasant out of doors. For an instant she considered the project of bringing her sewing down to the front stoop for the afternoon, only to abandon it with a sigh. There was her neuralgia for one thing, so inalienable a possession that Miss Bennett was wont to speak of it with pride, as if she had bought and paid for it. She did things on account of her neuralgia, and omitted others, for the same cogent reason. The warm breeze, which shook faint fragrance from the old-fashioned white roses in Miss Bennett's front yard, lifted wisps of the second-best false front from off her wrinkled forehead with terrifying boldness.

"If I was t' set in this breeze," she cogitated, "m' neuralgia 'd git right up on its year; 'n' I wouldn't sleep a wink with it t'-night. Th' closter I keep it, th' better 'tis."

As she reached this sacrificial conclusion her eyes lighted upon her erstwhile neighbour, Philura Pettibone, walking swiftly down the street. Miss

Bennett remarked the " set " of her blue foulard with professional interest.

" I never done a better job," she told herself. " But it's out o' style, somethin' scandalous."

The minister's wife unlatched the gate, smiling a greeting over its top at the dressmaker. Her cheeks were pinker than the faded rose in her hat and her blue eyes had a sort of glorified shine.

" I'm late, I know," she said, as she mounted the steps, " but Mrs. Puffer and Mrs. Beels came to see me this afternoon and brought all the children."

" Fer th' land sake!—not th' Puffer twins 'n' all, I sh'd hope? Was it Mis' Undertaker Beels or her-'twas-Jane Bascom? Both of 'em's got plenty o' childern."

" It was Jane Bascom," said Mrs. Pettibone. " Oh, Malvina! have you seen her littlest baby? "

" Me? No. I ain't," sniffed Miss Bennett. " Jane bought her last dress ready-made. She hed th' nerve t' stop me right in th' street—her a-wearin' th' dress—an' tell me she didn't hev no time fer gittin' a dress made. She said Sam Beels bought it for her in th' city, b'fore she was up 'n' around. ' It looks like it,' I sez,—jes' like that, I sez—castin' my eye down at the hang o' th' skirt. ' Well, if you're satisfied,' I sez . . ."

" The baby's a girl," murmured Mrs. Pettibone, softly.

" Huh! " commented Miss Bennett. " So's all

her others, ain't they? How many's she got now?"

"Five; they're all pretty children.—You remember how pretty Jane used to be, Malvina? But the littlest baby . . . She let me hold it. . . ."

Miss Bennett surveyed her pastor's wife with puzzled interest.

"I didn't know you was s' fond of childern, Philura," she said, wonderingly. "There! I went an' fergot ag'in. Now 'at you're Miss Rev'ren' Pettibone I'd ought t' r'member t' call you b' that name. The' ain't no tellin' how long you'll hev it."

Mrs. Pettibone looked startled, and the pink faded a little in her thin cheeks.

"Why what—what do you mean, Malvina?"

Miss Bennett turned and began the ascent of the narrow stair.

"I can't stan' out here no longer in this wind, with m' neuralgia," she said, over her shoulder. "Come right on up; your waist's all basted an' ready t' try on."

Mrs. Pettibone did not repeat her question; but her face still wore a troubled look as she obediently surveyed her small figure in Miss Bennett's mirror.

"Now don't you go t' worryin' 'bout what I said," advised Miss Bennett, as she pinned in a sleeve. "I dunno what p'sessed me; but you kind

o' put me in mind o' your hus'ban's first wife, jes' fer a minute."

"I—put you in mind——"

"Oh, you don't look none like th' first Mis' Pettibone—no more'n I do. 'N' I guess I'd oughtn't t' name her to you, anyhow."

"Why not?" asked the second Mrs. Pettibone, in a small, weak voice. "Why shouldn't you speak of her—to me?"

"Oh, I dunno. Some folks don't like t' think the' was anybody b'fore 'em; like an ostridge stickin' their heads in the sand, I say. I r'member Mis' Gus Bogert, she-'twas-Emiline Post. Em'line was his third. When she was first married she went 'round the house sly, huntin' up all the photos of th' other two, an' fas' 's she found 'em she burnt 'em up in th' kitchen stove. Gus, he'd had a big crayon portrait of his first wife made an' hung up in th' parlour; an' the secon' Mis' Bogert—she-'twas-Minnie Fisher—left it hangin' right over the sofy all durin' her time. But Em'line took it down when Gus was off on one o' his trips. She didn't das t' burn it; but she put it up in th' attic, way in under th' eaves, an' hung up in place of it a real nice premium pictur' she'd got fer soap-wrappers. It was of a lady, I r'member, drest in red, low-neck-an'-short-sleeves, lookin' roguish t' one side of a big black fan. 'Twas real han'some, 'n' a sight cheerfuller 'n' th' crayon pictur' o' th' first Mis' Bogert.

Well, purty soon, back comes Gus f'om his trip an' marches in th' parlour, with Em'line taggin' b'hind, s' nervous she didn't know which f'om tother. Gus looks 'round casual an' takes out his pipe an' fills it—Em'line watchin' him like a cat would a mouse. 'Seem good t' git home, Gus?' sez she, innercent. 'You bet,' sez he; an' sets down in th' patent rocker an' begins smokin' his pipe. Bimeby, he sez, soft, like he was speakin' t' hisself, 'I never knowed what I lost when I buried th' first Mis' Bogert;' an' he sighs heavy, lookin' up at th' pictur' o' th' lady in th' red dress. 'She certainly was the han'somest o' th' three!' he sez, thoughtful; 'an' th' wa'n't a selfish hair in her head.' . . . Now, Mis' Pettibone, ef you'll take this waist off an' put a shawl 'round you fer jest a minute, I'll stitch up the seams an' give it another try-on, then you won't hev t' come ag'in. . . . Well, Em'line, she stood it fer jes' three days. Every time Gus come in th' house he'd go an' stan' mournful in front o' th' pictur' of the lady in th' red low-neck-an'-short-sleeve dress. She hed beaut'ful neck an' arms, white an' round, an' a little more showin' than ought t' b' rights, while Em'line was dark complected an' hed all her dress-waists padded out t' make 'em look anyhow. . . . Good land! did I stick you with a pin? I'd ought t' be more keerful. Now you set right down, Philura, an' look at the fashions. I won't be a minute."

The sound of the sewing-machine driven at furious speed filled the silence while Mrs. Pettibone gazed unseeingly at the picture of a very tall, pink and white lady in a low-necked gown. She was seeing, instead, an old-fashioned photograph of a woman, with sweet, wistful eyes, and a full curl of dark hair lying softly across her round white neck.

"There!" said Miss Bennett, snapping off the threads. "Now I'll slip this on an' see how 'tis. . . . You don't seem t' gain much flesh, Mis' Pettibone, 'n' ef you don't mind I'm goin' t' slip in jest a mite o' cotton under the linin'. . . . You'd ruther not? Oh, all right, I c'n loosen up th' goods an' put a draped fichu across th' front. They're wearin' 'em this season, 'n' they're a real godsend t' thin folks, like you an' Em'line Bogert. . . . An' that puts me in mind; I didn't tell you what Em'line done about th' pictur'; did I? Well, as I was sayin', she stood it fer three long days; then one mornin' when Gus was t' th' store she took down th' pictur' o' th' beautiful lady with th' black fan—she'd come t' hate it b' now—an' took it up t' th' attic and shoved it way back in under th' eaves. But the crayon portrait o' th' first Mis' Bogert she carried downstairs 'n' washed its glass keerful and hung it up over th' sofy. She told me afterwards—when I was there makin' up her mournin' for Gus, it looked real good t' see it there. Sez she, earnest, 'I never knowed th' first

Mis' Bogert; but I felt like she was a sister.' 'N' come t' look, the pictur' wa'n't s' differ'nt f'om Em'line herself, bein' dark complected an' flat-chested, 'n' like that, with her hair done up on top an' hairpin frizzes. Em'line never took it down no more, 'xcept at house-cleanin' time. 'N' at Gus' funeral some of us noticed she'd put a wreath o' white everlastin's on th' frame." . . .

The minister's wife had already reached the gate when she paused, aware of the patter of Miss Bennett's slippered feet in swift pursuit.

"Land! ef I didn't ferget t' ask you 'bout them folks up t' th' Eggleston place," said the little dressmaker, "'n' I hed it in mind, special; but speakin' of the third Mis' Bogert sort o' shoved it back, like you will a paper pattern when you're lookin' fer somethin' else in the bureau drawer!"

But Mrs. Pettibone appeared unable to add to Miss Bennett's meagre store of information.

"D' you mean t' tell me, Philura Rice, 'at you don't know 't all what kind o' folks they be?" cross-questioned Miss Bennett, sternly, "an' you a-goin' there twict, a'ready? You must 'a' noticed somethin'; ef they're real dressy folks—them that has silk linin's to their every-day clo'es, an' like that; or ef they're the sort that wears ready-mades fer best."

Mrs. Pettibone considered gravely, her hand on the gate.

"Mrs. Hill impressed me as being a person of

means, and—yes, education,'' she said, with dignified reserve.

'' Well? '' prompted Miss Bennett, casting her apron over her head in tardy recognition of her neuralgia. '' Shall I wear m' best hair-front an' m' black Henrietta for 'em, er put on m' ol' brown? ''

'' They're not—very social people, I should say,'' hesitated Mrs. Pettibone, at a loss to interpret Miss Bennett's question.

'' Huh! stuck up an' proud,'' inferred the dressmaker. '' Jes' th' same, I shall wear m' Sunday-go-t'-meetin's. Let 'em know first off I'm full es good es they be, ef I do sew fer a livin'. I c'n pertect m' Henrietta with an apron; 'n' I don't keer ef it takes a week t' pick th' threads off.''

And with that she turned and marched into the house.

CHAPTER XVII

WHERE IS SYLVIA?

Milly Orne opened the front door of the old Eggleston house to Miss Bennett's ring early the next morning. The girl looked very fresh and rosy as she smiled a discreet welcome.

"You are to come right upstairs," she said, interrupting Miss Bennett's confident progress toward the living-room. "Everything's ready for you up there."

Miss Bennett bristled slightly.

"I always ust t' sew fer Miss Minerva in th' settin'-room," she observed, as she followed Milly up the stair. "The' sewin' m'chine was there, 'n' everythin' handy. I r'member I made her weddin' dress. . . . What's the matter?" she interrupted herself in a loud buzzing whisper. "Anybody sick?"

Milly shook her head.

"They don't like any noise about the house," she explained, as she ushered the dressmaker into a small room at the back of the house.

"Noise?" repeated Miss Bennett, adjusting her church toilet with little pulls and pats. "Noise! Well, I d'clare; I didn't realise 'at I was so t' say, noisy. Where's Mis' Hill?"

Milly explained that Mrs. Hill had not yet breakfasted, and would Miss Bennett have some coffee before beginning work?

"Might be's good a way 's any t' git acquainted," mused the little dressmaker. "I can't sew ha'f s' well fer strangers 's fer folks I know; s' I don't mind ef I do."

A bright pink overspread Milly's young face. She laid a coaxing hand upon Miss Bennett's arm.

"I—I'll bring it to you up here," she said, "on—on a tray. That would be pleasanter; wouldn't it?"

"Well; I want t' know!" piped Miss Bennett. "That stylish idee never came out o' your head, Milly Orne. . . . An' that's th' kind Mis' Hill is, huh? Well, I dunno 's I keer; forewarned's forearmed; 'n' I c'n be full es sarcastic 'n' like that es th' next one. But I don't want no coffee. You c'n tell Mis' Hill, when you go downstairs. Tell her I et m' breakfas' t' home, same es usual, 'n' you c'n say Miss Malvina Bennett's perfec'ly able t' walk downstairs soon es it comes dinner-time."

When Mrs. Hill finally appeared at the door of the back bedroom which she had ordered Milly to make ready for the sewing, it was to find Miss Malvina Bennett rocking her best frizzed front and her black Henrietta back and forth in front of the window with well-simulated ease.

"You are the seamstress," inferred Mrs. Hill,

briskly; " Miss—er—Bennett. Our grocer told me of you. You can make a plain morning-gown, I suppose? "

Miss Bennett gazed searchingly at the strange woman's tall, stout figure over the top of her spectacles. She saw at a glance that she was wearing a real linen, hand-embroidered dress.

" Made up f'om a imported robe-pattern," she told herself. " Cost fifteen, ninety-eight, I shouldn't wonder."

Aloud she said dryly.

" I guess I c'd make out, ef I was t' try. I sewed fer th' best people since I was fifteen: Mis' Deaconess Buckthorn, Mis' Rev'ren' Pettibone an'——"

" I have a pattern," interrupted Mrs. Hill, " which may serve to guide you."

Miss Bennett negligently indicated a pile of gaudily illustrated fashion-books.

" I brought 'em along thinkin' likely you wouldn't 'a' seen 'em," she said, loftily. " They're the latest f'om Noo York an' Paris: all you got 't do is t' pick an' choose the pictur' you like th' looks of. I don't need no patterns. I got m' own system."

" The dress is for my son's wife, Mrs. Walter Hill. You—I suppose Mrs. Pettibone has spoken to you of—Mrs. Hill? "

Miss Bennett shook her head, her lips compressed to a thin line.

"I don't never gossip," she said, decidedly. "In m' shop, or when I go out—which ain't often, an' only t' accomydate special, like of course t' you. I ain't no news-getherer. Anybody 'at knows me 'll tell you that."

Mrs. Hill turned abruptly from the bureau-drawer whose contents she was laying out upon a small table.

"That is a very good rule for a seamstress to make for herself," she said, coldly.

"'Tain't a bad one fer other folks, when it comes t' that," cackled Miss Bennett. "But I ain't what you'd call a *seamstress*. I'm a reg'lar dressmaker. Now, ef you'll jes' bring the young lady here till I c'n git her measures, I c'n be draughtin' a pattern. I don't like t' let m' time run t' waste."

Miss Bennett's head was tilted slightly to one side; she gazed aggressively at the woman in the hand-embroidered linen gown.

"Fer two cents," she told herself, "I'd walk down them stairs 'n' out th' front door. She don't like m' looks, 'n' she hates like p'ison t' fetch the young woman where I c'n talk t' her. Like enough she's got somethin' hid, an' she's tryin' desp'rit' hard t' pertend she ain't. She's a hard, selfish woman, er I lose my guess. But mebbe I b'en sent, who knows?"

Aloud she said, briskly:

"I can't do nothin' till I take them measures."

Mrs. Hill moved toward the door.

"I'll call my daughter," she said, her full dark eyes sweeping the little dressmaker with cold distaste.

Left to herself, Miss Bennett took a leisurely survey of the materials laid out upon the bed and bureau, and her spirits rose.

"Anyhow, she ain't no ways stingy," she said, aloud, as she measured off breadths of thin blue stuff, lengths of embroidery, and noted approvingly the number of spools of silk, bolts of ribbon, and cards of buttons. "That goods 'll make up reel pretty an' dressy, once I git m' sheers int' it."

Ten minutes more passed happily in a search through the fashion-books in pursuit of what Miss Bennett called "negli-gees." These were numerous and attractive; but the study of them palled after a while.

"My stars alive!" exclaimed the little dressmaker, indignantly. "That woman mus' think I'm workin' b' th' piece. Well, she'll find she's good an' mistaken; when I go out special t' accommydate, it's b' th' day, whether I set sewin' er idle."

She tiptoed cautiously to the door and applied her ear to the keyhole. No sound came from the passage without. Then she boldly opened the door.

"I didn't make no contrac' t' stay in this one

room constant, 't I know of,'' she muttered, as she stepped out. '' Land! I guess they clean fergot I was here.''

Open doors to the right and left revealed bedrooms, into which breeze and sun streamed cheerfully. Miss Bennett's bird-like glance took swift note of snowy bed-linen and the glisten of silver and ivory toilet articles as she stole hesitatingly toward the stair. She was thinking she would find Milly; Milly would know; when, suddenly, a voice from the hall below broke the silence. It was low and tense.

'' Walter—Walter! What are you doing? ''

'' What am I doing? What d' you suppose?—Reading a dreary novel, as usual,'' came the reply, in a man's drawling voice.

'' Where is Sylvia? I left her here with you. I can't find her anywhere.''

'' You left her—— Poor old girl; isn't she to stroll in the garden, even, if she feels like it? ''

'' No! Not alone. You know I never——''

'' Yes; I know. And, see here, Mother; let me tell you, you're making a big mistake——''

'' You say she went out? When? ''

'' Not ten minutes ago. Good Lord! Mother, one would think——''

'' Go look for her, quick—quick, I say! Take your horse.''

Miss Bennett beat a noiseless retreat at sound of a hurried foot on the stair. She sat turning

over the leaves of a fashion-book by the window when Mrs. Hill appeared. The woman's large face wore a determined smile.

"Has—have you seen anything of young Mrs. Hill?" she asked, her eyes searching the room. "I thought perhaps——"

"No; she ain't b'en here," replied Miss Bennett. "Mebbe she's gone t' walk. I seen somebody in a pink dress, a spell ago, cuttin' across th' back lot. It's nice an' cool in under the trees a day like this."

Mrs. Hill's plump hand sought her heart, with an uncertain gesture. She sank down in a chair, while a flood of dull purple swept over her pallid face.

"It's—it's very warm," she stammered, thickly. "I—feel the heat."

"I guess you b'en dashin' 'round consid'able, lookin' fer young Mis' Hill," hazarded Miss Bennett, kindly. "Why not let me an' Milly go look fer her? We're both of us light on our feet. Fleshy folks 'at wears their clo'es too tight——"

The woman was staring at her dully.

"Yes; go—go, quick! You saw her—she had on a pink dress; I—can't——"

Milly Orne dropped the spoon with which she was stirring some fragrant compound, at Miss Bennett's first explanatory word. The dressmaker stood staring in amazement at the girl's swift flight in the direction she had indicated.

"I want t' know!" cogitated Miss Bennett, as she followed at a more leisurely pace.

"What in under the canopy c'n be the matter with young Mis' Hill t' set everybody b' th' years like that? She mus' be crazy, er somethin'."

With due regard to the black Henrietta cloth in which she was attired, Miss Malvina avoided the fence at the rear of the old pasture. There was a gate, she knew, farther on; and beyond the gate a path leading through a daisied meadow.

"Well, I d'clare," she murmured. "Ef I was free 'n' idle t' walk right out in th' flowers like this, seems 's 'o' I'd be happy. I dunno when I've b'en out in th' reel country like this, a-walkin'."

There were wild strawberries ripening in the meadow; Miss Malvina could smell them, as she hurried along the path, her black skirts swishing the tall grass on either side.

"What 'd I giv' t' hev on an ol' calico dress 'n' wade right int' th' grass a-strawb'ryin'!" she said to herself. "I ain't hed a chanct t' do nothin' like that since I c'n r'member . . . 'n' wild strawb'ry shortcake, with cream—m-m-m!"

There was a glint of pink showing beside a big grey rock a dozen rods ahead. Miss Malvina strained her faded eyes hopefully. But it was only a wild rose in a glory of evanescent bloom. Around the shoulder of the hill was the placid pool, known as Eggleston's Pond.

"I wonder ef she could 'a' gone there?" pon-

dered Miss Malvina, and all unconsciously quickened her steps. "The water-lilies 'ud be in blow. Mebbe—mebbe. . . ."

And now Miss Malvina caught the glint of blue water amid the soft green of willows, crowding like eager children to the water's edge among the sturdy trunks of oaks and beeches. And, yes, she saw a motionless blur of warm rose, on the brink of the pond. There was a big rock there, shouldering boldly out into the pool, and beneath its shadow the water lay deep and dark. The little dressmaker stooped to gather a spray of wild roses, her heart beating in her throat.

"I got to be kind o' keerless, es if I was out fer pleasure 'n' jes' run acrost her casual," she told herself. "The' ain't no tellin' what's in that poor young creeter's mind—a-settin' there lonesome on the edge o' that water. But f'om what I seen an' heard a'ready, I sh'd say she didn't hev it none too pleasant t' home, what with a husban' like that Walter, an' a ma-in-law. . . ."

At Miss Bennett's approach the girl lifted dull, abstracted eyes from her fixed contemplation of the pool. But she did not speak.

"Good land!" cried Miss Malvina, briskly. "You cert'nly hev found a nice cool place t' set down an' rest, ain't you? It's real warm in the sun. . . . I s'pose you're young Mis' Hill. My name's Bennett—Miss Malvina Bennett. 'N' I

come up f'om the village this mornin' a-purpose t' make a dress fer you. But come t' take your measures, we couldn't find you nowhere; an' your ma-in-law, she sez. . . ."

The girl hunched a sullen shoulder toward the loquacious little dressmaker, her dark eyes again seeking the silent, mysterious depths on whose brink she was crouching.

"You won't mind ef I set down a minute t' git cooled off, will you?" continued Miss Malvina, rather breathlessly. "I sez t' your ma-in-law, 'I'll step out an' cast m' eye around,' I sez. She was all het up an' excited. I s'pose she kind o' hated to see me a-settin' there idle, b' th' day at that. But o' course I couldn't put m' shears t' th' goods without I took your measures. Thinks I, I bet that young lady's gone after water-lilies. Ain't they han'some though? Makes me think of a night-bloomin' cactus 'at Mis' Deaconess Scrimger hed one time. Ever see one? They call it Serious 'cause it don't never open 'xcept at night. But I think I like the day-bloomin' flowers best. They're cheerful. The's a reg'lar little sun-burst in every one o' them lilies; did y' ever take notice? Land! I wish I hed a scow. We'd git some of 'em t' take home. The' ust t' be a fishin'-boat tied t' th' willows on th' other side; but I see it's sunk t' th' bottom."

The girl sighed uncertainly. It was a piteous sound, suggesting a spent sob. Miss Malvina put

out her worn little hand and touched the girl gently.

" Now, you come on home with me, Mis' Hill," she said, coaxingly. " 'N' we'll make up that han'some goods int' th' purtiest dress we c'n find in th' pictur's. Th's a lady in colours on th' outside cover 'at looks a lot like you——"

" I—I don't want any dress," said the girl, in a low, smothered voice. " Go away, please; and —and don't tell Mother where I am."

Miss Malvina pushed back her best frizzed front from a forehead on which beads of perspiration were beginning to glisten.

" Ef I do," she said, desperately, " like es not you'd git dizzy an' fall in that there water. It's awful deep, right b' that stone. I know, 'cause a boy, he got drownded there, when I was a girl. Land! ef I was Philura Rice—her-'twas; she's Mis' Rev'ren' Pettibone, now—she'd know what t' say. She'd tell you cheerful 'bout th' All-Encirclin' Good, with everythin' you want in it, ready t' your han'. Ef it's folks you want special, er clo'es 'n' like that. Philura found her husban' that way; he was right there all the time, being th' pastor. But he'd no more 'a' thought o' marrying Philura Rice; an' I'll stick t' that t' m' dyin' day. But b'lievin', the way she done, sort o' drawed him right to her. He couldn't no more 'a' helped bein' drawed 'an a tack c'n help stickin' to one o' these 'ere magnums. . . . You know;

they're shaped like a horse-shoe, an' painted red. I got one t' my house, with nails a-hangin' to it like they was glued."

The girl had turned and was staring, wide-eyed.

"You say she found—her husband? Was he lost? When—where was he?"

Miss Malvina drew a deep breath.

"We c'n be talkin' whilst we walk along," she suggested, cheerfully. "Mebbe somebody er other 'll come on us sudden, ef we set here any longer."

The girl rose obediently. She seemed to have forgotten the dark lure of the water.

"You'll hev t' go an' see Mis' Pettibone fer yourself," went on Malvina Bennett. "Ask her t' tell you. I don't rightly understan' all th' is to it. But es nigh es I c'd make out, th' Rev'ren' Pettibone, he was *in the Encirclin' Good*—everybody's in it; you an' me, 'n' your hus'ban', 'n' even your ma-in-law—though like enough she don't sense it. Most folks don't. He was in it; 'n' Philura, bein', so t' say, alone in the world an' kind of lon'some, jus' drawed him t' her b' her thoughts. 'It's 'nough t' scare a body t' think what they c'n do jest b' thinkin' keerless,' I sez t' Philura. 'I wouldn't das t' advertise fer no man that-a-way,' sez I, 'fer fear he'd show up, 'n' I wouldn't like him when he come.' . . . Look there! Ef there ain't your ma-in-law. She

sees us. Now, you want t' chirk right up. Don't go off no more b' yourself. When you git that new dress, all made up stylish, come down t' the village an' see Mis' Rev'ren' Pettibone. She's an awful interestin' woman an' she'll tell you how t' git anythin' out th' atmosphere you want. . . . 'N' say, I pass th' post-office on m' way home. I thought I'd mention it, in case you was writin' t' any o' your frien's——"

The older Mrs. Hill was close upon them.

