

### XVIII

THE next morning the parson was standing before his scant congregation of Episcopalians.

It was the first body of these worshippers gathered together in the wilderness mainly from the seaboard aristocracy of the Church of England. A small frame building on the northern slope of the wide valley served them for a meeting-house. No mystical half-lights there but the mystical half-lights of Faith; no windows but the many-hued windows of Hope; no arches but the vault of Love. What more did those men and women need in that land, overshadowed always by the horror of quick or waiting death?

In addition to his meagre flock many an unclaimed goat of the world fell into that meek valley-path of Sunday mornings and came to hear, if not to heed, the voice of this quiet shepherd; so that now, as he stood delivering his final exhortation, his eyes ranged over wild, lawless, desperate countenances, rimming him

darkly around. They glowered in at him through the door, where some sat upon the steps; others leaned in at the windows on each side of the room. Over the closely packed rough heads of these he could see others lounging farther away on the grass beside their rifles, listening, laughing and talking. Beyond these stretched near fields green with maize, and cabins embosomed in orchards and gardens. Once a far-off band of little children rushed across his field of vision, playing at Indian warfare and leaving in the bright air a cloud of dust from an old Indian war trail.

As he observed it all — this singularly mixed concourse of God-fearing men and women and of men and women who feared neither God nor man nor devil — as he beheld the young fields and the young children and the sweet transition of the whole land from bloodshed to innocence, the recollection of his mission in it and of the message of his Master brought out upon his cold, bleak, beautiful face the light of the Divine: so from a dark valley one may sometime have seen a snow-clad peak of the Alps lit up with the rays of the hidden sun.

He had chosen for his text the words "My



peace I give unto you," and long before the closing sentences were reached, his voice was floating out with silvery, flute-like clearness on the still air of the summer morning, holding every soul, however unreclaimed, to intense and reverential silence :

"It is now twenty years since you scaled the mountains and hewed your path into this wilderness, never again to leave it. Since then you have known but war. As I look into your faces, I see the scar of many a wound ; but more than the wounds I see are the wounds I do not see : of the body as well as of the spirit — the lacerations of sorrow, the strokes of bereavement. So that perhaps not one of you here but bears some brave visible or invisible sign of this awful past and of his share in the common strife. Twenty years are a long time to fight enemies of any kind, a long time to hold out against such as you have faced ; and had you not been a mighty people sprung from the loins of a mighty race, no one of you would be here this day to worship the God of your fathers in the faith of your fathers. The victory upon which you are entering at last is never the reward of the feeble, the cowardly, the faint-

hearted. Out of your strength alone you have won your peace.

"But, O my brethren, while your land is now at peace, are you at peace? In the name of my Master, look each of you into his heart and answer : Is it not still a wilderness? full of the wild beasts of the appetites? the favourite hunting-ground of the passions? And is each of you, tried and faithful and fearless soldier that he may be on every other field, is each of you doing anything to conquer this?

"My cry to-day then is the war-cry of the spirit. Subdue the wilderness within you! Step by step, little by little, as you have fought your way across this land from the Eastern mountains to the Western river, driven out every enemy and now hold it as your own, begin likewise to take possession of the other until in the end you may rule it also. If you are feeble; if faint-hearted; if you do not bring into your lonely, silent, unwitnessed battles every virtue that you have relied on in this outward warfare of twenty years, you may never hope to come forth conquerors. By your strength, your courage, patience, watchfulness, constancy, — by the inmost will and beholden face of victory you are



to overmaster the evil within yourselves as you have overmastered the peril in Kentucky.

"Then in truth you may dwell in green and tranquil pastures, where the will of God broods like summer light. Then you may come to realize the meaning of this promise of our Lord, 'My peace I give unto you': it is the gift of His peace to those alone who have learned to hold in quietness their land of the spirit."

White, cold, aflame with holiness, he stood before them; and every beholder, awe-stricken by the vision of that face, of a surety was thinking that this man's life was behind his speech: whether in ease or agony, he had found for his nature that victory of rest that was never to be taken from him.

