

rippled down over her knees. With the loosening of her hair somehow had come the loosening of her tears. And with the loosening of her tears came the loosening of her hold upon what she, until this night, had never acknowledged to herself — her love of him, the belief that he had loved her.

The next morning the parson, standing a white, cold shepherd before his chilly wilderness flock, preached a sermon from the text: "I shall go softly all my years." While the heads of the rest were bowed during the last moments of prayer, she rose and slipped out.

"Yes," she said to herself, gathering her veil closely about her face as she alighted at the door of her house and the withered leaves of November were whirled fiercely about her feet, "I shall go softly all my years."

## XXIII

AFTER this the years were swept along. Fast came the changes in Kentucky. The prophecy which John Gray had made to his school-children passed to its realization and reality went far beyond it. In waves of migration, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of settlers of the Anglo-Saxon race hurried into the wilderness and there jostled and shouldered each other in the race passion of soil-owning and home-building; or always farther westward they rushed, pushing the Indian back. Lexington became the chief manufacturing town of the new civilization, thronged by merchants and fur-clad traders; gathered into it were men and women making a society that would have been brilliant in the capitals of the East; at its bar were heard illustrious voices, the echoes of which are not yet dead, are past all dying; the genius of young Jouett found for itself the secret of painting canvases so luminous and true that never



since in the history of the State have they been equalled; the Transylvania University arose with lecturers famous enough to be known in Europe: students of law and medicine travelled to it from all parts of the land.

John Gray's school-children grew to be men and women. For the men there were no longer battles to fight in Kentucky, but there were the wars of the Nation; and far away on the widening boundaries of the Republic they conquered or failed and fell: as volunteers with Perry in the victory on Lake Erie; in the awful massacre at the River Raisin; under Harrison at the Thames; in the mud and darkness of the Mississippi at New Orleans, repelling Pakenham's charge with Wellington's veteran, victory-flushed campaigners.

The school-master's friend, the parson, he too had known his more peaceful warfare, having married and become a manifold father. Of a truth it was feared at one period that the parson was running altogether to prayers and daughters. For it was remarked that with each birth, his petitions seemed longer and his voice to rise from behind the chancel with a fresh wail as of one who felt a growing grievance

both against himself and the Almighty. Howbeit, innocently enough after the appearance of the fifth female infant, one morning he preached on the words: "No man knoweth what manner of creature he is"; and was unaware that a sudden smile rippled over the faces of his hearers. But it was not until later on when mother and six were packed into one short pew at morning service, that they became known in a body as the parson's Collect for all Sundays.

Sometimes the little ones were divided and part of them sat in another pew where there was a single occupant — a woman — childless.

"Yes," she had said, "I shall go softly all my years."

The plants she had brought that summer from Virginia had long since become old bushes. The Virginia Creeper had climbed to the tops of the trees. The garden, though in the same spot, was another place now, with vine-heavy arbours and sodded walks running between borders of flowers and vegetables — daffodils and thyme — in the quaint Virginia fashion. There was a lawn covered as the ancestral one had been with the feathery grass of England.



There was a park where the deer remained at home in their wilderness.

Crowning this landscape of comfort and good taste, stood the house. Often of nights when its roof lay deep under snow and the eaves were bearded with hoary icicles, there were candles twinkling at every window and the sounds of music and dancing in the parlours. Once a year there was a great venison supper in the dining-room, draped with holly and mistletoe. On Christmas eve many a child's sock or stocking was hung — no one knew when or by whom — around the shadowy chimney-seat of her room; and every Christmas morning the little negroes from the cabins knew to whom each of these belonged. In spring, parties of young girls and youths came out from town for fishing parties and picknicked on the lawn amid the dandelions and under the song of the blackbird; during the summer, for days at a time, other gay company filled the house; of autumns there were nutting parties in the russet woods. Other guests also, not young, not gay. Aaron Burr was entertained there; there met for counsel the foremost Western leaders in his magnificent conspiracy. More than one great man of his day, middle-

aged, unmarried, began his visits, returned oftener for a while — always alone — and one day drove away disappointed.

Through seasons and changes she had gone softly: never retreating from life but drawing about her as closely as she could its ties, its sympathies, its duties: in all things a character of the finest equipoise, the truest moderation.

