

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE author published a few years ago a story entitled "John Gray." Some of the material of that story has been used in the work herewith published as "The Choir Invisible."

## THE CHOIR INVISIBLE

### I

THE middle of a fragrant afternoon of May in the green wilderness of Kentucky: the year 1795.

High overhead ridges of many-peaked cloud — the gleaming, wandering Alps of the blue ether; outstretched far below, the warming bosom of the earth, throbbing with the hope of maternity. Two spirits abroad in the air, encountering each other and passing into one: the spirit of scentless spring left by melting snows and the spirit of scented summer born with the earliest buds. The road through the forest one of those wagon-tracks that were being opened from the clearings of the settlers, and that wound along beneath trees of which those now seen in Kentucky are the unworthy survivors — oaks and walnuts, maples and elms, centuries old, gnarled, massive, drooping, majestic, through whose arches the sun hurled down

only some solitary spear of gold, and over whose gray-mossed roots some cold brook crept in silence; with here and there billowy open spaces of wild rye, buffalo grass, and clover on which the light fell in sheets of radiance; with other spots so dim that for ages no shoot had sprung from the deep black mould; blown to and fro across this wagon-road, odours of ivy, pennyroyal and mint, mingled with the fragrance of the wild grape; flitting to and fro across it, as low as the violet-beds, as high as the sycamores, unnumbered kinds of birds, some of which like the paroquet are long since vanished.

Down it now there came in a drowsy amble an old white bob-tail horse, his polished coat shining like silver when he crossed an expanse of sunlight, fading into spectral paleness when he passed under the rayless trees; his fore-top floating like a snowy plume in the light wind; his unshod feet, half-covered by the fetlocks, stepping noiselessly over the loamy earth; the rims of his nostrils expanding like flexible ebony; and in his eyes that look of peace which is never seen but in those of petted animals.

He had on an old bridle with knots of blue violets hanging down at his ears; over his broad back was spread a blanket of buffalo-skin; on this rested a worn black side-saddle, and sitting in the saddle was a girl, whom every young man of the town not far away knew to be Amy Falconer, and whom many an old pioneer dreamed of when he fell asleep beside his rifle and his hunting-knife in his lonely cabin of the wilderness. She was perhaps the first beautiful girl of aristocratic birth ever seen in Kentucky, and the first of the famous train of those who for a hundred years since have wrecked or saved the lives of the men.

Her pink calico dress, newly starched and ironed, had looked so pretty to her when she had started from home, that she had not been able to bear the thought of wearing over it this lovely afternoon her faded, mud-stained riding-skirt; and it was so short that it showed, resting against the saddle-skirt, her little feet loosely fitted into new bronze morocco shoes. On her hands she had drawn white half-hand mittens of home-knit; and on her head she wore an enormous white scoop-bonnet, lined with pink and tied under her chin in a huge

white muslin bow. Her face, hidden away under the pink-and-white shadow, showed such tints of pearl and rose that it seemed carved from the inner surface of a sea-shell. Her eyes were gray, almond-shaped, rather wide apart, with an expression changeful and playful, but withal rather shrewd and hard; her light-brown hair, as fine as unspun silk, was parted over her brow and drawn simply back behind her ears; and the lips of her little mouth curved against each other, fresh, velvet-like, smiling.

On she rode down the avenue of the primeval woods; and Nature seemed arranged to salute her as some imperial presence; with the waving of a hundred green boughs above and on each side; with a hundred floating odours; with the flash and rush of bright wings; with the swift play of nimble forms up and down the boles of trees; and all the sweet confusion of innumerable melodies.

Then one of those trifles happened that contain the history of our lives, as a drop of dew draws into itself the majesty and solemnity of the heavens.

From the pommel of the side-saddle there

dangled a heavy roll of home-spun linen, which she was taking to town to her aunt's merchant as barter for queen's-ware pitchers; and behind this roll of linen, fastened to a ring under the seat of the saddle, was swung a bundle tied up in a large blue-and-white checked cotton neckerchief. Whenever she fidgeted in the saddle, or whenever the horse stumbled as he often did because he was clumsy and because the road was obstructed by stumps and roots, the string by which this bundle was tied slipped a little through the loosening knot and the bundle hung a little lower down. Just where the wagon-trail passed out into the broader public road leading from Lexington to Frankfort and the travelling began to be really good, the horse caught one of his forefeet against the loop of a root, was thrown violently forward, and the bundle slipped noiselessly from the saddle to the earth.