But even as he stood thus, the white splendour faded from his countenance, leaving it shadowed with care. In one corner of the room, against the wall, shielding his face from the light of the window with his big black hat and the palm of his hand, sat the school-master. He was violently flushed, his eyes swollen and cloudy, his hair tossed, his linen rumpled, his posture bespeaking wretchedness and self-abandonment. Always in preaching the parson had

looked for the face of his friend; always it had been his mainstay, interpreter, steadfast advocate in every plea for perfection of life. But to-day it had been kept concealed from him; nor until he had reached his closing exhortation, had the school-master once looked him in the eye, and he had done so then in a most remarkable manner: snatching the hat from before his face, straightening his big body up, and transfixing him with an expression of such resentment and reproach, that among all the wild faces before him, he could see none to match this one for disordered and evil passion. If he could have harboured a conviction so monstrous, he would have said that his words had pierced the owner of that face like a spear and that he was writhing under the torture.

As soon as he had pronounced the benediction he looked toward the corner again, but the school-master had already left the room. Usually he waited until the others were gone and the two men walked homeward together, discussing the sermon.

To-day the others slowly scattered, and the parson sat alone at the upper end of the room disappointed and troubled.



John strode up to the door.

"Are you ready?" he asked in a curt unnatural voice.

"Ah!" The parson sprang up gladly. "I was hoping you'd come!"

They started slowly off along the path, John walking unconsciously in it, the parson stumbling along through the grass and weeds on one side. It had been John's unvarying wont to yield the path to him.

"It is easy to *preach*," he muttered with gloomy, sarcastic emphasis.

"If you tried it once, you might think it easier to practise," retorted the parson, laughing.

"It might be easier to one who is not tempted."

"It might be easier to one who is. No man is tempted beyond his strength, but a sermon is often beyond his powers. I let you know, young man, that a homily may come harder than a virtue."

"How can you stand up and preach as you've been preaching, and then come out of the church and laugh about it!" cried John angrily.

"I'm not laughing about what I preached on," replied the parson with gentleness.

"You are in high spirits! You are gay! You are full of levity!"

"I am full of gladness. I am happy: is that a sin?"

John wheeled on him, stopping short, and pointing back to the church:

"Suppose there'd been a man in that room who was trying to conquer some temptation—more terrible than you've ever known anything about. You'd made him feel that you were speaking straight at him—bidding him do right where it was so much easier to do wrong. You had helped him; he had waited to see you alone, hoping to get more help. Then suppose he had found you as you are now—full of your gladness! He wouldn't have believed in you! He'd have been hardened."

"If he'd been the right kind of man," replied the parson, quietly facing an arraignment that had the rancour of denunciation, "he ought to have been more benefited by the sight of a glad man than the sound of a sad sermon. He'd have found in me a man who practises what he preaches: I have conquered my wilderness. But I think," he added more gravely, "that if any such soul had come to me in his



trouble, I could have helped him: if he had let me know what it was, he would have found that I could understand, could sympathize. Still, I don't see why you should condemn my conduct by the test of imaginary cases. I suppose I'm happy now because I'm glad to be with *you*," and the parson looked the school-master a little reproachfully in the eyes.

"And do you think I have no troubles?" said John, his lips trembling. He turned away and the parson walked beside him.

"You have two troubles to my certain knowledge," said he in the tone of one bringing forward a piece of critical analysis that was rather mortifying to exhibit. "The one is a woman and the other is John Calvin. If it's Amy, throw it off and be a man. If it's Calvinism, throw it off and become an Episcopalian." He laughed out despite himself.

"Did you ever love a woman?" asked John gruffly.

"Many a one—in the state of the first Adam!"

"That's the reason you threw it off: many a one!"

"Don't you know," inquired the parson with an air of exegetical candour, "that no man can

be miserable because some woman or other has flirted his friend? That's the one trouble that every man laughs at — when it happens in his neighbourhood, not in his own house!"

The school-master made no reply.

"Or if it is Calvin," continued the parson, "thank God, I can now laugh at him, and so should you! Answer me one question: during the sermon, weren't you thinking of the case of a man born in a wilderness of temptations that he is foreordained never to conquer, and then foreordained to eternal damnation because he didn't conquer it?"

"No — *no!*"

"Well, you'd better've been thinking about it! For that's what you believe. And that's what makes life so hard and bitter and gloomy to you. *I* know! I carried Calvinism around within me once: it was like an uncorked ink-bottle in a rolling snowball: the farther you go, the blacker you get! Admit it now," he continued in his highest key of rarefied persistency, "admit that you were mourning over the babies in your school that will have to go to hell! You'd better be getting some of your own: the Lord will take care of other people's! Go



to see Mrs. Falconer! See all you can of her. There's a woman to bring you around!"