But there are women in the world — some of us men may have discerned one of them in the sweep of our experience — to whom the joy and the sorrow come alike with quietness. For them there is neither the cry of sudden delight nor the cry of sudden anguish. Gazing deep into their eyes, we are reminded of the light of dim churches; hearing their voices, we dream of some minstrel whose murmurs reach us imperfectly through his fortress wall; beholding the sweetness of their faces, we are touched as by the appeal of the mute flowers; merely meeting them in the street, we recall the long-vanished image of the Divine Goodness. They are the women who have missed happiness and who know it, but having failed of affection, give themselves to duty. And so life never rises high and close about them as about one



who stands waist-deep in a wheat-field, gathering at will either its poppies or its sheaves ; it flows forever away as from one who pauses waist-deep in a stream and hearkens rather to the rush of all things toward the eternal deeps. It was into the company of these quieter pilgrims that she had passed : she had missed happiness twice.

Her beauty had never faded. Nature had fought hard in her for all things, having prepared her for all things ; and to the last youth of her womanhood it burned like an autumn rose which some morning we may have found on the lawn under a dew that is turning to ice. But when youth was gone, in the following years her face began to reflect the freshness of Easter lilies. For prayer will in time make the human countenance its own divinest altar ; years upon years of true thoughts, like ceaseless music shut up within, will vibrate along the nerves of expression until the lines of the living instrument are drawn into correspondence, and the harmony of visible form matches the unheard harmonies of the mind. It was about this time also that there fell upon her hair the earliest rays of that light which is the dawn of the Eternal Morning.

She had never ceased to watch his career as part of her very life. Time was powerless to remove him farther from her than destiny had removed him long before : it was always yesterday ; the whole past with him seemed caught upon the clearest mirror just at her back. Once or twice a year she received a letter, books, papers, something ; she had been kept informed of the birth of his children. From other sources—his letters to the parson, traders between Philadelphia and the West—she knew other things : he had risen in the world, was a judge, often leading counsel in great cases, was almost a great man. She planted her pride, her gratitude, her happiness, on this new soil : they were the last fresh growths of her character ; they were the few seed that a woman in the final years will sow in a window-box and cover with a window-pane and watch and water and wake and think of in the night—she who was used once to range the fields.

But never from first to last had she received a letter from him that was transparent ; the mystery stayed unlifted ; she had to accept the constancy of his friendship without its confidence. Question or chiding of course there



never was from her; inborn refinement alone would have kept her from curiosity or prying; but she could not put away the conviction that the concealment which he steadily adhered to was either delicately connected with his marriage or registered but too plainly some downward change in himself. Which was it, or was it both? Had he too missed happiness? missed it as she had—by a union with a perfectly commonplace, plodding, unimaginative, unsympathetic, unrefined nature? Or had he changed for the worse without even this provocation? Had he gone the usual way of men, fallen, grown secretly corrupt? And was it a mercy to be able to remember him, not to know him?

These thoughts filled her so often, so often! For into the busiest life—the life that toils to shut out thought—the inevitable leisure will come; and with the leisure will return the dreaded emptiness, the loneliness, the never stifled need of sympathy, affection, companionship—for that world of two outside of which every other human being is a stranger. And it was he who entered into all these hours of hers as by a right that she had neither the heart nor the strength to question.

For behind everything else there was one thing more—deeper than anything else, dearer, more sacred; the feeling she would never surrender that for a while at least he had cared more for her than he had ever realized.

One mild afternoon of autumn she was walking with quiet dignity around her garden. She had just come from town where she had given to Jouett the last sitting for her portrait, and she was richly dressed in the satin gown and cap of lace which those who see the picture nowadays will remember. The finishing of it had saddened her a little; she meant to leave it to him; and she wondered whether, when he looked into the eyes of this portrait, he would at last understand: she had tried to tell him the truth; it was the truth that Jouett painted.

Thus she was thinking of the past as usual; and once she paused in the very spot where one sweet afternoon of May long ago he had leaned over the fence, holding in his hand his big black hat decorated with a Jacobin cockade, and had asked her consent to marry Amy. Was not yonder the very maple, in the shade of which he and she sat some weeks later while she had



talked with him about the ideals of life? She laughed, but she touched her handkerchief to her eyes as she turned to pass on. Then she stopped abruptly.

Coming down the garden walk toward her with a light rapid step, his head in the air, a smile on his fresh noble face, an earnest look in his gray eyes, was a tall young fellow of some eighteen years. A few feet off he lifted his hat with a free, gallant air, uncovering a head of dark-red hair, closely curling.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, in a voice that fell on her ear like music long remembered. "Is this Mrs. Falconer?"

"Yes," she replied, beginning to tremble, "I am Mrs. Falconer."

"Then I should like to introduce myself to you, dearest madam. I am John Gray, the son of your old friend, and my father sends me to you to stay with you if you will let me. And he desires me to deliver this letter."

