CHAPTER II

ON THE WISDOM OF CHARITY

THE sun had dropped behind the mountain, leaving Coniston in amethystine shadow, and the last bee had flown homeward from the apple blossoms in front of Aunt Lucy Prescott's window, before Cynthia returned. Aunt Lucy was Cynthia's grandmother, and eighty-nine years of age. Still she sat in her window beside the lilac bush, lost in memories of a stout, rosy lass who had followed a stalwart husband up a broad river into the wilderness some seventy years agone in Indian days — Weathersfield Massacre days. That lass was Aunt Lucy herself, and in just such a May had Timothy's axe rung through the Coniston forest and reared the log cabin, where six of her children were born. Likewise in review passed the lonely months when Timothy was fighting behind his rugged General Stark for that privilege more desirable to his kind than life — self-government. Timothy Prescott would pull the forelock to no man, would have such God-fearing persons as he chose make his laws for him.

Honest Captain Timothy and his Stark heroes, Aunt Lucy and her memories, have long gone to rest. Little did they dream of the nation we have lived to see, straining at her constitution like a great ship at anchor in a gale, with funnels belching forth smoke, and a new race of men thronging her decks for the mastery. Coniston is there still behind its mountain, with its rusty firelocks and its hillside graves.

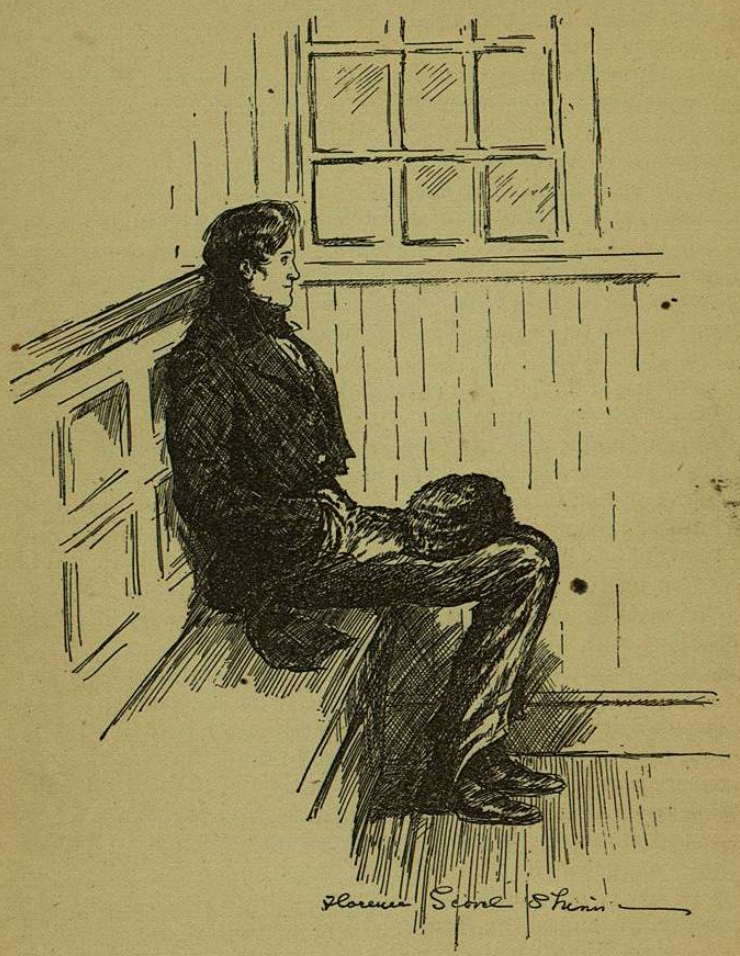
Cynthia, driving back from Brampton in the gig, smiled at Aunt Lucy in the window, but she did not so much as glance at the tannery house farther on. The tannery

house, be it known, was the cottage where Jethro dwelt, and which had belonged to Nathan, his father; and the tannery sheds were at some distance behind it, nearer Coniston Water. Cynthia did not glance at the tannery house, for a wave of orthodox indignation had swept over her: at any rate, we may call it so. In other words, she was angry with herself: pitied and scorned herself, if the truth be told, for her actions — an inevitable mood.