"Sylvia!" she cried, her breath coming in great gasps. "Sylvia!"

The girl looked at her from under mutinous brows.

"Good land, Mis' Hill, th' wasn't no need of your gittin' all het up!" expostulated Miss Bennett. "I ain't going t' charge ye a cent fer th' time I spent walkin' out. Me an' young Mis' Hill enjoyed every minute of it; didn't we, Mis' Hill? a-lookin' at th' water-lilies an' all. . . ."

It was dusk, with a glimmer of fire-flies in the dark trees, when Miss Malvina, carrying a flat paper parcel, hurried along the narrow road leading to the village. She had done a good day's work, she knew; and in the pocket of her dress reposed a letter, slipped unseen into her hand as she draped the runaway of the morning with becoming folds of the dark blue stuff.

"I c'n finish this 'ere dress to home in m' shop," she had explained to her new patron.

" 'N' I'd a sight ruther do it, not relishin' m' vittles et solitary off a tray, like I was sick a-bed, which thank th' Lord I'm well, 'n' expect t' be, D. V.—es Miss Deaconess Buckthorn always says pious. I 'spose it stan's for ' don't ventilate;' 'n' I will say, too many draughts ain't good fer m' neuralgia."

Arrived at last under the glaring arc-light which the enterprising citizens of Innisfield had placed directly in front of the post-office, Miss Malvina slowly drew the letter from her pocket.

" Ef I was t' giv' one look at th' writin'," she reflected, " I couldn't no more help speakin' of it, 'an a sparrer c'n help chirpin'. So I guess I'll jus' shet my eyes, whilst I——"

A depressing sense of the irreparable swept over Miss Malvina, as she turned slowly away, after hearing the letter flop smartly against the bottom of the official box.

" 'Tain't human not t' wonder who it's to," she breathed. " 'N' I don't s'pose she'd 'a' cared a mite, neither—me takin' an int'rest 'n' like that. Anyway, that ma-in-law o' hern 'll never git her han's onto it. It's U. S. Mail, f'om now on. 'N' I done m' best."

CHAPTER XVIII

WINGS OF THE MORNING

THERE are nights in summer which are not meant to be wasted in sleep, for a magical veil, woven from moonlight and dew and the fragrance of a million flowers, transfigures the prosaic world of labour and sorrow into a place of wondrous delight. On nights like this, one who foregoes his sleep to wander forth into the enchanted land of faërie may see and hear much that is hid from the wise and prudent, who tarry bed-fast till daybreak. Under the roof of the old Eggleston house, Milly Orne lay wide-eyed in her narrow bed; outside her window in the topmost branches of a blossoming catalpa a bird sang drowsily, sweet snatches of matin song. A pair of catbirds were nesting there, and the little brown father of the fledglings safely folded under the mother's breast waked and slept on his swinging bough, and waked again in the broad light of the moon to ease his heart of its dream of love.

"It must be near morning," thought Milly, who also had slept fitfully, being dimly aware of the moonlight flooding her dingy little room and of the bird-song and fragrance beneath her window.

She arose, after a little, and bound her long

hair about her head. If at night-fall she had felt weariness and the leaden desire to sleep, both had vanished, leaving her wondrous strong and light of heart. She thought with sudden longing of the garden Grandfather Orne had pridefully laid out for Grandmother back in the fifties. It had been sadly neglected in Milly's absence, lusty weeds flaunting their coarse leaves in the queer old-fashioned rounds and squares sacred to the delicate blossoms of bluebells, lilies, and sweet-williams. It would soon be daylight (thought Milly), but surely the night was her own to do with as she willed.—And so, almost before she was aware of her resolution, she had passed softly through the sleeping house and out into the magical night.

High in the bridal white of his chamber the bird trilled softly, while half-hid in the unshorn grass dew-drenched sprays of honeysuckle and roses yielded their perfume as the girl's light garments brushed past them. Like a spirit she flitted down the long avenue of trees, unaware of following eyes as wakeful as her own.

The two old people lay heavily asleep in their bedroom next the kitchen. Milly paused under their window, propped open a hand's breadth, and listened, smiling, to the raucous concert of their breathing. The old dog had roused from his mat on the doorstep with a smothered bark, only to whine and fondle the hand held out to him.

Perhaps he was well used to seeing a sweet young ghost flitting among the flowers of a moonlight night, for he retreated to his place and lay down, his wise old head on his paws, his eyes, which saw things not to be uttered or understood, following the movements of the girl.

It was no easy task to distinguish between the coarse-textured leaves of encroaching weeds and the rightful denizens of the garden-beds. The moon, swinging halfway between zenith and horizon, shed only a mystic half-light over the sleeping garden. To her vexation Milly perceived that she had rooted up more than one of the thrifty four-o'-clocks and petunias, their velvet cups close shut against the dew. After all, toil belonged to the day, and in this old garden, asleep and breathing perfume, there were no weeds; the magic of the moonlight had touched them all with beauty.

So Milly trod the worn paths, her feet making no sound on the soft earth, her hands caressing the nodding blossoms, her fresh lips brushing the dew from their petals,—while the moon swung lower in the west, and along the eastern horizon a faint glow, dim and mystical as the heart of a sleeping rose, betrayed the dawn. Then all at once the birds awoke, with soft twitters and half-uttered trills; nestlings began to cry weakly for food, thrusting callow heads against the shielding breasts that brooded them. The old dog rose from his mat, yawned, turned thrice around and

lay down again, his wise head on his paws, his yellow eyes following the girl's light figure. (Or was it merely the familiar ghost which always vanished at daybreak?)

Milly had gained the road, her hands filled to overflowing with flowers, her thoughts as wild and free as the birds flitting overhead in the blended light of dawn and dying moon. She felt no fear and but little wonder when at the turn of the road she met him.

"What a night," he sighed. "And you—you are not a mortal woman, I swear—but a spirit. I think I am—afraid."

Milly looked at him, gravely.

"What is a mortal?" she asked. "And what is a spirit? And why should one be afraid, as you say, of either?"

"Hard questions, those," he made answer. "Yet it comes to me that I also am a spirit; and meeting thus, neither should be afraid of the other."

And whether it was the magic of the hour, or the pleading in his dark eyes seeking hers, Milly felt neither fear of him, nor shame which is more cruel than fear.

"If in truth," he went on, "you and I were not mortals, but spirits, I might say many things to you; and you—would listen."

"I will listen," said Milly, eager as a moth at the lip of a flower.

" Well, then, I have been unhappy, being bound with a hateful chain—which, after all, is not a chain but a silken web, spun in secret out of fear and pride. I was asleep when the chain was laid upon me; but now I am awake, and I see that I must break it—for your sake and my own."

The girl turned her glorified face toward him, the rose of dawn upon it.

" If I should pretend that I do not understand you," she said, slowly, " it would not be truth."

" Milly!" he cried. " You know that I love you!"

" Yes," she breathed. " I know. And I—love you."

But when (being mortal and a man) he would have clasped and kissed her, she drew away, regarding him over the mass of flowers she held against her breast, her face in the light of the living dawn gravely sweet as that of an angel.

" There is the chain," she said. " It lies betwixt us."

" Have I not said it is not a chain," he cried, " but a web of lies? It shall not separate us. . . . I am not——"

But she halted the words on his lips with a look.

" There are others to be thought of," she reminded him.

He groaned aloud.

"But not for always," he said. "Not forever, Milly—Milly!"

And now the moon had altogether vanished from behind them, and its magic light lost in the flood of honest day which streamed full in their young faces. The girl looked at him steadfastly.

"We have both forgotten many things," she said, sadly. "It is not possible to unsay words, once they are spoken—I would to God it were!"

"It is not possible," he echoed. "Thank God, it is not possible!" and with that name upon his lips, took her hand in both his own, and stooping kissed it with all reverence.

"Milly," he said, "whether you believe me, or not, I have done you no wrong."

"To me," she breathed, "you have done no wrong; but to another——"

"To another, I have done no wrong, I swear it! I will tell you everything and you shall judge——"

But at that she cried out.

"Tell me nothing," she entreated. "Let me go!"

She was only a woman, trembling and terror-smitten, now that the hour of her exaltation was past.

"Let me go!" she wailed. "Oh, why did you come out to meet me?"

As before, he did not attempt to follow; but stood watching her with troubled eyes, till the last

light flutter of her garments vanished on the green hillside.

"I am a fool!" he said, aloud. And smote his clenched fist in his palm.

For a long time thereafter he lay prone upon his face among the fern, thinking the long, long thoughts of youth, which in truth take wings of the morning from deeps of black despair to heights dreamed of but never quite attained. Yet it is good to fly.

CHAPTER XIX

GRANDMA ORNE SPEAKS HER MIND

Grandma Orne sat under the shelter of her small porch, looking out with patient, faded eyes over the old garden, where long spikes of hollyhock and foxglove swayed gently in the light breeze. It was nearing the hour of sunset and a warm yellow light brooded the garden and touched the tops of the apple-trees with gold. Outside the palings, lost in vines and luxuriant garlands of honeysuckle, the road thick with dust wound away toward the hills. The old woman had been sewing carpet-rags and a big basket filled with the parti-coloured balls stood at her side. In the rocking-chair beside her, Grandfather had fallen asleep, his head thinly covered with wisps of white hair bent sidewise; from his half-closed lips the breath escaped in little puffs, varied by an occasional snorting whistle.

Grandmother glanced at him indulgently, almost condescendingly. She never slept in the day-time. Presently, she got up from her chair and walked slowly to the gate, her lips moving soundlessly. She was thinking of Milly and of the fact that for more than a week the girl had not visited the cottage.

"I'd like t' know what she's a-doin'," she said, to herself. "Ef she don't come t'-night, I guess I'll hev t' g' up there an' see."

Her thoughts reverted to the Hills' evening dinners with rising indignation.

"It's all them hearty vittles t' git ready," she muttered. "Meat 'n' p'tatoes 'n' sich at night ain't good fer nobody. Makes 'em fractious, like too much oats would a horse. Ef she'd a-said in the th' b'ginnin' she wasn't ust t' no sech nonsense, I guess that woman 'd 'a' giv' in."

The lad's-love, petunias, and mignonette growing luxuriantly in their humble beds gave out sweet odours as the old woman's skirt brushed past. She came to the gate presently and, leaning upon it, looked up and down the dusty road with the submissive eyes of age, no longer eagerly expectant of anything. The sun was about to disappear behind a bank of purple cloud massed solidly upon the horizon like distant mountains. Mrs. Orne gazed at it with silent disapproval. Then her eyes travelled slowly to the roof of the old house. Part of the blackened shingles had already been replaced with new; but there was a large patch where the stripped rafters lay open to the sky.

"Didn't I warn Gran'pa over 'n' over not t' let them boys rip off one more shingle 'an they was ready t' lay?" she muttered, wrathfully. "An' Gran'pa, he sez t' me, 'You g' in 'n' ten' t'

yer knittin', Mother,' he sez. Let s'm' other men-folks come 'round th' place, it's wonderful how smart an' knowin' Gran'pa doos git all of a sudden. Seems like they kin' o' 'ncourage each other in foolishness. Well; ef it sets in fer a good stidy rain, come t'-morrow, mebbe Gran'pa 'll wish he'd listened t' me."

She turned her back on the threatening sunset to gaze once more toward the bend in the road, where her grand-daughter's slim figure had so often appeared on its way to the cottage. There were two figures there now, vaguely outlined against the parched growths of midsummer. The old woman strained her dim eyes upon them.

"Looks like Milly; but the's somebody else. Might be Will Craddock; he gits down this way sometimes. . . . No; 'tain't Will. He ain't s' tall, ner . . . Who c'n it be? She's talkin' t' him, turnin' her face up t' him, like a flower. . . . She's got that same pretty way o' lookin' out o' her eyes our Milly had. Awful sweet an' —an' innercent. . . . She don' know no more'n a baby—I never told her; mebbe I'd ought t' 'a' told her. . . . No; that ain't anybody I ever see b'fore, unless—— My grief! it's that fellow 'at rides a-past here on a brown horse,—him that lives there! But he's married. . . ."

The two were close at hand now, walking slowly.—Mrs. Orne, her small bent figure half-concealed in the shadow of a lilac bush, peered

out at them fearfully. She saw that Milly was looking down, her face pale in the yellow light that flared up from behind the sullen cloud-bank in the west, and that the man's tall head was bent; he was talking to her in low urgent tones.

"You believe me, don't you, Milly?" the old woman heard him say.

The girl looking up suddenly caught sight of the pale, watchful face behind the gate. She waved her hand in greeting.

"It's Gran'mother," she said, hurriedly. "No; don't wait, please. I——"

But Mrs. Orne had stepped outside; her old eyes flaming.

"You seem t' 'a' got pretty well acquainted with my gran'-darter?" she said, staring fixedly at the tall young man.

He stopped short, hat in hand.

"How could I help it?" he said, smiling. "You don't mind, I hope—Mrs. Orne."

"Yes; I do mind. You got th' same nice way with you. I see that b'fore now. But bein' a married man, I didn't think t' warn Milly against ye."

"Gran'mother!" protested the girl.

The old woman turned fiercely upon her. "G' in th' house," she commanded. "I got a word t' say t' him; I know his nice, smooth-spoken kind. Go in, I say!"

The girl cast a proud glance at the man, as she

passed in at the gate. He smiled reassuringly at her.

Mrs. Orne watched her grand-daughter as she trod lightly between the borders of sweet-smelling flowers. Then she faced the young man, who stood regarding her perplexedly.

"You was tryin' t' make her b'lieve somethin'," she said, sharply. "What was it?"

"Why—really, Mrs. Orne," he protested. "I——"

"Hev' you b'en makin' love t' Milly? Answer me, straight!"

He stared at her, his dark brows gathered over troubled eyes.

"I haven't said anything I'm not willing to stand by," he broke out, after a prolonged pause. "I'll tell you that much."

"Huh! I'd ought t' be 'bleeged t' ye, fer your kindness, I s'pose," sneered the old woman. "Mebbe your wife c'd tell me what sort of a man you are."

He moved away a few steps.

"I—Permit me to say good-night," he murmured.

"Come back here!" cried Mrs. Orne, stamping her foot.

Her usually mild, good-tempered face was distorted with fury. She seized him by the wrist.

"I'm a-goin' t' tell ye somethin' 'bout Milly," she hissed in his ear. "She don't know it no

more'n a baby. I never meant she should. She's growed up here along of us, jes' like one o' them posies, sweet an' innercent an' good. I wanted she sh'd stay so. I wanted she sh'd marry a good, honest man, 'at 'd take keer of her when we was dead 'n' gone. . . . Lord! Lord!"

Tears rushed into the fierce old eyes; she raised her apron to wipe them away.

"Mrs. Orne," he began, slowly, "I wish you would believe me, when I say——"

"B'lieve you!" she cried, shrilly. "B'lieve you? I wouldn't b'lieve a fellow like you, with yer hand on th' Bible! Her mother was fooled int' b'lievin' a nice, good-lookin,' smooth-spoken chap like you; an' what'd she git fer it? A heart broke in two, shame an' black looks, an'—a grave. I c'n show it to ye; over there in the cem'tary. That's what she got fer b'lievin'. 'N' d' you s'pose I'm a-goin' t' let little Milly—all we got left in the world—d' you think fer a minute I'm a-goin' t' stan' back, p'lite an' fearful o' m' betters—th' way you'd expect an old woman like me—and leave you t' tromp her down in the mud? You got t' go a-past me, first."

He drew a hard breath and squared his young shoulders.

"Look here," he said, under his breath. "You've had your say, now I'll have mine. This is a devilish world, I'm beginning to think. But I——"

He stopped short, his teeth set hard on his nether lip.

"I'm waitin' t' hear," scoffed the old woman.

"I wish you'd take a good look at me," he broke out desperately. "You've taken a lot for granted that isn't true. You aren't—fair!"

Something in his boyish voice touched her. She took him by both arms and turned him toward the waning sunset-light.

"Mebbe I've said too much," she mumbled. "Mebbe I——"

She peered up at him, straining to her tiptoes, her withered hands gripping the lapels of his coat. He submitted to her inspection; his angry, honest eyes staring down at her.

"Don't tell her what you told me," he begged. "God! it's too—brutal!"

His voice broke.

The old woman suddenly released him.

"Mebbe I said too much," she repeated, humbly. "But I—I'm awful feared o' strangers. I'm awful—feared."

"You needn't be afraid of me," he said, roughly. "You won't—tell her?"

She shook her head, mumbling wordlessly to herself.

"'Twould hurt her—you think? Yes, yes; you're right, she's like one o' them tall posies in the garden. Say—you wouldn't tromp a white flower in th' mud, would you?"

She heard his sharp-drawn breath; saw the blood leave his dark face.

"You wouldn't?" she begged, all the fury gone out of her tremulous old voice. "Me 'n' Gran'pa set an awful store b' Milly. She's all we got left. 'N' you wouldn't do nothin' t' hurt her——"

"Don't!" he groaned. "For God's sake—don't!"

He turned and strode away, his feet making no sound in the thick dust of the road. From behind the solid rampart of cloud the last gleam of yellow light shot upward, flickered and faded. . . .

Milly bent a troubled, questioning gaze on her grandmother, as the old woman hobbled slowly into view around the corner of the house. Mrs. Orne made pretence of gathering some fallen bits of cloth from the floor of the porch.

"It's a-goin' t' rain, Gran'pa," she said, raising her voice. "I tol' ye 't would this mornin', an 'all them shingles ripped off."

"Rain!" scoffed Gran'pa. "'Tain't a-goin' t' rain, jes' t' spite me. Th' Lord don't care a cotton hat what you tol' me this mornin'."

"Gran'pa Orne, you'd better be keerful th' way you talk. We ain't no mor'n 'n chaff in th' mill-race, ready t' be swep' away. Lord! Lord!"

Her voice rang out in a shrill crescendo.

"Don't holler so, Ma," protested the old man. "Me 'n' Milly ain't deef; be we, Milly?"

The girl was looking up anxiously at the sky and the dismantled roof.

"I'm afraid it is going to rain," she said. "And the roof—Oh! it's open right over your bedroom. You'll have to move to the other side. I'll help you, Gran'ma; then I must go back before it's dark."

"I ain't goin' t' let you go back no more, Milly. You b'en gone long 'nough. Me 'n' Gran'pa needs you."

The girl had risen from her seat on the door-step.

"We'll move the bed into the kitchen," she said. "Then I must go."

Her face with its clear, pure outlines shone like a pearl in the dusk of the little bedroom, as she began to strip off quilts and pillows.

"Did you hear what I said t' you?" asked Mrs. Orne, almost timidly. "Or was you thinkin' 'bout—'bout somethin' else?"

"I heard you, Gran'mother! But I can't leave them now, without warning. It wouldn't be right."

Both women were silent, taking refuge from each other's questioning eyes in the task of taking down the old bedstead and carrying it to the kitchen.

"If Gran'pa hadn't b'en s' brash," muttered Mrs. Orne. "I warned him not t' let them boys rip off shingles reckless, th' way they

done. But he's so set in his own way, Gran'pa is."

Milly smiled absent-mindedly, as she spread the coarse sheets over the straw mattress.

"Poor Gran'father," she murmured.

"Poor Gran'father!" echoed Mrs. Orne, sharply. "Whatever makes you say that? A body 'd think I was crazy, er—er—I guess I got some sense. I c'n see through a millstone with a hole in it s' good 's the next one. I don't want you should go back there. You b'en there too long a'ready."

Milly's lids drooped.

"Why did you—speak to Mr. Hill the way you did?" she asked, rather breathlessly.

"Why sh'd he be talkin' t' you? That's what I want t' know. An' why sh'd he be a-walkin' long side o' you, bendin' his head down like he was—like you was—an' him a married man?"

The girl stooped and laid her cool, fresh cheek against the withered one. There was mute appeal, mute confession in the fleeting caress; but the old woman, all her fears once more aroused and clamouring, perceived nothing.

"You got t' be—awful keerful—o' strange men, honey," she stammered. "He—he looks nice, I know; but you don't want t' b'lieve nothin' he says t' ye. I ain't never liked t'—t' tell you how dretful wicked some folks is. Seems too bad t' spile—all yer pretty white thoughts. But—

honey—sometimes—nice, smooth-spoken folks 'll tell th' blackest o' lies.—May God r'ward 'em, 'cordin' t' their works!"

"But, Gran'mother——"

"Yes, honey; yes! You're a-goin' t' tell me you know a heap better 'n I do. Young folks al'ays thinks that. . . . An ol' woman like Gran'ma, what c'n she know? That's what comes int' yer min'. You can't help it. . . . It's natur', I guess, t' b'lieve the world's made over new fer every generation. But 'tain't. Lord, no! Things goes on 'bout th' same. You—you won't b'lieve nothin' he tells you; will you, Milly?"

The girl made no answer. Through the open window came the distant mutter of thunder, and Gran'father's grumbling monotone, as he gathered up his garden tools:

"Drat th' rain! It's a-comin' sure, an' me a-thinkin' b' th' feelin' in m' bones 't was set fair fer another two weeks. Looks like Gran'ma 'd scared it up jes' t' spite me."

Milly dropped a light kiss on top of the old woman's cap.

"Don't worry about me, Gran'ma," she murmured. "I'm not so foolish and ignorant as you seem to think. I—I'll be careful."

She was gone the next instant. Mrs. Orne heard the gate slam shut behind her, and her husband's voice upraised in shrill warning of the approaching storm.

"Oh, Lord!" she quavered. "I can't see an inch in front o' m' face. Mebbe you know 'bout that fellow, I don't. . . . It does look like the' wa'n't no use o' prayin'. You know you didn't lift a finger t' save our Milly—'nless lettin' her die was savin' her. . . . We don't know nothin' 'bout what comes after; 'n' even ef it's all pearls 'n' gold up there; 'n' folks a-flyin' 'round with wings, a-wearin' crowns, 'n' a-playin' on harps, it don't seem t' do us much good. . . . Ef you don't take keer o' little Milly, I—I don't keer fer no harp, ner no wings. . . . They wouldn't comfort me none. . . . Don't lay it up ag'in her, Lord, that I ain't prayed fer s' long. . . . Mebbe you wouldn't blame me none, ef you was t' re'lise what I b'en through. . . . Lord—Lord!"

A broad flash of lightning illumined the darkened room and the bent old figure rocking back and forth distractedly on the edge of the bed.

"Why in creation don't y' light th' lamp, Ma?" demanded Grandfather's wrathful voice, from the door. "Here I be, a-knockin' m' shins up against them plaguey cheers. 'N' I tipped over somethin' out there. Dunno what 'twas; but I kind o' sensed things a-rollin' off ont' the' ground."

"My balls o' carpet-rags!" exclaimed Grandmother, brought suddenly back to earth. "Land, ef ever I see sech a man!"

In the dim light of the kerosene lamp, the two old people gazed anxiously at each other.

" Some folks is a-goin' t' git ketched in this 'ere shower," quoth Grandfather. " Hope 'twon't be Milly."

" Oh, she c'n run like a streak. She'll git ther' b'fore——"

A crash of thunder drowned the words. Then followed rain—rain beating upon the new shingles overhead, and dripping through the stark rafters above the empty bedroom.

Mrs. Orne moved slowly across the floor.

" 'Twon't hurt her none t' git wet," she said, musingly. " 'Tain't that 'at's worritin' me."

" Th' lightnin' 's 'nough t' fright' anybody," quavered Grandfather. " I'm 'fraid the little girl'll git skeered o' th' thunder."

" It's good fer girls t' git skeered, onct in a while," muttered Grandmother, darkly. " Ef that's all I was 'fraid of. . . . Lord—Lord! "

CHAPTER XX

AT THE PARSONAGE

The solemn rush of the wind in the evergreens came soothingly through the open windows of the minister's study, where Mrs. Pettibone, arrayed in dust-cap and apron, was once more guiltily busy in a surreptitious, but no less searching and drastic eradication of dust and débris. Mr. Pettibone had denied himself excursions to Boston of late that he might cultivate the parsonage vegetable garden, and in his visitations to the sick and sinful of his parish he had quite properly insisted upon his wife's company.

"You are looking tired, my dear," he said, kindly; "you need the fresh air and quiet of these country drives."

But on this particular Saturday morning, when he had been unexpectedly called to leave his unfinished sermon for a funeral some miles distant, she had declined to accompany him. Mrs. Wessels, she explained, had asked leave to wash of a Saturday this week.

The minister frowned.