"John Gray!" she cried, running forward and searching his face. "*You* John Gray! *You!* Take off your hat!" For a moment she looked at his forehead and his hair; her eyes became blinded with tears. She threw her

arms around his neck with a sob and covered his face with kisses.

"Madam," said the young fellow, stooping to pick up his hat, and laughing outright at his own blushes and confusion, "I don't wonder that my father thinks so much of you!"

"I never did that to your father!" she retorted. Beneath the wrinkled ivory of her skin a tinge of faintest pink appeared and disappeared.

Half an hour later she was sitting at a western window. Young John Gray had gone to the library to write to his father and mother, announcing his arrival; and in her lap lay his father's letter which with tremulous fingers she was now wiping her spectacles to read. In all these years she had never allowed herself to think of *her* John Gray as having grown older: she saw him still young, as when he used to lean over the garden fence. But now the presence of this son had the effect of suddenly pushing the father far on into life; and her heart ached with this first realization that he too must have passed the climbing-point and have set his feet on the shaded downward slope that leads to the quiet valley.



His letter began lightly :

"I send John to you with the wish that you will be to the son the same inspiring soul you once were to the father. You will find him headstrong and with great notions of what he is to be in the world. But he is warm-hearted and clean-hearted. Let him do for you the things I used to do; let him hold the yarn on his arms for you to wind off, and read to you your favourite novels; he is a good reader for a young fellow. And will you get out your spinning-wheel some night when the logs are roaring in the fireplace and let him hear its music? Will you some time with your own hands make him a johnny-cake on a new ash shingle? I want him to know a woman who can do all these things and still be a great lady. And lay upon him all the burdens that in any way you can, so that he shall not think too much of what he may some day do in life, but, of what he is actually doing. We get great reports of the Transylvania University, of the bar of Lexington, of the civilization that I foresaw would spring up in Kentucky; and I send John to you with the wish that he hear lectures and afterward go into the office of some one

whom I shall name, and finally marry and settle there for life. You recall this as the wish of my own; through John, then, I shall accomplish it—through John shall be done what I could not do. You see how stubborn I am! I have given him the names of my school-children. He is to find out those of them who still live there, and to tell me of those who have passed away or been scattered.

"I do not know; but if at the end of life I should be left alone here, perhaps I shall make my way back to Kentucky to John, as the old tree falls beside the young one."

From this point the tone of the letter changed.

"And now I am going to open to you what no other eye has ever seen, must ever see—one page in the book of my life."

When she reached these words with a contraction of the heart and a loud throbbing of the pulses in her ears, she got up and locked the letter in her bureau. Then, commanding herself, she went to the dining-room, and with her own hands prepared the supper table; got out her finest linen, glass, silver; had the sconces lighted, extra candelabra brought in;



gave orders for especial dishes to be cooked, and when everything was served, seated her guest at the foot of the table and let him preside as though it were his old rightful place. Ah, how like his father he was! Several times when the father's name was mentioned, he quite choked up with tears.

At an early hour he sought rest from the fatigue of travel. She was left alone. The house was quiet. She summoned the negro girl who slept on the floor in her room and who was always with her of evenings:

"You can go to the cabin till bedtime. And when you come in, don't make any noise. And don't speak to me. I shall be asleep."

Then seating herself beside the little candle stand which mercifully for her had shed its light on so many books in the great lonely bed-chamber, she re-read those last words:

"And now I am going to open to you what no other eye has ever seen, must ever see—one page in the book of my life:

"Can you remember the summer I left Kentucky? On reaching Philadelphia I called on a certain family consisting, as I afterwards ascertained, of father, mother, and daughter;

and being in search of lodgings, I was asked to become a member of their household. This offer was embraced the more eagerly because I was sick for a home that summer and in need of some kind soul to lean on in my weakness. I had indeed been led for these reasons to seek their acquaintance—the father and mother having known my own parents early in life, so that they had seemed old friends even before I met them. You will thus understand how natural a haven with my loneliness and amid such memories this house became to me, and upon what grounds I stood in my association with its members from the beginning.

"When the lawsuit went against me and I was wrongfully thrown into jail for debt, their faithful interest only deepened. Very poor themselves, they would yet have made any sacrifice in my behalf. During the months of my imprisonment they were often with me, bringing every comfort and brightening the dulness of many an hour.

"Upon my release I returned gladly to their household, welcomed I could not say with what joyous affection. Soon afterwards I found a position in the office of a law firm and got my start in life.



"And now I cross the path of some things that cannot be written. But you who know what my life and character had been will nobly understand: remember your last words to me.

"One day I offered my hand to the daughter. I told her the whole truth: that there was some one else—not free; that no one could take the place this other was filling at that moment, would fill always. Nevertheless, if she would accept me on these conditions, everything that it was in my power to promise she should have.

