

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.

"How did you know who it was? You saw me coming!"

"Did I? I don't like to contradict a stranger."

"Am I a stranger?"

"What makes a stranger? How long has it been since you were here?"

"A lifetime," he replied gravely.

"You are still living! Will you walk into my parlour?"

"Will you meet me at the door?"

It was so pleasant to seem gay, to say nothing, be nothing! She came quietly over to the fence and gave him her hand with a little laugh.

"You have holiday of Saturdays. I have not, you see. But I can take a recess: come in. You are looking well! Wounds agree with you."

He went trembling round to the gate, passed in, and they sat down on the bench.

"How things grow in this soil," she said pointing to the garden. "It has only been five or six weeks since you were here. Do you remember? I was planting the seed; now look at the plants!"

"I, too, was sowing that afternoon," he replied musingly. "But my harvest ripened before yours; I have already reaped it."

"What's that you are saying about me?" called out a hard, smooth voice from over the fence at their back. "I don't like to miss anything!"

Amy had a piece of sewing, which she proceeded to spread upon the fence.

"Will you show me about this, Aunt Jessica?"

She greeted John without embarrassment or discernible remembrance of their last meeting. Her fine blond hair was frowsy and a button was missing at the throat of her dress. (Some women begin to let themselves go after marriage; some after the promise of marriage.) There were cake-crumbs also in one corner of her mouth.

"These are some of my wedding clothes," she said to him prettily. "Aren't they fine?"

Mrs. Falconer drew her attention for a moment and then began to measure the cloth over the back of her finger, counting the lengths under her breath.

Amy took a pin from the bosom of her dress and picked between her pearly teeth daintily.

"Aunt Jessica," she suddenly inquired with a mischievous look at John, "before you were engaged to uncle, was there any one else you liked better?"

With a terrible inward start, he shot a covert glance at her and dropped his eyes. Mrs. Falconer's answer was playful and serene.

"It has been a long time; it's hard to remember. But I've heard of such cases."

There was something in the reply that surprised Amy and she peeped under Mrs. Falconer's bonnet to see what was going on. She had learned that a great deal went on under that bonnet.

"Well, *after* you were engaged to him, was there anybody else?"

"I don't think I remember. But I've known of such cases."

Amy peeped again, and the better to see for herself hereafter, coolly lifted the bonnet off.

"Well, after you were *married* to him," she said, "was there anybody else? I've known of such cases," she added, with a dry imitation of the phrase.

"You have made me forget my lengths,"

said Mrs. Falconer with unruffled innocence. "I'll have to measure again."

Amy turned to John with sparkling eyes.

"Did you ever know a man who was in love with a married woman?"

"Yes," said John, secretly writhing, but too truthful to say "no."

"What did he do about it?" asked Amy.

"I don't know," replied John, shortly.

"What do you think he ought to have done? What would *you* do?" asked Amy.

"I don't know," replied John, more coolly, turning away his confused face.

"Neither of you seems to know anything this afternoon," observed Amy, "and I'd always been led to suppose that each of you knew everything."

As she departed with her sewing, she turned to send a final arrow, with some genuine feeling.

"I think I'll send for *uncle* to come and talk to *me*."

"Stay and talk to us," Mrs. Falconer called to her with a sincere, pitying laugh. "Come back!"

Amy's questions had passed high over her

head like a little flock of chattering birds; they had struck him low, like bullets.

"Go on," she said quietly, when they were seated again, "what was it about the harvest?"

He could not reply at once; and she let him sit in silence, looking across the garden while she took up her knitting from the end of the bench, and leaning lightly toward him, measured a few rows of stitches across his wrist. It gave way under her touch.

"These are your mittens for next winter," she said softly, more softly than he had ever heard her speak. And the quieting melody of her mere tone!—how unlike that other voice which bored joyously into you as a bright gimlet twists its unfeeling head into wood. He turned on her one quick, beautiful look of gratitude.

