

XIII

WHEN Mrs. Falconer had drawn near John's hut on the morning of his misfortune, it was past noon despite all her anxious, sorrowful haste to reach him. His wounds had been dressed. The crowd of people that had gathered about his cabin were gone back to their occupations or their homes — except a group that sat on the roots of a green tree several yards from his door. Some of these were old wilderness folk living near by who had offered to nurse him and otherwise to care for his comforts and needs. The affair furnished them that renewed interest in themselves which is so liable to revisit us when we have escaped a fellow-creature's suffering but can relate good things about ourselves in like risks and dangers; and they were drawing out their reminiscences now with unconscious gratitude for so excellent an opportunity befalling them in these peaceful unadventurous days. Several of John's boys

lay in the grass and hung upon these narratives. Now and then they cast awe-stricken glances at his door which had been pushed to, that he might be quiet; or, if his pain would let him, drop into a little sleep. They made it their especial care, when any new-comer hurried past, to arrest him with the command that he must not go in; and they would thus have stopped Mrs. Falconer but she put them gently aside without heed or hearing.

When she softly pushed the door open, John was not asleep. He lay in a corner on his low hard bed of skins against the wall of logs — his eyes wide open, the hard white glare of the small shutterless window falling on his face. He turned to her the look of a dumb animal that can say nothing of why it has been wounded or of how it is suffering; stretched out his hand gratefully; and drew her toward him. She sat down on the edge of the bed, folded her quivering fingers across his temples, smoothed back his heavy, coarse, curling hair, and bending low over his eyes, rained down into them the whole unuttered, tearless passion of her distress, her sympathy.

Major Falconer came for her within the hour

and she left with him almost as soon as he arrived.

When she was gone, John lay thinking of her.

"What a nurse she is!" he said, remembering how she had concerned herself solely about his life, his safety, his wounds. Once she had turned quickly:

"Now you can't go away!" she had said with a smile that touched him deeply.

"I wish *you* didn't have to go!" he had replied mournfully, feeling his sudden dependence on her.

This was the first time she had ever been in his room—with its poverty, its bareness. She must have cast about it a look of delicate inquiry—as a woman is apt to do in a single-man's abode; for when she came again, in addition to pieces of soft old linen for bandages she brought fresh cool fragrant sheets—the work of her own looms; a better pillow with a pillow-case on it that was delicious to his cheek; for he had his weakness about clean, white linen. She put a curtain over the pitiless window. He saw a wild rose in a glass beside his Testament. He discovered moccasin slippers beside his bed.

"And here," she had said just before leaving, with her hand on a pile of things and with an embarrassed laugh—keeping her face turned away—"here are some towels."

Under the towels he found two night shirts—new ones.

When she was gone, he lay thinking of her again.

He had gratefully slipped on one of the shirts. He was feeling the new sense of luxury that is imparted by a bed enriched with snow-white, sweet-smelling pillows and sheets. The curtain over his window strained into his room a light shadowy, restful. The flower on his table,—the transforming touch in his room—her noble brooding tenderness—everything went into his gratitude, his remembrance of her. But all this—he argued with a sudden taste for fine discrimination—had not been done out of mere anxiety for his life: it was not the barren solicitude of a nurse but the deliberate, luxurious regard of a mother for his comfort: no doubt it represented the ungovernable overflow of the maternal, long pent-up in her ungratified. And by this route he came at last to a thought of her that was

novel for him—the pitying recollection of her childlessness.

“What a mother she would have been!” he said rebelliously. “The mother of sons who would have become great through her—and greater through the memory of her after she was gone.”

When she came again, seeing him out of danger and seeing him comfortable, she seated herself beside his table and opened her work.

“It isn’t good for you to talk much,” she soon said reprovingly, “and I have to work—and to think.”