In front of the minister's barn under the elms on the hill Cynthia pulled the harness from the tired horse with an energy that betokened activity of mind. She was not one who shrank from self-knowledge, and the question put itself to her, "Whither was this matter tending?" The fire that is in strong men has ever been a lure to women; and many, meaning to play with it, have been burnt thereby since the world began. But to turn the fire to some use, to make the world better for it or stronger for it, that were an achievement indeed! The horse munching his hay, Cynthia lingered as the light fainted above the ridge, with the thought that this might be woman's province, and Miss Lucretia Penniman might go on leading her women regiments to no avail. Nevertheless she was angry with Jethro, not because of what he had said, but because of what he *was*.

The next day is Sunday, and there is mild excitement in Coniston. For Jethro Bass, still with the coonskin cap, but in a brass-buttoned coat secretly purchased in Brampton, appeared at meeting! It made no difference that he entered quietly, and sat in the rear slip, orthodox Coniston knew that he was behind them: good Mr. Ware knew it, and changed a little his prayers and sermon: Cynthia knew it, grew hot and cold by turns under her poke bonnet. Was he not her brand, and would she not get the credit of snatching him? How willingly, then, would she have given up that credit to the many who coveted it — if it were a credit. Was Jethro at meeting for any religious purpose?

Jethro's importance to Coniston lay in his soul, and that soul was numbered at present ninety and ninth.



"And sat in the rear slip."

When the meeting was over, Aunt Lucy Prescott hobbled out at an amazing pace to advise him to read chapter seven of Matthew, but he had vanished: via the horse sheds, if she had known it, and along Coniston Water to the house by the tannery, where he drew breath in a state of mind not to be depicted. He had gazed at the back of Cynthia's poke bonnet for two hours, but he had an uneasy feeling that he would have to pay a price.

The price was paid, in part, during the next six days. To do Jethro's importance absolute justice, he did inspire fear among his contemporaries, and young men and women did not say much to his face; what they did say gave them little satisfaction. Grim Deacon Ira stopped him as he was going to buy hides, and would have prayed over him if Jethro had waited; dear Aunt Lucy did pray, but in private. In six days orthodox Coniston came to the conclusion that this ninety and ninth soul were better left to her who had snatched it, Cynthia Ware.

As for Cynthia, nothing was farther from her mind. Unchristian as was the thought, if this thing she had awakened could only have been put back to sleep again, she would have thought herself happy. But would she have been happy? When Moses Hatch congratulated her, with more humor than sincerity, he received the greatest scare of his life. Yet in those days she welcomed Moses's society as she never had before; and Coniston, including Moses himself, began thinking of a wedding.

Another Saturday came, and no Cynthia went to Brampton. Jethro may or may not have been on the road. Sunday, and there was Jethro on the back seat in the meeting-house: Sunday noon, over his frugal dinner, the minister mildly remonstrates with Cynthia for neglecting one who has shown signs of grace, citing certain failures of others of his congregation: Cynthia turns scarlet, leaving the minister puzzled and a little uneasy: Monday, Miss Lucretia Penniman, alarmed, comes to Coniston to inquire after Cynthia's health: Cynthia drives back with her as far as Four Corners, talking literature and the advancement of woman; returns on foot, thinking of something

else, when she discerns a figure seated on a log by the roadside, bent as in meditation. There was no going back: the thing to do was to come on, as unconcernedly as possible, not noticing anything, — which Cynthia did, — not without a little inward palpitating and curiosity, for which she hated herself and looked the sterner. The figure unfolded itself, like a Jack from a box.

"You say the woman wahn't any to blame — wahn't any to blame?"

The poke bonnet turned away. The shoulders under it began to shake, and presently the astonished Jethro heard what seemed to be faint peals of laughter. Suddenly she turned around to him, all trace of laughter gone.

"Why don't you read the book?"

"So I am," said Jethro, "so I am. Hain't come to this casting-off yet."

"And you didn't look ahead to find out?" This with scorn.

"Never heard of readin' a book in that fashion. I'll come to it in time — g-guess it won't run away."

Cynthia stared at him, perhaps with a new interest at this plodding determination. She was not quite sure that she ought to stand talking to him a third time in these woods, especially if the subject of conversation were not, as Coniston thought, the salvation of his soul. But she stayed. Here was a man who could be dealt with by no known rules, who did not even deign to notice a week of marked coldness.

