

throat, fastened his fingers like iron rivets around the windpipe. And then — with the long, loud, hoarse, despairing roar with which a man, his mouth half full of water, sinks far out in the ocean — he fell again.

## XI

It was ten o'clock that morning of mid-May. The rain was over. Clouds and mists were gone, leaving an atmosphere of purest crystal. The sun floated a globe of gold in the yielding blue. Above the wilderness on a dead tree-top, the perch of an eagle now flashing like a yellow weather-vane, a thrush poured the spray-like far-falling fountain of his notes over upon the bowed woods. Beneath him the dull green domes of the trees flashed as though inlaid with gems, white and rose. Under these domes the wild grapevines, climbing the forest arches as the oak of stone climbs the arches of a cathedral, filled the ceiling and all the shadowy spaces between with fresh outbursts of their voluptuous dew-born fragrance. And around the rough-haired Satyr feet of these vines the wild hyacinth, too full of its own honey to stand, fell back on its couch of moss waiting to be visited by the singing bee.

The whole woods emerged from the cloudy

bath of Nature with the coolness, the freshness, the immortal purity of Diana united to the roseate glow and mortal tenderness of Venus; and haunted by two spirits: the chaste, unfading youth of Endymion and the dust-born warmth and eagerness of Dionysus.

Through these woods, feeling neither their heat nor their cold, secured by Nature against any passion for either the cooling star or the inflaming dust, rode Amy — slowly homeward from the ball. Yet lovelier, happier than anything the forest held. She had pushed her bonnet entirely off so that it hung by the strings at the back of her neck; and her face emerged from the round sheath of it like a pink and white tulip, newly risen and bursting forth.

When she reached home, she turned the old horse loose with many pappings and good-byes and promises of maple sugar later in the day; and then she bounded away to the garden to her aunt, of whom, perhaps, she was more truly fond than of any one in the world except herself.

Mrs. Falconer had quickly left off work and was advancing very slowly — with mingled haste and reluctance — to meet her.

“Aunt Jessica! Aunt Jessica!” cried Amy in a voice that rang like a small silver bell, “I haven’t seen you for two whole nights and three whole days!” Placing her hands on Mrs. Falconer’s shoulders, she kissed her once on each cheek and twice playfully on the pearly tip of the chin; and then she looked into her eyes as innocently as a perfect tulip might look at a perfect rose.

Mrs. Falconer smilingly leaned forward and touched her lips to Amy’s forehead. The caress was as light as thistle-down — perhaps no warmer.

“Three entire days!” she said chidingly. “It has been three months,” and she searched through Amy’s eyes onward along the tortuous little passages of her heart as a calm blue air might search the chambers of a cold beautiful sea-shell.

Each of these women instantly perceived that since they had parted a change had taken place in the other; neither was aware that the other noticed the change in herself. Mrs. Falconer had been dreading to find one in Amy when she should come home; and it was the one she saw now that fell as a chill upon

her. Amy was triumphantly aware of a decisive change in herself, but chose for the present, as she thought, to keep it hidden; and as for any change in her aunt—that was an affair of less importance.

“Why, Aunt Jessica!” she exclaimed indignantly, “I don’t believe you are glad to see me,” and throwing her arms around Mrs. Falconer’s neck, she strained her closely. “But you poor dear auntie! Come, sit down. I’m going to do *all* the work now—mine and yours, both. Oh! the beautiful gardening! Rows and rows and rows! With all the other work beside. And me an idle good-for-nothing!”

The two were walking toward a rough bench placed under a tree inside the picket fence. Amy had thrown her arm around Mrs. Falconer’s waist.

“But you went to the ball,” said the elder woman. “You were not idle there, I imagine. And a ball is good for a great deal. One ought to accomplish more there than in a garden. Besides, you went with John Gray, and he is never idle. Did—he—accomplish—nothing?”

“Indeed, he was not idle!” exclaimed Amy with a jubilant laugh. “Indeed he did accom-

plish something—more than he ever did in his life before!”

Mrs. Falconer made no rejoinder; she was too poignantly saying to herself:

“Ah! if it is too late, what will become of him?”

