

## III

HE had learned a great deal about her past, and held it mirrored in his memory. The general picture of it rose before his eyes now, as he leaned on the fence this pleasant afternoon in May and watched her restoring to its place, with delicate strokes of her finger-tips, the lock of her soft, shining hair.

How could any one so fine have thriven amid conditions so exhausting? Those hard toiling fingers, now grasping the heavy hoe, once used to tinkle over the spinet; the small, sensitive feet, now covered with coarse shoe-packs tied with leather thongs, once shone in rainbow hues of satin slippers and silken hose. A sun-bonnet for the tiara of osprey plumes; a dress spun and woven by her own hand out of her own flax, instead of the stiff brocade; log hut for manor-house; one negro boy instead of troops of servants: to have possessed all that, to have been brought down to all this, and not to have been ruined by it, never to have lost

distinction or been coarsened by coarseness, never to have parted with grace of manner or grace of spirit, or been bent or broken or overclouded in character and ideals, — it was all this that made her in his eyes a great woman, a great lady.

He held her in such reverence that, as he caught the serious look in her eyes at his impulsive question, he was sorry he had asked it: the last thing he could ever have thought of doing would have been to intrude upon the privacy of her reflections.

“What was I thinking of?”

There was a short silence and then she turned to him eagerly, brightly, with an entire change of voice and expression —

“But the news from town — you haven’t told me the news.”

“Oh, there is any amount of news!” he cried, glad of a chance to retreat from his intrusion. And he began lightly, recklessly:

“A bookbinder has opened a shop on Cross Street — a capital hand at the business, by the name of Leischman — and he will bind books at the regular market prices in exchange for linen rags, maple sugar, and goose-quills. I

advise you to keep an eye on your geese, if the major once takes a notion to have his old Shakespeare and his other volumes, that had their bindings knocked off in crossing the Alleghanies, elegantly rebound. You can tell him also that after a squirrel-hunt in Bourbon County the farmers counted scalps, and they numbered five thousand five hundred and eighty-nine; so that he is not the only one who has trouble with his corn. And then you can tell him that on the common the other day Nelson Tapp and Willis Tandy had a fearful fight over a land-suit. Now it was Tandy and Tapp; now it was Tapp and Tandy; but they went off at last and drowned themselves and the memory of the suit in a bowl of sagamity."

"And there is no news for me, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! I am happy to inform you that at McIllvain's you can now buy the finest Dutch and English letter-paper, gilt, embossed, or marbled."

"That is not very important; I have no correspondents."

"Well, a saddlery has been opened by two fellows from London, England, and you can now buy Amy a new side-saddle. She needs one."

"Nor is that! The major buys the saddles for the family."

"Well, then, as I came out on Main Street, I passed some ladies who accused me of being on my way here, and who impressed it upon me that I must tell you of the last displays of women-wear: painted and velvet ribbons, I think they said, and crêpe scarfs, and chintzes and nankeens and moreens and sarcenets, and—oh yes!—some muslinette jackets tam-boured with gold and silver. They said we were becoming civilized—that the town would soon be as good as Williamsburg, or Annapolis, or Philadelphia for such things. You see I am like my children: I remember what I don't understand."

"I understand what I must not remember! Don't tell me of those things," she added. "They remind me of the past; they make me think of Virginia. I wear homespun now, and am a Kentuckian."

"Well, then, the Indians fired on the Ohio packet-boat near Three Islands and killed—"

"Oh!" she said, with pain and terror, "don't tell me of that, either! It reminds me of the present."

"Well, in Holland two thousand cats have been put into the corn-stores, to check the ravages of rats and mice," he said, laughing.

"What is the news from France? Do be serious!"

"In New York some Frenchmen, seeing their flag insulted by Englishmen who took it down from the liberty-cap, went upstairs to the room of an English officer named Codd, seized his regimental coat and tore it to pieces."

"I'm glad of it! It was a very proper action!"

"But, madam, the man Codd was perfectly innocent!"

"No matter! His coat was guilty. They didn't tear *him* to pieces; they tore his coat. Are there any new books at the stores?"