"She said that in time she would win the rest.

"A few weeks later that letter came from you, bringing the intelligence that changed everything. (Do you remember my reply? I seem only this moment to have dropped the pen.) As soon as I could control myself, I told her that now you were free, that it was but justice and kindness alike to her and to me that I should give her the chance to reconsider the engagement. A week passed, I went again. I warned her how different the situation had become. I could promise less than before—I could not say how little. A month later I went again.

"Ah, well—that is all!

"The summer after my marriage I travelled to Virginia regarding a lawsuit. One day I rode far out of my course into the part of the country where you had lived. I remained some days strolling over the silent woods and fields, noting the bushes on the lawn, such as you had carried over into Kentucky, hunting out the quiet nooks where you were used to read in your girlhood. Those long, sweet, sacred summer days alone with you there before you were ever married! *O Jessica! Jessica! Jessica! Jessica!* And to this day the sight of peach blossoms in the spring—the rustle of autumn leaves under my feet! Can you recall the lines of Malory? '*Men and women could love together seven years, and then was love truth and faithfulness.*' How many more than seven have I loved you!—you who never gave me anything but friendship, but who would in time, I hope, have given me everything if I had come back. Ah, I did come back! I have forever been coming back! Many a time even now as soon as I have hurried through the joyous gateways of sleep, I come back over the mountains to you as naturally as though there had been no years to separate and to age. Let me



tell you all this! My very life would be incomplete without it! I owed something to you long before I owed anything to another: a duty can never set aside a duty. And as to what I have owed you since, it becomes more and more the noblest earthly debt that I shall ever leave unpaid. I did not know you perfectly when we parted: I was too young, too ignorant of the world, too ignorant of many women. A man must have touched their coarseness in order to appreciate their refinement; have been wounded by untruthfulness to understand their delicate honour; he must have been driven to turn his eyes mercifully away from their stain before he can ever look with all the reverence and gratitude of his heart and soul upon their brows of chastity.

"But of my life otherwise. I take it for granted that you would like to know where I stand, what I have become, whether I have kept faith with the ideals of my youth.

"I have succeeded, perhaps reached now what men call the highest point of their worldly prosperity, made good my resolve that no human power should defeat me. All that Macbeth had not I have: a quiet throne of my own, children,

wife, troops of friends, duties, honours, ease. There have been times when with natural misgiving lest I had wandered too far these many summers on a sea of glory, I have prepared for myself the lament of Wolsey on his fall: yet ill fortune has not overwhelmed me or mine.

"All this prosperity, as the mere fruit of my toil, has been less easy than for many. I may not boast with the Apostle that I have fought a good fight, but I can say that I have fought a hard one. The fight will always be hard for any man who undertakes to conquer life with the few and simple weapons I have used and who will accept victory only upon such terms as I have demanded. For be my success small or great, it has been won without wilful wrong of a single human being and without inner compromise or other form of self-abasement. No man can look me in the eyes and say I ever wronged him for my own profit; none may charge that I have smiled on him in order to use him, or called him my friend that I might make him do for me the work of a servant.

"Do not imagine I fail to realize that I have added my full share to the general evil of the world: in part unconsciously, in part against



my conscious will. It is the knowledge of this influence of imperfection forever flowing from myself to all others, that has taught me charity with all the wrongs that flow from others toward me. As I have clung to myself despite the evil, so I have clung to the world despite all the evil that is in the world. To lose faith in men, not in humanity; to see justice go down and not believe in the triumph of injustice; for every wrong that you weakly deal another or another deals you to love more and more the fairness and beauty of what is right; and so to turn with ever-increasing love from the imperfection that is in us all to the Perfection that is above us all—the perfection that is God: this is one of the ideals of actual duty that you once said were to be as candles in my hand. Many a time this candle has gone out; but as quickly as I could snatch any torch—with your sacred name on my lips—it has been relighted.

“My candles are all beginning to burn low now. For as we advance far on into life, one by one our duties end, one by one the lights go out. Not much ahead of me now must lurk the great mortal changes, coming always nearer, always faster. As they approach, I look less

to my candles, more toward my lighthouses—those distant unfailing beacons that cast their rays over the stormy sea of this life from the calm ocean of the Infinite. I know this: that if I should live to be an old man, my duties ended and my candles gone, it is these that will shine in upon me in that vacant darkness. And I have this belief: that if we did but recognize them aright, these ideals at the close of life would become one with the ideals of our youth. We lost them as we left mortal youth behind; we regain them as we enter upon youth immortal.

“If I have kept unbroken faith with any of mine, thank you. And thank God!”

THE END