XII

SEVERAL days had slipped by.

At John's request they had moved his bed across the doorway of his cabin; and stretched there, he could see the sun spring every morning out the dimpled emerald ocean of the wilderness; and the moon follow at night, silvering the soft ripples of the multitudinous leaves lapping the shores of silence: days when the inner noises of life sounded like storms; nights when everything within him lay as still as memory.

His wounds had behaved well from the outset. When he had put forth all his frenzied despairing strength to throttle the cougar, it had let go its hold only to sink its fangs more deeply into his flesh, thus increasing the laceration; and there was also much laceration of the hand. But the rich blood flowing in him was the purest; and among a people who for a quarter of a century had been used to the treatment of wounds, there prevailed a rough but genuine

skill that stood him in good stead. To these hardy fighting folk, as to him, it was a scratch; and he would have liked to go on with his teaching. Warned of the danger of inflammation, however, he took to his bed; and according to our own nervous standards which seem to have intensified pain for us beyond the comprehension of our forefathers, he was sick and a great sufferer.

Those long cool, sweet, brilliant days! Those long still, lonely, silvery nights! His cabin stood near the crest of the hill that ran along the southern edge of the settlement; and propped on his bed, he could look down into the wide valley — into the town. The frame of his door became the frame of many a living picture. Under a big shady tree at the creekside, he could see some of his children playing or fishing: their shouts and laughter were borne to his ear; he could recognize their shrill voices — those always masterful voices of boys at their games. Sometimes these little figures were framed timidly just outside the door — the girls with small wilted posies, the boys with inquiries. But there was no disguising the dread they all felt that he might soon be well: he had felt it

himself once; he did not blame them. Wee Jennie even came up with her slate one day and asked him to set her a sum in multiplication; he did so; but he knew that she would rub it out as soon as she could get out of sight, and he laughed quietly to himself at this tiny casuist, who was trying so hard to deceive them both.

Two or three times, now out in the sunlight, now under the shadow of the trees, he saw an old white horse go slowly along the distant road; and a pink skirt and a huge white bonnet — two or three times; but he watched for it a thousand times till his eyes grew weary.

One day Erskine brought the skin of the panther which he was preparing for him, to take the place of the old one under his table. He brought his rifle along also, — his "Betsy," as he always called it; which, however, he declared was bewitched just now; and for a while John watched him curiously as he nailed a target on a tree in front of John's door, drew on it the face of the person whom he charged with having bewitched his gun, and then, standing back, shot it with a silver bullet; after which, the spell being now undone, he dug the bullet

out of the tree again and went off to hunt with confidence in his luck.

And then the making of history was going on under his eyes down there in the town, and many a thoughtful hour he studied that. The mere procession of figures across his field of vision symbolized the march of destiny, the onward sweep of the race, the winning of the continent. Now the barbaric paint and plumes of some proud Indian, peaceably come to trade in pelts but really to note the changes that had taken place in his great hunting ground, loved and ranged of old beyond all others: this figure was the Past — the old, old Past. Next, the picturesque, rugged outlines of some backwoods rifleman, who with his fellows had dislodged and pushed the Indian westward: this figure was the Present — the short-lived Present. Lastly, dislodging this figure in turn and already pushing him westward as he had driven the Indian, a third type of historic man, the fixed settler, the land-loving, house-building, wife-bringing, child-getting, stock-breeding yeoman of the new field and pasture: this was the figure of the endless Future. The retreating wave of Indian life, the thin restless wave of

frontier life, the on-coming, all-burying wave of civilized life — he seemed to feel close to him the mighty movements of the three. His own affair, the attack of the panther, the last encounter between the cabin and the jungle — looked to him as typical of the conquest; and that he should have come out of the struggle alive, and have owed his life to the young Indian fighter and hunter who had sprung between him and the incarnate terror of the wilderness, affected his imagination as an epitome of the whole winning of the West.

One morning while the earth was still fresh with dew, the great Boone came to inquire for him, and before he left, drew from the pocket of his hunting shirt a well-worn little volume.

"It has been my friend many a night," he said. "I have read it by many a camp-fire. I had it in my pocket when I stood on the top of Indian Old Fields and saw the blue grass lands for the first time. And when we encamped on the creek there, I named it Lulbegrud in honour of my book. You can read it while you have nothing else to do;" and he astounded John by leaving in his hand Swift's story of adventures in new worlds.