"That woman is always in the way," he said, with entire injustice. "Why not let her wash if she wants to, and you come with me. It's a lovely

day. We'll take our lunch, eat it on the way, and be home in time for supper."

She shook her head, with the gentle stubbornness he was beginning to know. The prospect of a combined picnic and funeral, unique though it was, did not blind her to the advantage of a long day in which to work her will upon the parsonage unhampered by his presence.

He kissed her good-bye hastily at last; then spoke words of strong encouragement and exhortation to the protesting old horse, who was, it appeared, perfectly aware of the day of the week and the illegal nature of a proceeding which removed him from a leisurely rumination of hay and equine thoughts during a morning sacred to leisure. At the moment of his departure the gate clicked to admit the figure of Mrs. Wessels, unnaturally bulky in her wash-day attire concealed from the public eye by a voluminous skirt of rusty black.

Mrs. Wessels was found to be overflowing with explanations and apologies, as she removed the outside layers of her costume.

" Es I sez t' Wessels, ' Mis' Pettibone won't care,' I sez. ' It's all one to her whether I come a-Sat'day er a-Monday. The's al'ays dirty clo'es t' th' pars'nage t' be washed,' I sez. Not 'at your wash is any dirtier 'an other folkses. But go where you will in this 'ere world, you're sure to find dirt t' be swep' an' clo'es t' be washed.

Now, ain't that so? An' th' Meth'dist picnic comes a-Tuesday this year, so I promised the childern I'd wash their clo'es on a-Monday, so's 't they c'n go. Yes, Mis' Pettibone, the childern go t' your Sunday-school mornins at nine-thirty an' the Meth'dist Sunday-school at twelve o'clock an', when I c'n git 'em started, t' the Baptist Sunday-school at four P.M. Yes'm; I want 'em t' be able t' jedge fair an' square 's t' which r'ligion 's best. Georgie he likes the Meth'dists; th's somethin' kind o' hearty an' free-'n'-easy t' the Meth'dist Church, Georgie sez; an' M'ree Is'-bell likes your church best, so I guess M'ree'll be a Presb'terian all right. She sez she ain't got no speshul reason; 'n' I guess 't would be hard t' find one, es I tell her pa. But he sez 'let her be, Ma; we won't stan' in her way,' he sez. Wessels is reel int'rested in r'ligion, fer all he ain't darkened the door of a church in fifteen years. Wessels favors th' Babtists; he sez it stan's t' reason a body 'at 'd lived wicked ought t' be put right in under th' water, when it comes t' babtisin' 'em. But th' childern 's all b'en sprinkled a'ready; that ought t' do some good, I sez, special when they're little an' ain't got much hair. But M'randy, she took a notion all by herself, when she was 'bout twelve, t' be a 'Piscopal. I thought I sh'd die. 'M'randy Wessels,' I sez, 'the ain't none of our folks nor your pa's neither, ever b'en 'Piscopals. 'N' what in under the canopy *you*

want off *them.'* I sez. 'The 'Piscopals is s' stylish, Ma,' she sez; 'an' they pernounce their words s' nice, an' the prayers is all wrote out,' she sez, 'so you know b'forehan' jest how long they're goin' t' be.' So M'randy, she's a 'Piscopal. 'N' I dunno's th's anything reelly wrong in it. But I'm goin' to' do up her white dress so 't she c'n go t' the Meth'dist picnic a-Tuesday, along o' th' other childern. Georgie, he sez he's lottin' t' save M'randy yit, like a brand plucked f'om th' burnin'. He learned that t' th' Meth'dist Sunday-school; an' th' way he gits it off—with M'randy a-turnin' up her nose at him—makes me think he'd ought t' be a preacher b' rights. Wessels, he sez Georgie c'n be a local jus' 's well 's not; 'n' ef he starts in when he 's ten he c'n be a progidy. He's eight now, my Georgie is, an' ef he ain't cut out t' be a progidy I dunno who is. Well, I guess I'd better knock on wood along o' that! It 's a lot safer when you've gone 'n' bragged that-a-way 'bout yer childern. It might save 'em f'om goodness knows what!"

It was when Mrs. Pettibone had succeeded at length in stemming the tide of this Jordan that she found the rush of the wind in the evergreens so exquisitely soothing. Other sounds reached her from afar: an intermittent rattle and creak of wagon-wheels; the shouts of children at play; a soulless performance on the patent piano-player across the street; the discordant quarrelling of

sparrows about the eaves, and from the kitchen, happily distant, the voice of Mrs. Wessels upraised in tuneful exhortation, timed to a deliberate rubbing of the minister's wristbands on the corrugated surface of the washboard:

"Pull fer th' shore, sailor: pull fer th' shore!"

Philura Pettibone endeavoured conscientiously to keep her thoughts from hovering about the photograph, hidden from view between the leaves of the inky blotter on her husband's writing-table. But as she dusted the minister's commentaries and theologies in due sequence of their picturesque but no less disturbing disorder, her blue eyes wandered thither at lessening intervals. She wondered vaguely why he had not chosen to protect it by a frame and set it atop his table in plain view. She would have liked (she hoped) to see it there. She might even have ventured to speak of it to him. But its concealment suggested a secret, unassuaged grief, not to be shared with another, not even—nay, rather, more particularly not—with herself. She pictured his face as it must have looked when he placed the photograph in its secure (as he no doubt supposed) hiding-place. For another to have seen it, even by accident, was like pushing aside, without sanctifying unction of sacred oil, the shielding veil from before the Holy of Holies.

After a little she ventured to dust the blotter, her fingers light and hesitating, as one might touch the dead. His half-written sermon lay open to her view. She stooped and read:

"——Then, too, the memory of those who have outstripped us in the race, passing into the life more abundant, cheers us in our unending struggle after goodness and purity and truth. We could not, indeed, bear to think often of those 'lost angel faces,' were we not faithful to the vision which is vouchsafed us at intervals, like spaces of sunlit blue glimpsed through riven cloud."

She thought he must have looked at the picture before writing those words. Perhaps his lips (which had kissed hers so carelessly at the moment of parting) had pressed that exquisite pictured mouth, with its half-smiling, wholly wistful curve.

The minister had shut himself into his study for more than an hour that morning before starting for his distant appointment. She fancied him pale and graver than his wont when he finally emerged in answer to her summons. Then a sudden distressful wonder fell upon her. Was the picture still there? or had he taken it away with him, folded close against his heart in the breast-pocket of his best preaching-coat? Her fingers trembled in their swift search. She drew a deep breath of relief: the picture was in its place. She

wished passionately that he would have it copied large and hung upon the wall, like the crayon portrait of the first Mrs. Gus Bogert. But, how could she bear the searching gaze of those dark eyes, more particularly when engaged as at present, in an overt act of disobedience. She felt sure that the first Mrs. Pettibone would never sweep and dust the study in defiance of his wishes—nor, indeed, any room in the parsonage. Mary Pettibone was not (she reminded herself) that kind of a woman. Somebody—she thought it was Mrs. Deacon Scrimger—had once said in her hearing that the minister's wife was a slack housekeeper. There had been a hired girl in the parsonage in those days, who even (it was whispered) made the bed the minister's wife slept in till ten o'clock of a morning.

She took the picture from its hiding place, and stared at it hungrily. Then, quite deliberately, as one who has cast silly scruples to the wind, she crossed the room to the little mirror, with its cheap mockery of sconce and candles. The mirror was a wedding gift from her Sunday-school class. She had put it there herself, so that the minister might set his necktie straight and push back the unruly lock from his forehead the last thing of a Sunday morning. The mirror told no comforting lies. It gave back to the second Mrs. Pettibone a small, pale face, its forehead faintly lined beneath silvered waves of abundant hair, blue

eyes under vaguely marked brows, and a mouth with little beauty of curve or sensuous color. Feature by feature she compared it with the faded loveliness of the photograph.

"You have no right to expect much," she told herself, relentlessly. "You are only to piece out with. Didn't you know that? You did know it. You ought to be thankful for the chance to work for him—to cook his food and mend his clothes—yes, and clean his study so that he won't know it has been cleaned."

So absorbed was the second Mrs. Pettibone in these bitter-sweet reflections that she did not hear Mrs. Wessels' trampling footsteps in the passage. But she started violently at sound of that philosophical lady's voice at the door:

"Well, I d'clare; you must be gittin' deef! I heerd th' door-bell ring a couple o' times, 'n' thinks s'I, whatever c'n Mis' Pettibone be doin' not t' hear that bell? At last I come m'self. It's a lady t' see you, 'm; I put her in th' parlour.... My! ain't this room a sight,—with th' books an' all! I'll whirl in an' finish puttin' it t' rights, ef you say so! . . . You don't want I should? All right. But the' ain't nobody knows how t' do fer him any better 'n' I do, havin' worked here constant sence his first wife died. . . . Yes; I put th' comp'ny in th' parlour."

Mrs. Wessels came quite inside and closed the door behind her.

"It's the young lady f'om the old Eggleston place," she said, confidentially. "I washed up there a couple o' times b'fore Milly Orne come t' work fer 'em. Land! You never see sech clo'es, all lace an' 'mbroid'ry, fussed up t' beat th' band. My, yes; I knowed her th' minute I opened th' door. She's in th' parlour a-settin' in th' plush cheer b' th' window."

Mrs. Pettibone slipped the photograph inside her blouse as she crossed the hall. Mrs. Wessels still lingered, her lean head craned forward on its long neck, with the obvious intent of witnessing the meeting between the two women.

The girl was sitting very straight and still on the edge of her chair. Mrs. Pettibone, in the act of closing the door quietly but firmly behind her, was startled by the look, at once eager and despairing, on her young face.

"Perhaps you don't remember me?" the girl said, as she rose. "I am—you saw me——"

"Yes, I remember you very well," the minister's wife hastened to reassure her visitor. "You are Mrs. Walter Hill, from the farm. I am very glad——"

"You are mistaken. I am not Mrs. Walter Hill," the girl said, in a low, hard voice.

She had thrown back her head with its heavy braids; her eyes were defiant.

"You are not——" faltered Mrs. Pettibone, overcome by a sudden recollection of the older

woman's words: "She has a delusion. She thinks another man is her husband."

"I see what you are thinking. I suppose Mother told you I am insane. She has treated me as if she thought I was, all along. I don't see why I'm not."

"Won't you—sit down," Mrs. Pettibone suggested, nervously. "We can talk better that way."

Already she had forgotten the picture hidden in her blouse.

"You will let me talk to you? The sewing-woman—I don't know her name—said you would. She said you could help me."

"Oh!" murmured the minister's wife, moving her fingers uncertainly. "You must mean Malvina Bennett. She told me she was going to work for you."

"I meant to drown myself that day," the girl said, quite simply, and with as little concern as though she had mentioned a trip to the city. She did not appear to notice the other woman's start of fear and amazement.

"I had been to the edge of that pool often and often and—tried," she went on; "but somehow I—couldn't. I suppose I kept hoping something would happen. But that morning I just knew nothing would. Life would go on, getting more and more unbearable, till—— So I ran all the way, meaning to jump in and have it over

with before Mother found out I was gone. She has watched me for months, night and day. But Walter didn't notice. I don't suppose he cared. I shouldn't, in his place."

"But—my dear; your—your husband——"

"I told you Walter wasn't my husband. He is my brother."

She drew a deep, half-suffocated breath, like that of an exhausted swimmer.

"There!" she sighed, "I've told. You wouldn't have guessed: would you? Mother said no one would guess, if Walter and I—played our parts. We couldn't—play our parts—so very well; but Mother—— You see, she didn't believe me when I told her I was married, and so——"

"My dear," interrupted Mrs. Pettibone, trembling violently against the back of the haircloth sofa, "do you think you ought to tell me all this? Wouldn't your Mother——"

She felt suddenly weak and ill, and her voice trailed off faintly into silence under the girl's black gaze.

"Then, it isn't true!" the girl broke out, sharply. "The woman told me a lie, because she was afraid. Everybody has told me lies! Oh-h!"

The inarticulate despair in her young voice struck hard against the older woman's pitiful cowardice.

"What did Malvina Bennett tell you—about me?" faltered Mrs. Pettibone.

"She said you knew how to find people who were lost. She said you found your husband that way. In the—the All-Encircling Good. But it was a lie. And I've told you for nothing. Well——"

She looked down quietly at the floor, thinking, perhaps, of the dark peace of the pool by the rock.

Philura Pettibone felt the sharp corner of the photograph prick her thin breast. It seemed to rouse her to a faint realisation of the tragedy under that still face.

"It was not a lie," she said, weakly. "It is —true. But one forgets, sometimes. I did—only this morning."

After a little she added, with an effort:

"I—I will do all I can to help you."

The girl looked at her searchingly.

"Do you mean that it's true about the—the All-Encircling—Good? I don't know what that means; but I've said it over and over to myself, and somehow it made me feel—I wanted to see you."

Her voice was choked.

"None of us can know what the All-Encircling Good really is," Mrs. Pettibone said, in a low, hesitating voice. "It means—God, everywhere present, knowing all things——"

"I'm not religious," the girl said, coldly. "I never liked church."

She arose, and drew her scarf about her shoulders.

" I might have known it was only that. I wish I hadn't—— Oh, put it down to my insanity! "

She laughed aloud as she walked toward the door.

Mrs. Pettibone stared at the girl aghast, her back rigid against the haircloth sofa, her hands seeking her heart instinctively. Again she felt the slight prick of the hidden picture.

The girl, still smiling drearily to herself, was about to pass out. Mrs. Pettibone watched her fingers close upon the door-knob, like one in a painful dream. Then all at once she sprang up, alert, alive.

" You are not going," she cried, " until I have told you. . . . What is it you want? "

The girl turned with a queer, jerky movement of her head.

" What do I want? " she repeated. " What do I want? Why should I tell you? "

Mrs. Pettibone took the girl's limp hand and held it tightly, as if she feared to let go.

" You must come back and sit by me on the sofa. I shall not let you go away without telling me."

The girl sat down with the sullen acquiescence of a child accustomed to yield to a superior will.

" You will tell me? " urged Mrs. Pettibone.

The girl made no answer. Her eyes were set drearily upon the opposite wall, where hung a cheap copy of the Huguenot lovers.

" If you want anything—anything," the gentle voice went on, " it is yours already. It will come to you—whatever it is. Because you wouldn't want it—you couldn't, if God didn't want you to have it. God is good. He loves you. He—knows everything."

She felt the girl's hand tremble violently within her own.

" I want—Stephen," she whispered. " I—want him!"

She burst into hard, racking sobs.

" Oh, Stephen—Stephen!" she moaned. " You didn't mean to leave me without a word! You couldn't!"

All at once she dried her eyes and sat up.

" I'm going to tell you everything," she said. " I must. You will believe me."

But she lapsed into silence, staring before her at the picture of the tall lover and the girl within his clasp.

" Stephen looked something like that man in the picture," she said, after a long minute. " He was that much taller than me."

Her lips fell apart like a child's.

" He did look something like that," she repeated, wonderingly.

After a pause she added:

"I had a photograph of him, but Mother found it and took it away. She said I ought to be ashamed—— She said he was poor and common-looking, and that I might have known——"

Mrs. Pettibone sat very still. Within her blouse she was conscious of the picture. She felt very much ashamed of herself, and the realisation forced hot blood upward into her face.

The girl glanced at her uncertainly.

"We were married," she said, "by a regular minister. But I didn't know the minister's name. And he didn't give me any paper. He said he would send it to Stephen, afterward. But he went away. So——"

Mrs. Pettibone sighed. She didn't know how to ask questions skilfully; but she felt that the girl needed help in telling her story.

"You mean the minister went away?" she suggested, timidly, "and without giving you a certificate. That was very careless of him. But there should have been other papers—the license and the Bureau of Vital Statistics; surely——"

The girl shook her head.

"The minister didn't go away—not that I know of. I meant Stephen. He went West two weeks after we were married. He had an opening. And as soon as he 'made good'—that's what he called it—he was going to send for me. But he didn't—I never heard from him. I'm afraid something—something happened——"

Two big tears escaped from her eyes and rolled swiftly down her haggard young face.

"Sometimes I wish I was sure—he is dead."

"Oh, my dear!" protested Mrs. Pettibone.

All the alertness and aliveness of which she had been so vividly conscious but a moment before seemed to have deserted her.

"I'm sure I hope not," she added, gazing at the girl in a flutter of sympathy and alarm.

"If he was dead," the girl went on, gloomily, "I shouldn't be afraid of that other—of what Mother thinks. That is too horrible!"

Her voice had sunken almost to a whisper.

"What—what does Mrs. Hill——" Mrs. Pettibone attempted to ask. The words seemed caught in her throat.

The girl laughed harshly.

"That's a part of the play," she said: "our name isn't Hill. But it makes no difference."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand," murmured the minister's wife.

She was not, indeed, an astute woman. Perhaps the girl was insane. A little fear crept into her mind as she reflected that she was alone with this big, strong young woman.

The girl stared at her from under gathered brows. Her eyes were hard once more.

"If he's—dead, I shall never hear from him. Perhaps Mother is right, after all. I oughtn't to have told."

"He isn't dead," said Mrs. Pettibone, without premeditation.

She could have given no reason for the sudden strong conviction which surged up within her.

"He isn't dead," she repeated.

The girl drew a deep breath.

"Then, why—why doesn't he write to me? Why didn't he—at first? You can see how terrible it was for me, when I—I found—I didn't know when he went away. He didn't know. But when Mother—— Oh, it was awful! She said I must take her to the minister's house. But I couldn't find it. We went one night to be married, quite suddenly; it was somewhere a good ways from our house. I didn't notice—— Then Mother said I had been deceived. She said Stephen was a bad man. There are—bad men like that, she said. She wondered why he left me at home. I told her it was only till he 'made good.' Then she—laughed. . . . She—laughed. . . ."

"Have you written to him?" asked the minister's wife.

"Only twice. Mother watched me—watched the mails. She said she would save me in spite of myself. She means to take me to Europe, afterwards. She thinks no one will know, and that I will forget. She says I shall have my coming-out party, just the same."

The girl sprang to her feet, as if the small, low-ceiled room stiffled her.

"I must go," she said. "If he is alive, you think——"

"Pray for him to come back to you," whispered Mrs. Pettibone, her small childish face upturned to the girl's stately young height. "Pray and believe that he will come. *Believe!* It will bring him back to you from the uttermost—the uttermost parts of the earth!"

"He went West," the girl said, vaguely.

She was looking at the picture of the Huguenot lovers.

"He couldn't be bad, and look like that," she said, in a low, meditative voice. "He was good. I know he was good. I couldn't have loved him; could I? if he was what Mother said."

She walked slowly to the door.

"Walter brought me," she said. "I asked Mother if I might go out to drive with Walter, and she was pleased. She wanted me to go before; but I wouldn't. She thought people ought to see us together. But we both hated it. Now, Walter is—kinder than at first. He said I might come in and talk to you—tell you, if it would make me feel any better."

She opened the door.

"I'm going to try," she said, looking back over her shoulder with a faint smile. "I think I shall pray—every minute."

" And believe," added Mrs. Pettibone. " You must expect him—soon."

" Is that what you did? " asked the girl, piteously.

Mrs. Pettibone nodded. She seemed unable to speak.

" I shall try," the girl repeated, humbly. " Pray and believe. Pray and believe. Oh, I did believe; but it's hard, now! "

Mrs. Pettibone watched her as she went slowly away. In front of the house was a low carriage. She saw the young man she had known as Walter Hill step out and help the girl to a seat within. Then the carriage rolled away down the street.

When she turned to go in, she found Mrs. Wessels standing behind her in the hall, her thin red arms akimbo; her eyes fixed upon the rapidly receding vehicle.

" Well, now, I never! " murmured that astute lady. " He handed her in reel nice; didn't he? Fer all I mistrusted he wa'n't no great shakes of a hus'ban', when I was there t' wash. He was out a careenin' 'round on that horse o' hisn most all day, an' she a-walkin' out in th' yard all by her lonesome, her ma-in-law watchin' her out the window like a cat would a mouse. But I've seed men that-a-way b'fore. They're queer critters, the best on 'em. Now ain't that so? . . . I s'pose you ain't re'lised it's past one o'clock, Mis' Pettibone. When the whistles blowed fer the third

time, I come in th' hall; but you was both busy with yer talk; so I jes' helped m'self t' whatever I c'd find, bein' kin' o' worn out rubbin'? The tea-pot's on th' stove; an' I left a piece o' pie fer you."

But Mrs. Pettibone did not at once avail herself of Mrs. Wessels' kindness. Instead, she went back into the minister's study and closed the door behind her.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself," she said aloud to the silence, which seemed all at once tolerant of her weakness and kind, to the point of forbearance.

"I am ashamed."

Having made her small confession, thus, she took the picture from her blouse and slipped it back between the leaves of the blotter.

"If you're alive," she whispered, "and can see,—perhaps you'll understand."

CHAPTER XXI

THE CONFESSION

THE minister came home from the funeral that afternoon rather earlier than he expected. Rufus, he stated (referring to the sorrel horse), had travelled well on the way home. Mrs. Pettibone recalled that it was the habit of Rufus to travel well when headed toward his manger.

"I hope," said the minister, looking narrowly at her, "you haven't been working too hard during my absence."

"Oh, no!" denied Mrs. Pettibone, casting down her eyes. "There wasn't much to do."

From his ignorant masculine viewpoint there never was much to do in the parsonage. How could there be, with only the two of them? Nevertheless, he continued to gaze at her, a puzzled look in his kindly eyes?

"Has anyone been here?" he asked.

Mrs. Pettibone appeared to reflect, her eyes still avoiding his.

"Yes," she said, with visible reluctance, "that young woman from the Eggleston house."

"Indeed!" cried the minister. "That is encouraging. I was hoping we might get some hold

upon them. They seem—er—rather unusual people.''

"Yes,'' murmured Mrs. Pettibone, "they are.''

She moved away from him, her thoughts centred determinedly upon the kitchen.

"You must be hungry,'' she said. "I will have supper early.''

"Thank you, my dear; I believe I am, now that you speak of it.''

He turned abruptly toward his study.

"I shall work on my sermon till you're ready.'' And he rumpled up his hair in the way she knew so well.

She perceived that already he had forgotten the half-formed questions in his mind.

But seated at their modest supper-table, he again referred to the matter.

"Did you—er—have a pleasant visit with that young person—Mrs. Hill?'' he inquired, as he sprinkled his second baked potato with salt and inserted a small—a very small—lump of butter in its steaming interior.

His wife did not answer; and after a pause he spoke again.

"I recall the fact that we found the younger Mrs. Hill's personality rather uninteresting; didn't we? She seemed very young, and—er—rather sullen. That, at least, is the impression she made upon me.''

He glanced inquiringly across the table at Mrs.

Pettibone, who was nervously crumbling a slice of bread beside her plate. She was not the sort of woman to crumble bread in so aimless and wasteful a manner. He continued to eye her with growing astonishment.

" Did the young woman ask for me? " he inquired. " I am apt to be at home of a Saturday; but I don't recall mentioning the fact to the Hills."

" Ought I—to tell you? "

The spot of colour in her cheek had deepened to scarlet.

" Ought you to tell me? You are referring to—— Am I to understand that something of an unusual nature took place during my absence? I can think of no reason why you should not tell me—everything."

" I've been wondering," she said, humbly, " whether I said the right thing. I didn't know, at first. And one who has thought small, mean thoughts for so many years—I did, you know. I used to think God was a large, severe person sitting up in the clouds somewhere and watching me, always displeased with what I did; and, yes—trying to think of some new way to make me unhappy. Of course, I knew I deserved it."

" You didn't tell her all that, my dear? " demanded the minister, who had forgotten to eat his potato. " Surely, you didn't——"

" No—no, indeed! I said she must pray and

believe, and that everything would come right. I said he was in the All-Encircling Good. I felt sure he was alive. I don't know why; but I did. And I told her so. But afterward—it came over me all of a sudden—if he should be dead; or if he was bad, as Mrs. Hill seemed to suppose. And one can't help thinking——"

"Really, my dear," interrupted the minister, "I shall have to ask you to explain. I can make neither head nor tail of what you are telling me. Unless you explicitly promised the young person to say nothing to me, I conceive that I should be told, at once, of all that took place."

Thus encouraged, she told him the substance of what had passed between her and the young woman from the old Eggleston farm.

He listened in silence, his forehead knit in troubled thought.

"If I told her what wasn't true," she said, "how terrible it would be! Perhaps I ought——"

He looked across at her, a smile dawning in his eyes.

"My dear," he said, in a slow, deep voice, "could any facts, however disastrous, alter the nature of God?"

She drew a half-sobbing breath.

