

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

before that he would welcome any chance of leaving the editor's service.

What he had always coveted since his coming into the wilderness was the young master's school; for the Irish teacher, afterwards so well-known a figure in the West, was even at this time beginning to bend his mercurial steps across the mountains. Out of his covetousness had sprung perhaps his enmity toward the master, whom he further despised for his Scotch blood, and in time had grown to dislike from motives of jealousy, and last of all to hate for his simple purity. Many a man nurses a grudge of this kind against his human brother and will take pains to punish him accordingly; for success in virtue is as hard for certain natures to witness as success in anything else will irritate those whose nerveless or impatient or ill-directed grasp it has wisely eluded.

On all accounts therefore it had fallen well to his purpose to make the schoolmaster the dupe of a disagreeable jest. The jest had had unexpectedly serious consequences: it had brought about the complete discomfiture of John in his love affair; it had caused the trouble behind the troubled face with which

he had looked out upon every one during his illness.

The two young men had never met since; but the one was under a cloud; the other was refulgent with his petty triumph; and he had set his face all the more toward any further aggressiveness that occasion should bring happily to his hand.

The mere road might have shamed him into manlier reflections. It was one of the forest highways of the majestic bison opened ages before into what must have been to them Nature's most gorgeous kingdom, her fairest, most magical Babylon: with hanging gardens of verdure everywhere swung from the tree-domes to the ground; with the earth one vast rolling garden of softest verdure and crystal waters: an ancient Babylon of the Western woods, most alluring and in the end most fatal to the luxurious, wantoning wild creatures, which know no sin and are never found wanting.

This old forest street of theirs, so broad, so roomy, so arched with hoary trees, so silent now and filled with the pity and pathos of their ruin — it may not after all have been marked

out by them. But ages before they had ever led their sluggish armies eastward to the Mississippi and, crossing, had shaken its bright drops from their shaggy low-hung necks on the eastern bank — ages before this, while the sun of human history was yet silvering the dawn of the world — before Job's sheep lay sick in the land of Uz — before a lion had lain down to dream in the jungle where Babylon was to arise and to become a name, — this old, old, old high road may have been a footpath of the awful mastodon, who had torn his terrible way through the tangled, twisted, gnarled and rooted fastnesses of the wilderness as lightly as a wild young Cyclone out of the South tears his way through the ribboned corn.

Ay, for ages the mastodon had trodden this dust. And, ay, for ages later the bison. And, ay, for ages a people, over whose vanished towns and forts and graves had grown the trees of a thousand years, holding in the mighty claws of their roots the dust of those long, long secrets. And for centuries later still along this path had crept or rushed or fled the Indians: now coming from over the moon-loved, fragrant, passionate Southern mountains;

now from the sad frozen forests and steely margins of the Lakes: both eager for the chase. For into this high road of the mastodon and the bison smaller pathways entered from each side, as lesser watercourses run into a river: the avenues of the round-horned elk, narrow, yet broad enough for the tossing of his lordly antlers; the trails of the countless migrating shuffling bear; the slender woodland alleys along which buck and doe and fawn had sought the springs or crept tenderly from their breeding coverts or fled like shadows in the race for life; the devious wolf-runs of the maddened packs as they had sprung to the kill; the threadlike passages of the stealthy fox; the tiny trickle of the squirrel, crossing, recrossing, without number; and ever close beside all these, unseen, the grass-path or the tree-path of the cougar.

Ay, both eager for the chase at first and then more eager for each other's death for the sake of the whole chase: so that this immemorial game-trace had become a war-path — a long dim forest street alive with the advance and retreat of plume-bearing, vermilion-painted armies; and its rich black dust, on which here

and there a few scars of sunlight now lay like stillest thinnest yellow leaves, had been dyed from end to end with the red of the heart.

