

XIX

THE closing day of school had come; and although he had waited in impatience for the end, it was with a lump in his throat that he sat behind the desk and ruler for the last time and looked out on the gleeful faces of the children. No more toil and trouble between them and him from this time on; a dismissal, and as far as he was concerned the scattering of the huddled lambkins to the wide pastures and long cold mountain sides of the world. He had grown so fond of them and he had grown so used to teach them by talking to them, that his speech overflowed. But it had been his unbroken wont to keep his troubles out of the schoolroom; and although the thought never left him of the other parting to be faced that day, he spoke out bravely and cheerily, with a smile:

"This is the last day of school, and you know that to-morrow I am going away and may never come back. Whether I do or not, I shall never

teach again, so that I am now saying good-bye to you for life.

"What I wish to impress upon you once more is the kind of men and women your fathers and mothers were and the kind of men and women you must become to be worthy of them. I am not speaking so much to those of you whose parents have not been long in Kentucky as to those whose parents were the first to fight for the land until it was safe for others to follow and share it. Let me tell you that nothing like that was ever done before in all this world. And if, as I sit here, I can't help seeing that this one of you has no father and this one no mother and this one neither father nor mother and that almost none of you have both, still I cannot help saying, You ought to be happy children! not that you have lost your parents, but that you have had such parents to lose and to remember!

"All of you are still too young to know fully what they have done and how the whole world will some day speak of them. Still, you can understand some things. For nowadays, when you go to your homes at night, you can lie down and sleep without fear or danger.

“And in the mornings your fathers go off to the fields to their work, your mothers go off to theirs, you go off to yours, feeling sure that you will all come together at night again. Some of you can remember when this was not so. Your father would put his arms around you in the morning and you would never see him again; your mother kissed you, and waved her hand to you as she went out of the gate; and you never knew what became of her afterwards.

“And don't you recollect how you little babes in the wilderness could never go anywhere? If you heard wild turkeys gobbling just inside the forest, or an owl hooting, or a paroquet screaming, or a fawn bleating, you were warned never to go there; it was the trick of the Indians. You could never go near a clump of high weeds, or a patch of cane, or a stump, or a fallen tree. You must not go to the sugar camp, to get a good drink, or to a salt lick for a pinch of salt, or to the field for an ear of corn, or even to the spring for a bucket of water: so that you could have neither bread nor water nor sugar nor salt. Always, always, it was the Indians. If you cried in the night, your mother came over to you and whispered: ‘Hush! they are coming!’

They will get you!’ And you forgot your pain and clung to her neck and listened.

“Now you are let alone, you go farther and farther away from your homes, you can play hide-and-seek in the canebrakes, you can explore the woods, you fish and you hunt, you are free for the land is safe.

“And then only think, that by the time you are men and women, Kentucky will no longer be the great wilderness it still is. There will be thousands and thousands of people scattered over it; and the forest will be cut down — can you ever believe that? — cut through and through, leaving some trees here and some trees there. And the cane will be cut down: can you believe that? And instead of buffalo and wild-cats and bears and wolves and panthers there will be flocks of the whitest sheep, with little lambs frisking about on the green spring meadows. And under the big shady trees in the pastures there will be herds of red cattle, so gentle and with backs so soft and broad that you could almost stretch yourselves out and go to sleep on them, and they would never stop chewing their cuds. Only think of the hundreds of orchards with their apple-blossoms

and of the big, ripe, golden apples on the trees in the fall! It will be one of the quietest, gentlest lands that a people ever owned; and this is the gift of your fathers who fought for it and of your mothers who fought for it also. And you must never forget that you would never have had such fathers, had you not had such mothers to stand by them and to die with them.

"This is what I have wished to teach you more than anything in your books — that you may become men and women worthy of them and of what they have left you. But while being the bravest kind of men and women, you should try also to be gentle men and gentle women. You boys must get over your rudeness and your roughness; that is all right in you now but it would be all wrong in you afterwards. And the last and the best thing I have to say to *you* is be good boys and grow up to be good men! That sounds very plain and common but I can wish you nothing better for there is nothing better. As for my little girls, they are good enough as they are!

