CONISTON

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

ON THE DANGERS OF CURIOSITY

First I am to write a love-story of long ago, of a time some little while after General Jackson had got into the White House and had shown the world what a real democracy was. The Era of the first six Presidents had closed, and a new Era had begun. I am speaking of political Eras. Certain gentlemen, with a pious belief in democracy, but with a firmer determination to get on top, arose, — and got on top. So many of these gentlemen arose in the different states, and they were so clever, and they found so many chinks in the Constitution to crawl through and steal the people's chestnuts, that the Era may be called the Boss-Era. After the Boss came along certain Things without souls, but of many minds, and found more chinks in the Constitution: bigger chinks, for the Things were bigger, and they stole more chestnuts. But I am getting far ahead of my love-story — and of my book.

The reader is warned that this first love-story will, in a few chapters, come to an end: and not to a happy end — otherwise there would be no book. Lest he should throw the book away when he arrives at this page, it is only fair to tell him that there is another and a much longer love-story later on, if he will only continue to read, in which, it is hoped, he may not be disappointed.

The hills seem to leap up against the sky as I de-

scribe that region where Cynthia Ware was born, and the very old country names help to summon up the picture. Coniston Mountain, called by some the Blue Mountain, clad in Hercynian forests, ten good miles in length, north and south, with its notch road that winds over the saddle behind the withers of it. Coniston Water, that oozes out from under the loam in a hundred places on the eastern slope, gathers into a rushing stream to cleave the very granite, flows southward around the south end of Coniston Mountain, and having turned the mills at Brampton, idles through meadows westward in its own green valley until it comes to Harwich, where it works again and tumbles into a river. Brampton and Harwich are rivals, but Coniston Water gives of its power impartially to each. From the little farm clearings on the western slope of Coniston Mountain you can sweep the broad valley of a certain broad river where grew (and grow still) the giant pines that gave many a mast to King George's navy as tribute for the land. And beyond that river rises beautiful Farewell Mountain of many colors, now sapphire, now amethyst, its crest rimmed about at evening with saffron flame; and, beyond Farewell, the emerald billows of the western peaks catching the level light. A dozen little brooks are born high among the western spruces on Coniston to score deep, cool valleys in their way through Clovelly township to the broad river — valleys full of the music of the water and fresh with the odor of the ferns.

To this day the railroad has not reached Coniston Village — nay, nor Coniston Flat, four miles nearer Brampton. The village lies on its own little shelf under the forest-clad slope of the mountain, and in the midst of its dozen houses is the green triangle where the militia used to drill on June days. At one end of the triangle is the great pine mast that graced no frigate of George's, but flew the stars and stripes on many a liberty day. Across the road is Jonah Winch's store, with a platform so high that a man may step off his horse directly on to it; with its checker-paned windows, with its dark interior smelling of coffee

and apples and molasses, yes, and of Endea rum — for this was before the days of the revivals.

How those checker-paned windows bring back the picture of that village green! The meeting-house has them, lantern-like, wide and high, in three sashes — white meeting-house, seat alike of government and religion, with its terraced steeple, with its classic porches north and south. Behind it is the long shed, and in front, rising out of the milkweed and the flowering thistle, the horse block of the first meeting-house, where many a pillion has left its burden in times agone. Honest Jock Hallowell built that second meeting-house — was, indeed, still building it at the time of which we write. He had hewn every beam and king post in it, and set every plate and slip. And Jock Hallowell is the man who, unwittingly, starts this chronicle.

At noon, on one of those madcap April days of that Coniston country, Jock descended from his work on the steeple to perceive the ungainly figure of Jethro Bass coming toward him across the green. Jethro was about thirty years of age, and he wore a coonskin cap even in those days, and trousers tucked into his boots. He carried his big head bent forward, a little to one side, and was not, at first sight, a prepossessing-looking person. As our story largely concerns him, and we must get started somehow, it may be well to fix a little attention on him.