The bench was short. Instinctively they seated themselves as far apart as possible; and they turned their faces outward across the garden, not toward each other as they had been used when sitting thus.

The one was nineteen—the tulip: with springlike charm but perfectly hollow and ready to be filled by east wind or west wind, north wind or south wind, according as each blew last and hardest; the other thirty-six—the rose: in its midsummer splendour with fold upon fold of delicate symmetric structures, making a masterpiece.

“Aunt Jessica,” Amy began to say drily, as though this were to be her last concession to a relationship now about to end, “I might as well tell you everything that has happened, just as I’ve been used to doing since I was a child—when I’ve done anything wrong.”

She gave a faithful story of the carrying off of her party dress, which of course had been missed and accounted for, the losing of it and the breaking of her engagement with John; the return of it, and her going to the ball with Joseph. This brought her mind to the scenes of the night, and she abandoned herself momentarily to the delight of reviving them.

"Ah! if *you* had been there, Aunt Jessica! If they had seen you in a ball dress as I've seen you without one: those shoulders! those arms! that skin! You would have been a swan among the rough-necked, red-necked turkeys," and Amy glanced a little enviously at a neck that rose out of the plain dress as though turned by a sculptor.

The sincere little compliment beat on Mrs. Falconer's ear like a wave upon a stone.

"But if you did not go with John Gray, you danced with him, you talked with him?"

"No," replied Amy, quickly growing grave, "I didn't dance with him. But we talked—yes—not much; it was a little too serious for many words," and she sank into a mysterious silence, seeming even to forget herself in some new recess of happiness.

Mrs. Falconer was watching her.

"Ah!" she murmured to herself. "It is too late! too late!" She passed her fingers slowly across her brow with a feeling that life had turned ashen, cold, barren.

"How is Kitty?" she asked quickly.

"Well—as always; and stupid."

"She is always kind and good, isn't she? and faithful."

"Kindness is not always interesting, unfortunately; and goodness is dreadful, and her faithfulness bores me to death."

"At least, she was your hostess, Amy."

"I lent her my silk stockings or she'd have had to wear cotton ones," exclaimed Amy, laughing. "We're even."

"If you were merely paying for a lodging, you should have gone to the inn."

"There was nobody at the tavern who could wear my silk stockings; and I had spent all my money."

"Don't you expect Kitty to return your visit?"

"I certainly do—more's the pity. She has such big feet!" Amy put out her toe and studied it with vixenish satisfaction.

"Aunt Jessica," she observed at length, looking round at her aunt. "You have to work too hard. And I have always been such a care to you. Wouldn't you like to get rid of me?"

Mrs. Falconer leaned quickly, imploringly, toward her.

"Is that a threat, Amy?"

Amy waited half a minute and then began with a composure that was tinged with condescension:

"You have had so much trouble in your life, Aunt Jessica; so much sorrow."

Mrs. Falconer started and turned upon her niece her eyes that were always exquisite with refinement.

"Amy, have I ever spoken to you of the troubles of my life?" The reproof was majestic in dignity and gentleness.

"You have not."

"Then will you never speak of them to me — never again — while you live!"

Amy began again with a dry, practical voice, which had in it the sting of revenge; her aunt's rebuke had nettled her.

"At least, *I* have always been a trouble to you. You sew for me, cook for me, make the

garden for me, spin and weave for me, and worry about me. Uncle has to work for me and support me."

The turn of the conversation away from herself brought such relief that Mrs. Falconer replied even warmly.

"You have been a great pleasure to him — and to me! The little I have done, you have repaid a thousand fold. Think of us at night without you! Your uncle on one side of the fireplace — me on the other, and you away! Think of us at the table — him at one end, me at the other, and you away! Think of me alone in the house all day, while he is in the fields! Child, I have depended on you — more than you will ever understand!" she added to herself.

"Aunt Jessica," observed Amy with the air of making a fine calculation, "perhaps uncle would think more of you if I were not in the house."

"Amy!"

"Perhaps you would think more of him!"

"Amy!"

"Perhaps if neither of you had me to depend on, you might depend more on each other and be happier."

"You speak to me in this way—on a subject like this! You'd better go!"