And last of all into this ancient woodland street of war one day there had stepped a strange new-comer—the Anglo-Saxon. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, always a lover of Land and of Woman and therefore of Home; in whose blood beat the conquest of many a wilderness before this—the wilderness of Britain, the wilderness of Normandy, the wildernesses of the Black, of the Hercinian forest, the wilderness of the frosted marshes of the Elbe and the Rhine and of the North Sea's wildest wandering foam and fury.

Here white lover and red lover had met and fought: with the same high spirit and overstrung will, scorn of danger, greed of pain; the same vehemence of hatred and excess of revenge; the same ideal of a hero as a young man who stands in the thick of carnage calm and unconscious of his wounds or rushes gladly to any poetic beauty of death that is terrible and sublime. And already the red lover was gone and the fair-haired lover stood the quiet owner of the road, the last of all its long train

of conquerors brute and human—with his cabin near by, his wife smiling beside the spinning-wheel, his baby crowing on the threshold.

History was thicker here than along the Appian Way and it might well have stirred O'Bannon; but he rode shamblingly on, untouched, unmindful. At every bend his eye quickly swept along the stretch of road to the next turn; for every man carried the eye of an eagle in his head in those days.

At one point he pulled his horse up violently. A large buckeye tree stood on the roadside a hundred yards ahead. Its large thick leaves already full at this season, drew around the trunk a seamless robe of darkest green. But a single slight rent had been made on one side as though a bough had been lately broken off to form an aperture commanding a view of the road; and through this aperture he could see something black within—as black as a crow's wing.

O'Bannon sent his horse forward in the slowest walk: it was unshod; the stroke of its hoofs was muffled by the dust; and he had approached quite close, remaining himself unobserved, before he recognized the school-master.

He was reclining against the trunk, his hat off, his eyes closed; in the heavy shadows he looked white and sick and weak and troubled. Plainly he was buried deep in his own thoughts. If he had broken off those low boughs in order that he might obtain a view of the road, he had forgotten his own purpose; if he had walked all the way out to this spot and was waiting, his vigilance had grown lax, his aim slipped from him.

Perhaps before his eyes the historic vision of the road had risen: that crowded pageant, brute and human, all whose red passions, burning rights and burning wrongs, frenzied fightings and awful deaths had left but the sun-scarred dust, the silence of the woods clothing itself in green. And from this panoramic survey it may have come to him to feel the shortness of the day of his own life, the pitifulness of its earthly contentions, and above everything else the sadness of the necessity laid upon him to come down to the level of the cougar and the wolf.

But as O'Bannon struck his horse and would have passed on, he sprang up quickly enough and walked out into the middle of the road.

When the horse's head was near he quietly took hold of the reins and throwing his weight slightly forward, brought it to a stop.

"Let go!" exclaimed O'Bannon, furious and threatening.

He did let go, and stepping backward three paces, he threw off his coat and waistcoat and tossed them aside to the green bushes: the action was a pathetic mark of his lifelong habit of economy in clothes: a coat must under all circumstances be cared for. He tore off his neckcloth so that his high shirt collar fell away from his neck, showing the purple scar of his wound; and he girt his trousers in about his waist, as a laboring man will trim himself for neat, quick, violent work. Then with a long stride he came round to the side of the horse's head, laid his hand on its neck and looked O'Bannon in the eyes:

"At first I thought I'd wait till you got back to town. I wanted to catch you on the street or in a tavern where others could witness. I'm sorry. I'm ashamed I ever wished any man to see me lay my hand on you.

"Since you came out to Kentucky, have I ever crossed you? Thwarted you in any plan

or purpose? Wronged you in any act? Ill-used your name? By anything I have thought or wished or done taken from the success of your life or made success harder for you to win?