"Heigho!" said Jock, rubbing his hands on his leather apron.

"H-how be you, Jock?" said Jethro, stopping.

"Heigho!" cried Jock, "what's this game of fox and geese you're a-playin' among the farmers?"

"C-callate to git the steeple done before frost?" inquired Jethro, without so much as a smile. "B-build it tight, Jock — b-build it tight."

"Guess he'll build his'n tight, whatever it is," said Jock, looking after him as Jethro made his way to the little tannery near by.

Let it be known that there was such a thing as social rank in Coniston; and something which, for the sake of an

advantageous parallel, we may call an Established Church. Coniston was a Congregational town still, and the deacons and dignitaries of that church were likewise the pillars of the state. Not many years before the time of which we write actual disestablishment had occurred, when the town ceased — as a town — to pay the salary of Priest Ware, as the minister was called. The father of Jethro Bass, Nathan the currier, had once, in a youthful lapse, permitted a Baptist preacher to immerse him in Coniston Water. This had been the extent of Nathan's religion; Jethro had none at all, and was, for this and other reasons, somewhere near the bottom of the social scale.

"Fox and geese!" repeated Jock, with his eyes still on Jethro's retreating back. The builder of the meeting-house rubbed a great, brown arm, scratched his head, and turned and came face to face with Cynthia Ware, in a poke bonnet.

Contrast is a favorite trick of authors, and no greater contrast is to be had in Coniston than that between Cynthia Ware and Jethro Bass. In the first place, Cynthia was the minister's daughter, and twenty-one. I can summon her now under the great maples of the village street, a virginal figure, gray eyes that kindled the face shaded by the poke bonnet, and up you went above the clouds.

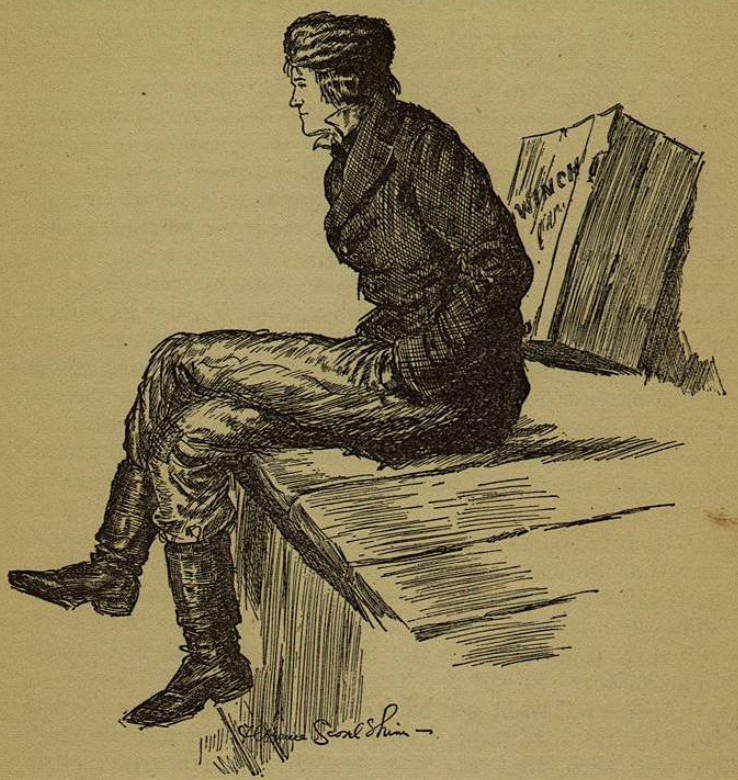
"What about fox and geese, Jock?" said Cynthia.

"Jethro Bass," said Jock, who, by reason of his capability, was a privileged character. "Mark my words, Cynthy, Jethro Bass is an all-fired sight smarter than folks in this town think he be. They don't take notice of him, because he don't say much, and stutters. He hain't be'n eddicated a great deal, but I wouldn't be afeard to warrant he'd make a racket in the world some of these days."