"What was it about the harvest?" she repeated, forbearing to return his look, and thinking that all his embarrassment followed from the pain of having thus met Amy.

He began to speak very slowly:

"The last time I was here I boasted that I had yet to meet my first great defeat in life . . . that there was nothing stronger in the world than a man's will and purpose . . . that

if ideals got shattered, we shattered them . . . that I would go on doing with my life as I had planned, be what I wished, have what I wanted."

"Well?" she urged, busy with her needles.

"I know better now."

"Aren't you the better for knowing better?"

He made no reply; so that she began to say very simply and as a matter of course:

"It's the defeat more than anything else that hurts you! Defeat is always the hardest thing for you to stand, even in trifles. But don't you know that we have to be defeated in order to succeed? Most of us spend half our lives in fighting for things that would only destroy us if we got them. A man who has never been defeated is usually a man who has been ruined. And, of course," she added with light raillery, "of course there are things stronger than the strongest will and purpose: the sum of other men's wills and purposes, for instance. A single soldier may have all the will and purpose to whip an army, but he doesn't do it. And a man may have all the will and purpose to whip the world, walk over it rough-shod, shoulder it out of his way as you'd like to do, but he doesn't do it. And of course we do

not shatter our ideals ourselves—always: a thousand things outside ourselves do that for us. And what reason had you to say that you would have what you wanted? Your wishes are not infallible. Suppose you craved the forbidden?"

She looked over at him archly, but he jerked his face farther away. Then he spoke out with the impulse to get away from her question:

"I could stand to be worsted by great things. But the little ones, the low, the coarse, the trivial! Ever since I was here last—beginning that very night—I have been struggling like a beast with his foot in a trap. I don't mean Amy!" he cried apologetically.

"I'm glad you've discovered there *are* little things," she replied. "I had feared you might never find that out. I'm not sure yet that you have. One of your great troubles is that everything in life looks too large to you, too serious, too important. You fight the gnats of the world as you fought your panther. With you everything is a mortal combat. You run every butterfly down and break it on an iron wheel; after you have broken it, it doesn't matter: everything is as it was before, except that you

have lost time and strength. The only things that need trouble us very much are not the things it is right to conquer, but the things it is wrong to conquer. If you ever conquer in yourself anything that is right, that will be a real trouble for you as long as you live—and for *me!*"

He turned quickly and sat facing her, the muscles of his face moving convulsively. She did not look at him, but went on:

"The last time you were here, you told me that I did not appreciate Amy; that I could not do her justice; but that no woman could ever understand why a man loved any other woman."

"Did I say that?" he muttered remorsefully.

"It was because *you* did not appreciate her—it was because *you* would never be able to do her justice—that I was so opposed to the marriage. And this was largely a question of little things. I knew perfectly well that as soon as you married Amy, you would begin to expect her to act as though she were made of iron: so many pieces, so many wheels, so many cogs, so many revolutions. All the inevitable little things that make up the most of

her life — that make up so large a part of every woman's life — the little moods, the little play, little changes, little tempers and inconsistencies and contradictions and falsities and hypocrisies which come every morning and go every night, — all these would soon have been to you — oh! I'm afraid they'd have been as big as a herd of buffalo! There would have been a bull fight for every foible."

She laughed out merrily, but she did not look at him.

"Yes," she continued, trying to drain his cup for him, since he would not do it himself, "you are the last man in the world to do a woman like Amy justice. I'm afraid you will never do justice to any woman, unless you change a good deal and learn a good deal. Perhaps no woman will ever understand *you* — except me."

She looked up at him now with the clearest fondness in her exquisite eyes.

With a groan he suddenly leaned over and buried his face in his hands. His hat fell over on the grass. Her knitting dropped to her lap, and one of her hands went out quickly toward his big head, heavy with its shaggy reddish mass of hair, which had grown long during his

sickness. But at the first touch she quickly withdrew it, and stooping over picked up his hat and put it on her knees, and sat beside him silent and motionless.