She did not see it. She indignantly gathered the reins more tightly in one hand, pushed back her bonnet, which now hung down over her eyes like the bill of a pelican, and applied her little switch of wild cherry to the horse's flank with such vehemence that a fly which was about

to alight on that spot went to the other side. The old horse himself—he bore the peaceable name of William Penn—merely gave one of the comforting switches of his bob-tail with which he brushed away the thought of any small annoyance, and stopped a moment to nibble at the wayside cane mixed with purple-blossoming peavine.

Out of the lengthening shadows of the woods the girl and the horse passed on toward the little town; and far behind them in the public road lay the lost bundle.

## II

IN the open square on Cheapside in Lexington there is now a bronze statue of John Breckinridge. Not far from where it stands the pioneers a hundred years ago had built the first log school-house of the town.

Poor old school-house, long since become scattered ashes! Poor little backwoods academicians, driven in about sunrise, driven out toward dusk! Poor little tired backs with nothing to lean against! Poor little bare feet that could never reach the floor! Poor little droop-headed figures, so sleepy in the long summer days, so afraid to fall asleep! Long, long since, little children of the past, your backs have become straight enough, measured on the same cool bed; sooner or later your feet, wherever wandering, have found their resting-places in the soft earth; and all your drooping heads have gone to sleep on the same dreamless pillow and there are sleeping. And the young school-master, who seemed exempt from frailty while

he guarded like a sentinel that lone outpost of the alphabet—he too has long since joined the choir invisible of the immortal dead. But there is something left of him though more than a century has passed away: something that has wandered far down the course of time to us like the faint summer fragrance of a young tree long since fallen dead in its wintered forest—like a dim radiance yet travelling onward into space from an orb turned black and cold—like an old melody, surviving on and on in the air without any instrument, without any strings.

John Gray, the school-master. At four o'clock that afternoon and therefore earlier than usual, he was standing on the hickory block which formed the doorstep of the school-house, having just closed the door behind him for the day. Down at his side, between the thumb and forefinger of one hand, hung his big black hat, which was decorated with a tricoloured cockade, to show that he was a member of the Democratic Society of Lexington, modelled after the Democratic Society of Philadelphia and the Jacobin clubs of France. In the open palm of the other lay his big silver English lever watch with a glass case and broad black silk fob.

A young fellow of powerful build, lean, muscular; wearing simply but with gentlemanly care a suit of black, which was relieved around his wrists and neck by linen, snow-white and of the finest quality. In contrast with his dress, a complexion fresh, pure, brilliant—the complexion of health and innocence; in contrast with this complexion from above a mass of coarse dark-red hair, cut short and loosely curling. Much physical beauty in the head, the shape being noble, the pose full of dignity and of strength; almost no beauty in the face itself except in the gray eyes which were sincere, modest, grave. Yet a face not without moral loftiness and intellectual power; rugged as a rock, but as a rock is made less rugged by a little vine creeping over it, so his was softened by a fine network of nerves that wrought out upon it a look of kindness; betraying the first nature of passion, but disciplined to the higher nature of control; youthful, but wearing those unmistakable marks of maturity which mean a fierce early struggle against the rougher forces of the world. On the whole, with the calm, self-respecting air of one who, having thus far won in the battle of life, has a fiercer longing

for larger conflict, and whose entire character rests on the noiseless conviction that he is a man and a gentleman.

Deeper insight would have been needed to discover how true and earnest a soul he was; how high a value he set on what the future had in store for him and on what his life would be worth to himself and to others; and how, liking rather to help himself than to be helped, he liked less to be trifled with and least of all to be seriously thwarted.

He was thinking, as his eyes rested on the watch, that if this were one of his ordinary days he would pursue his ordinary duties; he would go up street to the office of Marshall and for the next hour read as many pages of law as possible; then get his supper at his favourite tavern—the Sign of the Spinning-Wheel—near the two locust trees; then walk out into the country for an hour or more; then back to his room and more law until midnight by the light of his tallow dip.

But this was not an ordinary day—being one that he had long waited for and was destined never to forget. At dusk the evening before, the post-rider, so tired that he had

scarce strength of wind to blow his horn, had ridden into town bringing the mail from Philadelphia; and in this mail there was great news for him. It had kept him awake nearly all of the night before; it had been uppermost in his mind the entire day in school. At the thought of it now he thrust his watch into his pocket, pulled his hat resolutely over his brow, and started toward Main Street, meaning to turn thence toward Cross Street, now known as Broadway. On the outskirts of the town in that direction lay the wilderness, undulating away for hundreds of miles like a vast green robe with scarce a rift of human making.