They had reached the little bridge over the clear, swift Elkhorn. Their paths diverged. John stopped at his companion's last words, and stood looking at him with some pity.

"I thank you for your sermon," he said huskily; "I hope to get some help from *that*. But *you*!—you are making things harder for me every word you utter. You don't understand and I can't tell you."

He took the parson's cool delicate hand in his big hot one.

Alone in the glow of the golden dusk of that day he was sitting outside his cabin on the brow of the hill, overlooking the town in the valley. How peaceful it lay in the Sunday evening light! The burden of the parson's sermon weighed more heavily than ever on his spirit. He had but to turn his eye down the valley and there, flashing in the sheen of sunset, flowed the great spring, around the margin of which the first group of Western hunters had camped for the night and given the place its name from one of the battle-fields of the Revolu-

tion; up the valley he could see the roof under which the Virginia aristocracy of the Church of England had consecrated their first poor shrine. What history lay between the finding of that spring and the building of that altar! Not the winning of the wilderness simply; not alone its peace. That westward penetrating wedge of iron-browed, iron-muscled, iron-hearted men, who were now beginning to be known as the Kentuckians, had not only cleft a road for themselves; they had opened a fresh highway for the tread of the nation and found a vaster heaven for the Star of Empire. Already this youthful gigantic West was beginning to make its voice heard from Quebec to New Orleans; while beyond the sea the three greatest kingdoms of Europe had grave and troubled thoughts of the on-rushing power it foretold and the unimaginably splendid future for the Anglo-Saxon race that it forecast.

He recalled the ardour with which he had followed the tramp of those wild Westerners; footing it alone from the crest of the Cumberland; subsisting on the game he could kill by the roadside; sleeping at night on his rifle in some thicket of underbrush or cane; resolute to



make his way to this new frontier of the new republic in the new world; open his school, read law, and begin his practice, and cast his destiny in with its heroic people.

And now this was the last Sunday in a long time, perhaps forever, that he should see it all—the valley, the town, the evening land, resting in its peace. Before the end of another week his horse would be climbing the ranges of the Alleghanies, bearing him on his way to Mount Vernon and thence to Philadelphia. By outward compact he was going on one mission for the Transylvania Library Committee and on another from his Democratic Society to the political Clubs of the East. But in his own soul he knew he was going likewise because it would give him the chance to fight his own battle out, alone and far away.

Fight it out here, he felt that he never could. He could neither live near her and not see her, nor see her and not betray the truth. His whole life had been a protest against the concealment either of his genuine dislikes or his genuine affections. How closely he had come to the tragedy of a confession, she to the tragedy of an understanding, the day before! Her deathly

pallor had haunted him ever since—that look of having suffered a terrible wound. Perhaps she understood already.

Then let her understand! Then at least he could go away better satisfied: if he never came back, she would know: every year of that long separation, her mind would be bearing him the pardoning companionship that every woman must yield the man who has loved her, and still loves her, wrongfully and hopelessly: of itself that knowledge would be a great deal to him during all those years.

Struggle against it as he would, the purpose was steadily gaining ground within him to see her and if she did not now know everything, then to tell her the truth. The consequences would be a tragedy, but might it not be a tragedy of another kind? For there were darker moments when he probed strange recesses of life for him in the possibility that his confession might open up a like confession from her. He had once believed Amy to be true when she was untrue. Might he not be deceived here? Might *she* not appear true, but in reality be untrue? If he were successfully concealing his love from her, might she not



be successfully concealing her love from him? And if they found each other out, what then?

At such moments all through him like an alarm bell sounded her warning: "*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 anything in yourself that is right, that will be a real trouble for you as long as you live—and for me!*"

Had she meant *this*? But whatever mood was uppermost, of one thing he now felt assured: that the sight of her made his silence more difficult. He had fancied that her mere presence, her purity, her constancy, her loftiness of nature would rebuke and rescue him from the evil in himself: it had only stamped upon this the consciousness of reality. He had never even realized until he saw her the last time how beautiful she was; the change in himself had opened his eyes to this; and her greater tenderness toward him in their talk of his departure, her dependence on his friendship, her coming loneliness, the sense of a tragedy in her life—all these sweet half-mute appeals to sympathy and affection had rioted in his memory every moment since.