"But you had hardly come **out** here before you began to attack me and you have never stopped. Out of all this earth's prosperity you have envied me my little share: you have tried to take away my school. With your own good name gone, you have wished to befoul mine. With no force of character to rise in the world, you have sought to drag me down. When I have avoided a brawl with you, preferring to live my life in peace with every man, you have said I was a coward, you unmanly slanderer! When I have desired to live the best life I could, you have turned even that against me. You lied and you know you lied—blackguard! You have laughed at the blood in my veins—the sacred blood of my mother—"

His words choked him. The Scotch blood, so slow to kindle like a mass of cold anthracite, so terrible with heat to the last ashes, was burning in him now with flameless fury.

"I passed it all over. I only asked to go on

my way and have you go yours. But now—" He seemed to realize in an instant everything that he had suffered in consequence of O'Bannon's last interference in his affairs. He ground his teeth together and shook his head from side to side like an animal that had seized its prey.

"Get down!" he cried, throwing his head back. "I can't fight you as an equal but I will give you one beating for the low dog you are."

O'Bannon had listened immovable. He now threw the reins down and started to throw his leg over the saddle but resumed his seat. "Let go!" he shouted. "I will not be held and ordered."

The school-master tightened his grasp on the reins.

"Get down! I don't trust you."

O'Bannon held a short heavy whip. He threw this into the air and caught it by the little end.

The school-teacher sprang to seize it; but O'Bannon lifted it backward over his shoulder, and then raising himself high in his stirrups, brought it down. The master saw it coming

and swerved so that it grazed his ear; but it cut into the wound on his neck with a coarse, ugly, terrific blow and the blood spurted. With a loud cry of agony and horror, he reeled and fell backward dizzy and sick and nigh to fainting. The next moment in the deadly silence of a wild beast attacking to kill, he was on his feet, seized the whip before it could fall again, flung it away, caught O'Bannon's arm and planting his foot against the horse's shoulder, threw his whole weight backward. The saddle turned, the horse sprang aside, and he fell again, pulling O'Bannon heavily down on him.

There in the blood-dyed dust of the old woodland street, where bison and elk, stag and lynx, wolf and cougar and bear had gored or torn each other during the centuries before; there on the same level, glutting their passion, their hatred, their revenge, the men fought out their strength — the strength of that King of Beasts whose den is where it should be: in a man's spirit.

A few afternoons after this a group of rough young fellows were gathered at Peter's shop.

The talk had turned to the subject of the fight: and every one had thrown his gibe at O'Bannon, who had taken it with equal good nature. From this they had chaffed him on his fondness for a practical joke and his awkward riding; and out of this, he now being angry, grew a bet with Horatio Turpin that he could ride the latter's filly, standing hitched to the fence of the shop. He was to ride it three times around the enclosure, and touch it once each time in the flank with the spur which the young horseman took from his heel.

At the first prick of it, the high-spirited mettlesome animal, scarcely broken, reared and sprang forward, all but unseating him. He dropped the reins and instinctively caught its mane, at the same time pressing his legs more closely in against the animal's sides, thus driving the spur deeper. They shouted to him to lie down, to fall off, as they saw the awful danger ahead; for the maddened filly, having run wildly around the enclosure several times, turned and rushed straight toward the low open doors of the smithy and the pasture beyond. But he would not release his clutch; and with his body bent a little forward, he received the

blow of the projecting shingles full on his head as the mare shot from under him into the shop, scraping him off.

They ran to him and lifted him out of the sooty dust and laid him on the soft green grass. But of consciousness there was never to be more for him: his jest had reached its end.

XVI

It was early summer now.