He failed to urge his way through the throng as speedily as he may have expected, being withheld at moments by passing acquaintances, and at others pausing of his own choice to watch some spectacle of the street.

The feeling lay fresh upon him this afternoon that not many years back the spot over which the town was spread had been but a hidden glade in the heart of the beautiful, awful wilderness, with a bountiful spring bubbling up out of the turf, and a stream winding away through the green valley-bottom to the

bright, shady Elkhorn: a glade that for ages had been thronged by stately-headed elk and heavy-headed bison, and therefore sought also by unreckoned generations of soft-footed, hard-eyed red hunters. Then had come the beginning of the end when one summer day, toward sunset, a few tired, rugged backwoodsmen of the Anglo-Saxon race, wandering fearless and far into the wilderness from the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies, had made their camp by the margin of the spring; and always afterwards, whether by day or by night, they had dreamed of this as the land they must conquer for their homes. Now they had conquered it already; and now this was the town that had been built there, with its wide streets under big trees of the primeval woods; with a long stretch of turf on one side of the stream for a town common; with inns and taverns in the style of those of country England or of Virginia in the reign of George the Third; with shops displaying the costliest merchandise of Philadelphia; with rude dwellings of logs now giving way to others of frame and of brick; and, stretching away from the town toward the encompassing wilderness, orderly gardens and

orchards now pink with the blossom of the peach, and fields of young maize and wheat and flax and hemp.

As the mighty stream of migration of the Anglo-Saxon race had burst through the jagged channels of the Alleghanies and rushed onward to the unknown, illimitable West, it was this little town that had received one of the main streams, whence it flowed more gently dispersed over the rich lands of the newly created State, or passed on to the Ohio and the southern fringes of the Lakes. It was this that received also a vast return current of the fearful, the disappointed, the weak, as they recoiled from the awful frontier of backwood life and resought the peaceful Atlantic seaboard—one of the defeated Anglo-Saxon armies of civilization.

These two far-clashing tides of the aroused, migrating race—the one flowing westward, the other ebbing eastward—John Gray found himself noting with deep interest as he moved through the town that afternoon a hundred years ago; and not less keenly the unlike groups and characters thrown dramatically together upon this crowded stage of border history.

At one point his attention was arrested by the tearful voices of women and the weeping of little children: a company of travellers with pack-horses—one of the caravans across the desert of the Western woods—was moving off to return by the Wilderness Road to the old abandoned homes in Virginia and North Carolina. Farther on, his passage was blocked by a joyous crowd that had gathered about another caravan newly arrived—not one traveller having perished on the way. Seated on the roots of an oak were a group of young backwoodsmen—swarthy, lean, tall, wild and reckless of bearing—their long rifles propped against the tree or held fondly across the knees; the gray smoke of their pipes mingling with the gray of their jauntily worn raccoon-skin caps; the rifts of yellow sunlight blending with the yellow of their hunting-shirts and tunics; their knives and powder-horns fastened in the belts that girt in their gaunt waists: the heroic youthful sinew of the old border folk. One among them, larger and handsomer than the others, had pleased his fancy by donning more nearly the Indian dress. His breech-clout was of dappled fawn-skin; his long thigh boots of thin deer-hide were open at the

hips, leaving exposed the clear whiteness of his flesh; below the knees they were ornamented by a scarlet fringe tipped with the hoofs of fawns and the spurs of the wild turkey; and in his cap he wore the intertwined wings of the hawk and the scarlet tanager.

Under another tree in front of a tavern bearing the sign of the Virginia arms, a group of students of William and Mary, the new aristocrats of the West, were singing, gambling, drinking; while at intervals one of them, who had lying open before him a copy of Tom Paine's "Age of Reason," pounded on the table and apostrophied the liberties of Man. Once Gray paused beside a tall pole that had been planted at a street corner and surmounted with a liberty cap. Two young men, each wearing the tricolour cockade as he did, were standing there engaged in secret conversation. As he joined them, three other young men—Federalists—sauntered past, wearing black cockades, with an eagle button on the left side. The six men saluted coolly.