And so he lay watching her—watching her beautiful fingers which never seemed to rest in life—watching her quiet brow with its ripple of lustrous hair forever suggesting to him how her lovely neck and shoulders would be buried by it, if its long light waves were but loosened. To have a woman sitting by his table with her sewing—it turned his room into something vaguely dreamed of heretofore: a home. She finished a sock for Major Falconer and began on one of his shirts. He counted the stitches as they went into a sleeve. They made him angry. And her face!—over it had come a look

of settled weariness; for perhaps if there is ever a time when a woman forgets herself and the inward sorrow steals outward to the surface as an unwatched shadow along a wall, it is when she sews.

“What a wife she is!” he reflected enviously after she was gone; and he tried not to think of certain matters in her life. “What a wife! How unfaltering in duty!”

The next time she came, it was early. She seemed to him to have bathed in the freshness, the beauty, the delight of the morning. He had never seen her so radiant, so young. She was like a woman who holds in her hand the unopened casket of life—its jewels still un-gazed on, still unworn. There was some secret excitement in her as though the moment had at last come for her to open it. She had but a few moments to spare.

“I have brought you a book,” she said, smiling and laying her cheek against a rose newly placed by his Testament. For a moment she scrutinized him with intense penetration. Then she added:

“Will you read it wisely?”

“I will if I am wise,” he replied laughing.

"Thank you," and he held out his hand for the book eagerly.

She clasped it more tightly with the gayest laugh of irresolution. Her colour deepened. A moment later, however, she recovered the simple and noble seriousness to which she had grown used as the one habit of her life with him.

"You should have read it long ago," she said. "But it is not too late for you. Perhaps now is your best time. It is a good book for a man, wounded as you have been; and by the time you are well, you will need it more than you have ever done. Hereafter you will always need it more."

She spoke with partly hidden significance, as one who knows life may speak to one who does not.

He eyed the book despairingly.

"It is my old Bible of manhood," she continued with rich soberness, "part worthless, part divine. Not Greek manhood—nor Roman manhood: they were too pagan. Not Semitic manhood: that—in its ideal at least—was not pagan enough. But something better than any of these—something that is everything."

The subject struck inward to the very heart's

root of his private life. He listened as with breath arrested.

"We know what the Greeks were before everything else," she said resolutely: "they were physical men: we think less of them spiritually in any sense of the idea that is valued by us: and of course we do not think of them at all as gentlemen: that involves of course the highest courtesy to women. The Jews were of all things spiritual in the type of their striving. Their ancient system, and the system of the New Testament itself as it was soon taught and passed down to us, struck a deadly blow at the development of the body for its own sake—at physical beauty: and the highest development of the body is what the race can never do without. It struck another blow at the development of taste—at the luxury and grace of the intellect: which also the race can never do without. But in this old book you will find the starting-point of a new conception of ideal human life. It grew partly out of the pagan; it grew partly out of the Christian; it added from its own age something of its own. Nearly every nation of Europe has lived on it ever since—as its ideal. The whole world is being nourished

by that ideal more and more. It is the only conception of itself that the race can never fall away from without harm, because it is the ideal of its own perfection. You know what I mean?" she asked a little imperiously as though she were talking to a green boy.

"What do you mean?" he asked wonderingly. She had never spoken to him in this way. Her mood, the passionate, beautiful, embarrassed stress behind all this, was a bewildering revelation.

"I mean," she said, "that first of all things in this world a man must be a man — with all the grace and vigour and, if possible, all the beauty of the body. Then he must be a gentleman — with all the grace, the vigour, the good taste of the mind. And then with both of these — no matter what his creed, his dogmas, his superstitions, his religion — with both of these he must try to live a beautiful life of the spirit."

He looked at her eagerly, gratefully.

"You will find him all these," she resumed, dropping her eyes before his gratitude which was much too personal. "You will find all these in this book: here are men who were men; here

are men who were gentlemen; and here are gentlemen who served the unfallen life of the spirit."