"A great many! I have spent part of the last three days in looking over them. You can have new copies of your old favourites, Joseph Andrews, or Roderick Random, or Humphrey Clinker. You can have Goldsmith and Young, and Chesterfield and Addison. There is Don Quixote and Hudibras, Gulliver and Hume, Paley and Butler, Hervey and Watts, Lavater and Trenck, Seneca and Greg-

ory, Nepos and even Aspasia Vindicated—to say nothing of Abelard and Héloïse and Thomas à Kempis. All the Voltaires have been sold, however, and the Tom Paines went off at a rattling gait. By the way, while on the subject of books, tell the major that we have raised five hundred dollars toward buying books for the Transylvania Library, and that as soon as my school is out I am to go East as a purchasing committee. What particularly interests me is that I am going to Mount Vernon, to ask a subscription from President Washington. Think of that! Think of my presenting myself there with my tri-coloured cockade—a Kentucky Jacobin!"

"The President may be so occupied with the plots of you Kentucky Jacobins," she said, "that he will not feel much like supplying you with more literature." Then she added, looking at him anxiously, "And so you are going away?"

"I'm going, and I'm glad I'm going. I have never set eyes on a great man. It makes my heart beat to think of it. I feel as a young Gaul might who was going to Rome to ask Cæsar for gold with which to overthrow him. Seriously, it would be a dreadful thing for the

country if a treaty should be ratified with England. There is not a democratic society from Boston to Charleston that will not feel enraged with the President. You may be sure that every patriot in Kentucky will be outraged, and that the Governor will denounce it to the House."

"There *is* news from France, then — serious news?"

"Much, much! The National Convention has agreed to carry into full effect the treaty of commerce between the two Republics, and the French and American flags have been united and suspended in the hall. The Dutch have declared the sovereignty of the French, and French and Dutch patriots have taken St. Martin's. The English have declared war against the Dutch and granted letters of marque and reprisals. There has been a complete change in the Spanish Ministry. There has been a treaty made between France and the Grand Duke of Tuscany. The French fleet is in the West Indies and has taken possession of Guadeloupe. All French emigrants in Switzerland have been ordered to remove ten leagues from the borders of France. A hundred and

fifty thousand Austrians are hurrying down toward the Rhine, to be reinforced by fifty thousand more."

He had run over these items with the rapidity of one who has his eye on the map of the world, noting the slightest change in the situation of affairs that could affect Kentucky; and she listened eagerly like one no less interested.

"But the treaty! The treaty! The open navigation of the Mississippi!" she cried impatiently.

"The last news is that the treaty will certainly be concluded and the open navigation of the Mississippi assured to us forever. The major will load his flatboats, drift down to New Orleans, sell those Spanish fops his tobacco for its weight in gems, buy a mustang to ride home on, and if not robbed and murdered by the land-pirates on the way, come back to you like an enormous bumblebee from a clover-field, his thighs literally packed with gold."

"I am so glad, so glad, so glad!"

He drew from his pockets a roll.

"Here are papers for two months back. And now I've something else to tell you. That is one of the things I came for."

As he said this, his manner, hitherto full of humour and vivacity, turned grave, and his voice, sinking to a lower tone, became charged with sweetness. It was the voice in which one refined and sincere soul confides to another refined and sincere soul the secret of some new happiness that has come to it.

But noticing the negro lad, who had paused in his work several paces off and stood watching them, he said to her :

“May I have a drink?”

She turned to the negro :

“Go to the spring-house and bring some water.”

The lad moved away, smiling to himself and shaking his head.

“He has broken all my pitchers,” she added. “To-day I had to send my last roll of linen to town by Amy to buy more queen’s-ware. The moss will grow on the bucket before he gets back.”

When the boy was out of hearing, she turned again to him :

“What is it? Tell me quickly.”

“I have had news from Philadelphia. The case is at last decided in favour of the heirs, and

I come at once into possession of my share. It may be eight or ten thousand dollars.” His voice trembled a little despite himself.

She took his hands in hers with a warm, close pressure, and tears of joy sprang to her eyes.