Many another group and solitary figure he saw to remind him of the turbulent history of the time and place. A parson, who had been the



calmest of Indian fighters, had lost all self-control as he contended out in the road with another parson for the use of Dr. Watts' hymns instead of the Psalms of David. Near by, listening to them, and with a wondering eye on all he saw in the street, stood a French priest of Bordeaux, an exile from the fury of the avenging Jacobins. There were brown flatboatmen, in weather-beaten felt hats, just returned by the long overland trip from New Orleans and discussing with tobacco merchants the open navigation of the Mississippi; and as they talked, up to them hurried the inventor Edward West, who said with excitement that if they would but step across the common to the town branch, he would demonstrate by his own model that some day navigation would be by steam: whereat they all laughed kindly at him for a dreamer, and went to laugh at the action of his mimic boat, moving hither and thither over the dammed water of the stream. Sitting on a stump apart from every one, his dog at his feet, his rifle across his lap, an aged backwoodsman surveyed in sorrow the civilization that had already destroyed his hunting and that was about sending him farther west to the depths of Missouri—along with

the buffalo. His glance fell with disgust upon two old gentlemen in knee-breeches who met and offered each other their snuff-boxes, with a deep bow. He looked much more kindly at a grave, proud Chickasaw hunter, who strode by with inward grief and shame, wounded by the robbery of his people. Puritans from New England; cavaliers from Virginia; Scotch-Irish from Pennsylvania; mild-eyed trappers and bargemen from the French hamlets of Kaskaskia and Cahokia; wood-choppers; scouts; surveyors; swaggering adventurers; land-lawyers; colonial burgesses,—all these mingled and jostled, plotted and bartered, in the shops, in the streets, under the trees.

And everywhere soldiers and officers of the Revolution—come West with their families to search for homes, or to take possession of the grants made them by the Government. In the course of a short walk John Gray passed men who had been wounded in the battle of Point Pleasant; men who had waded behind Clark through the freezing marshes of the Illinois to the storming of Vincennes; men who had charged through flame and smoke up the side of King's Mountain against Ferguson's Caro-

lina loyalists; men who with chilled ardour had let themselves be led into the massacre of the Wabash by blundering St. Clair; men who with wild thrilling pulses had rushed to victory behind mad Antony Wayne.

And the women! Some—the terrible lioness-mothers of the Western jungles who had been used like men to fight with rifle, knife, and axe—now sat silent in the doorways of their rough cabins, wrinkled, scarred, fierce, silent, scornful of all advancing luxury and refinement. Flitting gaily past them, on their way to the dry goods stores—supplied by trains of pack-horses from over the Alleghanies, or by pack-horse and boat down the Ohio—hurried the wives of the officers, daintily choosing satins and ribands for a coming ball. All this and more he noted as he passed lingeringly on. The deep vibrations of history swept through him, arousing him as the marshalling storm cloud, the rush of winds, and sunlight flickering into gloom kindle the sense of the high, the mighty, the sublime.

As he was crossing the common, a number of young fellows stripped and girt for racing—for speed greater than an Indian's saved many a life in those days, and running was part of the regu-

lar training of the young—bounded up to him like deer, giving a challenge: he too was very swift. But he named another day, impatient of the many interruptions that had already delayed him, and with long, rapid strides he had soon passed beyond the last fields and ranges of the town. Then he slackened his pace. Before him, a living wall, rose the edge of the wilderness. Noting the position of the sun and searching for a point of least resistance, he plunged in.

Soon he had to make his way through a thicket of cane some twelve feet high; then through a jungle of wild rye, buffalo grass and briars; beyond which he struck a narrow deer-trace and followed that in its westward winding through thinner undergrowth under the dark trees.

He was unarmed. He did not even wear a knife. But the thought rose in his mind of how rapidly the forest also was changing its character. The Indians were gone. Two years had passed since they had for the last time flecked the tender green with tender blood. And the deadly wild creatures—the native people of earth and tree—they likewise had fled from

the slaughter and starvation of their kind. A little while back and a maddened buffalo or a wounded elk might have trodden him down and gored him to death in that thicket and no one have ever learned his fate—as happened to many a solitary hunter. He could not feel sure that hiding in the leaves of the branches against which his hat sometimes brushed there did not lie the panther, the hungrier for the fawns that had been driven from the near coverts. A swift lowering of its head, a tense noiseless spring, its fangs buried in his neck,—with no knife the contest would not have gone well with him. But of deadly big game he saw no sign that day. Once from a distant brake he was surprised to hear the gobble of the wild turkey; and more surprised still—and delighted—when the trail led to a twilight gloom and coolness, and at the green margin of a little spring he saw a stag drinking. It turned its terrified eyes upon him for an instant and then bounded away like a gray shadow.