"I—I suppose not," she murmured. "But I told her—I led her to expect——"

"'For Thou wilt light my candle,'" he quoted,

"'The Lord my God will enlighten my darkness.' We must believe that, my dear, if we let everything else go by the board."

"Do you mean——?"

She looked at him humbly.

"If our own candle is alight, and another comes to us in the dark——"

Her face became suddenly illumined.

"I see," she said. "It is like lighting a candle blown out in the wind, and one ought——"

"Obviously," he said; "one can do no less."

He lingered, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, a musing look upon his face; while she began removing the remnants of their meal.

"That explains something," he said, after a brief silence, "something which—er—disturbed me unreasonably. I had not intended speaking of it to you."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"I drove home to-night by way of the old Eggleston road; and as I rounded the corner by the big oak tree—you know the place—I came upon young Hill and Milly. They were talking earnestly. And as I passed I couldn't help noticing their faces."

She uttered a slight exclamation of dismay.

"The young fellow was flushed and eager—he's a handsome chap, by the way—and Milly—Milly had been crying, I think."

"Oh, I hope not!" breathed Mrs. Pettibone.

Her face had once more taken on a look of poignant distress.

"Tut-tut!" said the minister, smiling down at her. "How about the All-Encircling Good? Doesn't it embrace those two?"

"You didn't think so, till you knew," she retaliated.

He sighed.

"True," he acknowledged. "Oh, the body of this death, and its cowardly carnal mind! Well, my dear, I'm not fit to write sermons; but it appears to be my job. If it wasn't for you, and your occasional clear seeing—you see, I'm not making you too perfect—but if it wasn't for you, Miss Philura, I'm afraid I should oftener miss the truth of things, altogether."

Unwisely, perhaps, she turned to face him, a wan little smile curving her tremulous lips.

"You oughtn't to say that," she murmured, her voice shaken with the hard beating of her heart. "You wouldn't, if you knew—everything about me."

She tried to meet his gaze unflinchingly. But, alas! Miss Philura had never quite mastered the gentle art of dissembling. Her voice broke piteously over the last word.

He gazed at her in silence, while she made blind pretence of brushing imaginary crumbs from a spotless tablecloth.

"I'm afraid you've been working too hard to-

day," he said, gently drawing her toward him. "Come into the study, dear, and give an account of yourself."

But at the threshold she drew back.

"Not there," she begged, rather wildly. "I—oh, Silas, I've been deceiving you—all these months."

His face whitened slowly. Well, he had been afraid of it—had, all along, been conscious of something not well hidden in that transparent breast of hers. He led her, all shaken with sobs, to the shabby old sofa, and sat down at her side—but not touching her. God helping him, he would play the man.

"Now," he said, masterfully, "you will tell me what this means. Don't be afraid, dear," he added, with a gentleness in which there was no touch of compulsion, but only a great weariness, "I shall—understand."

Already he had passed in swift review the months of their brief engagement—of their marriage. Too long she had lived the life of a cloistered nun (he was thinking) to bear his rude transplanting. He should have been satisfied with her friendship, which she would have poured out for him, drop by drop, with delicate frugality. But now——

"I—cleaned—your study," she began, her head hanging, all the colour gone out of her face.

"You—cleaned——?"

"Your study—yes. You asked me not to—you forbade me. But I did. I've done it—oh, ever so many times, and always when you were away. And I pretended—I was careful to arrange everything—so you wouldn't know."

He glanced about him with slow bewilderment. Nothing had been changed: the Simpkin's Commentary on the Pauline Epistles lay just where he had left it the day before; on the writing-table were the loose sheets of his unfinished sermon; and on the floor——

"You—cleaned——" he repeated, dazedly. "Oh, hang the study! I don't care if you turn it inside out every day—from now on. What I want to know is—why did you cry when I said I couldn't write sermons without you?"

There was another matter, as he soon found out.

Mrs. Pettibone, it is true, wiped her eyes and tried to smile her appreciation of the splendid generosity of his surrender on the question of the study. She assured him, with touching earnestness, that she wouldn't turn the room inside out every day; but only at stated intervals, and with the same care and attention with which she had guiltily deceived him in the past.

"But you haven't answered my question," he persisted, turning her small face up to his and looking deep into her eyes. "There's something else; you must tell me what it is."

She was mute under his inquisitorial gaze, trembling a little, but not attempting to look away.

"Tell me," he begged, "—as you hope for our happiness!"

Thus adjured, she began, in a small, faint voice.

"One day, a long time ago, I took everything —off your—writing-table."

"Yes," he said, a smile creeping about the corners of his lips. "You have already confessed to that enormity."

"I—I dusted your—blotting-pad."

"Well?" he encouraged her.

She drew a quick breath, gazing at him incredulously.

"You didn't mean that I—should see. I had no right——"

"——To dust my blotting-pad? Well, possibly not. But I hereby grant you the inclusive and exclusive right to——"

The look in her eyes stopped him.

"Why, what——?" he began.

She arose and walked steadily to the writing-table. He followed her, in perplexed silence.

"You didn't mean that I—should see—this," she said.

And gave him the picture.

A slight exclamation escaped him at sight of it. Then he stood quite still, looking at the pictured face.

She was seeing it, too—the wistful mouth, with

its half-smiling, half-sad look of expectancy; the loose dark curl, lying softly upon the whiteness of the graceful neck; the deep, questioning eyes.

Presently he sighed.

"You—found this?" he said, looking up at last.

"It fell out—when I—— I put it back. I knew I had no—right."

Her voice trailed off in a minor key, infinitely touching in its hopeless appeal. Her shamed eyes begged his forgiveness.

"No—right?" he repeated, gently.

He put out his hand and led her back to the sofa.

"My dear," he said, after a silence, which somehow soothed and comforted her, "I loved—Mary. She was beautiful, as you know; and I—I was hardly more than a boy when we were married. We were—happy."

He sighed, his eyes not now upon the picture, but—as it seemed to her, breathing stilly at his side—afar off, intent upon some distant scene of a poignantly regretted past.

He roused himself after a little and looked down at her questioningly.

"Did you suppose I had hidden it?" he asked, with entire unexpectedness. "And that all this time I had been brooding over it—quite in secret? No, dear; I shall have to confess I didn't know it was there. Somebody—Mrs. Wessels, no doubt

—must have slipped it under the blotter—long ago."

A quaint, almost humorous smile touched his grave lips at sight of her awakening face.

She stirred, ever so little, the colour stealing back to cheeks and lips.

"If you had," she murmured, "I should not have wondered—nor blamed you. She was so beautiful; and I——"

He took her in his arms.

"You are very dear," he whispered, "and I—I love you."

Quite unnoticed, the photograph slipped to the floor and lay there, its dimmed loveliness face down upon the carpet.

CHAPTER XXII

A RAINY DAWN

" You must keep this door shut."

Milly looked up inquiringly; then she lowered her eyes, glancing sidewise at the small, motionless bundle on the cot.

" If the child cries," Mrs. Hill went on, in a slow, harsh voice, " the mother must not hear it. She is too ill at present."

The two women were standing in a small room off the kitchen, the light of a rainy dawn upon their faces.

" Shall I—would you like me to go for a doctor? " stammered the girl.

She stood twisting her fingers nervously, trembling a little after hours of dumb terror passed alone in the big kitchen.

" I should have told you in the beginning that I was able to care for the case," Mrs. Hill said, coldly. " If you were frightened, I am sorry. The child is healthy. It will sleep."

Milly stole a swift glance at her mistress: years appeared to have passed over her head during the night; the full, pale cheeks had fallen into longitudinal folds and wrinkles; there were pur-

ple pouches under the blood-shot eyes; streaks of white in the smoothly brushed hair.

"There was no time to call a physician," Mrs. Hill went on, slowly; "you know that." Her eyes cajoled; then threatened. "The event—was unexpected. But, fortunately, I have had—experience. My daughter is perfectly safe. She will—recover. You need feel no alarm."

The girl's troubled glance again sought the cot, in the midst of which, with a singular effect of lonely isolation, lay the motionless little mound of blankets.

"Would you—like to see the child?" asked Mrs. Hill, her mouth twisting in a difficult smile.

Milly's breast heaved.

"If—you please," she said, huskily.

Mrs. Hill moved toward the cot and stood for an instant gazing somberly down at it. A lump in her broad, bare throat seemed to move a little. She bent down, drawing the blankets aside.

"It is a fine, healthy child," she said, dryly. "A boy."

The girl gazed at the little head covered with dark down; at the tiny pink face, with its closed lids; at the minute fists upheaved on either side. Something within her trembled; the breath came from her parted lips in light, quick gasps.

Mrs. Hill replaced the blankets, her large hands moving swiftly.

"I am going upstairs," she said. "I shall come down presently for the gruel. Don't burn it."

Milly moved obediently toward the stove, still dazed and trembling before the unveiled mystery.

"You must keep this door shut?" the woman repeated, sharply. "And all the doors between—keep them closed. Do you hear?"

Milly raised her eyes from a blind contemplation of the bubbling stuff in the saucepan.

"If—the baby cries," she murmured, "shall I——?"

"It will not cry. I shall attend to its wants myself. Do not come upstairs. Do not permit anyone to enter. Do not speak to anyone. The house must be kept quiet."

Milly's lips parted. She seemed about to ask another question.

Mrs. Hill, darted a quick, impatient glance at her. Why am I forced to explain to you? it seemed to say.

"My son left this morning early," the toneless voice went on. "He will not return. We shall join him as soon as Mrs. Hill is able to travel."

The door closed; and Milly, left to herself, stood for a long minute quite motionless in the middle of the large kitchen. A heavy silence seemed to have settled upon the house. Outside in the wet grass a cricket chirped disconsolately; a stealthy

little wind crept about the eaves, whined eerily in the chimney, then passed with a deep murmurous rustle into the dripping hemlocks which fringed the ruined garden. The girl pressed the backs of both hands against her eyes, like a child in pain.

CHAPTER XXIII

PLAYING MOTHER

Philura Pettibone walked slowly between shorn meadows, where red clover was beginning to bloom as in early summer. She carried a basket on her arm filled with fresh eggs; the basket and the eggs furnishing a legitimate excuse for thus walking idly along the country road where there had been no dust these many days. Heavy rains had washed the landscape clean, and it now presented a shining morning face to the sky where capricious winds drove the clouds in opposite directions. In the rare upper air small, round, white fleeces, like a flock of lambs, moved slowly westward; while beneath them detached masses of denser vapour sailed majestically out to sea, their shadows flitting over meadow and hill like the drag-ropes of gigantic balloons.

Mrs. Pettibone's face, under the brim of her shady hat, shone like the newly washed earth. She was as happy as a woman may be who feels herself beloved. And this, be it said, she needs must know afresh, to-day, as well as yesterday, and likewise to-morrow, till winter comes and with it night.

But winter and night seemed very far away on

this day when summer forgot that it was August. The woman, whose hair was already a little gray, sang under her breath as she walked along—a little chirping song about a robin in a tree. Then, all at once, she saw the children.

There were ten of them, perhaps, or even fifteen. They were so small and merry in their pink and blue frocks, and they ran about so fast, she found them hard to count as butterflies about a puddle. The largest child—a girl—spied the woman looking at them across the fence, her face rosy and wistful under the shady hat.

"We can play in this meadow now," the girl said, confidentially. "The hay has been cut and there are no cows here. And to-day there is no school, because our teacher has gone to a funeral."

The girl's face shone with pure joy; she gazed at Mrs. Pettibone, her eyes sparkling under windblown hair.

"That is very nice," the minister's wife assented, understandingly.

"It was her Gran'mother," piped another child, as she danced up to the fence. "She was old; but now she's gone to heaven, and we can play all day. I'm glad; aren't you?"

Mrs. Pettibone nodded, her eyes very blue and bright, her cheeks pink with sudden longing.

"If I might come in for a little while?" she murmured.

The biggest girl regarded her doubtfully.

"You are grown-up," she objected.

"But I can play."

The girl glanced over her shoulder at the pink and blue frocks tumbling over one another in the grass.

"Can you play mother?" she asked.

Mrs. Pettibone blushed up to the margin of her silvered curls.

"Yes," she said, eagerly, "if you will let me."

"You'll have to climb over. We climbed over. We were going home. Our teacher said we must go home. But it is a pleasant day. Our mothers don't expect us for a long time yet, and the hay is all cut."

Mrs. Pettibone climbed over; it was not a difficult feat. But first she pushed her basket through the rails.

"What is in your basket?"

"Eggs, but they are not cooked."

The big girl turned her head; a number of the children had scampered to the fence, and were staring at the intruder with sudden gravity, almost displeasure on their round faces.

"She has eggs in her basket, but they are not cooked," explained the girl. "I said she might climb over. She can play mother."

The big girl spoke with a kindly but coercive authority.

"I shall be one mother; you will be the other mother. My p'tend-name is Mis-sis Alphonso

Smith. . . . Alphonso is a beautiful name; don't you think so? . . . Now, what will your name be?"

"Mrs. Silas Pettibone," submitted the woman in the blue gown. She was no taller than the big girl. "Do you think that is a good name for a mother?"

"It will do," pronounced the girl. "But Silas is not so beautiful as Alphonso. Now I shall have six children, 'n' you can have five. I think I'd better have the largest family, 'cause I'm more experienced. I spank my children when they're naughty. Do you?"

Mrs. Pettibone considered. Then she shook her head.

"No," she said. "No; I could never do that. I sing to my children, and hold them in my lap."

The girl cast a look of smiling scorn at her.

"If that's the kind of mother you're going to be, I'll give you the littlest ones. I'll take the big ones. My mother says all children need spanking, once in a while. We spank our dolls an' our kitten, regularly; don't we, Myra?"

"Uh-huh," assented a small child in a pink frock. "But I guess I'd rather be her little girl. I like to sit in laps an' be singed to."

"All right, now I'll divide the children. Your name is Myra Pet—— What'd you say your name was goin' t' be?"

" Pettibone," supplied the minister's wife.

" Your name is Myra Pettibone, an' your name is Hattie Smith, an' yours is Jennie Pettibone, 'n' yours—— Come here, Georgie. Do you want to be her little boy? You don't? Well, then, yours is Georgie Smith. I guess you'll have to have all girls, Mis' Pettibone! You don't care? "

Mrs. Pettibone shook her head.

" I don't care," she said, surveying her rapidly growing family with entire satisfaction.

The two little girls had huddled close against her skirts, and were staring truculently at the Smith family.

" Ma," whined the newly christened Myra, who was evidently acquainted with the rules of the game, " Georgie Smith is puttin' out his tongue to me! "

The big girl gazed sternly at the accused.

" Georgie Smith," she exclaimed, " do that again, 'n' see what you'll get! I'll tell your pa, sir, when he comes home t'-night! That's what I'll do. . . . Now, M'rie, you're Mis' Pettibone's next-to-the-youngest. She's a nice child, Mis' Pettibone; an' I'm going to give you Baby. I'd like to have Baby myself, she's so cunnin'. She doesn't go to school all the time; but her mother was canning ras'b'rries to-day so I brought her. Her real name is Louise Gwendolen; but everybody calls her Baby."

Mrs. Pettibone held out her arms with a smile,

and Mrs. Alphonso Smith gently propelled a chubby child of three into them.

" Now, le' me see; you've got Myra an' Jennie an' M'rie an' Baby. Do you want another? "

Mrs. Pettibone thought four would do. She was gazing rapturously at Louise Gwendolen, who had tucked her thumb into her rosy mouth with an air of drowsy content.

" Well, if it ain't, you can have another, jus' as well as not," promised Mrs. Alphonso Smith, generously. " That makes me seven."

She gazed with severe benevolence at the newly christened Smiths, who were cavorting joyously amid the clover.

" I shall cut me a good strong switch, first thing I do," murmured Mrs. Smith, darkly. " Seven's a big fam'ly for a little woman like me, Mis' Pettibone; more especial when their pa has gone to Boston for all day. . . . Now you must tell what your hus'ban's doing."

" My husband is—I think he is writing a sermon," submitted Mrs. Pettibone, realistically cuddling her youngest.

" A sermon? Is he a preacher-man? "

Mrs. Pettibone nodded.

Mrs. Alphonso Smith looked doubtful.

" That's really an' truly, isn't it? We're hardshell Baptists. That's the best kind, my father says."

She tossed her head carelessly.

"I don't know as I care. You can be a p'tend-Pres'pterian, if you want to. Now your house is under that tree, an' your yard comes to here."

She marked off an imaginary line with her toe.

"My house is under this big tree, and my yard is all that place over there. I'm going to take my children home and put them straight to bed. And you'd better, too. Then to-morrow morning—we don't have night last long, 'cause they won't lie still—we'll give 'em breakfast. You can have three lunch-baskets. I'll send one of my children over with them. You can p'tend he's a grocery-man, if you want to. You pick the money off the bushes—nice green leaves; roll 'em up, so! Looks exac'ly like money. We can have all we want. It takes lots of money, Mis' Pettibone, to bring up seven hearty children."

Mrs. Alphonso Smith achieved a grown-up sigh.

"I tell my hus'ban' every day of my life I don't see how I can make out; the children do wear their shoes out so. . . . Now, you go in your house, an' to-morrow first thing I'll come and call an' bring my two youngest children; an' then in the afternoon—— Georgie Smith! come here this minute! I see I'll have to spank you good, before your pa comes home. Then what do you think he'll say?"

Georgie Smith hung his head before the terrific possibilities he had doubtless realised in the not distant past.

Experience taught him to say:

"I wasn't doin' nothin', Ma; Marg'ry, she pinched me!"

"Marg'ry Smith, did you pinch your little brother? You can come in the house an' go straight to bed. You'll get no cake nor pie for your supper, Miss!"

Amid realistic howls of grief she turned to the less experienced matron:

"You'd better take your children right home, Mis' Pettibone. P'rhaps you didn't know it, but th's 'hoopin'-cough' round this neighbourhood; I thought I'd ought to tell you. My children have all had it; but yours haven't."

Mrs. Pettibone hastily withdrew with her flock to the spot kindly pointed out by Mrs. Alphonso Smith.

"Up in a tree, Robin I see, pecking them one by one," she crooned.

Baby was really and truly sleepy; she crept into her p'tend-mother's lap and pillowed her curly head comfortably upon her breast. Her little body was soft and warm; one could hear her sucking her thumb. Gentle thrills of rapture crept over the p'tend-mother.

"Cherries are ripe; cherries are ripe; oh, give the baby one!" she sang, and Myra and Jennie and M'rie resting their heads upon her skirt shut their eyes, squeezing them tight against the bright

sunrays that darted through the clustered oak leaves.

" It's night," whispered Myra, " an' we're in our cribs, covered up snug an' warm. I said my prayers; did you, M'rie? "

" But you have to say prayers to your mother," retorted M'rie, indignantly.

" Not when you're p'tending. You can p'tend you've said 'em to your mother. Let's hurry an' go to sleep; so 't'll be morning quicker."

" We haven't had any supper. I want my supper b'fore I go to sleep. Mother, I'm hungry. I want my supper! "

" Hush, my babe, lie still and slumber! " sang the p'tend-mother, tenderly. " Holy angels guard thy bed! "

" You lie still, M'rie Pettibone," counselled Myra, energetically. " Don't you see she's playing we've had our supper? 'N', anyway, the grocery-man didn't come yet. Maybe Georgie's got int' the baskets. He'd really an' truly eat up all the cake if he did."

At this awful suggestion the three little girls sat up straight, winking the sun from their eyes.

" It's morning, mother. It's morning. Don't you see how bright the sun shines? 'N' we're hungry. Can we have our breakfast? "

" You'll have to go to the grocery, children," Mrs. Pettibone smiled over the top of Baby's curly

head. "Here's the money; buy anything you want."

"H'm-m! Jus' see all the money our mother's got! I'm the oldest. I shall carry the money and buy the things."

"You are not the oldest, I shall buy the breakfast. I was seven last May."

"'N' I was seven jus' las' week. I am *so* the oldest. So there!"

The sound of a slap vigorously dealt, followed by really and truly crying, brought Mrs. Alphonso Smith to the scene.

She separated the combatants with a practised hand.

"That's what you get from being too good to your children," she explained to the perturbed Mrs. Pettibone. "You want to take 'em right in the beginnin' an' give 'em somethin' to cry for. What are you quarrelling about, children? If your own mother can't manage you, the neighbours'll have to come in an' help. . . . You're both seven? Course you are! You're twins; didn't you know that? I forgot to tell you. But you are. You can both carry the money, and you can both bring home the groceries; and if I hear you cry again, Jennie an' Myra—unless it's p'tend-cryin'—you'll find your name changed to Smith, all of a sudden. I got a good switch to my house, an' seven or nine, makes no difference to me. I'll take 'em any time you say, Mis'

Pettibone, an' trade you Hattie for 'em. She's a good girl an' minds her mother."

The hastily matched twins, amicably holding hands, trotted away under convoy of Mrs. Alphonso Smith. The third child, with a shrewd glance at the absorbed face of the p'tend-mother, followed.

"She don't care, as long's she's got Baby," she told the biggest girl. "She's huggin' an' kissin' Baby soft, like she was her really-truly mother."

"Oh, well," assented the resourceful Mrs. Alphonso Smith. "You can be my next-t'-the'-youngest little girl, if you'd rather. I'll take the twins, too. She can p'tend she's got an only child. I'd jus' s' soon have ten."

The p'tend-mother under the oak-tree was revelling in her dream. The delicious feel of the round, soft limbs; the silken mass of curls against her cheek; the warm breath coming and going between parted lips which resembled the half-closed bud of a pink rose, filled her with rapture.

"My little baby," she whispered. "Mother's own precious little baby!"

The starved breast under the baby's warm cheek throbbed with the passionate beating of the heart beneath. There was no other woman near to regard her with half-contemptuous eyes of wonder and pity. They were alone—these two—in the

wide, sweet-smelling world, with bees in the red clover and the voices of meadow-larks calling and answering under the drifting clouds.

How long she sat thus, folded in the warm happiness of that dream of motherhood, Philura Pettibone never knew. She was roused at last by a man's voice.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; I asked the children playing in the road, and they couldn't tell me——"

She looked up, her eyes from which the vision had not yet fled blue as corn-flowers under the brim of her shady hat.

"I'm afraid I've waked your baby," he apologised, with a smile.

He seemed of a commanding height viewed from her lowly seat under the tree; and now that the smile had faded from his young face, she saw that it was pale and anxious.

"Can you tell me where a family called Hill—I believe they are strangers in the neighbourhood—are living?"

The child slipped from her arms and, looking around the empty field with wide, startled eyes, began to cry piteously.

"I'm sorry," he repeated; "I seem to have frightened your baby. But you can tell her I will go at once."

His face was oddly familiar, now that she looked at it more narrowly. Where had she seen those

strongly marked brows, and the stern curve of the young lips?

He went away, when at length she had satisfied him with minute directions of a turn to the right, two to the left, a bridge to be crossed, and stone gate-posts, opposite a red barn. Her puzzled eyes followed him as he strode to the fence. He was in haste, whatever his name or business. . . .

She walked home under the noonday sun, with a guilty sense of furniture undusted, a pudding, which was to be and was not, and of a basket filled with mending, which ought on this particular day of the week to be empty. At the door she was met by her husband, his hair rumpled picturesquely upon his forehead in a way which signified that work in the study had gone smoothly that morning.

"How very nice you look, dear," he said, tilting her face all luminous with afterglow up to his. And he stooped to kiss her, though such was not his sober habit.

"Oh! Silas," she murmured, blushing, "I should have been home long ago; but I—came upon some children in a meadow."

"Some children in a meadow," he repeated, when she showed no inclination to explain further. "That sounds pleasant. And you——?"

"I climbed over the fence and—and—played with them," she confessed, her eyes downcast before the quizzical smile in his.

That afternoon, as with furtive dustcloth she was hurriedly attempting to make good the omissions of the morning, she beheld the majestic figure of Mrs. Buckthorn moving up the walk.

" I just stopped in on my way t' see poor Mis' Pratt," began that lady, with a searching glance about the room. . . . " What! You haven't heard she'd had another of her spells? Yes, I know she was 'bout-as-usual yesterday; but in the afternoon—— My, yes! I thought of course *you*'d heard, and Mr. Pettibone. . . . They didn't send for him? I s'pose they was too busy doin' fer her. But they'll expect him to call. It's a paster's dooty an' priv'lege; an' he'd ought t' know, without being sent for, where he's wanted."

Mrs. Buckthorn drew a sibilant breath from the interior of her being, accompanied by a solemn creaking of her stays.