The whole of his bare, bleak life was known to her; its half-starved beginning; its early merciless buffeting; the upheaval of vast circumstance in the revolutionary history of the times by which he had again and again been thrown back upon his own undefended strength; and stealthily following him from place to place, always closing around him, always seeking to strangle him, or to poison him in some vital spot, that most silent, subtle serpent of life—Poverty. Knowing this, and knowing also the man he had become, she would in secret sometimes liken him to one of those rare unions of delicacy and hardihood which in the world of wild flowers Nature refuses to bring forth except from the cranny of a cold rock. Its home is the battle-field of black roaring tempests; the red lightnings play among its roots; all night seamless snow-drifts are woven around its heart; no bee ever rises to it from the valley below where

the green spring is kneeling; no morning bird ever soars past it with observant song; but in due time, with unswerving obedience to a law of beauty unfolding from within, it sets forth its perfect leaves and strains its steadfast face toward the sun.

These paltry thousands! She realized that they would lift from him the burden of debts that he had assumed, and give him, without further waiting, the liberty of his powers and the opportunities of the world.

"God bless you!" she said with trembling lips. "It makes me happier than it does you. No one else in the whole world is as glad as I am."

Silence fell upon them. Both were thinking, but in very different ways—of the changes that would now take place in his life.

"Do you know," he said at length, looking into her face with the quietest smile, "that if this lawsuit had gone against me it would have been the first great defeat of my life? Sorely as I have struggled, I have yet to encounter that common myth of weak men, an insurmountable barrier. The imperfection of our lives—what is it but the imperfection of our planning

and doing? Shattered ideals—what hand shatters them but one's own? I declare to you at this moment, standing here in the clear light of my own past, that I firmly believe I shall be what I will, that I shall have what I want, and that I shall now go on rearing the structure of my life, to the last detail, just as I have long planned it."

She did not answer, but stood looking at him with a new pity in her eyes. After all, was he so young, so untaught by the world? Had a little prosperity already puffed him up?

"There will be this difference, of course," he added. "Hitherto I have had to build slowly; henceforth there will be no delay, now that I am free to lay hold upon the material. But, my dear friend, I cannot bear to think of my life as a structure to be successfully reared without settling at once how it is to be lighted from within. And, therefore, I have come to speak to you about—the lamp."

As he said this a solemn beauty flashed out upon his face. As though the outer curtain of his nature had been drawn up, she now gazed into the depths and confidences.

Her head dropped quickly on her bosom;

and she drew slightly back, as though to escape pain or danger.

"You must know how long I have loved Amy," he continued in a tone of calmness. "I have not spoken sooner, because the circumstances of my life made it necessary for me to wait; and now I wish to ask her to become my wife, and I am here to beg your consent first."

For some time she did not answer. The slip of an elm grew beside the picket fence, and she stood passing her fingers over the topmost leaves, with her head lowered so that he could not see her face. At length she said in a voice he could hardly hear:

"I have feared for a long time that this would come; but I have never been able to get ready for it, and I am not ready now."

Neither spoke for some time longer; only his expression changed, and he looked over at her with a compassionate, amused gravity, as though he meant to be very patient with her opposition. On her part, she was thinking—Is it possible that the first use he will make of his new liberty is to forge the chain of a new slavery? Is this some weak spot now to be fully revealed in his character? Is this the

drain in the bottom of the lake that will in the end bring its high, clear level down to mud and stagnant shallows and a swarm of stinging insects? At last she spoke, but with difficulty:

"I have known for a year that you were interested in Amy. You could not have been here so much without our seeing that. But let me ask you one question: Have you ever thought that I wished you to marry her?"

"I have always beheld in you an unmasked enemy," he replied, smiling.

"Then I can go on," she said. "But I feel as though never in my life have I done a thing that is as near being familiar and unwomanly. Nevertheless, for your sake—for hers—for ours—it is my plain, hard duty to ask you whether you are sure—even if you should have her consent—that my niece is the woman you ought to marry." And she lifted to him her clear, calm eyes, prematurely old in the experience of life.

"I am sure," he answered with the readiness of one who has foreseen the question.

The negro boy approached with a bucket of cold crystal water, and he drank a big gourd full of it gratefully.

"You can go and kindle the fire in the kitchen," she said to the negro. "It is nearly time to be getting supper. I will be in by and by."