"Jethro," she said, with a terrifying sternness, "I am going to ask you a question, and you must answer me truthfully."

"G-guess I won't find any trouble about that," said Jethro, apparently not in the least terrified.

"I want you to tell me why you are going to meeting."

"To see you," said Jethro, promptly, "to see you."

"Don't you know that that is wrong?"

"H-hadn't thought much about it," answered Jethro.

"Well, you should think about it. People don't go to meeting to — to look at other people."

"Thought they *did*," said Jethro. "W-why do they wear their best clothes — why do they wear their best clothes?"

"To honor God," said Cynthia, with a shade lacking in the conviction, for she added hurriedly: "It isn't right for you to go to church to see — anybody. You go there to hear the Scriptures expounded, and to have your sins forgiven. Because I lent you that book, and you come to meeting, people think I'm converting you."

"So you be," replied Jethro, and this time it was he who smiled, "so you be."

Cynthia turned away, her lips pressed together. How to deal with such a man! Wondrous notes broke on the stillness, the thrush was singing his hymn again, only now it seemed a pæan. High in the azure a hawk wheeled, and floated.

"Couldn't you see I was very angry with you?"

"S-saw you was goin' with Moses Hatch more than common."

Cynthia drew breath sharply. This was audacity — and yet she liked it.

"I am very fond of Moses," she said quickly.

"You always was charitable, Cynthy," said he.

"Haven't I been charitable to you?" she retorted.

"G-guess it has be'n charity," said Jethro. He looked down at her solemnly, thoughtfully, no trace of anger in his face, turned, and without another word strode off in the direction of Coniston Flat.

He left a tumultuous Cynthia, amazement and repentance struggling with anger, which forbade her calling him back: pride in her answering to pride in him, and she rejoicing fiercely that he had pride. Had he but known it, every step he took away from her that evening was a step in advance, and she gloried in the fact that he did not once look back. As she walked toward Coniston, the thought came to her that she was rid of the thing she had stirred up, perhaps forever, and the thrush burst into his song once more.

* * * * * * *

That night, after Cynthia's candle had gone out, when the minister sat on his doorsteps looking at the glory of the moon on the mountain forest, he was startled by the sight of a figure slowly climbing toward him up the slope. A second glance told him that it was Jethro's. Vaguely troubled, he watched his approach ; for good Priest Ware, while able to obey one-half the scriptural injunction, had not the wisdom of the serpent, and women, as typified by Cynthia, were a continual puzzle to him. That very evening, Moses Hatch had called, had been received with more favor than usual, and suddenly packed off about his business. Seated in the moonlight, the minister wondered vaguely whether Jethro Bass were troubling the girl. And now Jethro stood before him, holding out a book. Rising, Mr. Ware bade him good evening, mildly and cordially.

"C-come to leave this book for Cynthy," said Jethro.

Mr. Ware took it, mechanically.

"Have you finished it?" he asked kindly.

"All I want," replied Jethro, "all I want."

He turned, and went down the slope. Twice the words rose to the minister's lips to call him back, and were suppressed. Yet what to say to him if he came? Mr. Ware sat down again, sadly, wondering why Jethro Bass should be so difficult to talk to.

The parsonage was of only one story, with a steep, sloping roof. On the left of the doorway was Cynthia's room, and the minister imagined he heard a faint, rustling noise at her window. Presently he arose, barred the door; could be heard moving around in his room for a while, and after that all was silence save for the mournful crying of a whippoorwill in the woods. Then a door opened softly, a white vision stole into the little entry lighted by the fan-window above, seized the book and stole back. Had the minister been a prying man about his household, he would have noticed next day that Cynthia's candle was burned down to the socket. He saw nothing of the kind: he saw, in fact, that his daughter flitted about the house singing, and he went out into the sun to drop potatoes.

No sooner had he reached the barn than this singing ceased. But how was Mr. Ware to know that?