" I don't know as you re'lise, Philura, that if you ain't careful an' prayerful you might actooaly hender the work that's bein' carried on in our midst, 'stead of helpin' it—as you'd ought to do. Did you ever think of that? "

Mrs. Pettibone stole a guilty look at the spot where she had concealed the dustcloth behind a sofa-pillow. Mrs. Blackthorn found her murmured reply far from satisfying.

" I see you ain't," she observed, in hollow tones. " I was afraid of it. I sez t' the Deacon this mornin'. ' It's borne in upon me,' I sez, ' that,

however painful, I'd ought t' have a heart-t'-heart-talk with Philura Pettibone. No,' I sez, ' don't try to hold me back. Philura was a scholar in my Sunday-school class fer many, many years,' I sez, ' an' little I thought in them days, when his first wife was livin', that I sh'd ever see her in the pars'nage.' "

Mrs. Pettibone's eyes, uplifted from a depressed contemplation of the dusty round of a chair, fell upon the picture of the Huguenot Lovers on the opposite wall. A wandering sun-ray, piercing the leafy mazes of a lilac bush just outside the window, flickered tremulously over the two young faces, forever rapt in the sweet pain of that tragic parting.

" Oh! " she murmured, indistinctly, her thoughts bearing her far from Mrs. Buckthorn's massive presence and the droning sound of her intolerant voice. Had the stranger of the morning's encounter found the Eggleston farm? she wondered; and could it be——?

" Faithful are the wounds of a friend," her visitor was reminding her acidly. " I s'pose likely you'd ruther not think much about *her,* more especial 's you can't hold a candle t' her in looks. That's perfec'ly natural, I'm sure. We can't all be han'some, Philura; but we can all strive t' do our dooty."

CHAPTER XXIV

SYLVIA'S CHILD

Morning of the next day, marked by no evasion of housewifely duty, found Mrs. Pettibone busy in the compounding of a certain cake, which her lord had once approved, and which called for the frugal outlay of but a single egg and a solitary spoonful of butter. As the egg-whisk struck the bottom of the bowl in a brisk patter of sound she became aware of a shuffling step outside, and glancing up beheld Grandfather Orne apologetically wiping his feet upon the door-mat.

"Dunno's I'm so t' say muddy, ner yet dusty," he began. "But Gran'ma, she's got me trained, so 't I don't das' t' walk in on no floor 'ithout wipin'. 'I wonder if th's door-mats in heav'n,' I sez. But Gran'ma, she sez, 'No. Them Golden Streets is kep' clean 'nough t' eat off of,' she sez. . . . Yes'm, I'll set down a minute, if you don't mind."

The old man disposed himself in the wooden chair the minister's wife set for him, with considerable ceremony and a vast deal of clearing his throat. He had come to tell her something, she knew; but familiar with the ways of the countryside she went on compounding the cake,

her rapid spoon beating its staccato rhythm against the sides and bottom of the bowl.

"Milly come down f'om th' farm this mornin'," chirped Grandfather, clutching his old straw hat with both heavy hands, as if he feared it would escape him.

"Did she?"

"Yes'm; she come down, bare-headed 'n' all out o' breath."

The old man stared unwinkingly at the cake-tin, into which the minister's wife was carefully pouring the yellow mixture.

"Her Gran'ma was some s'prised t' see her."

"She must have been."

"Seems th' young lady's lit out, unexpected."

Mrs. Pettibone hastily set down her bowl.

"The young lady? Do you mean——"

"Her 'at was young Mis' Hill. Milly come down t' ask us, did we see her a-goin' by? I guess the's b'en some cur'us doin's up t' th' farm. The young man, he went off a week ago. 'N' Milly's b'en there alone with 'em. We thought mebbe you didn't know. Somebody 'd ought t' go up there. Gran'ma she sez t' me, 'Go down an' tell th' minister's wife, Gran'pa?' she sez. So I dropped m' hoe an' come, jus' 's I was. Beats all, how anybody c'd git right up out o' bed an' clear out, so 't nobody c'd trace 'em."

"Out of bed?" repeated the minister's wife, dazedly.

She walked across the floor and quite without knowledge of what she did opened the oven door and set her cake inside.

" Mebbe she was settin' up. Milly, she wa'n't allowed t' do nothin' outside th' kitchen; so she couldn't say 's t' what was goin' on upstairs. But the ol' lady; she was down in th' back room fer quite a spell this mornin' doin' fer th' baby; 'n' it must 'a' b'en while she was gone 'at th' young lady——"

" What!—Did you say there was a baby? " inquired Mrs. Pettibone.

The face she turned upon the old man was pink with excitement; her hands gripped her apron.

" Why, yes'm, 'n' she was washin' 'n' dressin' it, mebbe. Milly sez it's an' awful cute baby; it's 'bout a week old, I sh'd say. . . . You hadn't heerd of it, Ma'am? Well, I guess nobody had. 'Twas kep' kin' o' quiet. Even Gran'ma, she didn't know, till she went up t' see what'd become o' Milly. Gran'ma, she's a great han' t' fret an' worry, 'n' them folks up there——"

Grandfather Orne moved uneasily in his chair.

" I heerd Milly a-tellin' her Gran'ma th' baby 'd never b'en took upstairs."

He shuffled to his feet, and gazed frowningly into the crown of his hat.

" Ef I was you, Ma'am, I dunno but what I'd go up there 'n' kind o' look th' sitoation over—bein' 's you're the minister's wife. Milly, she

don't seem t' feel reel easy in her mind, an' her Gran'ma—wall, Ma'am, you know what kind of a critter Gran'ma is, always a-worritin' an' champin' o' her bit. An' 'tis queer fer a sick lady t'——"

But the mistress of the kitchen had disappeared. He heard the quick tread of her feet in the room beyond, a door opening and shutting, and the sound of voices.

"Seems kind of 'xcited," mused Mr. Orne. "Wall, let a man say the word 'baby' t' most any woman, 'n' she'll fly 'round like a turkey on a hot rock."

He moved slowly toward the door, his mouth twisted in a dubious smile.

"Cur'us critters—women-folks," he muttered. "Th' older I git, th' more they seem that-a-way t' me. Onreas'n'ble, es a rule, 'n'—'n' brash."

And, with this, his errand having been accomplished, Grandfather Orne returned to the cultivation of his late vegetables, which had been so suddenly interrupted by the unlooked-for apparition of his grand-daughter. Late vegetables, such as cabbages and beets, set in solid, respectable phalanxes, soothed his aged nerves. One could depend upon them in a world of chance and change, wherein women-folks abounded, and where unexpected and, for the most part, disagreeable things were always happening. A cabbage, he reflected vaguely, was always a cabbage, round, green—or

purple, as the case might be—unperturbable. One might say anything to a cabbage—and one frequently did—without a resultant tremor of a cool, crisp leaf. . . .

The Reverend Silas Pettibone, having listened attentively to his wife's agitated interpretation of Grandfather Orne's message, laid down his pen without a protest. But he was far from following the rapid flight of her imagination.

"You tell me a man asked you yesterday to direct him to the old Eggleston place; has it occurred to you that he might have been a sewing-machine agent and, therefore, not at all connected with the disappearance of——"

"Silas!" protested his wife. "A sewing-machine agent! He was young, tall, and very good-looking."

The minister smiled and rumpled his hair controversially.

"I will harness the horse," he said; "but I cannot forbear reminding you, my dear, that sewing-machine agents are quite as likely to be young, tall, and good-looking as other men. More so, in fact; the occupation it would seem appeals to youth; and youth——"

But she had already hurried away to put on her hat.

As he urged the indignant sorrel horse along the road as rapidly as the animal's outraged feelings would permit, Mr. Pettibone was inwardly

perturbed by the look on his wife's face. He had seen it there before; but being, despite his calling, imperfectly acquainted with the heart of woman he did not recognise it for what it was.

"You shouldn't worry too much about the young woman," he offered. "She might, you know, have wandered out into the woods for an airing, and—er—turned up long ago, quite safe and—er—none the worse for——"

She shot him a pitying look.

"I'm not thinking about *her,*" she said.

"What, then?"

Mrs. Pettibone's hands in their much-mended lisle-thread gloves closed tightly upon each other.

"If there is—a baby," she murmured, tremulously.

"That appears to be an incontrovertible premise," he admitted.

"And if—she didn't know——"

"My dear Philura," he smiled, "what an extraordinary imagination you are developing of late."

He patted the tense little hand nearest him, very kindly but firmly, as if in his judgment the process of which he had spoken would better cease.

"If she has gone—without knowing——" persisted Mrs. Pettibone, not appearing to notice the veiled protest.

He spoke sharply to the horse, who had taken advantage of the conversation to relax into

a shambling gait, expressive of his sentiments toward his master and the world at large, which he appeared to view with equine displeasure. . . .

"Do you want me to go in?" he asked, as he presently assisted her to alight before the old Eggleston house, "or do you prefer——?"

She was silent for a moment, looking timidly up at the shuttered windows.

"I—don't know," she said, at last. "Perhaps, she—perhaps I——"

"Precisely," assented the minister, with an air of relief. "Go in at once; Milly will admit you. I have a book with me. If you should want me——"

She took two steps toward the sombre old house; then suddenly turned, her face luminous but strangely pale.

"Please kiss me," she said.

"My dear!" he protested, "if anyone should be looking——"

But he stooped and his lips touched hers.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said, with a touch of masculine impatience. "I will go in, if you prefer."

But already she had moved away from him, a little sob in her throat. Overhead the wind passed through the evergreens with a solemn murmur.

No one answered her light rap at the side entrance, and after a moment of indecision the minister's wife passed around to the kitchen. The

door stood open; but Milly was not there. On the shelf over the well-polished cooking-range the loud-voiced clock buzzingly told the hour of four. There were flowers in a glass on the table, and a small rocking-chair stood near the window. Something white hung over the back of the chair. Her eyes fastened upon it. Then she stepped inside, her feet making no sound on the painted floor, where the sun lay in warm pools of yellow light. Slowly she moved across the space which separated her from the chair. To the left of the stove a second door stood part way open. She reached out a timid hand to touch the little garment on the back of the chair. It was made of flannel and there was lace about the scalloped hem. It was very quiet in the kitchen; the loud ticking of the clock beat hard against the silence. Somewhere, a great way off, a cock crew thrice, and the distant hoot of a locomotive whistle echoed lonesomely among the hills. Mrs. Pettibone held the little garment in both hands, pressing it against her cheek. The sun had rested upon it and it was warm and soft; the faint sweet smell of the wool was in her nostrils. Then all at once a sound broke the clock-ridden silence; some young creature was awake and stiring in the next room.

Philura Pettibone boldly pushed the door open and looked in. It was a small room, used perhaps as a servant's bedroom, in the days when the Egglestons were a large and prosperous family.

The walls, hung with defaced and dingy paper of a greenish hue, showed great splotches where the damp and mould had crept through the plaster. There was a single window, covered with a flimsy shade; in one corner stood a chest of drawers topped by a cracked mirror, and against the further wall a cot, its cheap blue and white striped mattress imperfectly concealed by a folded blanket. In the midst of the blanket a little mound of something white stirred feebly with a half-smothered cry.

It was perhaps half an hour later—Philura Pettibone never knew, since happiness takes no note of time. She was sitting in the rocking-chair swaying gently back and forth, her arms closed about the baby, her down-dropped eyes intent upon the downy head against her breast. The woman, who had noiselessly opened a door from behind, stood motionless, staring at her contemplatively from under gathered brows. Then, as if resolved upon a course of action, she came briskly forward, a determined smile upon her lips.

"Mrs. Pettibone!" she said, "I didn't know you were here."

The minister's wife looked up.

"Perhaps," she said, doubtfully, "I oughtn't to have taken it up."

The bleak smile on the other woman's lips faded.

"It doesn't matter," she said, looking at the child with a strange, intent expression. "It doesn't matter," she repeated, with a touch of impatience.

She sat down, her back to the window.

"I'm glad, on the whole, that you came," she said, after a heavy pause. "I had made up my mind to send for you. I am obliged at last to ask counsel of someone. You—or your husband—will do as well as another."

"Mr. Pettibone is outside," recollected Mrs. Pettibone. "Shall I—would you prefer——"

"No; sit still."

She moistened her lips furtively.

"I sent Milly to the village with a telegram. It—seemed necessary to recall my son, much as I dislike doing so."

The child in Mrs. Pettibone's arms stirred and began sucking its fists with little whimpering cries.

"Do you think—— Is it hungry?" she asked, timidly. "I—of course I know very little about babies; but——"

"The child—is a boy," Mrs. Hill said, harshly. "He is not hungry. Give him to me. I'll put him back on the cot. If he cries, it will not harm him."

She took the baby and walked quickly to the ugly little room. Mrs. Pettibone stood gazing at her broad stooped back and the jerky move-

ment of her elbows as she rearranged the blankets on the cot. The baby continued to cry feebly. Mrs. Hill, turning suddenly, surprised a look of poignant distress, almost of anger, on the watchful face. She shut the door firmly behind her.

"I think we will go in the other room," she said. "We shall not be disturbed there."

She held the door to the dining-room wide, motioning the other woman to pass in before her. But Mrs. Pettibone drew back protestingly.

"He might cry," she murmured, "and—we couldn't hear him."

Mrs. Hill's lips curled impatiently.

"Please go in," she said, peremptorily. "I have several things to tell you. You must pay attention, or you will be of no use to me. It will do the child no harm to cry for a while."

She closed the second door with decision and motioned her visitor to a chair.

"My daughter——"

Her face quivered for an instant, then settled into iron composure.

"The child was born ten days ago. My daughter made a good recovery. Yesterday she was fully dressed for the first time. We expected to leave this place next week. But——"

The minister's wife appeared to be listening, as if intent upon a distant sound. She spoke without premeditation.

" Don't you think she may have gone with her husband? " she asked.

Mrs. Hill started violently.

" With her husband? " she repeated, sharply. " Why should she go with her husband—without my knowledge? We expected—— Haven't I already told you that my son——"

She paused to look piercingly at Mrs. Pettibone.

" What have you heard? " she asked, sharply.

" She came to see me."

" Well? "

" She told me—about her marriage. She was very unhappy."

" I don't—understand how——"

" Your son brought her to the parsonage? " said Mrs. Pettibone, speaking slowly and distinctly. " They came in a carriage about two weeks ago. You didn't know it? "

The woman's dry lips formed the word No.

After a moment she shrugged her shoulders, her dull eyes moving slowly upward to the ceiling, where they appeared to fasten upon the movements of a fly crawling slowly about some ornate excrescence of discoloured plaster. " There was no use—I might have known. She was always stubborn and disobedient. I—tried to save her. God knows I tried! "

" I think you were trying to save yourself," said the minister's wife, with one of those sud-

den flashes of insight which occasionally visit the least discerning of women.

Mrs. Hill looked at her visitor, a dull flush rising in her sallow cheeks.

"You think——? What do you know about me—about any of us? How dare you say such a thing?"

"Because you are hard and cruel. You didn't believe anything she said. You thought your own child lied to you. You believed she was wicked, when she was only——"

Mrs. Hill flung up her hand in a sudden reckless gesture.

"Stop!" she ordered. "You have heard Sylvia's version of the matter. Now listen to mine."

But she was silent for a long minute, during which Mrs. Pettibone appeared to listen intently for some distant sound, her hands gripped in her lap.

"I don't know why I should tell you anything," Mrs. Hill resumed, in a bitter tone. "You appear to have mixed yourself up in our affairs from the beginning. Doubtless you assume that your position as the wife of a clergyman entitles you to—meddle."

Mrs. Pettibone rose trembling to her feet.

"The baby is crying," she said. "I cannot listen to you while the poor little thing is left alone in that room. It is cruel—abominable!"

Her voice shook. There was in her face at the moment all the blind, unreasoning fury of thwarted motherhood.

Mrs. Hill watched her visitor without apparent emotion as she hurried from the room. When, presently, she returned, the small flannel bundle hugged awkwardly to her breast, a faint flicker of amusement passed over her rigid face.

"You seem fond of infants," she commented, coldly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Pettibone, gazing defiantly at her from behind the rampart of flannel, "I am. I love them!"

She patted the baby's back, as women will, crooning over the downy little head.

"Fond," pronounced Mrs. Hill, curtly, "in the silly, ignorant way common to animals and some women. Sit down, if you will, and listen to what I have to say to you."

Mrs. Pettibone obeyed. The child had ceased its feeble wailing and lay quiet in her arms.

"I can look back from this point and see that I ruined Sylvia's disposition with over-indulgence," pursued Mrs. Hill, with iron composure. "All this"—she appeared to include the shabby room, Mrs. Pettibone, and the child in a gesture of disparagement—"is doubtless the result of my own mistaken kindness to a child of a singularly passionate and—uncontrolled nature. I should have been more severe—I should have in-

sisted upon more implicit obedience. Realising this, I have—tried——"

Her voice, cold and monotonous, suddenly choked. Mrs. Pettibone looked up from her rapt contemplation of the baby's unconscious face.

"You—tried?" she repeated, wonderingly.

Mrs. Hill's solid, erect figure appeared to grow larger, more substantial still. She shot a glance of impatient contempt at the minister's wife.

"My husband died when both of my children were young," she resumed, "leaving me with a considerable fortune. Our position in the world was unquestioned; our social prominence—— But why speak of this to you? It is impossible for a woman like you to understand in any degree the problem that faced me, when Sylvia—— My God! What a frightful discovery!"

The woman's large hands, of a yellowish-white colour, gripped the arms of her chair.

"She told you she was—married?" faltered Mrs. Pettibone.

"Married! . . . She had no proof—not even a ring. And the wretch had disappeared."

"Did you—you knew him?"

Mrs. Hill was staring at the child, who had again commenced its feeble wailing.

"Sylvia was a mere child—a schoolgirl," she said, harshly. "I employed a governess to instruct her in French and music. The woman connived at the acquaintance—kept it a secret

from me. The—the man was a poor clerk, or something of the sort. I knew nothing of him—never saw him. He was not of our world. I was, of course, much occupied with social and charitable work. It never occurred to me that Sylvia—— I had intended taking her to Europe this summer. We were only waiting for my son's graduation, when I—learned—the facts."

Mrs. Pettibone shifted the child's position in her arms with anxious tenderness.

"But when you—when she told you, why didn't you try——?"

"Not being totally devoid of common sense—as you appear to think—I did all that could be done without making an open scandal. I had my son to think of, the honour of the family name. There was no existing proof of the marriage. Sylvia's account of it was utterly unbelievable. What could I do? What would you have done?"

Her tone was bitterly sarcastic.

"I—should have loved her—all the time," breathed the minister's wife. "You might have done that. You might——"

"I am not," Mrs. Hill said, coldly, "a sentimentalist. I have always detested that sort of thing."

"Yet you have children."

The eyes of the two women met, like the blades of unsheathed rapiers.

For an instant neither spoke.

"You ought," said Philura Pettibone, slowly, "to have loved your daughter, before she was born; and afterwards—every minute!"

Mrs. Hill's large shoulders moved slightly.

"Really," she said, "I think we have quite lost sight of the matter in hand. I had no intention of asking your opinion of my character or conduct. I wished merely to inquire if you can give me the name and address of a trustworthy woman to care for the child. My daughter has left me of her own free will. I shall not—trouble myself further concerning her future."

"How could she leave her baby?" murmured Mrs. Pettibone. "It is that I don't understand."

The woman's face changed subtly.

"She supposed it was dead."

"You told her so?"

"I—allowed her to think so. It seemed—best."

Mrs. Pettibone looked at the large, pale face, in which the events of the summer had graven ineradicable lines, and a great pity took possession of her.

"Forgive me," she stammered. "I—didn't understand."

"You didn't understand?" repeated Mrs. Hill, dully. "No."

She stared at the wall, as if she saw written there words of judgment and of doom.

"If I—" the minister's wife half whispered the words—"if you could trust me——"

The opaque eyes came slowly back, with a look of weary incredulity.

"You want the child? Impossible!"

"Why—impossible? I would take good care of him. Oh, I would love him!"

"But—your husband's position—he would not consent. I should not, were I in his place. Think of the—scandal. No. I will take the child away with me. It has been ailing and will, perhaps, not survive. . . . Better so."

A low cry of protest broke from Philura Pettibone's lips. She spoke wildly, eagerly, scarce knowing what she said. Mrs. Hill listened, her fingers picking at the folds of her dress in painful bewilderment.

"You tell me—a man came to take Sylvia away? Stop! I do not follow you. What is this about a picture and—someone who spoke to you—of us?"

"It was her husband—I am sure of it! He looked like the picture. She wrote to him, and he must have come. And if she thought her baby was dead, there was nothing—forgive me for saying it—but can't you see she must have feared and dreaded you, after all that had happened?"

Mrs. Hill drew a deep breath; a faint colour stole into her face.

"If, as you say, her—the father of her child

found out where she was, and—— But why did he not come to me? If he could show me proof of the marriage—— No; I cannot believe it. She may be—dead."

Ghastly fear peered for an instant out of her distended eyes.

"I—after I missed her, I went to the little pool back in the woods. . . . I thought—but she was not strong enough to walk so far."

"The man," said Mrs. Pettibone, positively, "was driving a fast horse. I noticed it, particularly."

It was at this moment that both women became conscious of a discreet knock on the outside door.

CHAPTER XXV

"UNTO US A SON IS BORN"

The minister glanced doubtfully from one to the other of the two women, whose faces had instantly resumed the masks habitually worn before men.

Mrs. Pettibone smiled faintly at her husband.

" I—was holding the baby," she explained. " I didn't realise how—late it was."

" Your wife," Mrs. Hill said, dryly, " appears fond of children."

" H'm-m," murmured Mr. Pettibone, passing his hand over his chin.

For a moment all three were silent. The infant struggled feebly in its wrappings with half-strangled cries.

" You had better give it to me," Mrs. Hill said, impassively.

She rose from her chair and crossed the room.

Mrs. Pettibone gazed at her imploringly, sheltering the baby with her arms.

The minister, who had been consulting his watch, snapped its old-fashioned hunting-case shut with suggestive emphasis.

" Come, my dear," he said, with attempted jocularity, " you mustn't try to keep a baby from its grandmother, you know."

Mrs. Hill straightened herself with a jerk, her angry eyes denying his words.

"Silas!"

He turned at the sound of his wife's voice, doubtfully interpreting its passion of entreaty.

"We really oughtn't to stay longer," he said. "Mrs. Hill is perhaps——"

"Come and look at the baby," she urged.

He obeyed, gazing down at the small, pink, twisting face with a quasi-professional air of interest.

"Ah!" he murmured, "a—er—fine child. Boy or girl?"

"He is a boy, Silas," Mrs. Pettibone replied, looking up at him piteously. "Will you let me——? Oh, Silas, Mrs. Hill is obliged to go away at once to—to search for her daughter. She wants to leave the baby—and I—— Oh, Silas!"

"Impossible!" broke in Mrs. Hill's harsh monotone. "I—have changed my mind. I shall take the child with me."

"You don't want it! You don't love it! You are wishing it would die!"

Philura Pettibone's voice rang out in a shrill crescendo. She stared accusingly at the other woman.

"You would soon kill it—with hatred and neglect!"

"My dear Philura!" expostulated the min-

ister, shocked and incredulous, "surely you do not mean——"

He gazed attentively at his wife, the tardy realisation that he had never known her, slowly taking possession of him.

Mrs. Hill laughed mirthlessly.

"You make me little better than a murderer!" she exclaimed, contemptuously. "I assure you I couldn't have taken better care of the child if it had been——"

She bit her lip sharply.

"You will let me have the baby," begged the minister's wife, suddenly abandoning her threatening tone. "I—must have it—I must! You know it will only be a hindrance to you. How can you travel? And your son—you must think of him, you know."

Mrs. Hill glanced stealthily at the minister, who had moved toward the door, his grave face perplexed and frowning.

"How do you like the idea of adding a misbegotten child to your family?" she asked, jeeringly. "Clergymen are always preaching charity and good-will. But I have never known one who practised it. It is true that I do not want the child; God knows I have small cause for loving it. But I should not kill it with either kindness or neglect."

"Then I shall have him!"

Philura Pettibone rose from her chair, her face

pale and luminous like that of a woman newly emerged from the valley of the shadow into which every mother must needs descend. Without further word she passed slowly out of the room bearing the child in her arms. The two who were left behind heard the light sound of her feet upon the gravel, and the cries of the child, growing fainter with distance.

" I will pay liberally for its keep, of course, should you consent to the arrangement," Mrs. Hill said, haughtily. " I must explain further that I requested your wife to recommend to me some honest farmer's wife. I did intend to leave the child. It is nothing to me."

Mr. Pettibone gazed at her with stern rebuke.