She kept her eyes on the book. Her voice had become very grave and reverent. She had grown more embarrassed, but at last she went on as though resolved to finish:

"So it ought to help you! It *will* help you. It will help you to be what you are trying to be. There are things here that you have sought and have never found. There are characters here whom you have wished to meet without ever having known that they existed. If you will always live by what is best in this book, love the best that it loves, hate what it hates, scorn what it scorns, follow its ideals to the end of the world, to the end of your life—"

"Oh, but give it to me!" he cried, lifting himself impulsively on one elbow and holding out his hand for it.

She came silently over to the bedside and placed it on his hand. He studied the title wonderingly, wonderingly turned some of the leaves, and at last, smiling with wonder still, looked up at her. And then he forgot the book — forgot everything but her.

Once upon a time he had been walking along a woodland path with his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him as was his studious wont. In the path itself there had not been one thing to catch his notice: only brown dust — little stones — a twig — some blades of withered grass.

Then all at once out of this dull, dead motley of harmonious nothingness, a single gorgeous spot had revealed itself, swelled out, and disappeared: a butterfly had opened its wings, laid bare their inside splendours, and closed them again — presenting to the eye only the adaptive, protective, exterior of those marvellous swinging doors of its life. He had wondered then that Nature could so paint the two sides of this thinnest of all canvases: the outside merely daubed over that it might resemble the dead and common and worthless things amid which the creature had to live — a masterwork of concealment; the inside designed and drawn and coloured with lavish fulness of plan, grace of curve, marvel of hue — all for the purpose of the exquisite self-revelation which should come when the one great invitation of existence was sought or was given.

As the young school-master now looked up — too quickly — at the woman who stood over him, her eyes were like a butterfly's gorgeous wings that for an instant had opened upon him and already were closing — closing upon the hidden splendours of her nature — closing upon the power to receive upon walls of beauty all the sunlight of the world.

"What a woman!" he said to himself, strangely troubled a moment later when she was gone. He had not looked at the book again. It lay forgotten by his pillow.

"What a woman!" he repeated, with a sigh that was like a groan.

Her bringing of the book — her unusual conversation — her excitement — her seriousness — the impression she made upon him that a new problem was beginning to work itself out in her life — most of all that one startling revelation of herself at the instant of turning away: all these occupied his thoughts that day.

She did not return the next or the next or the next. And, it was during these long vacant hours that he began to weave curiously together all that he had ever heard of her and of her past; until, in the end, he accomplished some-

thing like a true restoration of her life — in the colour of his own emotions. Then he fell to wandering up and down this long vista of scenes as he might have sought unwearied a secret gallery of pictures through which he alone had the privilege of walking.

At the far end of the vista he could behold her in her childhood as the daughter of a cavalier land-holder in the valley of the James: an heiress of a vast estate with its winding creeks and sunny bays, its tobacco plantations worked by troops of slaves, its deer parks and open country for the riding to hounds. There was the manor-house in the style of the grand places of the English gentry from whom her father was descended; sloping from the veranda to the river landing a wide lawn covered with the silvery grass of the English parks, its walks bordered with hedges of box, its summer-house festooned with vines, its terraces gay with the old familiar shrubs and flowers loyally brought over from the mother land. He could see her as, some bright summer morning, followed by a tame fawn, she bounded down the lawn to the private landing where a slow frigate had stopped

to break bulk on its way to Williamsburg — perhaps to put out with other furniture a little mahogany chair brought especially for herself over the rocking sea from London; or where some round-sterned packet from New England or New Amsterdam was unloading its cargo of grain or hides or rum in exchange for her father's tobacco. Perhaps to greet her father himself returning from a long absence amid old scenes that still could draw him back to England; or standing lonely on the pier, to watch in tears him and her brothers — a vanishing group — as they waved her a last good-bye and drifted slowly out to the blue ocean on their way "home" to school at Eton.