Twice Cynthia, during the week that followed, got halfway down the slope of the parsonage hill, the book under her arm, on her way to the tannery; twice went back, tears of humiliation and self-pity in her eyes at the thought that she should make advances to a man, and that man the tanner's son. Her household work done, a longing for further motion seized her, and she walked out under the maples of the village street. Let it be understood that Coniston *was* a village, by courtesy, and its shaded road a street. Suddenly, there was the tannery, Jethro standing in front of it, contemplative. Did he see her? Would he come to her? Cynthia, seized by a panic of shame, flew into Aunt Lucy Prescott's, sat through half an hour of torture while Aunt Lucy talked of redemption of sinners, during ten minutes of which Jethro stood, still contemplative. What tumult was in *his* breast, or whether there was any tumult, Cynthia knew not. He went into the tannery again, and though she saw him twice later in the week, he gave no sign of seeing her.

On Saturday Cynthia bought a new bonnet in Brampton; Sunday morning put it on, suddenly remembered that one went to church to honor God, and wore her old one; walked to meeting in a flutter of expectancy not to be denied, and would have looked around had that not been a cardinal sin in Coniston. No Jethro! General opinion (had she waited to hear it among the horse sheds or on the green), that Jethro's soul had slid back into the murky regions, from which it were folly for even Cynthia to try to drag it.

CHAPTER III

THE CLERK AND THE LOCKET

To prove that Jethro's soul had not slid back into the murky regions, and that it was still indulging in flights, it is necessary to follow him (for a very short space) to Boston. Jethro himself went in Lyman Hull's six-horse team with a load of his own merchandise — hides that he had tanned, and other country produce. And they did not go by the way of Truro Pass to the Capital, but took the state turnpike over the ranges, where you can see for miles and miles and miles on a clear summer day across the trembling floors of the forest tops to lonely sentinel mountains fourscore miles away,

No one takes the state turnpike nowadays except crazy tourists who are willing to risk their necks and their horses' legs for the sake of scenery. The tough little Morgans of that time, which kept their feet like cats, have all but disappeared, but there were places on that road where Lyman Hull put the shoes under his wheels for four miles at a stretch. He was not a companion many people would have chosen with whom to enjoy the beauties of such a trip, and nearly everybody in Coniston was afraid of him. Jethro Bass would sit silent on the seat for hours and it is a fact to be noted that when he told Lyman to do a thing, Lyman did it; not, perhaps, without cursing and grumbling. Lyman was a profane and wicked man — drover, farmer, trader, anything. He had a cider mill on his farm on the south slopes of Coniston which Mr. Ware had mentioned in his sermons, and which was the resort of the ungodly. The cider was not so good as Squire Northcutt's, but cheaper. Jethro

was not afraid of Lyman, and he had a mortgage on the six-horse team, and on the farm and the cider mill.

After six days, Jethro and Lyman drove over Charlestown bridge and into the crooked streets of Boston, and at length arrived at a drover's hotel, or lodging-house that did not, we may be sure, front on Mount Vernon Street or face the Mall. Lyman proceeded to get drunk, and Jethro to sell the hides and other merchandise which Lyman had hauled for him.

There was a young man in Boston, when Jethro arrived in Lyman Hull's team, named William Wetherell. By extraordinary circumstances he and another connected with him are to take no small part in this story, which is a sufficient excuse for his introduction. His father had been a prosperous Portsmouth merchant in the West India trade, a man of many attainments, who had failed and died of a broken heart; and William, at two and twenty, was a clerk in the little jewellery shop of Mr. Judson in Cornhill.

William Wetherell had literary aspirations, and sat from morning till night behind the counter, reading and dreaming: dreaming that he was to be an Irving or a Walter Scott, and yet the sum total of his works in after years consisted of some letters to the *Newcastle Guardian*, and a beginning of the Town History of Coniston!

William had a contempt for the awkward young countryman who suddenly loomed up before him that summer's morning across the counter. But a moment before the clerk had been in a place where he would fain have lingered — a city where blue waters flow swiftly between white palaces toward the sunrise.

> "And I have fitted up some chambers there
> Looking toward the golden Eastern air,
> And level with the living winds, which flow
> Like waves above the living waves below."

Little did William Wetherell guess, when he glanced up at the intruder, that he was looking upon one of the forces of his own life! The countryman wore a blue swallow-tail coat (fashioned by the hand of Speedy

Bates), a neck-cloth, a coonskin cap, and his trousers were tucked into rawhide boots. He did not seem a promising customer for expensive jewellery, and the literary clerk did not rise, but merely closed his book with his thumb in it.

"S-sell things here," asked the countryman, "s-sell things here?"