"I have talked a long time. God bless you every one. I wish you long and happy lives and

I hope we may meet again. And now all of you must come and shake hands with me and tell me good-bye."

They started forward and swarmed toward him; only, as the foremost of them rose and hid her from sight, little Jennie, with one mighty act of defiant joy, hurled her arithmetic out of the window; and a chubby-cheeked veteran on the end of the bench produced a big red apple from between his legs and went for it with a smack of gastric rapture that made his toes curl and sent his glance to the rafters. They swarmed on him, and he folded his arms around the little ones and kissed them; the older boys, the warriors, brown and barefoot, stepping sturdily forward one by one, and holding out a strong hand that closed on his and held it, their eyes answering his sometimes with clear calm trust and fondness, sometimes lowered and full of tears; other little hands resting unconsciously on each of his shoulders, waiting for their turns. Then there were softened echoes — gay voices, dying away in one direction and another, and then — himself alone in the room — school-master no longer.

He waited till there was silence, sitting in his

old erect way behind his desk, the bright smile still on his face though his eyes were wet. Then, with the thought that now he was to take leave of *her*, he suddenly leaned forward and buried his face on his arms.

XX

IN the Country of the Spirit there is a certain high table-land that lies far on among the outposts toward Eternity. Standing on that calm clear height, where the sun shines ever though it shines coldly, the wayfarer may look behind him at his own footprints of self-renunciation, below on his dark zones of storm, and forward to the final land where the mystery, the pain, and the yearning of his life will either be infinitely satisfied or infinitely quieted. But no man can write a description of this place for those who have never trodden it; by those who have, no description is desired: their fullest speech is Silence. For here dwells the Love of which there has never been any confession, from which there is no escape, for which there is no hope: the love of a man for a woman who is bound to another, or the love of a woman for a man who is bound to another. Many there are who know what that means, and this is the reason why the land is always thronged. But

in the throng no one signals another; to walk there is to be counted among the Unseen and the Alone.

To this great wistful height of Silence he had struggled at last after all his days of rising and falling, of climbing and slipping back. It was no especial triumph for his own strength. His better strength had indeed gone into it, and the older rightful habitudes of mind that always mean so much to us when we are tried and tempted, and the old beautiful submission of himself to the established laws of the world. But more than what these had effected was what she herself had been to him and had done for him. Even his discovery of her at the window that last night had had the effect of bidding him stand off; for he saw there the loyalty and sacredness of wifehood that, however full of suffering, at least asked for itself the privilege and the dignity of suffering unnoticed.

Thus he had come to realize that Life had long been leading him blindfold, until one recent day, snatching the bandage from his eyes, she had cried: "Here is the parting of three ways, each way a tragedy: choose your way and your tragedy!"

If he confessed his love and found that she felt but friendship for him, there was the first tragedy. The wrong in him would lack the answering wrong in her, which sometimes, when the two are put together, so nearly makes up the right. From her own point of view, he would merely be offering her a delicate inefaceable insult. If she had been the sort of woman by whose vanity every conquest is welcomed as a tribute and pursued as an aim, he could never have cared for her at all. Thus while his love took its very origin from his belief of her nobility, he was premeditating the means of having her prove to him that this did not exist.

If he told her everything and surprised her love for him, there was the second tragedy. For over there, beyond the scene of such a confession, he could not behold her as anything else than a fatally lowered woman. The agony of this, even as a possibility, overwhelmed him in advance. To require of her that she should have a nature of perfect loyalty and at the same time to ask her to pronounce her own falseness — what happiness could that bring to him? If she could be faithless to one man because she

loved another, could she not be false to the second, if in time she grew to love a third? Out of the depths even of his loss of her the terrible cry was wrung from him that no love could long be possible between him and any woman who was not free to love him.

And so at last, with that mingling of selfish and unselfish motives, which is like the mixed blood of the heart itself, he had chosen the third tragedy: the silence that would at least leave each of them blameless. And so he had come finally to that high cold table-land where the sun of Love shines rather as the white luminary of another world than the red quickener of this.