He liked to dwell on the picture of her as a little school-girl herself: sent fastidiously on her way, with long gloves covering her arms, a white linen mask tied over her face to screen her complexion from tan, a sunbonnet sewed tightly on her head to keep it secure from the capricious winds of heaven and the more variable gusts of her own wilfulness; or on another picture of her — as a lonely little lass — begging to be taken to court, where she could marvel at her father, an awful judge in his wig

and his robe of scarlet and black velvet; or on a third picture of her — as when she was marshalled into church behind a liveried servant bearing the family prayer-book, sat in the raised pew upholstered in purple velvet, with its canopy overhead and the gilt letters of the family name in front; and a little farther away on the wall of the church the Lord's Prayer and the Commandments put there by her father at the cost of two thousand pounds of his best tobacco; finally to be preached to by a minister with whom her father sometimes spilt wine on the table-cloth, and who had once fought a successful duel behind his own sanctuary of peace and good will to all men. Here succeeded other scenes; for as his interest deepened, he never grew tired of this restorative image-building by which she could be brought always more vividly before his imagination.

Her childhood gone, then, he followed her as she glided along the shining creeks from plantation to plantation in a canoe manned by singing black oarsmen; or rode abroad followed by her greyhound, her face concealed by a black velvet riding-mask kept in place by a silver mouth-piece held between her teeth; or when

autumn waned, went rolling slowly along towards Williamsburg or Annapolis in the great family coach of mahogany, with its yellow facings, Venetian windows, projecting lamps, and high seat for footmen and coachman — there to take a house for the winter season — there to give and to be given balls, where she trod the minuet, stiff in blue brocade, her white shoulders rising out of a bodice hung with gems, her beautiful head bearing aloft its tower of long white feathers.

Yet with most of her life passed at the great lonely country-house by the bright river: gazing wistfully out of the deep-mullioned windows of diamond panes; flitting up and down the wide staircase of carven oak; buried in its library, with its wainscoted walls crossed with swords and hung with portraits of soldierly faces: all of which pleased him best, he being a home-lover. So that when facts were lacking, sometimes he would kindle true fancies of her young life in this place: as when she reclined on mats and cushions in the breeze-swept halls, fanned by a slave and reading the *Tatler* or the *Spectator*; or if it were the chill twilights of October, perhaps came in from a

walk in the cool woods with a red leaf at her white throat, and seated herself at the spinet, while a low blaze from the deep chimney seat flickered over her face, and the low music flickered with the shadows; or when the white tempests of winter raged outside, gave her nights to the reading of "Tom Jones," by the light of myrtleberry candles on a slender-legged mahogany table.

But he had heard a great deal of her visits at the other great country places of the day. Often at Greenway Court, where her father went to ride to hounds with Lord Fairfax and Washington; at Carter's Grove; at the homes of the Berkeleys, the Masons, the Spottswoods; once, indeed, at Castlewood itself, where the stately Madam Esmond Warrington had placed her by her own side at dinner and had kissed her cheek at leaving; but oftenest at Brandon Mansion where one of her heroines had lived—Evelyn Byrd; so that, Sir Godfrey Kneller having painted that sad young lady, who now lies with a heavy stone on her heavier heart in the dim old burying-ground at Westover, she would have it that hers must be painted in the same identical fashion, with

herself sitting on a green bank, a cluster of roses in her hand, a shepherd's crook across her knees.

And then, just as she was fairly opening into the earliest flower of womanhood, the sudden, awful end of all this half-barbaric, half-aristocratic life—the revolt of the colonies, the outbreak of the Revolution, the blaze of war that swept the land like a forest fire, and that enveloped in its furies even the great house on the James. One of her brothers turned Whig, and already gone impetuously away in his uniform of buff and blue, to follow the fortunes of Washington; the other siding with the "home" across the sea, and he too already ridden impetuously away in scarlet. Her proud father, his heart long torn between these two and between his two countries, pacing the great hall, his face flushed with wine, his eyes turning confusedly, pitifully, on the soldierly portraits of his ancestors; until at last he too was gone, to keep his sword and his conscience loyal to his king.