" You are a sinful woman," he pronounced, slowly. " Without love, a child is also without hope in the world. We will take him and endeavour to bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

" But I must insist upon paying you. I am rich——"

The minister repelled her with a gesture of dignified authority.

" Your money perish with you! " he exclaimed, with a severity before which the woman shrank as from the sharp cut of a whip.

. . . .

Milly Orne, returning from the village with anxious haste, met the minister's carriage at the

bend of the road. At sight of its occupants she stopped short, her eyes fastened upon the baby in Mrs. Pettibone's arms.

"Oh!" she cried, sharply. "You have been there. You——"

The minister pulled up the impatient horse.

"Yes," he began, doubtfully; "perhaps we have acted unwisely; but——"

He glanced at his wife's pale face.

"I have taken him for my own," she said, simply.

Her smile was sublime.

Milly shook her head compassionately.

"He has cried almost constantly for several days," she said. "I am afraid——"

"And you were there?' murmured Mrs. Pettibone, accusingly.

"She locked the door," returned Milly, her blue eyes filling with tears. "I—indeed, I could do nothing. But I am glad you are taking him away."

Left to herself, the girl's feet moved more and more slowly along the road. She appeared to be debating some doubtful question with herself. Arrived at length before the stately gate-posts, which marked a former pride of ownership, she paused to look half fearfully at the clustered chimneys of the old house, gravely withdrawn behind its ancient trees. The woman whom she had grown to fear and distrust—almost to hate, in

these, the last days of her service—was there alone, she knew. Already she had decided that she could not pass another night under that roof. But there was something she must say to Mrs. Hill before they parted as mistress and maid.

She found the woman in the little room off the kitchen engaged in packing the small belongings of the baby in a flat parcel. She glanced up sharply at sound of Milly's step.

" Did you send the message? " she asked.

Milly nodded, her eyes following the swift movements of the large, pale hands.

" I am packing these things," explained Mrs. Hill; " to-morrow you are to take them to the village. I have arranged with the clergyman's wife to care for the child. She is one of those silly creatures who pretend to adore children."

The girl stood silent, her hands hanging at her side.

Mrs. Hill noted her attitude with one of her darting glances.

" Why do you stand there like that? " she demanded. " Take off your hat and get me some tea at once. It is late."

Milly lifted her eyes to the clock which was on the stroke of six.

" I—am going now," she said, in a low, half-frightened voice. " You will not need me——"

" Going? " echoed Mrs. Hill, sharply. " Indeed, you are not. I shall need you for several

days, yet. Do you think I shall have nothing to do? There is the packing——"

"I am going—now," repeated Milly, doggedly. "I shall not stay here any longer."

The woman stared at her angrily.

"Take off your hat at once!" she ordered, stamping her foot.

"There is something I must tell you, before I go. You may like to hear it," Milly said, in her determined voice.

She paused, perhaps to choose her words with care, but when she finally spoke it was as though she had loaded a gun with hard, merciless phrases and fired them at a target with swift precision.

"I know what became of your daughter. She went away with a man. I saw him."

"You—saw—— What do you mean?"

Mrs. Hill sank limply into a chair, as if the words had actually penetrated her large breast, inflicting mortal injury. She stared up at the girl with something like entreaty in her dull eyes.

"I was at the front of the house, sweeping the passage," Milly went on. "You were dressing the baby. All the doors were shut between, as you told me."

"Yes—yes! Go on!"

"A man, driving a light buggy, came up the road. He spoke to me—asked me if a family named Hill lived in the house. I told him yes, and asked if I should call you. Just then a shut-

ter in the room above was thrown open; the man looked up. Your daughter was leaning across the sill. She didn't speak at first—just looked. He held out his arms to her. 'I have found you, at last,' he said."

"Well?" commented the woman, hoarsely. "What then?"

"I suppose she must have gone away with him," Milly said, lowering her eyes.

"You suppose?—Don't you know?"

"I—came in directly. I—didn't like to—look, after that."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Milly looked at her mistress defiantly. She did not answer.

"If you had told me, perhaps——"

Milly moved toward the kitchen door. On the threshold she paused to glance back. The woman was sitting motionless, a small folded garment in her lap, her eyes staring straight before her into vacancy.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PARISH HEARS THE NEWS

In the damp basement room of the Presbyterian church, used indifferently for Sunday-school, prayer-meetings, and the more secular activities of "The Ladies' Aid and Missionary Society," Mrs. Buckthorn, as president of the latter organisation, was assisting Miss Electa Pratt (chairman of the Sewing Committee) to lay out the work for the afternoon.

"We'd really ought t' get that home-mission'ry barrel ready to go to the Mountain-Whites this week," said Mrs. Buckthorn, with a deep sigh, expressive of the burden which rested upon her ample shoulders. "I hope we'll have a good attendance t'-day."

Miss Pratt sniffed, as she held up to view a limp and faded muslin dress of a fashion long since decadent.

"The buttons is tore right out o' this waist," she observed, with a malicious smile. "Do you think it would pay t' fix?—An' jus' look at the hem! Must 'a' been awful muddy 'n' never got washed clean."

Mrs. Buckthorn compressed her lips.

"I donated that dress myself," she said,

" after careful an' prayerful consideration. Some Mountain-White mother will be glad an' thankful for the opportunity of making over that dress for her child. . . . No, Electa, we will not take the ladies' time to repair it. Let them go on with the rompers for the missionary's twins. Then there's the ribbons t' cut an' sew for th' mile of pennies we're b'ginnin' for r'pairs on the church edifice. How much did you have t' pay a yard for that ribbon, Electa? "

" Ten cents," replied Miss Pratt. " An' it ain't all silk."

She rolled her greenish eyes toward the door.

" There comes Mis' Puffer, an' do look! If she ain't bringing her two youngest! Much work we'll get accomplished t'-day. I s'pose she remembered it was tea-an'-cake day. . . . Good afternoon, Mis' Puffer. . . . Oh, th' dear little tots! So glad you brought 'em right along."

" I had to," replied the matron, plaintively, " or stay at home. The baby's teething an' kind o' fretty, an' the twins can't do nothing with Georgie. He's so ambitious an' high-spirited. He takes right after his pa, Georgie does."

Mrs. Buckthorn gazed over the top of her spectacles at the little boy, who stood with his hands judicially folded behind his fat person, staring imperturbably about the sacred precinct.

" Little boy," she said, in a deep, hollow tone, " do you love Jesus? "

Young Master Puffer appeared to be considering the question with some doubt, when his mother hastily interposed in his behalf.

"Course he does, Mis' Buckthorn. He says his prayers just as cunning ev'ry night; an' he'd 'a' b'en in Sunday-school all summer if he hadn't had whooping-cough this spring, an' gone from that right into measles, an' from that int' chicken-pox."

"There's some children that seem 'lected t' be saved from their earliest infancy," stated Mrs. Buckthorn, sonorously. "My oldest girl, Martha Ellen, was that kind. She died when she was six—of water on the brain. She could repeat correctly twenty-one hymns and a hundred an' eight verses from the Bible. I've often wondered what she'd 'a' growed up t' be, had she been spared. But there's others that seem born fer perdition. They don't appear t' have no reel comprehension of spiritooal things, es I tell th' deacon."

Her spectacled glance dwelt darkly on the two small Puffers, who had taken refuge in their mother's skirts.

"I'd rather my children would live an' be healthy," murmured Mrs. Puffer, rebelliously. "I'd be scared stiff if they was too r'ligious, an' like that."

A number of ladies had strayed in by twos and threes, and Mrs. Buckthorn's attention, happily diverted from the subject of infant salvation to

the more urgent demands of her official position, passed them in review one by one.

"I don't see our pastor's wife in the room," she observed. "Has *any*one seen Mrs. Pettibone? I requested her to lead the d'votional exercises this afternoon, and we are already five minutes past the hour."

No one replied at first; then a thin voice uprose from the back of the room:

"I don't think she's comin'."

"You don't think— Mrs. Salter, did I understand you to say that our pastor's wife wasn't coming?"

The lady addressed, now the target for every eye, moved her angular shoulders slightly. It was evident that she was labouring under strong though suppressed excitement.

"I s'posed you'd heard, Mis' Buckthorn," she said. "But if you ain't——"

"Heard? Heard what?"

"Why, that the minister's wife's got a baby."

A gasp of incredulity exhaled sharply from every matron's breast. Miss Electa Pratt achieved a virginal blush, which, unluckily, centred upon the end of her nose.

"You must be mistaken," said Mrs. Puffer, authoritatively. "I'm sure I ought to know, if——"

"Sarah Jane Salter, you *are* mistaken," de-

clared Mrs. Buckthorn. "Do you suppose for a moment that I——"

"It's adopted," conceded Mrs. Salter, negligently. "I thought I said so."

"Adopted!"

The word uprose in vehement chorus. After which every lady looked searchingly at every other lady, and finally at Mrs. Buckthorn.

That lady had taken up her Bible, with an air of rigid self-control—the kind and variety of that sterling quality which appears to put off for future consideration a subject too large for unpremeditated speech.

"We will read together the Twenty-eighth Psa'm," she said, in her deepest prayer-meeting voice, "and afterward be led in prayer by Mis' Deaconess Scrimger."

These pious preliminaries having been duly carried out, needles, thread, and a number of inchoate garments were distributed by Miss Electa Pratt, who stated confidentially to Mrs. Puffer that she'd had such a shock a person could knock her down with a feather. Other ladies confessed to a "trembly feeling" induced, it may be believed, by the dramatic suddenness of Mrs. Salter's communication.

That lady, raised to a sudden eminence of social importance, was the object of a brisk fire of questions. But it was soon learned that she knew very little of the actual circumstances.

"No," she said, "I ain't been t' th' pars'nage, m'self. I had one o' my spells last night, an' I could sca'cely crawl over here t' the meeting. But I felt 's 'o' it was my duty t' come. All I know is, they come home f'om somewhere yest'd'y aft'-noon, with a baby. Obed, he telephoned t' me 'bout five o'clock that Rev. Pettibone was t' th' store asking for a nursing-bottle. Course, Obed he don't keep 'em in stock, so he told him t' go t' th' drug-store. I heerd they called in th' doctor this mornin'."

"It's a ver-ry se-rious thing to adopt a ba-by," stated Mrs. Buckthorn, strongly. And it was felt that she had voiced the sentiment of the meeting.

"Course, if you have children of your own, that's one thing," she went on, didactically. "The Lord sends 'em, an' you got t' do th' best you can with what comes. But to take some-body else's child t' raise is a terrible r'sponsi-bility. I don't think Philura Rice 'd ought t' attempt it, more especial as she has assumed other duties an' r'ponsibilities as the wife of our pastor. If she'd seen fit t' consult *me* be-fore taking such a step, I sh'd have advised her different."

"What I want t' know is, where did she get it?" put in Miss Pratt.

Then she giggled, in her usual high-pitched girl-ish manner.

"To think of Philura *with a baby!*" she cried. "The i-dee-a!"

"Obed asked Mr. Pettibone where they got it," said Mrs. Salter, "—an' he sort o' hummed an' hawed, an' sez he, 'I haven't consulted with Mrs. Pettibone, es t' whether it will be altogether best t' divulge the child's parentage,' he sez."

"Did you ever!" murmured Mrs. Scrimger. "Seem's 'o' we'd got a right t' know."

"I agree with you," said Mrs. Buckthorn, sonorously.

She folded the red and white gingham legs, upon which she had been at work, with deliberate motions of her large, fat hands.

"I'm obliged t' leave early t'-day," she told her satellites. "But I do hope you'll *all* remain while the light is good, because the barrel for the Mountain-Whites really must be got off in time t' put in our report for the annual church-meeting."

A resentful silence, broken only by the voices of the infant Puffers upraised in united protest, settled upon the gathering.

"The children," observed Mrs. Puffer, mildly, "seem t' be getting fretty. I think I'd better take 'em home."

"Aren't you going t' wait for the tea and cake?" asked Mrs. Scrimger.

But Mrs. Puffer had already gathered her belongings and was moving toward the door, the baby's fat face bobbing over her shoulder and

Master Georgie trailing a long strip of red and white checked gingham which somebody had tied to an empty spool.

"It's so kind of damp in this room, I feel it all through my bones," complained Mrs. Salter. "The doctor told me only yest'd'y I was t' avoid dampness. An' Obed sez t' me at dinner t'-day when I told him I meant t' make an effort an' get over t' the meeting, 'Don't you stay long,' he sez. Mr. Salter's awful pertic'lar about my health. 'Mind what I tell you,' he sez, 'or I'll have you down again on the flat o' your back.' So I guess——"

Her tall, angular figure disappeared through the door to the gentle patter of her speech.

"Well, it's funny, but I can't stay, either," simpered Miss Pratt. "I come early a-purpose so I c'd be excused at four. I have an important engagement."

With which Miss Pratt also departed.

The ladies who were left cast furtive glances at one another, while they set dutiful stitches in the red and white gingham rompers destined for the home-missionary's twins.

"It seems t' be clouding up," sighed one.

"No; but we don't get the light we'd ought to for sewing," opined another.

"If you ladies don't object," said Mrs. Scrimger, who was the chairman of the refreshment committee, "me an' Mis' Bassett 'll serve tea

kind o' early. I got to go home t' see t' somethin' fer th' deacon."

The entertainment committee withdrew to the adjoining kitchen, whence a subdued clatter of cups and plates presently issued.

A lady distinguished by a deep mourning costume arose.

"I don't care for tea," she said, gently. "It upsets my nerves."

And she went away.

"I don't wonder, Mis' Bartlett can't drink the tea Mis' Deaconess Scrimger brews," murmured a pallid person from the twilight shadow of the Sunday-school book-shelf. "It's strong enough to bear up an egg."

She whispered something to Mrs. Elder Trimmer who sat next her; then glided away, with a self-righteous air of superiority.

"I'm sure I don't want any strong tea; an' social-tea crackers are all we'll get for cake," said the woman nearest the door.

And she folded up her red and white gingham legs (meaning, of course, the home-missionary legs) and silently stole away.

When Mrs. Scrimger and Mrs. Bassett reëntered the room, each bearing a tray with cups and other tea paraphernalia, it was to find a room enlivened by neatly folded piles of sanguinary-hued material, but otherwise empty of occupants.

"Well!" gasped Mrs. Bassett, who was short

and stout and correspondingly lacking in breath at critical junctures. " Did you ever! "

Mrs. Deaconess Scrimger never did, in all her life; and she said so with great variety and freedom of speech.

" Will you have a cup of tea? " she asked Mrs. Bassett. " It's hot an' strong."

But Mrs. Bassett, it appeared, never drank tea of an afternoon. Nor did she at the moment feel appetite for the very dry and pale cakes reposing in serried rows in two church plates of green sprigged china. Mrs. Bassett thought she must go home at once—if Mrs. Scrimger didn't mind—and as there were no cups to wash.

Mrs. Scrimger, left to herself, drank two cups of tea—rather than waste it all. After which she providently restored the pale cakes to their pasteboard box. They would do nicely, she thought, for the next tea-an'-cake meeting.

It should be acknowledged at once that Mrs. Pettibone had—for the first time in years—forgotten the meeting of the Ladies' Aid and Missionary Society, the completeness of her lapse of memory being further evidenced by a slip of paper tucked the week before into the frame of her mirror and bearing the words, " Dev. Exercises L. A. M. S. Aug. 22" . . . Mrs. Pettibone had actually removed this paper, inscribed upon it words of far different purport, and given it to

Mr. Pettibone on the morning of that very day, as he stepped forth from the parsonage.

"THE BABY," said Mrs. Pettibone, "needs these things, at once."

And she appeared so very pink and excited, and her hair was rumpled into such careless curls, that the minister, after glancing at her in his usual professional way, looked a second time; then deliberately reëntered the house, closed the street door, and took her in his arms.

"Why—why, Silas!" murmured Mrs. Pettibone, in unaffected surprise.

"You looked so sweet," he excused himself; and kissed her twice.

This episode having been concluded to the satisfaction of both, he again went forth from the ministerial domicile and walked away very fast. He felt like whistling a secular tune, but refrained. It had not been Mr. Pettibone's custom to whistle tunes of any sort on the streets of Innisfield. Then he glanced at the memorandum his wife had given him.

"Dev. Exercises L. A. M. S. Aug. 22," he read. It puzzled him. Why should the baby require—But hold!—quite as she had meant him to do, he turned the paper over and perceived other words: "2 cakes, best Castile soap (white), 3 cards safety-pins, small, medium, and large. Two yds. fine white flannel, ¼ lb. lactose."

The minister had not slept as well as common the night before. There had been various noises of an unfamiliar nature and the ever recurrent vision of a small figure, panoplied in white, passing to and fro. But the sight of his wife's face across the breakfast-table had caused him to forget it all. He had not known she could look like that. The thought of it followed him, as he entered the Emporium of Elder George Trimmer, where safety-pins of assorted sizes could doubtless be found.

"Safety-pins?" said Brother Trimmer. "Um—yes, we have them."

He looked inquiringly across the counter at his pastor. He had heard of men whose wives were so negligent in the matter of buttons that they were compelled to make use of the invention which he now displayed in nickel-plated profusion upon his counter.

Mr. Pettibone painstakingly selected three cards, small, medium, and large, as per memorandum.

"And fine white flannel," he added. "You have fine white flannel, I suppose? and—er—Castile soap; the—er—best."

He glanced stealthily at the scrap of paper concealed in the palm of his hand.

"Er—white. The soap must be white."

"Well, well!" said Mr. Trimmer, with a slightly jocular air. "Hum—yes, yes!"

Mr. Trimmer was a family man, and proud of the fact.

"Only *two* yards of this flannel?" he inquired. "Only two? Now I should say you would require at least eight. Yes; eight wouldn't be any too lavish a pattern, I should say. Some ladies buy ten, or even twelve. A square yard of this flannel worked around the edge—yes, worked, scalloped, as ladies will—makes a tip-top infant's blanket."

"I think," said Mr. Pettibone, rubbing his chin dubiously, "that it already has a blanket; or, perhaps, two. I noticed Mrs. Pettibone——"

"Hum! Yes, yes!" murmured Mr. Trimmer, fussily. "Er—I may say I am surprised. I had no idea——"

"Nor had I, till yesterday," said his pastor. "It would never have occurred to me, I own; but my wife—— Yes; you may cut off two yards of that flannel. If more is required, Mrs. Pettibone will come in later. I think the child requires it to-day. As far as I know, its wardrobe is somewhat limited."

Mr. Trimmer's shears, which had shiningly snipped their way well into the blue-white flannel, came to a sudden halt.

"Limited!" he exclaimed, honestly aghast. "And you didn't know until yesterday?"

"In the course of our parochial rounds," said Mr. Pettibone, calmly, "we chanced yesterday

to meet—er—amid somewhat distressing circumstances—a young infant. My wife—er—Mrs. Pettibone is a very warm-hearted person, and, being touched by the infant's evident need of maternal care, she offered, indeed I may say insisted upon——"

"You adopted it? You took a child to—to bring up?"

"Precisely. We brought it with us to the parsonage last night. It is a boy, and appears——"

Mr. Trimmer shook his head.

"I'm sorry you didn't consult me," he said, "before taking such a step."

"Why?" propounded Mr. Pettibone. "Don't you think me capable of bringing up a son?"

Mr. Trimmer smacked his tongue smartly against the roof of his mouth.

"I wouldn't advise anybody to adopt a child," he said. "It's too great a r'sponsibility."

"It would have involved a graver responsibility to leave the child where it was," said Mr. Pettibone. "And why should I not assume a responsibility? I am, I believe, a responsible person."

Mr. Trimmer looked pityingly at him.

"Have you any idea what sort of man that infant will grow into?" he demanded.

"Well, no," replied the minister. "Can anyone predict what their children will grow into? Can you, for example?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Trimmer, "I can. If my

boys don't behave, I'll make 'em behave, and they know it. George Trimmer, Junior, will be a man like me. An' Henry's like his Ma."

"Well?" correlated the minister, tentatively.

"The breed's more'n the pastur'," quoted Mr. Trimmer, smartly. "Whose child is it? Where'd you git him? Tell me that, an' I'll tell you——"

"Impossible," said Mr. Pettibone. "We have decided to keep all that to ourselves. But let me remind you, Brother Trimmer, that an immortal soul has other attributes than those merely physical: all are children of God, and inherit eternal life—eternal possibilities of glory."

"In Adam's fall we sinned all," snapped Mr. Trimmer. "You can't get back of that."

He finished snipping off the flannel and banged his scissors smartly on the counter, as if they had been the shears of fate.

"I hope you won't be sorry ten years from now," he added, in a tone signifying the exact opposite of his words; "ner in twenty. I ain't got no use for other folks' children."

"In that respect," said his pastor, keenly, "you differ from Jesus of Nazareth."

With which trenchant saying he departed, leaving the two yards of blue-white flannel upon the counter.

Mr. Trimmer gazed at the small parcel with a singular expression on his rather dry and wizened countenance.

"In that respect I differ,—eh?" he muttered, thoughtfully. "Now what'd he mean b' that? Perhaps I did put it a little strong. . . . An' he fergot his flannel and the safety-pins. Mebbe I'd better send 'em up t' the house. She might want 'em f'r th' baby. . . . Here you, George, g' up t' the pars'nage with this bundle. They're in a hurry f'r it."

Mr. Trimmer walked to his desk in the rear of the store and opened his day-book, with the intent of entering the items the minister had forgotten to pay for.

"Adopted," he repeated. "Adopted! It'll cost 'em a good bit to bring up a boy. H'm! So it will. . . . Guess I won't charge it."

He laid down his pen with a pleasant glow about his heart.

That same afternoon when Mrs. Pettibone had fed the baby, she sat gazing at him with loving intentness. She supposed she ought to put him down in the little bed she had improvised out of two chairs and a pillow, but she excused herself on the ground that she had not yet had a chance to take a good look at the child. He had cried a good deal in the night and refused the bottle she had so urgently pressed into the small, widely opened mouth. In the morning she sent for Doctor North, and he had come at once in response to her summons.

"Well, Miss Philura, what's the matter with

you?" he began, as he hurriedly wriggled out of his raincoat. "Or is it the dominie? Don't know when I've been in this house before."

Mrs. Pettibone had always stood very much in awe of the excellent doctor. His large presence and loud authoritative voice affected many women that way. But all of them trusted him.

"You told me—advised me to adopt a baby," she said, trembling visibly. "And I—he's here, and I don't know what to feed him, or—or anything."

Doctor North stared at Mrs. Pettibone, his grizzled eyebrows drawn over his bright eyes in an intimidating frown.

"I told you—I advised you?" he blurted out. "When did I say anything like that—to you? I have no recollection——"

"A long time ago," she reminded him. "You were just coming out of Mrs. Salter's. She'd been having a spell; don't you remember?"

"Bless my soul! if I should tax my memory with everything I'd said coming out of Mrs. Salter's—— But you say you've actually got a baby on the premises? And I didn't even know it? I'll have to look into this. I will, indeed. Can't have that sort of thing going on."

And he rubbed his big hands together and laughed his big laugh as he followed the small fluttering person of Mrs. Pettibone into the sitting-room, where two chairs and a pillow were

placed in close juxtaposition to the stove, in which a fire was burning.

" I thought I ought to keep him warm," she murmured, as the doctor flung up a window, with a muttered exclamation.

" Yes, but not cook him, Miss Philura. Now, let's look into this."

He pulled away the flannel from the small, pink face.

" Why, bless my soul! " he exploded. " This child can't be much more than a week old. Where on earth—where's the mother? "

" He's ten days this morning," said Mrs. Pettibone, proudly. " I'm his mother."

The doctor stared at her frowningly.

" You! " his eyes said, only too plainly, " of all persons! "

She clasped her hands appealingly.

" Oh, don't you think I can? " she murmured. " I've wanted one so long, and I—I love him so! I'll do everything you tell me. I'll——"

" I guess you'll have to, seeing you've got him, by hook or crook. A boy—eh? Harder to raise than a girl. It's well to begin on a girl. Well, we'll see—we'll see! "

And he had seen, thoroughly and in detail, when he finally left the parsonage, after a visit of unparalleled length. Mrs. Pettibone felt that she had never appreciated sufficiently the vast and profound knowledge locked up in Mrs. Puffer's

matronly breast. No wonder mothers had that patronising air she had formerly resented. They had a right to be haughty and superior. They had a right, too, to pity ignorant persons who knew nothing of babies.

Mrs. Pettibone pensively regarded the baby's bottle, in which remained a small portion of properly modified milk. She had come a long way since yesterday, and learned many things of which she had no previous knowledge. And the doctor had said he would come again. He would come often; and she was not to worry about the charge, because an adopted baby was different. Everybody had to take hold with an adopted baby. It was no more than right.