Therefore it befell that the parson's sermon of the morning had dropped like living coals on his conscience. It had sounded that familiar, lifelong, best-loved, trumpet call of duty—the old note of joy in his strength rightly and valiantly to be put forth—which had always kindled him and had always been his boast. All the afternoon those living coals of divine remonstrance had been burning into him deeper and deeper but in vain: they could only torture, not persuade. For the first time in his life he had met face to face the fully aroused worst passions of his own stubborn, defiant, intractable nature: they too loved victory and were saying they would have it.

One by one the cabins disappeared in the darkness. One by one the stars bloomed out yellow in their still meadows. Over the vast green sea of the eastern wilderness the moon swung her silvery lamp, and up the valley floated a wide veil of mist bedashed with silvery light.

The parson climbed the crest of the hill, sat down, laid his hat on the grass, and slipped his long sensitive fingers backward over his shining hair. Neither man spoke at first: their friendship put them at ease. Nor did the one notice



the shrinking and dread which was the other's only welcome.

"Did you see the Falconers this morning?"

The parson's tone was searching and troubled and gentler than it had been earlier that day.

"No."

"They were looking for you. They thought you'd gone home and said they'd go by for you. They expected you to go out with them to dinner. Haven't you been there to-day?"

"No."

"I certainly supposed you'd go. I know they looked for you and must have been disappointed. Isn't this your last Sunday?"

"Yes."

He answered absently. He was thinking that if she was looking for him, then she had *not* understood and their relation still rested on the old innocent footing. Whatever explanation of his conduct and leave-taking the day before she had devised, it had not been in his disfavour. In all probability, she had referred it, as she had referred everything else, to his affair with Amy. His conscience smote him at the thought of her indestructible trust in him.

"If this is your last Sunday," resumed the

parson in a voice rather plaintive, "then this is our last Sunday night together. And that was my last sermon. Well, it's not a bad one to take with you. By the time you get back, you'll thank me more for it than you did this morning — if you heed it."

There was another silence before he continued, musingly :

"What an expression a sermon will sometimes bring out on a man's face! While I was preaching, I saw many a thing that no man knew I saw. It was as though I were crossing actual wildernesses; I met the wild beasts of different souls, I crept up on the lurking savages of the passions. I believe some of those men would have liked to confess to me. I wish they had."

He forbore to speak of John's black look, though it was of this that he was most grievously thinking and would have led the way to have explained. But no answer came.

"There was one face with no hidden guilt in it, no shame. I read into the depths of that clear mind. It said: 'I have conquered *my* wilderness.' I have never known another such woman as Mrs. Falconer. She never speaks of



herself; but when I am with her, I feel that the struggles of my life have been nothing."

"Yes," he continued, out of kindness trying to take no notice of his companion's silence, "she holds in quietness her land of the spirit; but there are battle-fields in her nature that fill me with awe by their silence. I'd dread to be the person to cause her any further trouble in this world."

The school-master started up, went into the cabin, and quickly came out again. The parson, absorbed in his reflections, had not noticed:

"You've thought I've not sympathized with you in your affair with Amy. It's true. But if you'd ever loved this woman and failed, I could have sympathized."

"Why don't you raise the money to build a better church by getting up a lottery?" asked John, breaking in harshly upon the parson's gentleness.

The question brought on a short discussion of this method of aiding schools and churches, then much in vogue. The parson rather favoured the plan (and it is known that afterwards a better church was built for him through this device); but his companion bore but a listless

part in the talk: he was balancing the chances, the honour and the dishonour, in a lottery of life.

"You are not like yourself to-day," said the parson reproachfully after silence had come on again.

"I know it," replied John freely, as if awaking at last.

"Well, each of us has his troubles. Sometimes I have likened the human race to a caravan of camels crossing a desert—each with a sore on his hump and each with his load so placed as to rub that sore. It is all right for the back to bear its burden, but I don't think there should have been any sore!"

"Let me ask you a question," said John, suddenly and earnestly. "Have there ever been days in your life when, if you'd been the camel, you'd have thrown the load and driver off?"

"Ah!" said the parson keenly, but gave no answer.

"Have there ever been days when you'd rather have done wrong than right?"

"Yes; there have been such days—when I was young and wild." The confession was reluctant.