"Occasionally, when folks have money to buy them."

"My name's Jethro Bass," said the countryman, "Jethro Bass from Coniston. Ever hear of Coniston?"

Young Mr. Wetherell never had, but many years afterward he remembered his name, heaven knows why. Jethro Bass! Perhaps it had a strange ring to it.

"F-folks told me to be careful," was Jethro's next remark. He did not look at the clerk, but kept his eyes fixed on the things within the counter.

"Somebody ought to have come with you," said the clerk, with a smile of superiority.

"D-don't know much about city ways."

"Well," said the clerk, beginning to be amused, "a man has to keep his wits about him."

Even then Jethro spared him a look, but continued to study the contents of the case.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Bass? We have some really good things here. For example, this Swiss watch, which I will sell you cheap, for one hundred and fifty dollars."

"One hundred and fifty dollars — er — one hundred and fifty?"

Wetherell nodded. Still the countryman did not look up.

"F-folks told me to be careful," he repeated without a smile. He was looking at the lockets, and finally pointed a large finger at one of them — the most expensive, by the way. "W-what d'ye get for that?" he asked.

"Twenty dollars," the clerk promptly replied. Thirty was nearer the price, but what did it matter.

"H-how much for that?" he said, pointing to another. The clerk told him. He inquired about them all, deliberately repeating the sums, considering with so well-feigned an air of a purchaser that Mr. Wetherell began to take a real joy in the situation. For trade was slack in August, and diversion scarce. Finally he commanded that the case be put on the top of the counter, and Wetherell humored him. Whereupon he picked up the locket he had first chosen. It looked very delicate in his huge, rough hand, and Wetherell was surprised that the eyes of Mr. Bass had been caught by the most expensive, for it was far from being the showiest.

"T-twenty dollars?" he asked.

"We may as well call it that," laughed Wetherell.

"It's not too good for Cynthy," he said.

"Nothing's too good for Cynthy," answered Mr. Wetherell, mockingly, little knowing how he might come to mean it.

Jethro Bass paid no attention to this speech. Pulling a great cowhide wallet from his pocket, still holding the locket in his hand, to the amazement of the clerk he counted out twenty dollars and laid them down.

"G-guess I'll take that one, g-guess I'll take that one," he said.

Then he looked at Mr. Wetherell for the first time.

"Hold!" cried the clerk, more alarmed than he cared to show, "that's not the price. Did you think I could sell it for that price?"

"W-wahn't that the price you fixed?"

"You simpleton!" retorted Wetherell, with a conviction now that he was calling him the wrong name. "Give me back the locket, and you shall have your money again."

"W-wahn't that the price you fixed?"

"Yes, but —".

"G-guess I'll keep the locket — g-guess I'll keep the locket."

Wetherell looked at him aghast, and there was no doubt about his determination. With a sinking heart the clerk realized that he should have to make good to Mr. Judson the seven odd dollars of difference, and then he lost his head. Slipping round the counter to the door of the shop,

he turned the key, thrust it in his pocket, and faced Mr. Bass again — from behind the counter.

"You don't leave this shop," cried the clerk, "until you give me back that locket."

Jethro Bass turned. A bench ran along the farther wall, and there he planted himself without a word, while the clerk stared at him, — with what feelings of uneasiness I shall not attempt to describe, — for the customer was plainly determined to wait until hunger should drive one of them forth. The minutes passed, and Wetherell began to hate him. Then some one tried the door, peered in through the glass, perceived Jethro, shook the knob, knocked violently, all to no purpose. Jethro seemed lost in a revery.

