

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

which was always the first law of nature with him, "what have I done to you?"

Peter would neither look nor speak; but being powerless before kindness, he was beginning to break down.

"Out with it," said John. "What have I done?"

"You know what you've *said*."

"What have I said about *you*?" asked John, now perceiving that some mischief had been at work here. "Who told you I had said anything about you?"

"It's no use for you to deny it."

"Who told you?"

"O'Bannon!"

"O'Bannon!" exclaimed John with a frown. "I've never talked to O'Bannon about you — about anything."

"You haven't abused me?" said Peter, wheeling on the schoolmaster, eyes and face and voice full of the suffering of his wounded self-love and of his wounded affection.

"I hope I've abused nobody!" said John proudly.

"Come in here!" cried Peter, springing up and hurrying into his shop.

Near the door stood a walnut tree with wide-spreading branches wearing the fresh plumes of late May, plumes that hung down over the door and across the windows, suffusing the interior with a soft twilight of green and brown shadows. A shaft of sunbeams penetrating a crevice fell on the white neck of a yellow collie that lay on the ground with his head on his paws, his eyes fixed reproachfully on the heels of the horse outside, his ears turned back toward his master. Beside him a box had been kicked over: tools and shoes scattered. A faint line of blue smoke sagged from the dying coals of the forge toward the door, creeping across the anvil bright as if tipped with silver. And in one of the darkest corners of the shop, near a bucket of water in which floated a huge brown gourd, Peter and John sat on a bench while the story of O'Bannon's mischief-making was begun and finished. It was told by Peter with much cordial rubbing of his elbows in the palms of his hands and much light-hearted smoothing of his apron over his knees. At times a cloud, passing beneath the sun, threw the shop into heavier shadow; and then the school-master's dark figure faded into the tone of the sooty wall behind

him and only his face, with the contrast of its white linen collar below and the bare discernible lights of his auburn hair above — his face, proud, resolute, astounded, pallid, suffering — started out of the gloom like a portrait from an old canvas.

“And this is why you never came to see me.” He had sprung up like a man made well, and was holding Peter’s hand and looking reproachfully into his eyes.

“I’d have seen you dead first,” cried Peter gaily, giving him a mighty slap on the shoulder. “But wait! O’ Bannon’s not the only man who can play a joke!”

John hurriedly left the shop with a gesture which Peter did not understand.

The web of deceptive circumstances that had been spun about him had been brushed away at last: he saw the whole truth now — saw his own blindness, blundering, folly, injustice.

He was on his way to Amy already.

When he had started out, he had thought he should walk around a little and then lie down again. Now with his powerful stride come back to him, he had soon passed the last house of the town and was nearing the edge of the

wilderness. He took the same straight short course of the afternoon on which he had asked Mrs. Falconer’s consent to his suit. As he hurried on, it seemed to him a long time since then! What experiences he had undergone! What had he not suffered! How he was changed!

“Yes,” he said over and over to himself, putting away all other thoughts in a resolve to think of this nearest duty only. “If I’ve been unkind to her, if I’ve been wrong, have I not suffered?”

He had not gone far before his strength began to fail. He was forced to sit down and rest. It was near sundown when he reached the clearing.

“At last!” he said gratefully, with his old triumphant habit of carrying out whatever he undertook. He had put out all his strength to get there.

He passed the nearest field — the peach trees — the garden — and took the path toward the house.

“Where shall I find her?” he thought. “Where can I see her alone?”

Between him and the house stood a building

of logs and plaster. It was a single room used for the spinning and the weaving of which she had charge. Many a time he had lain on the great oaken chest into which the homespun cloth was stored while she sat by her spinning-wheel; many a talk they had had there together, many a parting; and many a Saturday twilight he had put his arms around her there and turned away for his lonely walk to town, planning their future.

"If she should only be in the weaving-room!"