Over the lofty table-land of Kentucky the sky bent darkest blue, and was filled with wistful, silvery light that afternoon as he walked out to the Falconers'. His face had never looked so clear, so calm; his very linen never so spotless, or so careful about his neck and wrists; and his eyes held again their old beautiful light — saddened.

From away off he could descry her, walking about the yard in the pale sunshine. He had

expected to find her preoccupied as usual; but to-day she was strolling restlessly to and fro in front of the house, quite near it and quite idle. When she saw him coming, scarce aware of her own actions, she went round the house and walked on quickly away from him.

As he was following and passing the cabin, a hand was quickly put out and the shutter drawn partly to.

"How do you do!"

That hard, smooth, gay little voice!

"You mustn't come here! And don't you peep! When are you going?"

He told her.

"*To-morrow!* Why, have you forgotten that I'm married to-morrow! Aren't you coming? Upon my word! I've given you to the widow Babcock, and you are to ride in the procession with her. She has promised me not to laugh once on the way or even to allude to anything cheerful! Be persuaded! . . . Well, I'm sorry. I'll have to give your place to Peter, I suppose. And I'll tell the widow she can be natural and gay: Peter'll not mind! Good-bye! I can't shake hands with you."

Behind the house, at the foot of the sloping

hill, there was a spring such as every pioneer sought to have near his home; and a little lower down, in one corner of the yard, the water from this had broadened out into a small pond. Dark-green sedgy cane grew thick around half the margin.

One March day some seasons before, Major Falconer had brought down with his rifle from out the turquoise sky a young lone-wandering swan. In those early days the rivers and ponds of the wilderness served as resting-places and feeding-grounds for these unnumbered birds in their long flights between the Southern waters and the Northern lakes. A wing of this one had been broken, and out of her wide heaven of freedom and light she had floated down his captive but with all her far-sweeping instincts throbbing on unabated. This pool had been the only thing to remind her since of the blue-breasted waves and the glad fellowship of her kind. On this she had passed her existence, with a cry in the night now and then that no one heard, a lifting of the wings that would never rise, an eye turned upward toward the turquoise sky across which familiar voices called to each other, called down, and were lost in the distance.

As he followed down the hill, she was standing on the edge of the pond, watching the swan feeding in the edge of the cane. He took her hand without a word, and looked with clear unfaltering eyes down into her face, now swanlike in whiteness.

She withdrew her hand and gave him the gloves which she was holding in the other.

"I'm glad you thought enough of them to come for them."

"I couldn't come! Don't blame me!"

"I understand! Only I might have helped you in your trouble. If a friend can't do that—may not do that! But it is too late now! You start for Virginia to-morrow?"

"To-morrow."

"And to-morrow Amy marries. I lose you both the same day! You are going straight to Mount Vernon?"

"Straight to Mount Vernon."

"Ah, to think that you will see Virginia so soon! I've been recalling a great deal about Virginia during these days when you would not come to see me. Now I've forgotten everything I meant to say!"

They climbed the hill slowly. Two or three

times she stopped and pressed her hand over her heart. She tried to hide the sound of her quivering breath and glanced up once to see whether he were observing. He was not. With his old habit of sending his thoughts on into the future, fighting its distant battles, feeling its far-off pain, he was less conscious of their parting than of the years during which he might not see her again. It is the woman who bursts the whole grape of sorrow against the irrepressible palate at such a moment; to a man like him the same grape distils a vintage of yearning that will brim the cup of memory many a time beside his lamp in the final years.

He would have passed the house, supposing they were to go to the familiar seat in the garden; but a bench had been placed under a forest tree near the door and she led the way to this. The significance of the action was lost on him.

"Yes," she continued, returning to a subject which furnished both an escape and a concealment of her feelings, "I have been revisiting my girlhood. You love Kentucky, but I cannot make myself over."

Her face grew full of the finest memories and all the fibres of her nature were becoming more

unstrung. He had made sure of his strength before he had ever dared see her this day, had pitted his self-control against every possible temptation to betray himself that could arise throughout their parting; and it was this very composure, so unlooked for, that unconsciously drove her to the opposite extreme. Shades of colour swept over her neck and brow, as though she were sitting under wind-tossed blossoming peach boughs. Her lustrous, excited eyes seemed never able to withdraw themselves from his whitened solemn face. Its mute repressed suffering touched her; its calmness filled her with vague pain that at such a time he could be so calm. And the current of her words ran swift, as a stream loosened at last from some steep height.