"Jock Hallowell!" cried Cynthia, the gray eyes beginning to dance, "I suppose you think Jethro's going to be President."

"All right," said Jock, "you can laugh. Ever talked with Jethro?"

"I've hardly spoken two words to him in my life," she



"As our story largely concerns him."

replied. And it was true, although the little white parsonage was scarce two hundred yards from the tannery house.

"Jethro's never ailed much," Jock remarked, having reference to Cynthia's proclivities for visiting the sick. "I've seed a good many different men in my time, and I tell you, Cynthy Ware, that Jethro's got a kind of power you don't often come acrost. Folks don't suspicion it."

In spite of herself, Cynthia was impressed by the ring of sincerity in the builder's voice. Now that she thought of it, there was rugged power in Jethro's face, especially when he took off the coonskin cap. She always nodded a greeting when she saw him in the tannery yard or on the road, and sometimes he nodded back, but oftener he had not appeared to see her. She had thought this failure to nod stupidity, but it might after all be abstraction.

"What makes you think he has ability?" she asked, picking flowers from a bunch of arbutus she held.

"He's rich, for one thing," said Jock. He had not intended a dissertation on Jethro Bass, but he felt bound to defend his statements.

"Rich!"

"Wal, he hain't poor. He's got as many as thirty mortgages round among the farmers — some on land, and some on cattle."

"How did he make the money?" demanded Cynthia, in surprise.

"Hides an' wool an' bark — turned 'em over an' swep' in. Gits a load, and Lyman Hull drives him down to Boston with that six-hoss team. Lyman gits drunk, Jethro keeps sober and saves."

Jock began to fashion some wooden pegs with his adze, for nails were scarce in those days. Still Cynthia lingered, picking flowers from the bunch.

"What did you mean by 'fox and geese,' Jock?" she said presently.

Jock laughed. He did not belong to the Establishment, but was a Universalist; politically he admired General

Jackson. "What'd you say if Jethro was Chairman of the next Board of Selectmen?" he demanded.

No wonder Cynthia gasped. Jethro Bass, Chairman of the Board, in the honored seat of Deacon Moses Hatch, the perquisite of the church in Coniston! The idea was heresy. As a matter of fact, Jock himself uttered it as a playful exaggeration. Certain nonconformist farmers, of whom there were not a few in the town, had come into Jonah Winch's store that morning; and Jabez Miller, who lived on the north slope, had taken away the breath of the orthodox by suggesting that Jethro Bass be nominated for town office. Jock Hallowell had paused once or twice on his work on the steeple to look across the tree-tops at Coniston shouldering the sky. He had been putting two and two together, and now he was merely making five out of it, instead of four. He remembered that Jethro Bass had for some years been journeying through the town, buying his hides and wool, and collecting the interest on his mortgages.

Cynthia would have liked to reprove Jock Hallowell, and tell him there were some subjects which should not be joked about. Jethro Bass, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen!

"Well, here comes young Moses, I do believe," said Jock, gathering his pegs into his apron and preparing to ascend once more. "Callated he'd spring up pretty soon."

"Jock, you do talk foolishly for a man who is able to build a church," said Cynthia, as she walked away. The young Moses referred to was Moses Hatch, Junior, son of the pillar of the Church and State, and it was an open secret that he was madly in love with Cynthia. Let it be said of him that he was a steady-going young man, and that he sighed for the moon.

"Moses," said the girl, when they came in sight of the elms that shaded the gable of the parsonage, "what do you think of Jethro Bass?"

"Jethro Bass!" exclaimed honest Moses, "whatever put him into your head, Cynthy?" Had she mentioned,

perhaps, any other young man in Coniston, Moses would have been eaten with jealousy.

"Oh, Jock was joking about him. What do you think of him?"