"Have you ever had a trouble, and everybody around you fell upon you in the belief that it was something else?"

"That *has* happened to me—I suppose to all of us."

"Were you greatly helped by their misunderstanding you?"

"I can't say that I was."

"You would have been glad for them to know the truth, but you didn't choose to tell them?"

"Yes; I have gone through such an experience."

"So that their sympathy was in effect ridiculous?"

"That is true also."

"If you have been through all this," said John conclusively, "then without knowing anything more, you can understand why I am not like myself, as you say, and haven't been lately."

The parson moved his chair over beside the school-master's and took one of his hands in both of his own, drawing it into his lap.

"John," he said with affection, "I've been wrong: forgive me! And I can respect your silence. But don't let anything come between

us and keep it from me. One question now on this our last Sunday night together: Have you anything against me in this world?"

"Not one thing! Have you anything against me?"

"Not one thing!"

Neither spoke for a while. Then the parson resumed:

"I not only have nothing against you, but I've something to say; we might never meet hereafter. You remember the woman who broke the alabaster box for the feet of the Saviour while he was living—that most beautiful of all the appreciations? And you know what we do? Let our fellow-beings carry their crosses to their Calvaries, and after each has suffered his agony and entered into his peace, we go out to him and break our alabaster boxes above his stiff cold feet. I have always hoped that my religion might enable me to break my alabaster box for the living who alone can need it—and who always do need it. Here is mine for your feet, John: Of all the men I have ever known, you are the most sincere; of them all I would soonest pick upon you to do what is right; of them all you have the cleanest face,



because you have the most innocent heart; of them all you have the highest notions of what a man may do and be in this life. I have drawn upon your strength ever since I knew you. You have a great deal. It is fortunate; you will need a great deal; for the world will always be a battle-field to you, but the victory will be worth the fighting. And my last words to you are: fight it out to the end; don't compromise with evil; don't lower your ideals or your aims. If it can be any help to you to know it, I shall always be near you in spirit when you are in trouble; if you ever need me, I will come; and if my poor prayers can ever bring you a blessing, you shall have that."

The parson turned his calm face up toward the firmament and tears glistened in his eyes. Then perhaps from the old habit and need of following a sermon with a hymn, he said quite simply:

"Would you like a little music? It is the Good-bye of the Flute to you and a pleasant journey."

The school-master's head had dropped quickly upon his arms, which were crossed over the back of his chair. While the parson was prais-

ing him, he had put out his hand two or three times with wretched, imploring gestures. Keeping his face still hidden, he moved his head now in token of assent; and out upon the stillness of the night floated the Farewell of the Flute.

But no sermon, nor friendship, nor music, nor voice of conscience, nor voice of praise, nor ideals, nor any other earthly thing could stand this day against the evil that was in him. The parson had scarce gone away through the misty beams before he sprang up and seized his hat.

There was no fog out on the clearing. He could not have said why he had come. He only knew that he was there in the garden where he had parted from her the day before. He sat on the bench where they had talked so often, he strolled among her plants. How clear in the moonlight every leaf of the dark green little things was, many of them holding white drops of dew on their tips and edges! How plain the last shoe-prints where she had worked! How peaceful the whole scene in every direction, how sacredly at rest! And the cabin up there at the end of the garden where they were sleeping side by side—how the moon poured its



strongest light upon that: his eye could never get away from it. So closely a man might live with a woman in this seclusion! So entirely she must be his!

His passions leaped like dogs against their chains when brought too near. They began to draw him toward the cabin until at last he had come opposite to it, his figure remaining hidden behind the fence and under the heavy shadow of a group of the wilderness trees. Then it was that taking one step further, he drew back.

The low window of the cabin was open and she was sitting there near the foot of her bed, perfectly still and looking out into the night. Her face rested in one palm, her elbow on the window sill. Her nightgown had slipped down from her arm. The only sleepless thing in all the peace of that summer night: the yearning image of mated loneliness.

He was so close that he could hear the loud regular breathing of a sleeper on the bed just inside the shadow. Once the breathing stopped abruptly; and a moment later, as though in reply to a command, he heard her say without turning her head:

"I am coming"

The voice was sweet and dutiful; but to an ear that could have divined everything, so dead worn away with weariness.

Then he saw an arm put forth. Then he heard the shutter being fastened on the inside.