When he had gone about two miles, keeping his face steadily toward the sun, he came upon evidences of a clearing: burnt and fallen tim-

ber; a field of sprouting maize; another of young wheat; a peach orchard flushing all the green around with its clouds of pink; beyond this a garden of vegetables; and yet farther on, a log house.

He was hurrying on toward the house; but as he passed the garden he saw standing in one corner, with a rake in her hand, a beautifully formed woman in homespun, and near by a negro lad dropping garden-seed. His eyes lighted up with pleasure; and changing his course at once, he approached and leaned on the picket fence.

“How do you do, Mrs. Falconer?”

She turned with a cry, dropping her rake and pushing her sun-bonnet back from her eyes.

“How unkind to frighten me!” she said, laughing as she recognized him; and then she came over to the fence and gave him her hand—beautiful, but hardened by work. A faint colour had spread over her face.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he replied, smiling at her fondly. “But I had rapped on the fence twice. I suppose you took me for a flicker. Or you were too busy with your gar-

dening to hear me. Or, may be you were too deep in your own thoughts."

"How do you happen to be out of school so early?" she asked, avoiding the subject.

"I was through with the lessons."

"You must have hurried."

"I did."

"And is that the way you treat people's children?"

"That's the way I treated them to-day."

"And then you came straight out here?"

"As straight and fast as my legs could carry me — with a good many interruptions."

She searched his face eagerly for a moment. Then her eyes fell and she turned back to the seed-planting. He stood leaning over the fence with his hat in his hand, glancing impatiently at the house.

"How can you respect yourself, to stand there idling and see me hard at work?" she said at length, without looking at him.

"But you do the work so well — better than I could! Besides, you are obeying a Divine law. I have no right to keep you from doing the will of God. I observe you as one of the daughters of Eve — under the curse of toil."

"There's no Divine command that I should plant beans. But it is my command that Amy shall. And this is Amy's work. Aren't you willing to work for *ner*?" she asked, slowly raising her eyes to his face.

"I am willing to work for her, but I am not willing to do her work!" he replied. "If the queen sits quietly in the parlour, eating bread and honey" — and he nodded, protesting, toward the house.

"The queen's not in the parlour, eating bread and honey. She has gone to town to stay with Kitty Poythress till after the ball."

She noted how his expression instantly changed, and how, unconscious of his own action, he shifted his face back to the direction of the town.

"Her uncle was to take her in to-morrow," she went on, still watching him, "but no! she and Kitty *must* see each other to-night; and her uncle must be *sure* to bring her party finery in the gig to-morrow. I'm sorry you had your walk for nothing; but you'll stay to supper?"

"Thank you; I must go back presently."

"Didn't you expect to stay when you came?"

He flushed and laughed in confusion.

"If you'll stay, I'll make you a johnny-cake on a new ash shingle with my own hands."

"Thank you, I really must go back. But if there's a johnny-cake already made, I could easily take it along."

"My johnny-cakes do not bear transportation."

"I wouldn't transport it far, you know."

"Do stay! Major Falconer will be so disappointed. He said at dinner there were so many things he wanted to talk to you about. He has been looking for you to come out. And, then, we have had no news for weeks. The major has been too busy to go to town; and I!—I am as dry as one of the gourds of Confucius."

His thoughts settled contentedly upon her once more and his face cleared.

"I can't stay to supper, but I'll keep the Indians away till the major comes," he said. "What were you thinking of when I surprised you?"

"What was I thinking of?"

She stopped working while she repeated his words and folded her hands about the handle of the rake as if to rest awhile. A band of her

soft, shining hair, loosened by its own weight when she had bent over to thin some seed carelessly scattered in the furrow, now fell across her forehead. She pushed her bonnet back and stood gathering it a little absently into its place with the tips of her fingers. Meanwhile he could see that her eyes rested upon the edge of the wilderness. It seemed to him that she must be thinking of that; and he noted with pain, as often before, the contrast between her and her surroundings. From every direction the forest appeared to be rushing in upon that perilous little reef of a clearing — that unsheltered island of human life, newly displaying itself amid the ancient, blood-flecked, horror-haunted sea of woods. And shipwrecked on this island, tossed to it by one of the long tidal waves of history, there to remain in exile from the manners, the refinement, the ease, the society to which she had always been accustomed, this remarkable gentlewoman.