He had many other visitors: the Governor, Mr. Bradford, General Wilkinson, the leaders in the French movement, all of whom were solicitous for his welfare as a man, but also as their chosen emissary to the Jacobin Club of Philadelphia. In truth it seemed to him that every one in the town came sooner or later, to take a turn at his bedside or wish him well.

Except four persons: Amy did not come; nor Joseph, with whom he had quarrelled and with whom he meant to settle his difference as soon as he could get about; nor O'Bannon, whose practical joke had indirectly led to the whole trouble; nor Peter, who toiled on at his forge with his wounded vanity.

Betrothals were not kept secret in those days and engagements were short. But as he was sick and suffering, some of those who visited him forbore to mention her name, much less to speak of the preparations now going forward for her marriage with Joseph. Others, indeed, did begin to talk of her and to pry; but he changed the subject quickly.

And so he lay there with the old battle going on in his thoughts, never knowing that she had promised to become the wife of another: fight-

ing it all over in his foolish, iron-minded way: some days hardening and saying he would never look her in the face again; other days softening and resolving to seek her out as soon as he grew well enough and learn whether the fault of all this quarrel lay with him or wherein lay the truth: yet in all his moods sore beset with doubts of her sincerity and at all times passing sore over his defeat — defeat that always went so hard with him.

Meantime one person was pondering his case with a solicitude that he wist not of: the Reverend James Moore, the flute-playing Episcopal parson of the town, within whose flock this marriage was to take place and who may have regarded Amy as one of his most frisky wayward fleeces. Perhaps indeed as not wearing a white spiritual fleece at all but as dyed a sort of merino-brown in the matter of righteousness.

He had long been fond of John — they both being pure-minded men, religious, bookish, and bachelors; but their friendship caused one to think of the pine and the palm: for the parson, with his cold bleak face, palish straight hair put back behind white ears, and frozen

smile, appeared always to be inhabiting the arctic regions of life; while John, though rooted in a tropical soil of many passions, strove always to bear himself in character like a palm, upright, clean-cut; having no low or drooping branches; and putting forth all the foliage and blossoms of the mind at the very summit of his powers.

The parson and the school-master had often walked out to the Falconers' together in the days when John imagined his suit to be faring prosperously; and from Amy's conduct, and his too slight knowledge of the sex, this arctic explorer had long since adjusted his frosted faculties to the notion that she expected to become John's wife. He was sorry; it sent an extra chill through the icebergs of his imagination; but perhaps he gathered comforting warmth from the hope that some of John's whiteness would fall upon her and that thus from being a blackish lambkin she would at least eventually turn into a light-gray ewe.

When the tidings reached his far-inward ear that she was to marry Joseph instead of his friend, a general thaw set in over the entire landscape of his nature: it was like

spring along the southern fringes of Greenland.

The error must not be inculcated here that the parson had no passions: he had three — ruling ones: a passion for music, a passion for metaphysics, and a passion for satirizing the other sex.

Dropping in one afternoon and glancing with delicate indirection at John's short shelf of books, he inquired whether he had finished with his Paley. John said he had and the parson took it down to bear away with him. Laying it across his stony knees as he sat down and piling his white hands on it,

"Do you believe Paley?" he asked, turning upon John a pair of the most beautiful eyes, which looked a little like moss agates.

"I believe St. Paul," replied John, turning his own eyes fondly on his open Testament.

"Do you believe Paley?" insisted the parson, who would always have his questions answered directly.

"There's a good deal of Paley: what do you mean?" said John, laughing evasively.

"I mean his ground idea — the corner stone of his doctrine — his *pou sto*. I mean do you

believe that we can infer the existence and character of God from any evidences of design that we see in the universe?"

"I'm not so sure about that," said John. "What we call the evidences of design in the universe may be merely certain laws of our own minds, certain inward necessities we are under to think of everything as having an order and a plan and a cause. And these inner necessities may themselves rest on nothing, may be wrong, may be deceiving us."

"Oh, I don't mean that!" said the parson. "We've got to believe our own minds. We've got to do that even to disbelieve them. If the mind says of itself it is a liar, how does it know this to be true if it is a liar itself? No; we *have* to believe our own minds whether they are right or wrong. But what I mean is: can we, according to Paley, infer the existence and character of God from anything we see?"