He stepped softly to the door and looked in. She was there—standing near the middle of the room with her face turned from him. The work of the day was done. On one side were the spinning-wheels, farther on a loom; before her a table on which the cloth was piled ready to be folded away; on the other the great open chest into which she was about to store it. She had paused in revery, her hands clasped behind her head.

At the sight of her and with the remembrance of how he had misjudged and mistreated her—most of all swept on by some lingering flood of the old tenderness—he stepped forward,

put his arms softly around her, drew her closely to him, and buried his cheek against hers:

"Amy!" he murmured, his voice quivering, his whole body trembling, his heart knocking against his ribs like a stone.

She struggled out of his arms with a cry and recognizing him, drew her figure up to its full height. Her eyes filled with passion, cold and resentful.

He made a gesture.

"Wait!" he cried. "Listen."

He laid bare everything—from his finding of the bundle to the evening of the ball.

He was standing by the doorway. A small window in the opposite wall of the low room opened toward the west. Through this a crimson light fell upon his face revealing its pallor, its storm, its struggle for calmness.

She stood a few yards off with her face in shadow. As she had stepped backward, one of her hands had struck against her spinning-wheel and now rested on it; with the other she had caught the edge of the table. From the spinning-wheel a thread of flax trailed to the ground; on the table lay a pair of iron shears.

As he stood looking at her facing him thus

in cold half-shadowy anger—at the spinning-wheel with its trailing flax—at the table with its iron shears—at her hands stretched forth as if about to grasp the one and to lay hold on the other—he shudderingly thought of the ancient arbitress of Life and Death—Fate the mighty, the relentless. The fancy passed and was succeeded by the sense of her youth and loveliness. She wore a dress of coarse snow-white homespun, narrow in the skirt and fitting close to her arms and neck and to the outlines of her form. Her hair was parted simply over her low beautiful brow. There was nowhere a ribbon or a trifle of adornment: and in that primitive, simple, fearless revelation of itself her figure had the frankness of a statue.

While he spoke the anger died out of her face. But in its stead came something worse—hardness; and something that was worse still—an expression of revenge.

“If I was unfeeling with you,” he implored, “only consider! You had broken your engagement without giving any reason; I saw you at the party dancing with Joseph; I believed myself trifled with. I said that if you could treat

me in that way there was nothing you could say that I cared to hear. I was blind to the truth; I was blinded by suffering.”

“If you suffered, it was your own fault,” she replied, calm as the Fate that holds the shears and the thread. “I wanted to explain to you why I broke my engagement and why I went with Joseph: you refused to allow me.”

“But before that! Remember that I had gone to see you the night before. You had a chance to explain then. But you did not explain. Still, I did not doubt that your reason was good. I did not ask you to state it. But when I saw you at the party with Joseph, was I not right, in thinking that the time for an explanation had passed?”

“No,” she replied. “As long as I did not give any reason, you ought not to have asked for one; but when I wished to give it, you should have been ready to hear it.”

He drew himself up quickly.

“This is a poor pitiful misunderstanding. I say, forgive me! We will let it pass. I had thought each of us was wrong—you first, I, afterward.”

“I was not wrong either first or last!”

"Think so if you must! Only, try to understand *me!* Amy, you know I've loved you. You could never have acted toward me as you have, if you had not believed that. And that night—the night you would not see me alone—I went to ask you to marry me. I meant to ask you the next night. . . . I am here to ask you now! . . ."

He told her of the necessity that had kept him from speaking sooner, of the recent change which made it possible. He explained how he had waited and planned and had shaped his whole life with the thought that she would share it.

She had listened with greater interest especially to what he had said about the improvement in his fortunes. Her head had dropped slightly forward as though she were thinking that after all perhaps she had made a mistake. But she now lifted it with deliberateness:

"And what right had you to be so sure all this time that I would marry you whenever you asked me? What right had you to take it for granted that whenever you were ready, I would be?"

The hot flush of shame dyed his face that

she could deal herself such a wound and not even know it.