"Aunt Jessica," replied Amy, never budging, "the time has been when I would have done so. But it is too late now for you ever to tell me to leave your presence. I am a woman! If I had not been, I shouldn't have said what I just have."

Mrs. Falconer looked at her in silence. This rare gentlewoman had too profound a knowledge of the human heart not to realize that she was completely vanquished. For where in this world is not refinement instantly beaten by coarseness, gentleness by rudeness, all delicacy by all that is indelicate? What can the finest consideration avail against no consideration? the sweetest forbearance against intrusiveness? the beak of the dove against the beak of the hawk? And yet all these may have their victory; for when the finer and the baser metal are forced to struggle with each other in the same field, the finer may always leave it.

With unruffled dignity and with a voice that Amy had never heard—a voice that brought the blood rushing into her cheeks—Mrs. Falconer replied:

"Yes; it is true: you are a woman. This is the first day that you have ever made me feel this. For I have always known that as soon as you became one, you would begin to speak to me as you have spoken. I shall never again request you to leave my presence: when it becomes unavoidable, I shall leave yours."

She rose and was moving away. Amy started up and caught her.

"Aunt Jessica, I've something to tell you!" she cried, her face dyed scarlet with the sting.

Mrs. Falconer released herself gently and returned to her seat.

"You know what I mean by what I said?" inquired Amy, still confused but regaining self-command rapidly.

"I believe I know: you are engaged to be married."

The words were very faint: they would have reached the subtlest ear with the suggestiveness of a light dreary wind blowing over a desolation.

"Yes; I am engaged to be married."

Amy affirmed it with a definite stress.

"It is this that has made you a woman?"

"It is this that has made me a woman."

After the silence of a moment Mrs. Falconer inquired :

"You do not expect to ask my consent — my advice?"

"I certainly do not expect to ask your consent — your advice."

Amy was taking her revenge now — and she always took it as soon as possible.

"Nor your uncle's?"

"Nor my uncle's."

After another, longer silence :

"Do you care to tell me how long this engagement has lasted?"

"Certainly! — Since last night."

"Thank you for telling me that. I think I must go back to my work now."

She walked slowly away. Amy sat still, twirling her bonnet strings and smiling to herself.

This outburst of her new dignity — this initial assertion of her womanhood — had come almost as unexpectedly to herself as to her aunt. She had scarcely known it was in herself to do such a thing. Certain restrictions had been chafing her for a long time: she had not dreamed that they could so readily be set

aside, that she had only to stamp her foot violently down on another foot and the other foot would be jerked out of the way. In the flush of elation, she thought of what had just taken place as her Declaration of Independence. She kept on celebrating it in a sort of intoxication at her own audacity :

"I have thrown off the yoke of the Old Dynasty! Glory for the thirteen colonies! A Revolution in half an hour! I'm the mother of a new country! Washington, salute me!"

Then, with perhaps somewhat the feeling of a pullet that has whipped a hen in a barnyard and that after an interval will run all the way across the barnyard to attack again and see whether the victory is complete, she rose and went across the garden, bent on trying the virtue of a final peck.

"But you haven't congratulated me, Aunt Jessica! You have turned your back on the bride elect — you with all your fine manners! She presents herself once more to your notice: the future Mrs. Joseph Holden, Junior, to be married one month from last night!" And unexpectedly standing in front of Mrs. Falconer, Amy made one of her low bows which

she had practised in the minuet. But catching sight of the face of her aunt, she cried remorsefully:

"Oh, I have been so rude to you, Aunt Jessica! Forgive me!" There was something of the new sense of womanhood in her voice and of the sisterhood in suffering which womanhood alone can bring.

But Mrs. Falconer had not heard Amy's last exclamation.

"What do you mean?" she asked with quick tremulous eagerness. She had regained her firmness of demeanour, which alone should have turned back any expression of sympathy before it could have been offered.

"That I am to become Mrs. Joseph Holden—a month from last night," repeated Amy bewitchingly.

"You are serious?"

"I am serious!"