He straightened himself up a moment later, and keeping his face turned away reached for his hat and drew it down over his eyes.

"I can't tell you! You don't understand!" he said in a broken voice.

"I understand everything. Amy has told me — poor little Amy! She is not wholly to blame. I blame you more. You may have been in love with your idea of her, but anything like that idea she never has been and never will be; and who is responsible for your idea, then, but yourself? It is a mistake that many a man makes; and when the woman disappoints him, he blames her, and deserts her or makes her life a torment. Of course a woman may make the same mistake; but, as a rule, women are better judges of men than men are of women. Besides, if they find themselves mistaken, they bear their disappointment better and show it less: they alone know their tragedy; it is the unperceived that kills."

The first tears that he had ever seen gath-

ered and dimmed her eyes. She was too proud either to acknowledge them or to hide them. Her lids fell quickly to curtain them in, and the lashes received them in their long, thick fringes. But she had suffered herself to go too far.

"Ah, if you had *loved* her! *loved* her!" she cried with an intensity of passion, a weary, immeasurable yearning, that seemed to come from a life in death. The strength of that cry struck him as a rushing wind strikes a young eagle on the breast, lifting him from his rock and setting him afloat on the billows of a rising storm. His spirit mounted the spirit of her unmated confession, rode it as its master, exulted in it as his element and his home. But the stricken man remained motionless on the bench a few feet from the woman, looking straight across the garden, with his hands clinched about his knees, his hat hiding his eyes, his jaws set sternly with the last grip of resolution.

It was some time before either spoke. Then her voice was very quiet.

"You found out your mistake in time; suppose it had been too late? But this is all so

sad; we will never speak of it again. Only you ought to feel that from this time you *can* go on with the plans of your life uninterrupted. Begin with all this as a small defeat that means larger victory! There is no entanglement now, not a drawback; what a future! It does look as though you might now have everything that you set your heart on."

She glanced up at him with a mournful smile, and taking the knitting which had lain forgotten in her lap leaned over again and measured the stitches upon his wrist.

"When do you start?" she asked, seeing a terrible trouble gathering in his face and resolved to draw his thoughts to other things.

"Next week."

The knitting fell again.

"And you have allowed all this time to go by without coming to see us! You are to come every day till you go: promise!"

He had been repeating that he would not trust himself to come at all again, except to say good-bye.

"I can't promise that."

"But we want you so much! The major wants you. I want you more than the major.

Why should meeting Amy be so hard? Remember how long it will be before you get back. When will you be back?"

He was thinking it were better never.

"It is uncertain," he said.

"I shall begin to look for you as soon as you are gone. I can hear your horse's feet now, rustling in the leaves of October. But what will become of me till then? Ah, you don't begin to realize how much you are to me!"

"Oh!"

He stretched his arms out into vacancy and folded them again quickly.

"I'd better go."

He stood up and walked several paces into the garden, where he feigned to be looking at the work she had left. Was he to break down now? Was the strength which he had relied on in so many temptations to fail him now, when his need was sorest?

In a few minutes he wheeled round to the bench and stopped full before her, no longer avoiding her eyes. She had taken up the book which he had laid on his end of the seat and was turning the pages.

"Have you read it?"

"Over and over."

"Ah! I knew I could trust you! You never disappoint. Sit down a little while."

"I'd — better go!"

"And haven't you a word? Bring this book back to me in silence? After all I said to you? I want to know how you feel about it — all your thoughts."

She looked up at him with a reproachful smile —

The blood had rushed guiltily into his face, and she seeing this, without knowing what it meant, the blood rushed into hers.

"I don't understand," she said proudly and coldly, dropping her eyes and dropping her head a little forward before him, and soon becoming very pale, as from a death-wound.

He stood before her, trembling, trying to speak, trying not to speak. Then he turned and strode rapidly away.