"Sometime you might be in that part of Virginia. I should like you to know the country there and the place where my father's house stood. And when you see the President, I wish you would recall my father to him. And you remember that one of my brothers was a favourite young officer of his. I should like you to hear him speak of them both: he has not forgotten. Ah, my father! He had his faults,

but they were all the faults of a gentleman. And the faults of my brothers were the faults of gentlemen. I never saw my mother; but I know how genuine she was by the books she liked and her dresses and her jewels, and the manner in which she had things put away in the closets. One's childhood is everything! If I had not felt I was all there was in the world to speak for my father and my mother and my brothers! Ah, sometimes pride is the greatest of virtues!"

He bowed his head in assent.

With a swift transition she changed her voice and manner and the conversation:

"That is enough about me. Have you thought that you will soon be talking to the greatest man in the world—you who love ideals?"

"I have not thought of it lately."

"You will think of it soon! And that reminds me: why did you go away as you did the last time you were here—when I wanted to talk with you about the book?"

Her eyes questioned him imperiously.

"I cannot tell you: that is one of the things you'd better not wish to understand."

She continued to look at him, and when she spoke, her voice was full of relief:

"It was the first time you ever did anything that I could not understand: I could not read your face that day."

"Can you read it now?" he asked, smiling at her sorrowfully.

"Perfectly!"

"What do you read?"

"Everything that I have always liked you for most. Memories are a great deal to me. Ah, if you had ever done anything to spoil yours!"

"Do you think that if I loved a woman she would know it by looking at my face?"

"You would tell her: that is your nature."

"Would I? *Should I?*"

"Why not?"

There was silence.

"Let me talk to you about the book," he cried suddenly. He closed his eyes and passed one hand several times slowly across his forehead; then facing her but with his arm resting on the back of the seat and his eyes shaded by his hand he began:

"You were right: it is a book I have needed.

At first it appeared centuries old to me and far away: the greatest gorgeous picture I had ever seen of human life anywhere. I could never tell you of the regret with which it filled me not to have lived in those days—of the longing to have been at Camelot; to have seen the King and to have served him; to have been friends with the best of the Knights; to have taken their vows; to have gone out with them to right what was wrong, to wrong nothing that was right."

The words were wrung from him with slow terrible effort, as though he were forcing himself to draw nearer and nearer some spot of supreme mental struggle. She listened, stilled, as she had never been by any words of his. At the same time she felt stifled—felt that she should have to cry out—that he could be so deeply moved and so self-controlled.

More slowly, with more composure, he went on. He was still turned toward her, his hand shading the upper part of his face:

"It was not until—not until—afterwards—that I got something more out of it than all that—got what I suppose you meant. . . . I suppose you meant that the whole story was

not far away from me but present here—its right and wrong—its temptation; that there was no vow a man could take then that a man must not take now; that every man still has his Camelot and his King, still has to prove his courage and his strength to all men . . . and that after he has proved these, he has—as his last, highest act of service in the world . . . to lay them all down, give them all up, for the sake of—of his spirit. You meant that I too, in my life, am to go in quest of the Grail: is it all that?"

The tears lay mute on her eyes. She rose quickly and walked away to the garden. He followed her. When they had entered it, he strolled beside her among the plants.

"You must see them once more," she said. Her tone was perfectly quiet and careless. Then she continued with animation:

"Some day you will not know this garden. When we are richer, you will see what I shall do: with it, with the house, with everything! I do not live altogether on memories: I have hopes."

They came to the bench where they were used to talk. She sat down, and waited until

she could control the least tremor of her voice. Then she turned upon him her noble eyes, the exquisite passionate tender light of which no effort of the will could curtain in. Nor could any self-restraint turn aside the electrical energy of her words:

"I thought I should not let you go away without saying something more to you about what has happened lately with Amy. My interest in you, your future, your success, has caused me to feel everything more than you can possibly realize. But I am not thinking of this now: it is nothing, it will pass. What it has caused me to see and to regret more than anything else is the power that life will have to hurt you on account of the ideals that you have built up in secret. We have been talking about Sir Thomas Malory and chivalry and ideals: there is one thing you need to know—*all* of us need to know it—and to know it well.