He drew himself up again, sparing her:

"I loved you. I could not love without hoping. I could not hope without planning. Hoping, planning, striving,—everything!—it was all because I loved you!" And then he waited, looking down on her in silence.

She began to grow nervous. She had stooped to pick up the thread of flax and was passing it slowly between her fingers. When he spoke again, his voice showed that he shook like a man with a chill:

"I have said all I can say. I have offered all I have to offer. I am waiting."

Still the silence lasted for the new awe of him that began to fall upon her. In ways she could not fathom she was beginning to feel that a change had come over him during these weeks of their separation. He used more gentleness with her: his voice, his manner, his whole bearing had finer courtesy; he had strangely ascended to some higher level of character, and he spoke to her from this distance with a sadness that touched her indefinitely—with a larger manliness that had its

quick effect. She covertly lifted her eyes and beheld on his face a proud passion of beauty and of pain beyond anything that she had ever thought possible to him or to any man. She quickly dropped her head again; she shifted her position; a band seemed to tighten around her throat; until, in a voice hardly to be heard, she murmured falteringly:

"I have promised to marry Joseph."

He did not speak or move, but continued to stand leaning against the lintel of the doorway, looking down on her. The colour was fading from the west leaving it ashen white. And so standing in the dying radiance, he saw the long bright day of his young hope come to its close; he drained to its dregs his cup of bitterness she had prepared for him; learned his first lesson in the victory of little things over the larger purposes of life, over the nobler planning; bit the dust of the heart's first defeat and tragedy.

She had caught up the iron shears in her nervousness and begun to cut the flaxen thread; and in the silence of the room only the rusty click was now heard as she clipped it, clipped it, clipped it.

Then such a greater trembling seized her that she laid the shears back upon the table. Still he did not move or speak, and there seemed to fall upon her conscience an insupportable burden until, as if by no will of her own, she spoke again pitifully:

"I didn't know that you cared so much for me. It isn't *my* fault. You had never asked me, and he had already asked me twice."

He changed his position quickly so that the last light coming in through the window could no longer betray his face. All at once his voice broke through the darkness, so unlike itself that she started:

"When did you give him this promise? I have no right to ask . . . when did you give him this promise?"

She answered as if by no will of her own:

"The night of the ball—as we were going home."

She waited until she felt that she should sink to the ground.

Then he spoke again as if rather to himself than to her, and with the deepest sorrow and pity for them both:

"If I had gone with you that night—if I

had gone with you that night—and had asked you—you would have married *me*.”

Her lips began to quiver and all that was in her to break down before him—to yearn for him. In a voice neither could scarce hear she said:

“*I will marry you yet!*”

She listened. She waited. Out of the darkness she could distinguish not the rustle of a movement, not a breath of sound; and at last cowering back into herself with shame, she buried her face in her hands.

Then she was aware that he had come forward and was standing over her. He bent his head down so close that his lips touched her hair—so close that his warm breath was on her forehead—and she felt rather than knew him saying to himself, not to her:

“Good-bye!”

He passed like a tall spirit out of the door, and she heard his footsteps die away along the path—die slowly away as of one who goes never to return.

XV

A JEST may be the smallest pebble that was ever dropped into the sunny mid-ocean of the mind; but sooner or later it sinks to a hard bottom, sooner or later sends its ripples toward the shores where the caves of the fatal passions yawn and roar for wreckage. It is the Comedy of speech that forever dwells as Tragedy's fondest sister, sharing with her the same unmarked domain; for the two are but identical forces of the mind in gentle and in ungentle action as one atmosphere holds within itself unseparated the zephyr and the storm.

The following afternoon O'Bannon was ambling back to town—slowly and awkwardly, he being a poor rider and dreading a horse's back as he would have avoided its kick. He was returning from the paper mill at Georgetown whither he had been sent by Mr. Bradford with an order for a further supply of sheets. The errand had not been a congenial one; and he was thinking now as often