In the depths of the greening woods the school-master lay reading:

“And thus it passed on from Candlemass until after Easter that the month of May was come, when every lusty heart beginneth to blossom and to bring forth fruit; for like as herbs and trees bring forth fruit and flourish in May, in likewise, every lusty heart that is any manner a lover springeth and flourisheth in lusty deeds. For it giveth unto all lovers courage—that lusty month of May—in something to constrain him to some manner of thing more in that month than in any other month. For diverse causes: For then all herbs and trees renew a man and woman; and, in likewise, lovers call again to their mind old gentleness and old service and many kind deeds that were forgotten by negligence. For like as winter rasure doth alway erase and deface green summer, so fareth it by

unstable love in man and woman. For in many persons there is no stability; . . . for a little blast of winter's rasure, anon we shall deface and lay apart true love (for little or naught), that cost so much. This is no wisdom nor stability, but it is feebleness of nature and great disworship whomsoever useth this. Therefore like as May month flowereth and flourisheth in many gardens, so in likewise let every man of worship flourish his heart in this world: first unto God, and next unto the joy of them that he promised his faith unto; for there was never worshipful man nor worshipful woman but they loved one better than another. And worship in arms may never be foiled; but first reserve the honour to God, and secondly the quarrel must come of thy lady: and such love I call virtuous love. But nowadays men cannot love seven nights but they must have all their desires. . . . Right so fareth love nowadays, soon hot, soon cold: this is no stability. But the old love was not so. Men and women could love together seven years . . . and then was love truth and faithfulness. And lo! in likewise was used love in King Arthur's days. Wherefore I liken love nowadays unto summer and winter; for like as

the one is hot and the other cold, so fareth love nowadays." . . .

He laid the book aside upon the grass, sat up, and mournfully looked about him. Effort was usually needed to withdraw his mind from those low-down shadowy centuries over into which of late by means of the book, as by means of a bridge spanning a known and an unknown land, he had crossed, and wonder-stricken had wandered; but these words brought him swiftly home to the country of his own sorrow.

Unstable love! feebleness of nature! one blast of a cutting winter wind and lo! green summer defaced: the very phrases seemed shaped by living lips close to the ear of his experience. It was in this spot a few weeks ago that he had planned his future with Amy: these were the acres he would buy; on this hill-top he would build; here, home-sheltered, wife-anchored, the warfare of his flesh and spirit ended, he could begin to put forth all his strength upon the living of his life.

Had any frost ever killed the bud of nature's hope more unexpectedly than this landscape now lay blackened before him? And had any summer ever cost so much? What could strike

a man as a more mortal wound than to lose the woman he had loved and in losing her see her lose her loveliness?

As the end of it all, he now found himself sitting on the blasted rock of his dreams in the depths of the greening woods. He was well again by this time and conscious of that re-tightened grasp upon health and redder stir of life with which the great Mother-nurse, if she but dearly love a man, will tend him and mend him and set him on his feet again from a bed of wounds or sickness. It had happened to him also that with this reflushing of his blood there had reached him the voice of Summer advancing northward to all things and making all things common in their awakening and their aim.

He knew of old the pipe of this imperious Shepherd; sounding along the inner vales of his being; herding him toward universal fellowship with seeding grass and breeding herb and every heart-holding creature of the woods. He perfectly recognized the sway of the thrilling pipe; he perfectly realized the joy of the jubilant fellowship. And it was with eyes the more mournful therefore that he gazed in purity about him

at the universal miracle of old life passing into new life, at the divinely appointed and divinely fulfilled succession of forms, at the unrent mantle of the generations being visibly woven around him under the golden goads of the sun.

“ . . . for like as herbs bring forth fruit and flourish in May, in likewise, every heart that is in any manner a lover springeth and flourisheth in lusty deeds.” . . . But all this must come, must spend itself, must pass him by, as a flaming pageant dies away from a beholder who is forbidden to kindle his own torch and claim his share of its innocent revels. He too had laid his plans to celebrate his marriage at the full tide of the Earth's joy, and these plans had failed him.

But while the school-master thus was gloomily contemplating the end of his relationship with Amy and her final removal from the future of his life, in reality another and larger trouble was looming close ahead.

A second landscape had begun to beckon: not like his poor little frost-killed field, not of the earth at all, but lifted unattainable into the air, faint, clear, elusive—the mirage of another woman. And how different she! He felt sure

that no winter's rasure would ever reach that land; no instability, no feebleness of nature awaited him there; the loveliness of its summer, now brooding at flood, would brood unharmed upon it to the natural end.