"Ideals are of two kinds. There are those that correspond to our highest sense of perfection. They express what we might be were life, the world, ourselves, all different, all better. Let these be high as they may! They are not

useless because unattainable. Life is not a failure because they are never attained. God Himself requires of us the unattainable: 'Be ye perfect, even as I am perfect! He could not do less. He commands perfection, He forgives us that we are not perfect! Nor does He count us failures because we have to be forgiven. Our ideals also demand of us perfection—the impossible; but because we come far short of this we have no right to count ourselves as failures. What are they like—ideals such as these? They are like light-houses. But light-houses are not made to live in; neither can we live in such ideals. I suppose they are meant to shine on us from afar, when the sea of our life is dark and stormy, perhaps to remind us of a haven of hope, as we drift or sink in shipwreck. All of *your* ideals are light-houses.

"But there are ideals of another sort; it is these that you lack. As we advance into life, out of larger experience of the world and of ourselves, are unfolded the ideals of what will be possible to us if we make the best use of the world and of ourselves, taken as we are. Let these be as high as they may, they will

always be lower than those others which are perhaps the veiled intimations of our immortality. These will always be imperfect; but life is not a failure because they are so. It is these that are to burn for us, not like lighthouses in the distance, but like candles in our hands. For so many of us they are too much like candles! — the longer they burn, the lower they burn, until before death they go out altogether! But I know that it will not be thus with you. At first you will have disappointments and sufferings — the world on one side, unattainable ideals of perfection on the other. But by degrees the comforting light of what you may actually do and be in an imperfect world will shine close to you and all around you, more and more. It is this that will lead you never to perfection, but always toward it."

He bowed his head: the only answer he could make.

It was getting late. The sun at this moment passed behind the western tree-tops. It was the old customary signal for him to go. They suddenly looked at each other in that shadow.

"I shall always think of you for your last words to me," he said in a thick voice, rising.

"Some day you will find the woman who will be a candle," she replied sadly, rising also. Then with her lips trembling, she added piteously:

"Oh, if you ever marry, don't make the mistake of treating the woman as an ideal! Treat her in every way as a human being exactly like yourself! With the same weakness, the same struggles, the same temptations! And as you have some mercy on yourself despite your faults, have some mercy on her despite hers."

"Must I ever think of you as having been weak and tempted as I have been?" he cried, the guilty blood rushing into his face in the old struggle to tell her everything.

"Oh, as for me — what do *you* know of me!" she cried, laughing. And then more quickly:

"I have read your face! What do you read in mine?"

He looked long into it:

"All that I have most wished to see in the face of any woman — except one thing!"

"What is that? But don't tell me!"

She turned away toward the garden gate. In silence they passed out — walking toward

the edge of the clearing. Half-way she paused. He lifted his hat and held out his hand. She laid hers in it and they gave each other the long clinging grasp of affection.

"Always be a good man," she said, tightening her grasp and turning her face away.

As he was hurrying off, she called to him in a voice full of emotion :

"Come back!"

He wheeled and walked towards her blindly.

She scanned his face, feature by feature.

"Take off your hat!" she said with a tremulous little laugh. He did so and she looked at his forehead and his hair.

"Go now, dear friend!" she said calmly but quickly.

XXI

It was the morning of the wedding.

According to the usage of the time the marriage ceremony was to take place early in the forenoon, in order that the guests, gathered in from distant settlements of the wilderness, might have the day for festivity and still reach home before night. Late in the afternoon the bridal couple, escorted by many friends, were to ride into town to Joseph's house, and in the evening there was to be a house-warming.

The custom of the backwoods country ran that a man must not be left to build his house alone; and one day some weeks before this wagons had begun to roll in from this direction and from that direction out of the forest, hauling the logs for Joseph's cabin.

Then with loud laughter and the writhing of tough backs and the straining of powerful arms and legs, men old, middle-aged, and young had raised the house like overgrown boys at play, and then had returned to their own neglected