And then more dreadful years and still sadder times; as when one dark morning toward day-break, by the edge of a darker forest draped with snow where the frozen dead lay thick, they

found an officer's hat half filled with snow, and near by, her father fallen face downward; and turning him over, saw a bullet-hole over his breast, and the crimson of his blood on the scarlet of his waistcoat; so departed, with manfulness out of this world and leaving behind him some finer things than his debts and mortgages over dice and cards and dogs and wine and lotteries. Then not long after that, the manor-house on the James turned into the unkindest of battle-fields; one brother defending at the head of troops within, the other attacking at the head of troops without; the snowy bedrooms becoming the red-stained wards of a hospital; the staircase hacked by swords; the poor little spinet and the slender-legged little mahogany tables overturned and smashed, the portraits slashed, the library scattered. Then one night, seen from a distance, a vast flame licking the low clouds; and afterwards a black ruin where the great house had stood, and so the end of it all forever.

During these years, she, herself, had been like a lily in a lake, never uprooted, but buried out of sight beneath the storm that tosses the waves back and forth.

Then white and heavenly Peace again, and the liberty of the Anglo-Saxon race in the New World. But with wounds harder to heal than those of the flesh; with memories that were as sword-points broken off in the body; with glory to brighten more and more, as time went on, but with starvation close at hand. Virginia willing to pay her heroes but having naught wherewith to pay, until the news comes from afar, that while all this has been going on in the East, in the West the rude border-folk, the backwoodsmen of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies, without generals, without commands, without help or pay, or reward of any kind, but fighting of their own free will and dyeing every step of their advance with their blood, had entered and conquered the great neutral game-park of the Northern and the Southern Indians, and were holding it against all plots: in the teeth of all comers and against the frantic Indians themselves; against England, France, Spain,—a new land as good as the best of old England—Kentucky! Into which already thousands upon thousands were hurrying in search of homes—a new movement of the race—its first spreading-out

over the mighty continent upon its mightier destiny.

So had come about her hasty marriage with her young officer, whom Virginia rewarded for his service with land; so had followed the breaking of all ties, to journey by his side into the wilderness, there to undergo hardship, perhaps death itself after captivity and torture such that no man who has ever loved a woman can even look another man in the face and name.

Thus ever on and on unwittingly he wove the fibres of her life about him as his shirt of destiny: following the threads nearer, always nearer, toward the present, until he reached the day on which he had first met her on his arrival in the wilderness. From that time, he no longer relied upon hearsay, but drew from his own knowledge of her to fill out and so far to end all these fond tapestries of his memory and imagination.

But as one who has traversed a long gallery of pictures, and, turning to look back upon all that he has passed, sees a straight track narrowing away into the dimming distance, and only the last few life scenes standing out lustrous

and clear, so the school-master, gazing down this long vista, beheld at the far end of it a little girl, whom he did not know, playing on the silvery ancestral lawns of the James; at the near end, watching by his bedside on this rude border of the West, a woman who had become indispensable to his friendship.

More days passed, and still she did not return. His eagerness for her rose and followed, and sorrowfully set with every sun.

Meantime he read the book, beginning it with an effort through finding it hard to withdraw his mind from his present. But soon he was clutching it with a forgotten hand and lay on his bed for hours joined fast to it with unreleasing eyes; draining its last words into his heart, with a thirst newly begotten and growing always the more quenchless as it was always being quenched. So that having finished it, he read it again, now seeing the high end of it all from the low beginning. And then a third time, more clingingly, more yearningly yet, thrice lighting the fire in his blood with the same straw. Like a vital fire it was left in him at last, a fire of red and of white flame; the two flames forever hostile, and seeking each to

burn the other out. And while it stayed in him thus as a fire, it had also filled all tissues of his being as water fills a sponge—not dead water a dead sponge—but as a living sap runs through the living sponges of a young oak on the edge of its summer. So that never should he be able to forget it; never henceforth be the same in knowledge or heart or conscience; and nevermore was the lone spiritual battle of his life, if haply waged at all, to be fought out by him with the earlier, simpler weapons of his innocence and his youth, but with all the might of a tempted man's high faith in the beauty and the right and the divine supremacy of goodness.