He buried his face guiltily in his hands as he tried to shut out the remembrance of how persistently of late, whithersoever he had turned, this second image had reappeared before him, growing always clearer, drawing always nearer, summoning him more luringly. Already he had begun to know the sensations of a traveller who is crossing sands with a parched tongue and a weary foot, crossing toward a country that he will never reach, but that he will stagger toward as long as he has strength to stand.

During the past several days—following his last interview with Amy—he had realized for the first time how long and how plainly the figure of Mrs. Falconer had been standing before him and upon how much loftier a level. Many a time of old, while visiting the house, he had grown tired of Amy; but he had never felt wearied by *her*. For Amy he was always making apologies to his own conscience; she needed

none. He had secretly hoped that in time Amy would become more what he wished his wife to be; it would have pained him to think of her as altered. Often he had left Amy's company with a grateful sense of regaining the larger liberty of his own mind; by her he always felt guided to his better self, he carried away her ideas with the hope of making them his ideas, he was set on fire with a spiritual passion to do his utmost in the higher strife of the world.

For this he had long paid her the guiltless tribute of his reverence and affection. And between his reverence and affection and all the forbidden that lay beyond rose a barrier which not even his imagination had ever consciously overleaped. Now the forbidding barrier had disappeared, and in its place had appeared the forbidden bond—he knew not how or when. How could he? Love, the Scarlet Spider, will in a night hang between two that have been apart a web too fine for either to see; but the strength of both will never avail to break it.

Very curiously it had befallen him furthermore that just at the time when all these

changes were taking place around him and within him, she had brought him the book that she had pressed with emphasis upon his attention.

In the backwoods settlements of Pennsylvania where his maternal Scotch-Irish ancestors had settled and his own life been spent, very few volumes had fallen into his hands. After coming to Kentucky not many more until of late: so that of the world's history he was still a stunted and hungry student. When, therefore, she had given him Malory's "Le Morte D'Arthur," it was the first time that the ideals of chivalry had ever flashed their glorious light upon him; for the first time the models of Christian manhood, on which western Europe nourished itself for centuries, displayed themselves to his imagination with the charm of story; he heard of Camelot, of the king, of that company of men who strove with each other in arms, but strove also with each other in grace of life and for the immortal mysteries of the spirit.

She had said that he should have read this book long before but that henceforth he would always need it even more than in his past: that

here were some things he had looked for in the world and had never found; characters such as he had always wished to grapple to himself as his abiding comrades: that if he would love the best that it loved, hate what it hated, scorn what it scorned, it would help him in the pursuit of his own ideals to the end.

Of this and more he felt at once the truth, since of all earthly books known to him this contained the most heavenly revelation of what a man may be in manliness, in gentleness, and in goodness. And as he read the nobler portions of the book, the nobler parts of his nature gave out their immediate response.

Hungrily he hurried to and fro across the harvest of those fertile pages, gathering of the white wheat of the spirit many a lustrous sheaf: the love of courage, the love of courtesy, the love of honour, the love of high aims and great actions, the love of the poor and the helpless, the love of a spotless name and a spotless life, the love of kindred, the love of friendship, the love of humility of spirit, the love of forgiveness, the love of beauty, the love of love, the love of God. Surely, he said to himself, within the band of these virtues lay not only

a man's noblest life, but the noblest life of the world.

While fondling these, he failed not to notice how the great book, as though it were a living mouth, spat its deathless scorn upon the things that he also—in the imperfect measure of his powers—had always hated: all cowardice of mind or body, all lying, all oppression, all unfaithfulness, all secret revenge and hypocrisy and double-dealing: the smut of the heart and mind.

But ah! the other things besides these.