The door-bell rang. It was Mrs. Buckthorn, and she had come directly from the forgotten meeting of the Ladies' Aid and Missionary Society.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LADIES AID

" My *dear* Philura," Mrs. Buckthorn began at once, " I was *never* more surprised in *all* the course of my life! "

Her large face wore a chastened expression of grief, and she steppd softly as she entered the hall.

" I suppose I may see it," she murmured, in precisely the same tone she would have used in a house of mourning.

" Yes," responded Mrs. Pettibone, also in hushed accents, " he is asleep, now."

" Dear, dear! ' sighed Mrs. Buckthorn, as she stooped over the unconscious infant. " My, my! "

And she clicked her tongue rapidly against the roof of her mouth, as the proper preliminary for a repetition of her initial remark, varied only by a change of emphasis.

" My dear *Philura,* I was never more *surprised* in all the course of my *life.*"

" Isn't he *dear?* " propounded Mrs. Pettibone, boldly. She added with noticeable pride, almost arrogance: " Doctor North says he is an unusually fine child. He weighs nine pounds. And of course he'll gain, on proper food."

Mrs. Buckthorn clicked rapidly, as if words were inadequate to express her emotions. Then she shook her head.

"You shouldn't have done it, Philura," she said, solemnly.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Pettibone.

But it was evident that she did not ask for information. Her question, on the contrary, expressed unqualified defiance. And so, indeed, Mrs. Buckthorn interpreted its meaning.

"You should have consulted *me*, before taking such a se-rious step," she said. "You don't know what it is to bring up a ba-by."

Mrs. Pettibone, fortified by her recent conference with Doctor North, elevated her chin slightly.

"Nobody does, till they try," she said. "I suppose I can learn, just as—as you did."

Mrs. Buckthorn transfixed her with an awful look.

"*Moth-er-hood,*" she stated, sonorously, "prepares a woman for the *ard-u-ous* duties which await her. You have had no such preparation, Philura; therefore——"

"What about trained nurses? They're not even married, and they learn."

Mrs. Pettibone's tone, and indeed her manner, was almost flippant. She added: "Doctor North says I shall get along splendidly. He says——"

"What are you feeding the ba-by?" interrupted Mrs. Buckthorn, gazing suspiciously at

the child's sleeping face over the top of her spectacles.

"Modified milk," replied Mrs. Pettibone, glibly. "Top milk, boiled water, and—lactose, in proper——"

"Oh, my!" broke in the older matron. "That will *never* do! I don't b'lieve in these new-fangled——"

"But Doctor North says——"

"I have no confidence in doctors, when it comes to ba-bies."

"But——"

"What should a big, rough *man* know about a tender, delicate infant?" demanded Mrs. Buckthorn, excitedly. "What you want t' feed that ba-by is——"

The door-bell rang.

It was Mrs. Puffer, and she carried an amateurish-looking parcel done up in newspaper and tied with a strip of red and white checked gingham.

"I just ran in for a minute to bring these little slips," she said, breathlessly, "and to see the baby. . . . Oh! *isn't* he—— It is a boy? I thought so, the minute I looked at him. What are you feeding him? . . . Oh, yes; I think that's good—only I add barley water, instead of plain water, and if his p'ecious 'ittle tummey gets upset, leave off the milk entirely. . . . How can you tell? Oh, by——"

The door-bell rang.

It was Miss Electa Pratt. She came in, her befrizzled head very much on one side, her angular chin seeking to hide itself coyly amid the ruffles at her throat.

"I feel so *funny!*" she giggled. "I don't know *what* t' say. Philura with a baby! Dear, *dear!* I couldn't have been *more* surprised, if you'd really—don't you know? . . . Isn't he *tiny?* How do you *dare* to touch him? *I* shouldn't, I know. . . . And *what* does Mr. Pettibone say? . . . He isn't in? Oh, that's *too* bad! I wanted t' ask him— And, oh, Philura, if you haven't got a crib for the baby, Ma says there's one in our attic you can have just as well as——"

The door-bell rang.

It was Mrs. Salter, carrying a small square box, of an ancient and fly-specked appearance.

"Well, seem 's 'o' our sewing-society——" she murmured. "I just ran over to bring you a sample of Dr. Pillwick's Patent Purified Baby Food. An agent left it at the store last winter. Obed doesn't carry it in stock; but he says he can get it for you, if it agrees with the baby. . . . Oh, *there* it is! *What* a care! I wonder you dare attempt it. As I was saying t' Obed, if the Lord had seen fit——"

The door-bell rang.

Mrs. Bartlett, like a shadow of woe in her somber garments, glided in. She was a pretty woman

with eyes perpetually reddened by weeping. Everybody in Innisfield knew that she had lost four children one after the other; and the four little mounds in the cemetery never lacked fresh blossoms, summer or winter.

She kissed Mrs. Pettibone silently; then moved toward the two chairs and the pillow on which reposed the sleeping infant, oblivious to the storm of excitement his small presence in the parsonage had evoked. She gazed at the child long and earnestly.

"He looks," she murmured, in the ear of her pastor's wife, "like my little Jamie."

The other women in the room were silent; even Mrs. Buckthorn blew her nose, loudly and sympathetically. Mrs. Pettibone squeezed the bereaved mother's hand. She knew now (she was telling herself) how poor Mrs. Bartlett felt. Before she had not been able to guess.

"I—I've brought over a few things," murmured the lady in black. "I'd like you to have them for this dear little baby."

Mrs. Pettibone murmured her thanks.

"The expressman will leave a wicker crib and a perambulator—I suppose you haven't had time—— No; I don't care to keep them any longer. My—babies don't need them. And this dear little soul—how strong and well he looks!"

The door-bell rang.

Mrs. Trimmer and Mrs. Bassett arrived together. Both ladies carried parcels.

"So this is what became of our Ladies' Aid!" crowed Mrs. Bassett, all smiles. "You'd ought t' have seen Mis' Deaconess Scrimger an' me with the cups and a pot of b'ilin' tea an' the cake an' all—— Oh, here's the baby! You certainly did give us the s'prise of our young lives, Mis' Pettibone. No wonder you fergot th' d'votional exercises. Most anybody would."

Mrs. Trimmer had already pressed her parcel upon Mrs. Pettibone's acceptance.

"A few binders," she murmured, "just tore off of silk an' wool flannel. Some folks cat-stitch 'em; but I never did. Their little stomachs are too tender—— Oh! *is-n't* he—— Where did he come from? You'll tell *us,* I know."

Seven pairs of earnest, determined eyes fastened upon Mrs. Pettibone's flushed and conscious face.

"I was just going to ask Philura that *ver-ry* same question," intoned Mrs. Buckthorn.

"Is he an orphan?" twittered Mrs. Puffer, patting the blankets anxiously.

"I s'pose he come from somewheres around here?" inferred Miss Pratt, astutely. "I heard you brought him in the buggy."

"We—we've decided not—to tell."

A slight murmur of surprise arose from seven protesting mouths.

" Don't be has-ty, Philura," warned Mrs. Buckthorn. " A secret about a ba-by is bound to come out."

" Mr. Pettibone and I both think that, on account of the parents——"

" O-o-oh! "

" They are married," stated Mrs. Pettibone, doggedly. " But we don't—we don't even know their name—that is, I do know their first names; and I've named the baby——"

" You've named the baby, already? " cried Mrs. Puffer, in obvious disappointment. " I was just going t' suggest——"

" An' I suppose, of course, Mr. Pettibone—being the adopted father——"

" His name," said Mrs. Pettibone, positively, " is Stephen."

When, just before tea-time, the minister returned from a round of parish visiting, he found his wife alone with her new treasure in a room abounding in new and unfamiliar objects.

" Why—why, what has happeed? " he inquired, gazing short-sightedly at several elaborate creations of wicker-work, a number of patent nursing bottles, a bath-tub, and a profusion of small garments spread out on the chairs and tables.

" Oh, Silas! " cried his wife, " everybody is *so* interested. You can't think."

The door-bell rang.

It was Miss Malvina Bennett. She wore her

sewing-by-the-day dress, and carried a large roll of fashion-books under her arm.

"Uh-huh!" murmured Miss Malvina, after she had inspected the baby, who was at the moment engaged in absorbing his allotted portion of top-milk. "So *that's* the way it turned out. Well, well!"

She nodded her head understandingly.

"I ain't a-goin' t' ask you where it come f'om; but I c'd make a pretty good guess, ef I was t' try."

"We're not going to tell anyone, Malvina."

Miss Bennett cackled dryly.

"I met 'em a-comin' away," she said. "Land! they was a-canvassin' the subjec'! Electa Pratt, she's a sharp one. 'They brought it home in the buggy,' she sez, pos'tive, so it must 'a' come f'om round here. I didn't let on. But I sez t' myself, 'nless them folks hes gone, I sez,—'n', even then, there's Milly Orne knows all about it."

"Milly won't tell," murmured Mrs. Pettibone. "It's just on account of——"

Miss Malvina nodded.

"Jus' 's well t' keep it clost, ef you kin," she agreed. "But what's become o' *her?* Don't she want the baby?"

"She thinks—she believes it died. She went away, believing——"

Miss Bennett gave vent to a snort of disgust.

"Ef that ain't like that stuck-up old woman!

She'd 'a' drove the girl t' her death b' drowndin', ef it hadn't b'en fer me. I told her pint blank 'bout th' Encirclin' Good,—not 'at I knowed much 'bout it, m'self—but it seemed t' take a holt on that poor, young creetur'. It did, fer a fact."

She approached her kind, wrinkled face close to Mrs. Pettibone's.

"I mailed a letter f'r her," she whispered. "I kind o' thought——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pettibone, "he must have received it."

"D' you mean——?"

"He took her away."

"Well! I want t' know!"

Miss Bennett poked the small flannel bundle in Mrs. Pettibone's lap, with an experimental forefinger.

"I'd admire t' make some clo'es fer it," she said. "I c'd do 'em evenin's. It's child's play t' sew them little things; 'n' I'd love to, I d'clare I would! 'Twould be a change f'om grown-up sewin'."

Her faded eyes met those of her pastor's wife with an imploring look.

"You—you wouldn't mind, Philura?"

"Of course I wouldn't," Mrs. Pettibone returned, promptly. "I can't sew nearly as beautifully as you do."

Her thin arms closed jealously about the tiny form.

"I—I'm not going to be—selfish with him," she breathed. "You can come in and—hold him, whenever you want to, Malvina; and—and you can pretend he's part yours."

"Can I?" cried Miss Bennett, joyously. "Say! I'll be his Aunt Malvina; that's what I'll be. It's kind o' suitable, too, when you think of it—me a-makin' her a dress, an' mailin' a letter t' his pa, 'n' keepin' her out o' the pond, 'n' like that. Don't you think so?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MISS PHILURA'S BABY

When the Reverend Silas Pettibone had yielded to his wife's determined wish in the matter of the baby, he had been very far indeed from realising the full significance of his act. He would have been ashamed to put his thoughts into words—would, very likely, have denied that they existed; but his hospitality had appeared, in the light of his imperfect masculine understanding, to be not unlike that extended to a homeless little animal. Some people, he knew, strenuously objected to sheltering a forlorn, half-starved kitten, driving it from their doors with harsh cries of scorn and contumely. As for a dog, strayed or stolen, they resolutely turned their backs on his pleading eyes and the voiceless eloquence of his persuasive tail. Silas Pettibone was not that sort of a man. Solidarity was not merely a word to him, he felt to his innermost fibre the mysterious oneness of life. So this little unwelcome, unloved scrap of humanity should find shelter under his roof, permanent or temporary as the case might be.

But it was precisely this latter aspect of their quasi-parenthood which continually harassed his wife.

" If they should come to take him away," she was always saying, her eyes shadowed with fear.

" We should certainly have to give him up," was the minister's unbiased opinion. " We have, you know, no legal right to the child."

" But—she gave him to me," argued his wife.

Mr. Pettibone shook his head.

" I was present," he would remind her. " You walked calmly away with the child in your arms; she merely allowed you to take him."

" She didn't want him."

" That is true, but——"

It was this " but," rooted in unknown conditions, which haunted Mrs. Pettibone, and would not down.

The day after she had triumphantly carried her point with Mrs. Hill, Milly Orne appeared at the parsonage. She was the bearer of a parcel of baby clothes and an envelope which was found to contain bank-notes amounting to a hundred dollars.

In response to Mrs. Pettibone's eager questions, Milly said she had left Mrs. Hill the night before. The parcel had been delivered at the Ornes' by the expressman, who had been employed to fetch a wagon-load of trunks from the old Eggleston house to the railway station. Milly supposed the woman had left Innisfield. Grandfather had seen her driving past in a carriage.

Her blue eyes persistently avoided Mrs. Pettibone's.

"What became of the young man?" asked the minister's wife.

A resentful blush sprang into the girl's averted face and mounted swiftly to the roots of her bright hair.

"How should I know?" she murmured.

"Oh!"

The exclamation was involuntary; but Mrs. Pettibone instantly regretted that she had allowed it to escape her lips.

Milly Orne was looking at her defiantly.

"I hope," she said, coldly, "I shall never see any of them again."

Then, unexpectedly, she was compelled to deal with several large tears which forced themselves into view on her lashes.

"I'm sure you'll think—I know—I'm very foolish," stammered Milly, whisking the tears away with a touch of anger. "But I—I wish I hadn't gone there, at all."

Mrs. Pettibone forebore questions; but she could not help remembering with an uncomfortable sense of guilt that it was at her suggestion Milly had gone to the Eggleston farm.

"Anyway, you have earned the new roof," she reminded the girl, after an awkward silence during which Milly dried her eyes and successfully subdued her emotion. "And—and the cow.

That is surely something to be thankful for."

The girl smiled forlornly.

"I did what I started out to do," she assented, staring out of the window.

Presently she added:

"You will keep the baby?"

"I certainly shall," said Mrs. Pettibone. "Unless——"

It has been pointed out to us that the obvious uncertainty of everything in this our earthly experience magnifies our joys, and puts, as it were, a cutting edge upon our powers of appreciation.

If one could be absolutely assured, argue these wise philosophers, that one's friends would never die, one's house never burn down, one's investments never fail, life would become of a sudden utterly flat, stale, and unprofitable. It is the keen sparkle of the unexpected, the undreamed of, even the apprehended, which makes the draught in any wise palatable.

Philura Pettibone watched the gradual unfolding of her rose of life with a tremor back of the joy. But it was no less a joy, for all that, and after months of peaceful and undisputed possession of the child she almost forgot the tragic face of his young mother.—Almost, but not quite; there was the picture of the Huguenot Lovers still hanging on the parlor wall.

She had named the baby Stephen after his unknown father, in a sudden passion of sentiment.

Afterward she regretted her haste. There were so many splendid names for men, and Stephen did so put one in mind of the first martyr. She preferred not to think of martyrs when she looked at the baby. And he *was* a baby, as Bishop Brooks used to say to the delighted mothers of his congregation. Not even the latest Puffer could show such sparkling blue eyes.—She was glad his eyes were blue, and not big and dark and passionate, like his poor mother's. And his hair curled—really curled, you know, not merely stood on end under diligent applications of a wet hair-brush. He was pink—as pink as a healthy baby ought to be, and of exactly the right fatness. In a word, little Stephen Pettibone (as he was actually christened by the minister in church, of a Sunday morning) was a baby any woman might be proud to mother.

It was wonderful, too, what an all-round difference the baby in the parsonage made. Female parishioners of a critical, even censorious turn of mind, who had heretofore merely scarified the minister's sermons, now stopped him in the street to ask after the baby. The fame of the baby went abroad, as it were, in all the land. Hard-fisted old farmers, driving loads of produce to town, broke into broad smiles at sight of Mrs. Pettibone wheeling the perambulator. People came to call at the parsonage who had never before darkened the door of the ministerial domicile.

The baby, in short, was like a cheerful little fire, newly kindled on a cold hearth; people stretched their hands toward him with smiles, tardily realising how cold and frost-bitten they had been. And the baby, basking in the universal approbation, thrived and grew like a lusty little tree in the sunshine.

"Every single day," Mrs. Pettibone confided to the minister, "he is sweeter and lovelier than he was yesterday."

The minister formed the habit of sauntering about till after the baby had had his bath. He found, to his surprise, that he could write better and more easily than ever before; his association with the baby appeared to have opened up entirely new regions of Biblical truth. It was surprising how many trenchant sayings relating to children there were in the Bible. Mr. Pettibone had not noticed them before, being occupied with such themes as total depravity, the state of the unsaved soul after death, and kindred subjects suited to the joyless adult idea of Christianity.

Love had already done much for the Reverend Silas Pettibone; but there had remained an unsunned side of his nature of which he himself was only dimly conscious, so the moon may be cognisant of the cold sterility of its darkened hemisphere.

Mrs. Pettibone had loyally believed her husband to be quite perfect as he was; but she was not

blind to the change in him. She spent hours in secret, teaching the baby to say a single word. Then one morning, wonderful to relate, her pupil —prefacing his initial effort at speech with a ravishing smile—said "Poppa!"

It was a proud moment for both of them; and it was on that very morning that, for the first time, Mr. Pettibone put into words his own secret misgivings.

"If we'd never had him," he observed, thoughtfully, "we shouldn't have known what we were missing."

"I should have known," said Mrs. Pettibone, with a wise smile.

She could say it now, without painful blushes.

He looked at her intently, observing with secret wonder the changes wrought by her quasi-motherhood. She had certainly grown plumper; her eyes and cheeks and lips had taken on a look of youth; the lines of her arms and shoulders had changed subtly—as arms and shoulders will under a burden daily growing heavier, yet always more beloved.

"But if they should come now, to take him," he went on, "I'm afraid——"

Mrs. Pettibone was putting on the baby's cloak preparatory to taking him out for an airing. She successfully extracted one pink fist from the sleeve she had first made into a nest; then proceeded to rumple up the other in a way Mrs. Puffer had taught her.

"Why do you say that," she asked, reproachfully, "just as I was beginning to forget about it?"

She kissed the baby passionately in the nape of his neck, where fuzzy yellow curls were beginning to take advantage of his improved habits in the way of sitting up.

"Do you know he's nine months old, Silas? He'll soon be a year; and we haven't heard a word from any of them. . . . Never mind, Precious, he didn't like to have his bonnet tied; 'deed he didn't; but now he's going day-day. . . . There!"

She achieved a smart bow under the protesting chin.

"Take him a minute, dear, while I put on my hat and wheel the carriage out. He's sleepy; he'll be sound the minute I take him out."

She was tucking the baby snugly into his perambulator—for, though it was April and the big maples were already brave with scarlet blossoms, the wind still flourished a keen edge which put one in mind of blue-white snows and unmelted ice to the northward. Mrs. Wessels, her head draped in a plaid tea-towel, stood looking on. That worthy woman was armed with a broom and dust-pan, and her face was drawn into myriad puckers and folds of deliberate thought.

"My, my!" she exclaimed. "Who'd 'a'

thought one short year ago I'd be a-standin' here on th' pars'nage stoop a-watchin' Mis' Pettibone all took up with a baby! 'S I was sayin' t' Wessels only yest'd'y, ' She couldn't be no more took up,' I sez, ' ef it was her own child.' 'N' Wessels, he sez—it's wonderful how he thinks things out, a-settin' there b' th' stove—' She mightn't be took up half s' much,' he sez, pos'tive, ' ef 't *was* her baby.' 'N' I guess that's so, come t' think of it. . . . You'd feel easier, 'n' more indiffer'nt like in your mind, ef——"

" I don't see why you should think so," interrupted Mrs. Pettibone, grasping the handle of the perambulator firmly.

She appeared slightly defiant, as if Mrs. Wessels had unwittingly touched upon a subject already uppermost in her mind.

" The baby is mine," she added, positively, "—just as much mine as if——"

" But you ain't 'dopted it legal, have you? " inquired Mrs. Wessels, more for the sake of sustaining her pose of easeful contemplation than for any information she hoped to elicit.

" When you sweep the parlour to-day, Mrs. Wessels, I'd like you to wipe off the windows," said Mrs. Pettibone, pointedly ignoring the question. She added that the windows in question were very dusty.

" Yes, I know they be," agreed Mrs. Wessels, with a mournful sigh; " I noticed they looked

somethin' terrible 's I come along this mornin'; 'n' I sez t' m'self, 'Louisa Wessels,' I sez, 'if you have th' time an' stren'th t'-day you mus' git 'round t' wash off them winders f'r Mis' Pettibone. They're a disgrace t' th' pars'nage,' I sez, 'all streaked an' gormed up.' . . . But I dunno; I got an awful gone feelin' t' th' pit o' my stomick t'-day. I sez t' Wessels this mornin', ef 'twas anybody but Mis' Pettibone I was goin' to work for, I b'lieve I'd stay t' home an' take care o' m'self.' But I knowed you wa'n't one t' take advantage o' nobody; so I come, an' I'll do m' best. Ef I c'n git 'round t' them winders, I will; ef I can't, jus' you take a little kur'seen on a rag 'n' do 'em yourself. 'Twon't take you no time. But I wouldn't leave 'em that-a-way 'nother week, ef I was you. Looks reel slack. . . . Where'd you say I'd find the tea? Guess I'll make me a cup b'fore I do another lick o' work—ef you don't want I sh'd drop right down in m' tracks. . . . 'N' when I think o' Wessels an' all them childern a-hangin' t' m' skirts, an' me a-doin' day's work fer th' vittles they put in their mouths, it doos seem like I'd ought t' take care o' m'self; now, don't it? "

Mrs. Pettibone had moved slowly toward the gate during this exordium, pushing the perambulator before her. She was embarked upon the smooth expanse of sidewalk beyond, when she again heard the pursuing voice of Mrs. Wessels,

and glancing back beheld that lady leaning reposefully upon the fence, the checkered towel about her head fluttering gaily in the wind.

" 'N', oh, say! Mis Pettibone! " she called out, " goin' t' th' meat-market? . . . I thought mebbe you was. I didn't see nothin' but scraps o' bacon in the ice-chest. I jus' wanted t' tell you, ef you was plannin' f'r my dinner, let it be pork-chops. The' ain't nothin' more tasty ner stren'thnin'. . . . What, 'm'? You don't think so? 'N' you say th' minister don't like 'em t' work on? W'y, land! th' ain't any vittles I know of 'at stan's by you like fresh pork. . . . 'N', ef it ain't too much trouble—seein' you got th' baby kerridge 'n' c'n bring it jus' 's well 's not—fetch me ten cents' worth o' cat-meat. . . . Yes'm, cat-meat 's what I said. It makes lovely soup. You didn't know it? . . . Bein' the minister's wife you'll likely git a good bag full. You don't need t' let on it's fer me. Tell Kelly your cat eats reel hearty. He doos, f'r I seen him at th' baby's milk yest'd'y. . . . Oh, didn't you know? I tipped it over gettin' some f'r m' tea. Th' cat licked it up. Yes'm, saved me th' trouble o' gettin' down on m' han's 'n' knees. A cat's useful that-a-way. . . . I'm goin' in now. . . . If th' door-bell rings d' you want I should call th' minister? . . . Ef it's a pedlar, I won't? No'm. But 's I tell Wessels——"

Mrs. Pettibone had already passed out of hearing, trundling the carriage with its hood snugly drawn against the assaults of the wind. She stopped at the post-office, and the postmaster handed her two religious papers, an advertisement of a church organ, and a letter, directed in a firm, masculine hand to Mr. Pettibone. She tucked the mail under the baby's blanket for safe-keeping and proceeded on her way.

Miss Electa Pratt, arrayed bleakly in a new spring suit of black and white check and a hat bristling with ribbon bows and impossible flowers, was just issuing from the portals of the Trimmer Emporium.

"Good morning, Philura," she said. "And *how* is the baby?—Dear me, I can't get used to seein' you out with it. I sh'd think you'd feel kind o' queer."

"Queer?" echoed Mrs. Pettibone.

She took advantage of the pause in her progress to peep under the hood. The baby was sleeping soundly, his long dark lashes resting lightly on the warm rose of his cheek. Miss Pratt peeped, too.

"Isn't he an awful care?" she asked. "I notice you don't get time for Ladies' Aid any more, and you're hardly ever at church."

"Once in a while Milly Orne takes care of him for me," Mrs. Pettibone said. "I wouldn't trust him with anyone else."

Miss Pratt's greenish eyes glittered unpleasantly.

"Well, I've found out where you got him," she said. "You might 's well 've told in the first place."

"You've found out?" echoed Mrs. Pettibone. Instinctively she braced herself for what might be coming.