Mrs. Falconer did not take Amy's word: she searched her face and eyes with one swift scrutiny that was like a merciless white flame of truth, scorching away all sham, all play, all unreality. Then she dropped her head quickly, so that her own face remained hidden,

and silently plied her work. But how the very earth about the rake, how the little roots and clods, seemed to come to life and leap joyously into the air! All at once she dropped everything and came over and took Amy's hand and kissed her cheek. Her lovely eyes were glowing; her face looked as though it had upon it the rosy shadow of the peach trees not far away.

"I do congratulate you," she said sweetly, but with the reserve which Amy's accession to womanhood and the entire conversation of the morning made an unalterable barrier to her. "You have not needed advice: you have chosen wisely. You shall have a beautiful wedding. I will make your dress myself. The like of it will never have been seen in the wilderness. You shall have all the finest linen in the weaving-room. Only a month! How shall we ever get ready!—if we stand idling here! Oh, the work, the work!" she cried and turned to hers with a dismissing smile—unable to trust herself to say more.

"And I must go and take the things out of my bundle," cried Amy, catching the contagion of all this and bounding away to the house.



Some five minutes later Mrs. Falconer glanced at the sun: it was eleven o'clock — time to be getting dinner.

When she reached her room, Amy was standing beside the bed, engaged in lifting out of the bundle the finery now so redolent of the ball.

"Aunt Jessica," she remarked carelessly, without looking round, "I forgot to tell you that John Gray had a fight with a panther in his school-room this morning," and she gave several gossamer-like touches to the white lace tucker.

Mrs. Falconer had seated herself in a chair to rest. She had taken off her bonnet, and her fingers were unconsciously busy with the lustrous edges of her heavy hair. At Amy's words her hands fell to her lap. But she had long ago learned the value of silence and self-control when she was most deeply moved: Amy had already surprised her once that morning.

"The panther bit him in the shoulder close to the neck," continued Amy, folding the tucker away and lifting out the blue silk coat. "They were on the floor of the school-house in the last struggle when Erskine got there. He had gone for Phoebe Lovejoy's cows, because it was rain-

ing and she couldn't go herself; and he heard John as he was passing. He said his voice sounded like the bellow of a dying bull."

"Is he much hurt? Where is he? Did you go to see him? Who dressed his wound? Who is with him?"

"They carried him home," said Amy, turning round to the light and pressing the beautiful silk coat in against her figure with little kicks at the skirt. "No; I didn't go; Joseph came round and told me. He didn't think the wound was very dangerous — necessarily. One of his hands was terribly clawed."

"A panther? In town? In his school-room?"—

"You know Erskine keeps a pet panther. I heard him tell Mrs. Poythress it was a female," said Amy with an apologetic icy, knowing little laugh. "And he said this one had been prowling about in the edge of the canebrakes for several days. He had been trying to get a shot at it. He says it was nearly starved: that was why it wanted to eat John whole before breakfast."

Amy turned back to the bed and shook out delicately the white muslin dress—the dress that

John had hung on the wall of his cabin — that had wound itself around his figure so clingingly.

There was silence in the room. Amy had now reached the silk stockings; and taking up one, she blew down into it and quickly peeped over the side, to see whether it would fill out to life-size — with a mischievous wink.

“I am going to him at once.”

Amy looked up in amazement.

“But, Aunt Jessica,” she observed reproachfully; “who will get uncle’s dinner? You know I can’t.”

“Tell your uncle what has happened as soon as he comes.”

She had risen and was making some rapid preparations.

“I want my dinner,” said Amy ruefully, seating herself on the edge of the bed and watching her aunt with disapproval.

“You *can’t* go now!” she exclaimed. “Uncle has the horses in the field.”

Mrs. Falconer turned to her with simple earnestness.

“I hoped you would lend me your horse?”

“But he is tired; and beside I want to use

him this afternoon: Kitty and I are going visiting.”

“Tell your uncle when he comes in,” said Mrs. Falconer, turning in the doorway a minute later, and speaking rapidly to her niece, but without the least reproach, “tell your uncle that his friend is badly hurt. Tell him that we do not know how badly. Tell him that I have gone to find out and to do anything for him that I can. Tell him to follow me at once. He will find me at his bedside. I am sorry about the dinner.”

M