Sown among the white wheat of the spirit were the red tares of the flesh; and as he strode back and forth through the harvest, he found himself plucking these also with feverish vehemence. There were things here that he had never seen in print: words that he had never even named to his secret consciousness; thoughts and desires that he had put away from his soul with many a struggle, many a prayer; stories of a kind that he had always declined to hear when told in companies of men: all here, spelled out, barefaced, without apology, without shame: the deposits of those old, old moral voices and standards long since buried deep

under the ever rising level of the world's whitening holiness.

With utter guilt and shame he did not leave off till he had plucked the last red tare; and having plucked them, he had hugged the whole inflaming bundle against his blood—his blood now flushed with youth, flushed with health, flushed with summer.

And finally, in the midst of all these things, perhaps coloured by them, there had come to him the first great awakening of his life in a love that was forbidden.

He upbraided himself the more bitterly for the influence of the book because it was she who had placed both the good and the evil in his hand with perfect confidence that he would lay hold on the one and remain unsoiled by the other. She had remained spirit-proof herself against the influences that tormented him; out of her own purity she had judged him. And yet, on the other hand, with that terrible candour of mind which he used either for or against himself as rigidly as for or against another person, he pleaded in his own behalf that she had made a mistake in overestimating his strength, in underestimating his temptations. How should

she know that for years his warfare had gone on direfully? How realize that almost daily he had stood as at the dividing of two roads: the hard, narrow path ascending to the bleak white peaks of the spirit; the broad, sweet, downward vistas of the flesh? How foresee, therefore, that the book would only help to rend him in twain with a mightier passion for each?

He had been back at the school a week now. He had never dared go to see her. Confront that luminous face with his darkened one? Deal such a soul the wound of such dishonour? He knew very well that the slightest word or glance of self-betrayal would bring on the immediate severance of her relationship with him: her wifeness might be her martyrdom, but it was martyrdom inviolate. And yet he felt that if he were once with her, he could not be responsible for the consequences: he could foresee no degree of self-control that would keep him from telling her that he loved her. He had been afraid to go.

But ah, how her image drew him day and night, day and night! Slipping between him and every other being, every other desire. Her voice kept calling to him to come to her—a

voice new, irresistible, that seemed to issue from the deeps of Summer, from the deeps of Life, from the deeps of Love, with its almighty justification.

This was his first Saturday. To-day he had not even the school as a post of duty, to which he might lash himself for safety. He had gone away from town in an opposite direction from her home, burying himself alone in the forest. But between him and that summoning voice he could put no distance. It sang out afresh to him from the inviting silence of the woods as well as from its innumerable voices. It sang to him reproachfully from the pages of the old book: "*In the lusty month of May lovers call again to their mind old gentleness and old service and many deeds that were forgotten by negligence:*" he had never even gone to thank her for all her kindness to him during his illness!

Still he held out, wrestling with himself. At last Love itself, the deceiver, snarlingly pleaded that she alone could cure him of all this folly. It had grown up wholly during his absence from her, no doubt by reason of this. Many a time before he had gone to her about other troubles, and always he had found her carrying that steady

light of right-mindedness which had scattered his darkness and revealed his better pathway.

He sprang up and set off sternly through the woods. Goaded by love, he fancied that the presence of the forbidden woman would restore him to his old, blameless friendship.

XVII

SHE was at work in the garden: he had long ago noted that she never idled.

He approached the fence and leaned on it as when they had last talked together; but his big Jacobin hat was pulled down over his eyes now. He was afraid of his own voice, afraid of the sound of his knuckles, so that when at last he had rapped on the fence, he hoped that she had not heard, so that he could go away.

"Knock louder," she called out from under her bonnet. "I'm not sure that I heard you."

How sunny her voice was, how pure and sweet and remote from any suspicion of hovering harm! It unshackled him as from a dreadful nightmare.

He broke into his old laugh—the first time since he had stood there before—and frankly took off his hat.