"Never thought one way or t'other," he answered. "Jethro never had much to do with the boys. He's always in that tannery, or out buyin' of hides. He does make a sharp bargain when he buys a hide. We always goes shares on our'n."

Cynthia was not only the minister's daughter, — distinction enough, — her reputation for learning was spread through the country roundabout, and at the age of twenty she had had an offer to teach school in Harwich. Once a week in summer she went to Brampton, to the Social library there, and sat at the feet of that Miss Lucretia Penniman of whom Brampton has ever been so proud — Lucretia Penniman, one of the first to sound the clarion note for the intellectual independence of American women; who wrote the "Hymn to Coniston"; who, to the awe of her townspeople, went out into the great world and became editress of a famous woman's journal, and knew Longfellow and Hawthorne and Bryant. Miss Lucretia it was who started the Brampton Social Library, and filled it with such books as both sexes might read with profit. Never was there a stricter index than hers. Cynthia, Miss Lucretia loved, and the training of that mind was the pleasantest task of her life.

Curiosity as a factor has never, perhaps, been given its proper weight by philosophers. Besides being fatal to a certain domestic animal, as an instigating force it has brought joy and sorrow into the lives of men and women, and made and marred careers. And curiosity now laid hold of Cynthia Ware. Why in the world she should ever have been curious about Jethro Bass is a mystery to many, for the two of them were as far apart as the poles. Cynthia, of all people, took to watching the tanner's son, and listening to the brief colloquies he had with other men at Jonah Winch's store, when she went there to buy things for the parsonage; and it seemed to her that Jock had not

"Moses was a steady-going young man."

been altogether wrong, and that there was in the man an indefinable but very compelling force. And when a woman begins to admit that a man has force, her curiosity usually increases. On one or two of these occasions Cynthia had been startled to find his eyes fixed upon her, and though the feeling she had was closely akin to fear, she found something distinctly pleasurable in it.

May came, and the pools dried up, the orchards were pink and white, the birches and the maples were all yellow-green on the mountain side against the dark pines, and Cynthia was driving the minister's gig to Brampton. Ahead of her, in the cañon made by the road between the great woods, strode an uncouth but powerful figure—coon-skin cap, homespun breeches tucked into boots, and all. The gig slowed down, and Cynthia began to tremble with that same delightful fear. She knew it must be wicked, because she liked it so much. Unaccountable thing! She felt all akin to the nature about her, and her blood was coursing as the sap rushes through a tree. She would not speak to him; of that she was sure, and equally sure that he would not speak to her. The horse was walking now, and suddenly Jethro Bass faced around, and her heart stood still.

"H-how be you, Cynthy?" he said.

"How do you do, Jethro?"

A thrush in the woods began to sing a hymn, and they listened. After that a silence, save for the notes of answering birds quickened by the song, the minister's horse nibbling at the bushes. Cynthia herself could not have explained why she lingered. Suddenly he shot a question at her.

"Where be you goin'?"

"To Brampton, to get Miss Lucretia to change this book," and she held it up from her lap. It was a very large book.

"Wh-what's it about?" he demanded.

"Napoleon Bonaparte."

"Who was he?"

"He was a very strong man. He began life poor and

unknown, and fought his way upward until he conquered the world."

"C-conquered the world, did you say? Conquered the world?"

"Yes."

Jethro pondered.

"Guess there's somethin' wrong about that book—somethin' wrong. Conquer the United States?"

Cynthia smiled. She herself did not realize that we were not a part of the world, then.

"He conquered Europe, where all the kings and queens are, and became a king himself—an emperor."

"I want to know!" said Jethro. "You said he was a poor boy?"

"Why don't you read the book, Jethro?" Cynthia answered. "I am sure I can get Miss Lucretia to let you have it."

"Don't know as I'd understand it," he demurred.

"I'll try to explain what you don't understand," said Cynthia, and her heart gave a bound at the very idea.

"Will you?" he said, looking at her eagerly. "Will you? You mean it?"