"You have been with her so much!" she continued to Gray after another interval of embarrassment. "And you know, or you ought to know, her disposition, her tastes, her ways and views of life. Is she the companion you need now? will always need?"

"I have been much with her," he replied, taking up her words with humorous gravity. "But I have never studied her as I have studied law. I have never cross-examined her for a witness, or prosecuted her as an attorney, or pronounced sentence on her as a judge. I am her advocate—and I am ready to defend her now—even to you!"

"John!—"

"I love her—that is all there is of it!"

"Suppose you wait a little longer."

"I have waited too long already from necessity." It was on his lips to add: "I have gone too far with her; it is too late to retreat;" but he checked himself.

"If I should feel, then, that I must withhold my consent?"

He grew serious, and after the silence of a few moments, he said with great respect:

"I should be sorry; but—" and then he forbore.

"If Major Falconer should withhold his?"

He shook his head, and set his lips, turning his face away through courtesy.

"It would make no difference! *Nothing* would make any difference!" and then another silence followed.

"I suppose all this would be considered the proof that you loved her," she began at length, despairingly, "but even love is not enough to begin with; much less is it enough to live by."

"You don't appreciate her! You don't do her justice!" he cried rudely. "But perhaps no woman can ever understand why a man loves any other woman!"

"I am not thinking of why you love my niece," she replied, with a curl of pride in her nostril and a flash of anger in her eyes. "I am thinking of why you will cease to love her, and why you will both be unhappy if you marry her. It is not my duty to analyze your affections; it is my duty to take care of her welfare."



"My dear friend," he cried, his face aglow with impatient enthusiasm — "my dear friend," and he suddenly lifted her hand to his lips, "I have but one anxiety in this whole matter: will you cease to be my friend if I act in opposition to your wishes?"

"Should I cease to be your friend because you had made a mistake? It is not to *me* you are unkind," she answered, quickly withdrawing her hand. Spots of the palest rose appeared on her cheeks, and she bent over and picked up the rake, and began to work.

"I must be going," he said awkwardly; "it is getting late."

"Yes," she said; "it is getting late."

Still he lingered, swinging his hat in his hand, ill at ease, with his face set hard away.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" he asked at length, wheeling and looking her steadily and fondly in the eyes.

"That is all," she replied, controlling the quiver in her voice; but then letting herself go a little, she added with slow distinctness:

"You might remember this: some women in marrying demand all and give all: with good men they are the happy; with base men they

are the broken-hearted. Some demand everything and give little: with weak men they are tyrants; with strong men they are the divorced. Some demand little and give all: with congenial souls they are already in heaven; with uncongenial they are soon in their graves. Some give little and demand little: they are the heartless, and they bring neither the joy of life nor the peace of death."

"And which of these is Amy?" he said, after a minute of reflection. "And which of the men am I?"

"Don't ask her to marry you until you find out both," she answered.

She watched him as he strode away from her across the clearing, with a look in her eyes that she knew nothing of — watched him, motionless, until his tall, black figure passed from sight behind the green sunlit wall of the wilderness. What undisciplined, unawakened strength there was in him! how far such a stride as that would carry him on in life! It was like the tread of one of his own forefathers in Cromwell's unconquerable, hymn-singing armies. She loved to think of him as holding his descent from a line so pious and so

grim : it served to account to her for the quality of stern, spiritual soldiership that still seemed to be the mastering trait of his nature. How long would it remain so, was the question that she had often asked of herself. A fighter in the world he would always be — she felt sure of that ; nor was it necessary to look into his past to obtain this assurance ; one had but to look into his eyes. Moreover, she had little doubt that with a temper so steadily bent on conflict, he would never suffer defeat where his own utmost strength was all that was needed to conquer. But as he grew older, and the world in part conquered him as it conquers so many of us, would he go into his later battles as he had entered his earlier ones — to the measure of a sacred chant ? Beneath the sweat and wounds of all his victories would he carry the white lustre of conscience, burning untarnished in him to the end ?