"It sounds reasonable," said John.

"Does it! Then suppose you apply this method of reasoning to a woman: can you infer *her* existence from anything you see? Can you trace the evidences of design *there?* Can

you derive the slightest notion of *her* character from *her* works?"

As the parson said this, he turned upon the sick man a look of such logical triumph that John, who for days had been wearily trying to infer Amy's character from what she had done, was seized with a fit of laughter — the parson himself remaining perfectly grave.

Another day he examined John's wound tenderly, and then sat down by him with his beautiful moss-agate eyes emitting dangerous little sparkles.

"It's a bad bite," he said, "the bite of a cat — *felis concolor*. They are a bad family — these cats — the scratchers." He was holding John's wounded hand. "So you've had your fight with a *felis*. A single encounter ought to be enough! If some one hadn't happened to step in and save you! — What do you suppose is the root of the idea universal in the consciousness of our race that if a man had not been a man he'd have been a lion; and that if a woman hadn't been a woman she'd have been a tigress?"

"I don't believe there's any such idea universal in the consciousness of the race," replied John, laughing.

"It's universal in my consciousness," said the parson doggedly, "and my consciousness is as valid as any other man's. But I'll ask you an easier question: who of all men, do you suppose, knew most about women?"

"*Women* or Woman?" inquired John.

"Women," said the parson. "We'll drop the subject of Woman: she's beyond us!"

"I don't know," observed John. "St. Paul knew a good deal, and said some necessary things."

"St. Paul!" exclaimed the parson condescendingly. "He knew a few noble Jewesses — superficially — with a scattering acquaintance among the pagan sisters around the shores of the Mediterranean. As for what he wrote on that subject — it may have been inspired by Heaven: it never could have been inspired by the sex."

"Shakspeare, I suppose," said John.

"The man in the Arabian Nights," cried the parson, who may have been put in mind of this character by his own attempts to furnish daily entertainment. "He knew a thousand of them — intimately. And cut off the heads of nine hundred and ninety-nine! The only reason he

did not cut off the head of the other was that he had learned enough: he could not endure to know any more. All the evidence had come in: the case was closed."

"I suppose there are men in the world," he continued, "who would find it hard to stand a single disappointment about a woman. But think of a *thousand* disappointments! A thousand attempts to find a good wife — just one woman who could furnish a man a little rational companionship at night. Bluebeard also must have been a well-informed person. And Henry the Eighth — there was a man who had evidently picked up considerable knowledge and who made considerable use of it. But to go back a moment to the idea of the *felis* family. Suppose we do this: we'll begin to enumerate the qualities of the common house cat. I'll think of the cat; you think of some woman; and we'll see what we come to."

"I'll not do it," said John. "She's too noble."

"Just for fun!"

"There's no fun in comparing a woman to a cat."

"There is if she doesn't know it. Come,

begin!" And the parson laid one long forefinger on one long little finger and waited for the first specification.

"Fineness," said John, thinking of a certain woman.

"Fondness for a nap," said the parson, thinking of a certain cat.

"Grace," said John.

"Inability to express thanks," said the parson.

"A beautiful form," said John.

"A desire to be stroked," said the parson.

"Sympathy," said John.

"Oh, no!" said the parson; "no cat has any sympathy. A dog has: a man is more of a dog."

"Noble-mindedness," said John.

"That will not do either," said the parson. "Cats are not noble-minded; it's preposterous!"

"Perfect ease of manner," said John.

"Perfect indifference of manner," said the parson.

"No vanity," said John.

"No sense of humour," said the parson.

"Plenty of wit," said John.

"You keep on thinking too much about some woman," remonstrated the parson, slightly exasperated.

"Fastidiousness," said John.

"Soft hands and beautiful nails," said the parson, nodding encouragingly.

"A gentle footstep," said John with a softened look coming into his eyes. "A quiet presence."

"A quiet pounce on you unawares," said the parson.

"Beautiful taste in music," said John.

"Oh! dreadful!" said the parson. "What on earth are you thinking about?"

"The love of rugs and cushions," said John, groping desperately.

"The love of a lap," said the parson fluently.

"The love of playing with its victim," said John, thinking of another woman.

"Capital!" cried the parson. "That's the truest thing we've said. We'll not spoil it by another word;" but he searched John's face covertly to see whether this talk had beguiled him.