One morning his wounds had begun to require attention. No one had yet come to him: it was hardly the customary hour: and moreover, by rising in bed he could see that something unusual had drawn the people into the streets. The news of a massacre on the western frontier, perhaps; the arrival of the post-rider with angry despatches from the East; or the torch of revolution thrown far northward from New Orleans. His face had flushed with

feverish waiting and he lay with his eyes turned restlessly toward the door.

It was Mrs. Falconer who stepped forward to it with hesitation. But as soon as she caught sight of him, she hurried to the bed.

"What is the trouble? Have you been worse?"

"Oh, nothing! It is nothing."

"Why do you say that—to me?"

"My shoulder. But it is hardly time for them to come yet."

She hesitated and her face showed how serious her struggle was.

"Let *me*," she said firmly.

He looked up quickly, confusedly, at her with a refusal on his lips; but she had already turned away to get the needful things in readiness, and he suffered her, if for no other reason than to avoid letting her see the painful rush of blood to his face. As she moved about the room, she spoke only to ask unavoidable questions; he, only to answer them; and neither looked at the other.

Then he sat up in the bed and bared his neck and shoulder, one arm and half his chest; and with his face crimson, turned his eyes away.

She had been among the women in the fort during that summer thirteen years before, when the battle of the Blue Licks had been fought; and speaking in the quietest, most natural of voices, she now began to describe how the wounded had straggled in from the battle-field; one rifleman reeling on his horse and held in his seat by the arm of a comrade, his bleeding, bandaged head on that comrade's shoulder; another borne on a litter swung between two horses; others—footmen—holding out just long enough to come into sight of the fort, there to sink down; one, a mere youth, fallen a mile back in the hot dusty buffalo trace with an unspoken message to some one in his brave, beautiful, darkening eyes. But before this, she told him how the women had watched all that night and the day previous inside the poor little earth-mound of a defence against artillery, built by order of Jefferson and costing \$37.50; the women taking as always the places of the men who were gone away to the war; becoming as always the defenders of the land, of the children, of those left behind sick or too old to fight. How from the black edge of dawn they had strained their eyes in the direction of the bat-

tle until at last a woman's cry of agony had rent the air as the first of the wounded had ridden slowly into sight. How they had rushed forth through the wooden gates and heard the tidings of it all and then had followed the scenes and the things that could never be told for pity and grief and love and sadness.

After a little pause she began to speak of Major Falconer as the school-master had never known her to speak; tremulously of his part in that battle, a Revolutionary officer serving as a common backwoods soldier; eloquently of his perfect courage then and always, of his perfect manliness; and she ended by saying that the worst thing that could ever befall a woman was to marry an unmanly man.

"If any one single thing in life could ever have killed me," she said, "it would have been that."

With her last words she finished the dressing of his wounds. Spots of the deepest rose were on her cheeks; her eyes were lighted with proud fire. Confusedly he thanked her and, lying back on his pillow, closed his eyes and turned his face away.

When she had quickly gone he sat up in the

bed again. He drew the book guiltily from under his pillow, looked long and sorrowfully at it, and then with a low cry of shame — the first that had ever burst from his lips — he hurled it across the room and threw himself violently down again, with his forehead against the logs, his eyes hidden, his face burning.

XIV

THE first day that John felt strong enough to walk as far as that end of the town, he was pulling himself unsteadily past the shop when he saw Peter and turned in to rest and chat.

The young blacksmith refused to speak to him.

“Peter!” said John with a sad, shaky voice, holding out his hand, “have I changed so much? Don’t you know me?”

“Yes; I know you,” said Peter. “I wish I didn’t.”

“I don’t think I recognize you any more,” replied John, after a moment of silence. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, you get along,” said Peter. “Clear out!”

John went inside and drank a gourd of water out of Peter’s cool bucket, came back with a stool and sat down squarely before him.

“Now look here,” he said with the candour