Miss Pratt giggled.

"'Tain't so hard t' see through a mill-stone with a hole in it, once you take notice of the hole," she remarked, acidly. "He's the child of that young woman who was up to the Eggleston farm last summer. She ran away and left it, an' the other woman gave it to you."

There was feline enjoyment in the eyes she fixed upon Philura Pettibone's agitated face.

"That don't surprise you none, of course; but mebbe this will: Their name wasn't Hill, at all; but Cruden. The day Al Fisher took the trunks down from the farm I happened t' be at the station inquiring for a package; so I took a good look at 'em. They was all marked C. and one of 'em had a card tacked on to it 'at had b'en scratched off with a pencil. 'S luck would have it, I had an eraser in my bag, so I rubbed it off an' copied down what I see. It was——"

"Electa!" exclaimed Mrs. Pettibone, weakly.

"Oh, you don't think it was reel nice f'r me to find out somethin' about your baby? Well, I

thought it was my Chr-r-istian duty. You want I should tell you what I see on that card?"

Mrs. Pettibone drew a tremulous breath.

"I don't—know," she murmured. "I——"

"I guess you do," said Miss Pratt. "Anyway, I was comin' t' tell th' minister this mornin'—I jus' got th' letter."

The flowers in the new spring hat rustled like dried cat-tails in the cold wind.

"I don't believe I—— Please don't, Electa."

"I'd listen, ef I was you," advised Miss Pratt, strongly. "You'll have t' know, first er last. The name on that card was Mrs. Alexander Cruden, Chilworth Gardens, Ch'cago. . . . They came far enough away from home, anybody 'd s'pose. But as it happens, Ma has a cousin livin' out in Ch'cago, so I wrote t' her an' asked a few questions. She didn't answer for a long while, an' I'd about give up; but, yeste'd'y——"

"The baby," said Mrs. Pettibone, in a small, weak voice, "is waking up. I—I must be going home."

"I'll walk right along with you, Philura," volunteered Miss Pratt, amiably. "I'd like t' show Mr. Pettibone the letter I got from my cousin, Matilda Slicer—she's an own cousin o' Ma's on the Smith side. . . . You don't want I should? Well, I mus' say you're *grateful!* But you can't prevent me from tellin' Mr. Pettibone, even if you did manage t' marry him, with your *wonderful*

new thought. Oh, I know how you worked it, Philura; and th's others——"

But Philura Pettibone had fled hastily down a side street, and Miss Pratt forbore to follow. She was anxious to stop at her friend, Mrs. Buckthorn's, who would, she was confident, appreciate to the full the news of which she was at present sole proprietor and purveyor. . . .

Mr. Pettibone, as was his invariable custom, permitted his morning mail to lie unopened on the hall-table; this method of procedure tending to a more complete concentration of mind on topics of an other worldly nature. There was not infrequently food for disturbing thought in the parti-coloured envelopes, bearing tradesmen's names in the upper left-hand corner. It was true that his church, after strenuous and concerted effort, had at the time of his marriage paid all arrears of his salary in full. But since that date the brethren had lapsed into an easeful complacence, in view of the well-known frugality of the second Mrs. Pettibone. Everybody in Innisfield knew that Philura Rice had been as poor as the proverbial church mouse. Ergo: she was well accustomed to strenuous economy; and it would be a pity, indeed, to encourage the sinful extravagance which would undoubtedly obtain in the ministerial domicile under the urge of temptation in the subtle guise of a promptly paid salary. The minister's digestion being slightly impaired, the

letters were frequently allowed a still longer period of neglect, while he played with the baby. The baby, newly awakened from his nap, was in capital form for a frolic, and Mr. Pettibone had acquired the useful and pleasant habit of devoting himself to the small, bright-eyed tyrant, while his wife washed the dinner dishes.

Mrs. Pettibone had not yet spoken to her husband of Electa Pratt's officious detective work. He would be indignant, she was sure; and, after all, Electa had discovered nothing of any real importance. She recollected, as she polished the glasses, that the young woman had said her name was Sylvia Cruden, on the occasion of their first meeting in the Eggleston woods. Of course, Electa's discoveries would soon become common property, with such ingenious addenda as Miss Slicer, the Western cousin, chose to write and Electa to invent. It was all very disagreeable; but it could not affect her secure possession of the baby.

She could hear his chuckles of infantile glee and the forensic voice of Mr. Pettibone, as he recited Mother Goose rhymes for the baby's delectation. She smiled happily to herself. Electa Pratt might talk all she liked; so might Mrs. Buckthorn; so might the parish at large. She hoped they would enjoy it.

Mrs. Wessels had finished the sweeping, in her own peculiar way—a way Philura Pettibone would

not have " put up with " a few short months ago. But when one had a baby to care for, other things must stand aside. Mrs. Wessels had not, it was plain, sufficient strength to wash the windows in the parlour. It was early—only half-past one, indeed—when Mrs. Pettibone set the last clean dish upon the shelf. She decided that she would wash the windows herself. The baby would be good; he was always good; she would arrange his toys on a thick comfort on the parlour floor and circumscribe his activities with the indispensable " Yard." She would then be free to remove the indubitable traces of small moist fingers from the window-panes. Mrs. Wessels had referred to them as a disgrace to the parsonage. Mrs. Pettibone reflected that she would have unqualifiedly agreed with Mrs. Wessels at an earlier stage of her career. She recalled her unspoken, but no less harsh, criticisms of Mrs. Puffer's window-glass. Now, she thought she rather liked it. It looked as if there were children in the house. She said it plainly in the privacy of her own thoughts, and the words brought a delicate kindling of hope to cheeks and eyes.

She was still looking very pink and pretty when she authoritatively interrupted the frolic in the study. The baby, she explained, must have his dinner at once; and she hoped Mr. Pettibone had not forgotten the meeting of the C. E. Convention Committee in the prayer-meeting room, at

three. In reply to a half-hearted inquiry, she stated that in her opinion his second-best preaching suit would be plenty good enough for the occasion.

It was at this moment that Mr. Pettibone's divided attention became centred upon his mail, which Mrs. Pettibone kindly deposited upon his writing-table; then she held out her arms for the baby. There was a moment of delicious triumph for the minister, when the small despot turned from the cajoling smile of the lady to hide his curly head against his breast.

"He likes me!" cried Mr. Pettibone, with fervid conviction, tempered only by an amazed incredulity.

"Of course he does!" chimed in Mrs. Pettibone, as she captured the baby and bore him away in triumph.

"He loves his daddy, b'ess him!" he heard her cooing on the other side of the door. . . .

The religious newspapers received a passing glance, promising an hour of future enjoyment; the alluring advertisement of church organs, a renunciatory sigh as it found lodgment in an overcrowded waste-basket; but upon the letter, addressed to himself in an unknown hand and postmarked with the name of a distant city, he spent a motionless, abstracted half hour.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LORD GAVE

It lacked a quarter of three by the gloomy, black marble clock (presented by an admiring parish, on the occasion of his first marriage) when Mr. Pettibone, his hair very much rumpled and a worried, almost distracted expression on his kind, grave face, stepped across to the parlour.

"My dear Philura——" he began; then stopped to rumple his hair afresh with a distraught gesture.

"Why, Silas!" she cried, turning from a comprehensive polishing of the lower left-hand pane of the front window—which being of a cheap, greenish glass but ill rewarded her labours. "You are not even dressed; and that meeting——"

She paused to remove the handle of the baby's rattle-box from a too close proximity to his windpipe.

"That's the third time!" she announced; "he seems possessed to ram that celluloid thing down his blessed little throat."

She surveyed the article in question with severely critical eyes.

"I should think anybody would know better

than to make a toy like that for a baby,'' she said. '' I sha'n't let him have it any more, Silas,—if Mrs. Buckthorn did give it to him. She says all her children cut their teeth on it. But I don't care if they did. That doesn't make it any better.''

Mr. Pettibone glanced distractedly about the room.

'' I—er—don't you think, my dear, you'd better leave the—er—windows in this room till another day? '' he inquired, rather wildly. '' I—I—it seems to me——''

'' Silas, you'll certainly be late at that committee meeting,'' declared Mrs. Pettibone, looking up from a rapturous cuddle of the baby. . . . '' Isn't he the sweetest thing? '' she added, irrelevantly.

'' Lord—Lord! '' groaned Mr. Pettibone.

He dropped into a chair, as if spent with emotion.

'' What is the matter, Silas? '' demanded Mrs. Pettibone, tardily aware of his perturbation.

She gazed searchingly at him.

'' Is it your stomach? I knew I ought not to have those pork-chops for dinner. . . . Tell me, Silas? ''

'' I—I can't,'' muttered the minister. '' I might have known—It's my fault. . . . If I'd only——''

She was standing in the middle of the floor, the baby pressed against her breast.

" I know," she said, quietly. " You—you've heard something——"

Her steadfast eyes wavered for an instant as her lips sought the crown of the curly little head.

" Tell me," she begged.

He drew a deep breath.

" They—er—just found out," he began, avoiding her eyes. " The letter was from——"

" Yes? " she breathed. " And—they are coming——? "

" To-day," he said. " You must—They may be here at any moment."

" They sha'n't have him, Silas! " she cried, in a breaking voice. " I—I can't give him up—I can't! I love him so! "

" My dear," he said, gravely. " My dear! "

Their eyes met in a long look. . . .

She held out the child to him with a renunciatory gesture.

" Take him, please. I must put this room to rights before——"

It was all over before the black marble clock on the mantle told the hour of four. Like other dreaded crises in life, it arrived quietly enough —this time in the shabby guise of a depot hack drawn up before the parsonage gate. Mrs. Pettibone stood in the window, the child in her arms, and watched the two young figures emerge from

its stuffy interior and hurry up the walk. The girl had been crying, she noticed; she was dressed somberly in black. The man at her side bent his tall head, as if to encourage her with murmured words, as they paused for an instant in the sparse shadow of a budding lilac. The girl looked up at him, a lovely smile breaking over her face. Then the bell jangled noisily.

As had been agreed upon beforehand, Mr. Pettibone opened the door. She heard a brief question, a briefer answer; then the parlour door closed quietly. . . .

It seemed a long time that she stood there gazing out of the window, the child held close against her breast. . . . The baby whimpered a little and twisted his rosy face toward hers. " He wants to go out in his carriage," she thought, with an uncontrollable throb of pain. . . . Then at last the door opened, and the minister, very pale and grave, stood gazing at her compassionately from the threshold.

After a moment of indecision he came in, closing the door behind him.

" The young woman's mother is dead."

He uttered the words tentatively—almost humbly.

She offered no comment.

" It seems Mrs. Maitland knew nothing of the child's existence," he went on, hurriedly, " until —her mother sent for her, the day before her

death. Up to that time Mrs. Cruden had refused to communicate with her daughter. . . . I should explain, perhaps, that Hill was a family name, assumed merely for convenience."

The child's impatient whimper changed to a fretful cry.

"He wants me to take him out," she said, in a clear, colourless voice. "He is used to going out at this time."

Mr. Pettibone took two steps toward her, his face twitching strangely.

"My dear!" he murmured, "you will be brave——? You won't——"

He stopped abruptly and turned again toward the door.

"Their name," he said, slowly, "is Maitland. —You will come now and—speak to them?"

She walked steadily across the hall, hushing the child in her arms, mechanically.

"He shall go out, pretty soon," she was murmuring. "So he shall! Mother will put his coat on, and his little bonnet."

The young woman was standing by the window, her handkerchief crumpled into a moist little ball clutched in one hand. She turned swiftly —her eyes fastening upon the child in Mrs. Pettibone's arms.

"Is that my baby?" she asked.

She did not look at Mrs. Pettibone.

"My wife," said the young man, rather stiffly,

"has been very much upset by the suddenness of her mother's death; perhaps you will—understand."

"I—understand," said Mrs. Pettibone.

The baby had turned from the stranger in the large black hat and was hiding his face in her neck, with little whimpering cries.

"He is afraid," Mrs. Pettibone explained. "He doesn't like black."

"Oh, but he mustn't be afraid of me! He's my baby. Come to mother, darling! . . . Oh, Stephen, isn't he a dear? And he looks like you; his eyes——"

"The baby's name," said Mrs. Pettibone, steadily, "is Stephen."

"How nice of you! . . . But I could have changed it, you know, if you'd called him anything else. Of course he had to be named after his father."

Her large dark eyes sought her husband's inquiringly. He had taken his watch from his pocket.

"We haven't much time," he told her.

Mrs. Maitland glanced doubtfully at the minister's wife.

"I'll get his things ready," Mrs. Pettibone offered, quietly. "You—you'll want everything, of course?"

The young mother shook her head.

"I don't think we have time," she objected.

"We can buy everything, you know; and we must get the express from Boston to-night. Do let me take him! He'll have to get used to his mother—the darling! I'm afraid I don't know much about babies; but we'll hire a nurse for him right away."

The child's desolate little cry pursued her as she hurried from the room; she could hear, too, the futile attempts of the young parents to quiet him. His pitiful complainings rang in her ears while she hastily rolled some little garments into an awkward bundle. They could buy everything. And they would hire a nurse for him. . . .

At the supreme moment of parting young Mrs. Maitland appeared to be visited by a transient gleam of comprehension.

"I suppose you'll really miss him," she said, brightly. "And I haven't even thanked you, dear Mrs. Pettibone. What must you think of me? But I do appreciate—everything, more than I can say. . . . If mother had only told me about baby—— Poor mother! She meant to be kind. . . . You will let us—pay you for taking care of him all these months? He must have cost a lot; and we are rich, you know, now that poor mother——"

But at this, Mrs. Pettibone, who had preserved her usual tranquil, even smiling, demeanour—to the uneasy wonderment of her husband—drew back.

"Pay me?" she breathed. "Pay me—for taking care of—my baby?"

The minister listened to her movements in the room over his study for quite half an hour after the depot hack had rolled away. It was very quiet in the house, save for those hushed footfalls on the floor above. She had chosen it for the baby's nursery because of the morning sun which streamed in through its three windows. Mr. Pettibone sat very still, huddled together in his study-chair, a desolate sense of bereavement deepening within him. Many times he had stood calmly above a little casket, voicing those words of the universal heart-break: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!"

He tried to repeat them now; but the words died upon his lips.

The sounds in the room above had ceased, and the silence beat heavily upon his ears. He compelled himself to get to his feet—to ascend the stair.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away——" He must, somehow, manage to convey comfort to that sorely stricken heart. . . .

She sat quite still in the gathering dusk, over against the window looking toward the east. There were small finger-marks upon the pane. He remembered that only that morning she had sat

there, the baby on her knee, looking out at him as he raked the sodden leaves, and the child had beat upon the glass with its rosy palms. He crossed the room on tiptoe and knelt down at her side, and putting his arms about her pressed his wet cheek to hers.

"Why, Silas," she said, stirring a little. "Why, my dear——"

She had not been weeping then. He experienced a vague sĕnse of bewilderment, not unmixd with fear. Then all at once he perceived that she was smiling, her face dimly luminous in the dusk of the April evening.

"I was thinking," she said, slowly, "about—him."

"Yes, dear," he murmured; his spent breath sounding very like a sob.

"From the very first day—you remember, Silas? And—ever since."

Her empty hands suddenly tightened in her lap.

"I hope," she said, "that his nurse—will love him.—She said she would—hire a nurse; rich women do that. She said—they were rich, Silas. You heard her?"

"My dear Philura," he reminded her, with a touch of his old authority. "She is his mother. We must not forget that."

"I know," she submitted.

He rose to his feet presently and looked about him—at the white crib in the corner with

its tiny pillow, still bearing the imprint of the baby's head; at the cheap little toys, neatly arranged in a basket; at the small toilet appurtenances set forth upon the bureau. . . .

"We must give these things away," he said, almost harshly, "——put them out of sight; I cannot allow you——"

She lifted her hand with a pleading gesture.

"No, Silas; no," she said, softly. "Let them—stay. . . ."

CHAPTER XXX

MILLY

Daffodils and crocus spread vivid patches of colour against the stiff brown mould of the Orne garden, and languid bees, plunged deep in their faintly odorous cups, smeared their brown bodies in the plentiful pollen with soft humming of content. Over against the leafless hedge sprays of "yellow-bush" and flowering almond were beginning to show a delicate tracery of gold and rose.

Grandma Orne standing in the door, her gingham apron over her head, looked forth over the garden to the orchard beyond.

"It doos beat all," she murmured, "how everythin' comes 'round, jes' th' same, year after year. Things 'at don't make no differ'nce, like yellow-bush an' crocus-blows. They don't look no older 'an when I was young—an' me 'n' Gran'pa a-standin' here, both of us straight an' strong an' full o' gumption. . . . A body 'd think a bush was more account 'an folks—ef they didn't know no better."

"What you mutterin' about, Gran'ma?" propounded a feeble voice from the bedroom.

"Seems 's 'o' your tongue was always a-waggin'."

Mrs. Orne poured the contents of a saucepan into a cup, her lips firmly compressed.

"You b'en asleep, Gran'pa, nigh ont' two hours," she told him. "Here's yer broth, all nice an' hot. I'll put an extry piller under yer head so 't you c'n drink it."

The old man groaned protestingly as he yielded to her ministrations.

"I ain't b'en asleep," he contradicted, "not fer a minute. Don't ye s'pose I know?"

"I heerd ye a-snorin'," said Grandma, convincingly. "You cert'nly had a reel nice nap."

She held the steaming cup to his puckered lips.

"I want you should swaller this right down," she exhorted him, anxiously, "so 's t' git up yer stren'th. The spring 's comin' on reel nice; why, th's crocus 'n' yellow-bush 'n' butter-'n'-eggs, all in blow,—jes' where you planted 'em out when we was first married. You r'member, don't you, Gran'pa?"

He stared at her uncomprehendingly over the brim of the cup, his eyes under their sparse lashes resembling dull blue glass.

"Where's Milly?" he demanded, fretfully. "I ain't seen her all day. She don't seem t' keer ef her ol' gran'pa——"

"Now, don' you talk that-a-way," interrupted Mrs. Orne, with a brisk show of authority.

"Milly come in t' see you, first thing this mornin'. She was up in the night a couple o' times, too, t' fix th' fire. I guess you fergot——"

She bent over the bed and spoke loudly in the old man's ear:

"——Milly's a-workin' t' Malvina Bennett's shop. She's a-learnin' th' dressmakin' trade, Gran'pa!"

"Wall, you don't hev' t' holler at me like that," he rebuked her. "I ain't no deefer 'n' you be. What'd Milly want t' do that fer, I'd like t' know? I want her t' hum. She c'd make out t' plant th' lettuce an' reddishes, I guess. 'N' you want t' git th' t'matoes started in them tin cans I saved. . . . Seems like, I put a ripe t'mato on a board t'—t' dry—fer seed; but I dunno—I dunno——"

His wrinkled lids fell suddenly over the dull blue of his tired old eyes. He was asleep.

Mrs. Orne softly withdrew the extra pillow from beneath her husband's head. Then she stood looking down at him, her head, slightly tremulous with age, bent to one side; her hands touching the bedclothes with little caressing pats.

"Well, I guess Gran'pa's better," she murmured; "he looked reel bright when he was settin' up; 'n' he conterdicted me jest es peart an' sassy. Oh, he'll be 'round, Gran'pa will. But, land! I mus' git them t'mato seeds started. I'd clean fergot 'em."

Milly came home early that night. She was afraid Grandfather wasn't quite so well when she left him in the morning, she explained. The old lady reassured her with little cackling reminiscences of Grandpa's smart sayings during the day.

"An' you'd ought t' 'a' heerd him a-findin' fault," she finished, triumphantly. "Oh, he's pickin' up, Gran'pa is. 'Twon't be no time b'fore he's out a-putterin' 'round th' garden. But I'm 'fraid he'll be hoppin' mad when he fin's we clean fergot th' t'matoes. They'd ought t' be an inch high b' now. He wants you should plant the reddishes, Milly; 'n' I guess you'd better do it right off, so's I c'n tell him t'-morrow; mebbe it'll kind o' pacify him."

The sun was sinking in a soft glow of burning rose as the girl thrust her spade deep in the yielding loam. She had changed her neat gown to one of faded gingham, and over it wore an old coat of Grandfather's—a concession to Grandmother's anxious fears lest she should "take cold"; on her feet were broken shoes—"plenty good fer th' garden," the old lady had declared, providently. Milly had yielded, without protest; but once out of sight of the window where Grandmother was washing the tea-things she flung aside the hat pressed down over her bright hair. The walls of Miss Malvina's sewing-room had seemed to stifle the girl that day; she welcomed the cool wind which had sprung up at sunset with a sigh

of relief. High up in the big chestnut trees across the road robins were singing, and from the reedy margin of the brook uprose the plaintive piping of frogs. Afar off on a neighbouring farm a cow blatantly announced her annual bereavement. The hollow, melancholy note floated lonesomely on the wind—seemed, indeed, to be a part of it, as it swept the budding trees, on its way down the valley.

The light was fading as she scattered the seed in the shallow drills she had prepared for it. The cow had ceased her complaining by now; but the plaintive frogs piped louder than ever from their reedy marsh. Milly was thinking vaguely of the gentle patter of Miss Malvina's conversation that day. The little dressmaker had indulged in various reminiscences of her own youth, as the two women set neat finishing stitches on a gown intended for a village bride.

"Reel pretty, ain't it?" said Miss Malvina, surveying her handiwork with honest pride. "Land! I r'member, when I first b'gun sewin' stiddy, I ust t' feel kind o' nervous like whenever I had t' make a wedd'n-dress, er a shroud; seems 's o' th' goods felt kind o' differ'nt t' th' han'. . . . I s'pose I hadn't reely give up bein' married m'self, 'n' I hed kind of a notion in them days 'at I'd die young, ef I wasn't. It seemed like an awful while t' forty, even. Think s' I, I can't never stan' it that long. But, land! I guess

th's some folks jes' born t' help other folks live an' die. I know I was; for here I be—fifty-one, m' las' birthday, an' still chipper,—a-making up wedd'n-dresses an' shrouds, er anythin' 'at comes t' han'. 'N' I've give up dyin', definite, till my time comes."

Milly smoothed the earth carefully above the radish seed and pressed it down with a board, as Grandfather had taught her, wondering if after all it would seem so terribly long to thirty; and if, arrived at that distant bourne, she could, at last, forget youth and the poignant ache of loneliness at her heart.

She arose from her knees presently and brushed the loose earth from her gown. Grandmother had lighted the lamp and set it on a table near the window. Its long ray of pale light extended into the gathering dusk, like an unyielding finger pointing down a gray vista of years to be travelled humbly and meekly.

Then, all at once, she perceived that she was not alone. Absorbed in her thoughts, she had not heard the click of the gate nor his step on the soft earth. He stood, a little way off, gazing at her doubtfully.

"I—wasn't sure at first that it was really you," he said.

She glanced awkwardly at her faded gingham and ragged coat, her heart beating suffocatingly in her throat. Already she had seen that he was

older, graver, and that his dress was of a sober elegance.

"Aren't you going to speak to me, Milly?"

His voice seemed to come to her from a great way off.

"I—You surprised me," she stammered.

Her hands (she was thinking) were stained with earth. Her feet, in their broken shoes, moved a little.

Then all at once she felt his arms close about her.

"Milly—Milly!" he was murmuring, his lips against her cold cheek.

She struggled to free herself.

"No—no!" she cried out. "You must let me go!"

"Why? Don't you love me? Have you—forgotten, already?"

He drew away from her, his face pale in the fading light.

"But perhaps you are thinking——"

"I have finished thinking, long ago," she said, her delicate head thrown back, her eyes gazing straight into his. "All these months, when I heard nothing from you——"

"You don't know," he interrupted, eagerly. "My mother—— You will let me explain——"

"It isn't necessary," she said, sadly. "You are not in my world, Walter Hill. You had nothing else to do—nothing, even, to amuse yourself

with; so—you amused yourself with me. Your mother permitted it, because she needed a servant. . . . That is what I am fit for—a servant! I understand—I know. You needn't explain."

"Milly," he said, gravely, "my mother—is dead."

His voice broke a little over the hard word.

"All that she did—strange, even cruel as it may seem to you—must be forgiven, now. Do you think you can forgive her—and me?"

She gazed at him without speech, her eyes, under the fallen masses of her hair, wet with sudden tears.

"But I—— You don't know—everything," she murmured. "I am not even——"

"You are the woman I love," he made swift answer.

And in his voice and eyes was all the boy's passion, deepened and made sacred by the sorrowful realisation of the man who has looked upon death, and from it learned something of the meaning of life.

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Santa Barbara

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW.

3 1205 02043 8790

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A A 001 424 213 5