"Certainly," she answered, and blushed, not knowing why. "I—I must be going," and she gathered up the reins.

"When will you give it to me?"

"I'll stop at the tannery when I come back from Brampton," she said, and drove on. Once she gave a fleeting glance over her shoulder, and he was still standing where she had left him.

When she returned, in the yellow afternoon light that flowed over wood and pasture, he came out of the tannery door. Jake Wheeler or Speedy Bates, the *journeyman* tailoress, from whom little escaped, could not have said it was by design—thought nothing, indeed, of that part of it.

"As I live!" cried Speedy from the window to Aunt Lucy Prescott in the bed, "if Cynthy ain't givin' him a book as big as the Bible!"

Aunt Lucy hoped, first, that it was the Bible, and second, that Jethro would read it. Aunt Lucy, and Established Church Coniston in general, believed in snatching brands from the burning, and who so deft as Cynthia at this kind of snatching! So Cynthia herself was a hypocrite for once, and did not know it. At that time Jethro's sins were mostly of omission. As far as rum was concerned, he was a creature after Aunt Lucy's own heart, for he never touched it: true, gaunt Deacon Ira Perkins, tithing-man, had once chided him for breaking the Sabbath — shooting at a fox.

To return to the book. As long as he lived, Jethro looked back to the joy of the monumental task of mastering its contents. In his mind, Napoleon became a rough Yankee general; of the cities, villages, and fortress he formed as accurate a picture as a resident of Venice from Marco Polo's account of Tartary. Jethro had learned to read, after a fashion, to write, add, multiply, and divide. He knew that George Washington and certain barefooted companions had forced a proud Britain to her knees, and much of the warring in the book took color from Captain Timothy Prescott's stories of General Stark and his campaigns, heard at Jonah Winch's store. What Paris looked like, or Berlin, or the Hospice of St. Bernard — though imaged by a winter Coniston — troubled Jethro not at all; the thing that stuck in his mind was that Napoleon — for a considerable time, at least — compelled men to do his bidding. Constitutions crumble before the Strong. Not that Jethro philosophized about constitutions. Existing conditions presented themselves, and it occurred to him that there were crevices in the town system, and ways into power through the crevices for men clever enough to find them.

A week later, and in these same great woods on the way to Brampton, Cynthia overtook him once more. It was characteristic of him that he plunged at once into the subject uppermost in his mind.

"Not a very big place, this Corsica — not a very big place."

"A little island in the Mediterranean," said Cynthia.

"Hum. Country folks, the Bonapartes — country folks?"

Cynthia laughed.

"I suppose you might call them so," she said. "They were poor, and lived out of the world."

"He was a smart man. But he found things goin' his way. Didn't have to move 'em."

"Not at first," she admitted; "but he had to move mountains later. How far have you read?"

"One thing that helped him," said Jethro, in indirect answer to this question, "he got a smart woman for his wife — a smart woman."

Cynthia looked down at the reins in her lap, and she felt again that wicked stirring within her, — incredible stirring of minister's daughter for tanner's son. Coniston believes, and always will believe, that the social bars are strong enough. So Cynthia looked down at the reins.

"Poor Josephine!" she said, "I always wish he had not cast her off."

"C-cast her off?" said Jethro. "Cast her off! Why did he do that?"

"After a while, when he got to be Emperor, he needed a wife who would be more useful to him. Josephine had become a drag. He cared more about getting on in the world than he did about his wife."

Jethro looked away contemplatively.

"Wa-wahn't the woman to blame any?" he said.

"Read the book, and you'll see," retorted Cynthia, flicking her horse, which started at all gaits down the road. Jethro stood in his tracks, staring, but this time he did not see her face above the hood of the gig. Presently he trudged on, head downward, pondering upon another problem than Napoleon's. Cynthia, at length, arrived in Brampton Street, in a humor that puzzled the good Miss Lucretia sorely.