It was this religious purity of his nature and his life, resting upon him as a mantle visible to all eyes but invisible to him, that had, as she believed, attracted her to him so powerfully. On that uncouth border of Western civilization, to which they had both been cast, he was a little

lonely in his way, she in hers ; and this fact had drawn them somewhat together. He was a scholar, she a reader ; that too had formed a bond. He had been much at their home as lover of her niece, and this intimacy had given her a good chance to take his wearing measure as a man. But over and above all other things, it was the effect of the unfallen in him, of the highest keeping itself above assault, of his first youth never yet brushed away as a bloom, that constituted to her his distinction among the men that she had known. It served to place him in contrast with the colonial Virginia society of her remembrance — a society in which even the minds of the clergy were not like a lawn scentless with the dew on it, but like a lawn parched by the afternoon sun and full of hot odours. It kept him aloof from the loose ways of the young backwoodsmen and aristocrats of the town, with whom otherwise he closely mingled. It gave her the right, she thought, to indulge a friendship for him such as she had never felt for any other man ; and in this friendship it made it easier for her to overlook a great deal that was rude in him, headstrong, overbearing.

When, this afternoon, he had asked her what she was thinking of when he surprised her with his visit, she had not replied: she could not have avowed even to herself that she was thinking of such things as these: that having, for some years, drawn out a hard, dull life in that settlement of pathfinders, trappers, wood-choppers, hunters, Indian fighters, surveyors; having afterwards, with little interest, watched them, one by one, as the earliest types of civilization followed,—the merchant, the lawyer, the priest, the preacher of the Gospel, the soldiers and officers of the Revolution,—at last, through all the wilderness, as it now fondly seemed to her, she saw shining the white light of his long absent figure, bringing a new melody to the woods, a new meaning to her life, and putting an end to all her desire ever to return to the old society beyond the mountains.

His figure passed out of sight, and she turned and walked sorrowfully to the cabin, from the low rugged chimney of which a pale blue smoke now rose into the twilight air. She chid herself that she had confronted the declaration of his purpose to marry her niece with so little spirit, such faulty tact. She had long

known that he would ask this; she had long gotten ready what she would say; but in the struggle between their wills, she had been unaccountably embarrassed, she had blundered, and he had left rather strengthened than weakened in his determination.

But she must prevent the marriage; her mind was more resolute than ever as to that.

Slowly she reached the doorstep of the cabin, a roughly hewn log, and turning, stood there with her bonnet in her hand, her white figure outlined before the doorway, slender and still.

The sun had set. Night was rushing on over the awful land. The wolf-dog, in his kennel behind the house, rose, shook himself at his chain, and uttered a long howl that reached away to the dark woods—the darker for the vast pulsing yellow light that waved behind them in the west like a gorgeous soft aerial fan. As the echoes died out from the peach orchard came the song of a robin, calling for love and rest.

Then from another direction across the clearing another sound reached her: the careless whistle of the major, returning from his day's work in the field. When she heard that, her

face took on the expression that a woman sometimes comes to wear when she has accepted what life has brought her although it has brought her nothing for which she cares; and her lips opened with an unconscious sigh of weariness — the weariness that has been gathering weariness for years and that runs on in weariness through the future.

Later, she was kneeling before the red logs of the fireplace with one hand shielding her delicate face from the blistering heat; in the other holding the shingle on which richly made and carefully shaped was the bread of Indian maize that he liked. She did not rise until she had placed it where it would be perfectly browned; otherwise he would have been disappointed and the evening would have been spoiled.

## IV

JOHN GRAY did not return to town by his straight course through the forest, but followed the winding wagon-road at a slow, meditative gait. He was always thoughtful after he had been with Mrs. Falconer; he was unusually thoughtful now; and the gathering hush of night, the holy expectancy of stars, a flock of white clouds lying at rest low on the green sky like sheep in some far uplifted meadow, the freshness of the woods soon to be hung with dew,—all these melted into his mood as notes from many instruments blend in the ear.

But he was soon aroused in an unexpected way. When he reached the place where the wagon-road passed out into the broader public road leading from Lexington to Frankfort, he came near stumbling over a large, loose bundle, tied in a blue and white neckerchief.

Plainly it had been lost and plainly it was his duty to discover if possible to whom it