All this satire meant nothing sour, or bitter, or ignoble with the parson. It was merely the low, far-off play of the northern lights of his mind, irradiating the long polar night of his

bachelorhood. But even on the polar night the sun rises — a little way; and the time came when he married — as one might expect to find the flame of a volcano hidden away in a mountain of Iceland spar.

Toward the end of his illness, John lay one night just inside his door, looking soberly, sorrowfully out into the moonlight. A chair sat outside, and the parson walked quietly up the green hill and took it. Then he laid his hat on the grass; and passed his delicate hands slowly backward over his long fine straight hair, on which the moonbeams at once fell with a lustre as upon still water or the finest satin.

They talked awhile of the best things in life, as they commonly did. At length the parson said in his unworldly way:

"I have one thing against Aristotle: he said the effect of the flute was bad and exciting. He was no true Greek. John, have you ever thought how much of life can be expressed in terms of music? To me every civilization has given out its distinct musical quality; the ages have their peculiar tones; each century its key, its scale. For generations in Greece you can

hear nothing but the pipes; during other generations nothing but the lyre. Think of the long, long time among the Romans when your ear is reached by the trumpet alone.

"Then again whole events in history come down to me with the effect of an orchestra, playing in the distance; single lives sometimes like a great solo. As for the people I know or have known, some have to me the sound of brass, some the sound of wood, some the sound of strings. Only — so few, so very, very few yield the perfect music of their kind. The brass is a little too loud; the wood a little too muffled; the strings — some of the strings are invariably broken. I know a big man who is nothing but a big drum; and I know another whose whole existence has been a jig on a fiddle; and I know a shrill little fellow who is a fife; and I know a brassy girl who is a pair of cymbals; and once — *once*," repeated the parson whimsically, "I knew an old maid who was a real living spinet. I even know another old maid now who is nothing but an old music book — long ago sung through, learned by heart, and laid aside: in a faded, wrinkled binding — yellowed paper stained by tears — and haunted by

an odour of rose-petals, crushed between the leaves of memory: a genuine very thin and stiff collection of the rarest original songs — not songs without words, but songs without sounds — the ballads of an undiscovered heart, the hymns of an unanswered spirit."

After a pause during which neither of the men spoke, the parson went on:

"All Ireland — it is a harp! We know what Scotland is. John," he exclaimed, suddenly turning toward the dark figure lying just inside the shadow, "you are a discord of the bagpipe and the harp: there's the trouble with *you*. Sometimes I can hear the harp alone in you, and then I like you; but when the bagpipe begins, you are worse than a big bumble-bee with a bad cold."

"I know it," said John sorrowfully. "My only hope is that the harp will outlast the bee."

"At least that was a chord finely struck," said the parson warmly. After another silence he went on.

"Martin Luther — he was a cathedral organ. And so it goes. And so the whole past sounds to me: it is the music of the world: it is the

vast choir of the ever-living dead." He gazed dreamily up at the heavens: "Plato! he is the music of the stars."

After a little while, bending over and looking at the earth and speaking in a tone of unconscious humility, he added:

"The most that we can do is to begin a strain that will swell the general volume and last on after we have perished. As for me, when I am gone, I should like the memory of my life to give out the sound of a flute."

He slipped his hand softly into the breast-pocket of his coat and more softly drew something out.

"Would you like a little music?" he asked shyly, his cold beautiful face all at once taking on an expression of angelic sweetness.

John quickly reached out and caught his hand in a long, crushing grip: he knew this was the last proof the parson could ever have given him that he loved him. And then as he lay back on his pillow, he turned his face back into the dark cabin.

Out upon the stillness of the night floated the parson's passion — silver-clear, but in an undertone of such peace, of such immortal gen-

tleness. It was as though the very beams of the far-off serenest moon, falling upon his flute and dropping down into its interior through its little round openings, were by his touch shorn of all their lustre, their softness, their celestial energy, and made to reissue as music. It was as though his flute had been stuffed with frozen Alpine blossoms and these had been melted away by the passionate breath of his soul into the coldest invisible flowers of sound.

At last, as though all these blossoms in his flute had been used up — blown out upon the warm, moon-lit air as the snow-white fragrances of the ear — the parson buried his face softly upon his elbow which rested on the back of his chair.

And neither man spoke again.