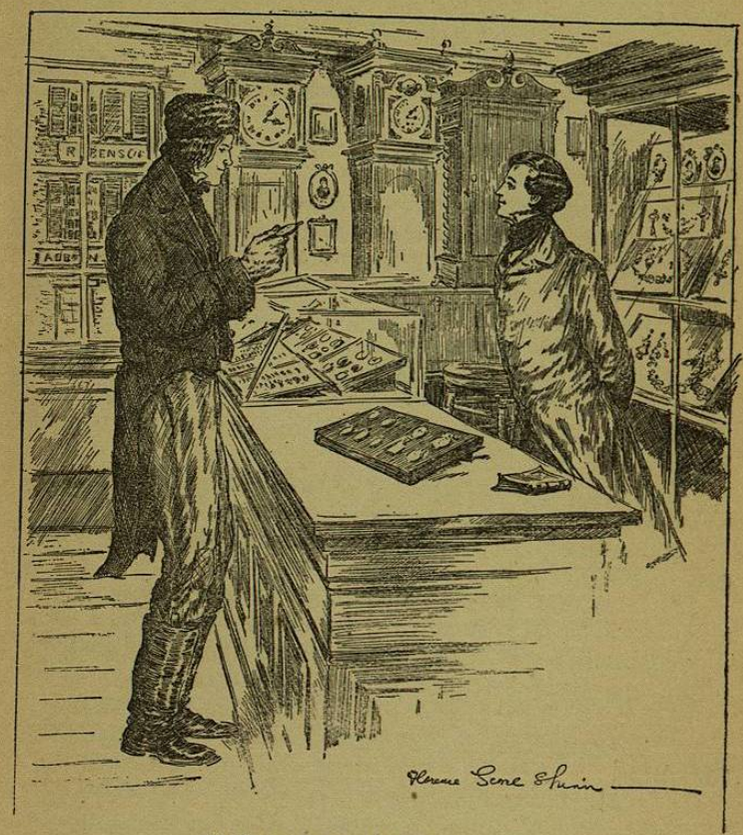
"This has gone far enough," said the clerk, trying to keep his voice from shaking; "it is beyond a joke. Give me back the locket." And he tendered Jethro the money again.

"W-wahn't that the price you fixed?" asked Jethro, innocently.

Wetherell choked. The man outside shook the door again, and people on the sidewalk stopped, and presently against the window-panes a sea of curious faces gazed in upon them. Mr. Bass's thoughts apparently were fixed on Eternity — he looked neither at the people nor at Wetherell. And then, the crowd parting as for one in authority, as in a bad dream the clerk saw his employer, Mr. Judson, courteously pushing away the customer at the door who would not be denied. Another moment, and Mr. Judson had gained admittance with his private key, and stood on the threshold staring at clerk and customer. Jethro gave no sign that the situation had changed.

"William," said Mr. Judson, in a dangerously quiet voice, "perhaps you can explain this extraordinary state of affairs."

"I can, sir," William cried. "This gentleman" (the word stuck in his throat), "this gentleman came in here to examine lockets which I had no reason to believe he would buy. I admit my fault, sir. He asked the price



"'It's not too good for Cynthy'"

of the most expensive, and I told him twenty dollars, merely for a jest, sir." William hesitated.

"Well?" said Mr. Judson.

"After pricing every locket in the case, he seized the first one, handed me twenty dollars, and now refuses to give it up, although he knows the price is twenty-seven."

"Then?"

"Then I locked the door, sir. He sat down there, and hasn't moved since."

Mr. Judson looked again at Mr. Bass, this time with unmistakable interest. The other customer began to laugh, and the crowd was pressing in, and Mr. Judson turned and shut the door in their faces. All this time Mr. Bass had not moved, not so much as to lift his head or shift one of his great cowhide boots.

"Well, sir," demanded Mr. Judson, "what have you to say?"

"N-nothin'. G-guess I'll keep the locket. I've paid for it — I've paid for it."

"And you are aware, my friend," said Mr. Judson, "that my clerk has given you the wrong price?"

"Guess that's his l-lookout." He still sat there, doggedly unconcerned.

A bull would have seemed more at home in a china-shop than Jethro Bass in a jewellery store. But Mr. Judson himself was a man out of the ordinary, and instead of getting angry he began to be more interested.

"Took you for a greenhorn, did he?" he remarked.

"F-folks told me to be careful — to be careful," said Mr. Bass.

Then Mr. Judson laughed. It was all the more disconcerting to William Wetherell, because his employer laughed rarely. He laid his hand on Jethro's shoulder.

"He might have spared himself the trouble, my young friend," he said. "You didn't expect to find a greenhorn *behind* a jewellery counter, did you?"

"S-surprised me some," said Jethro.

Mr. Judson laughed again, all the while looking at him.

"I am going to let you keep the locket," he said, "because it will teach my greenhorn a lesson. William, do you hear that?"

"Yes, sir," William said, and his face was very red.

Mr. Bass rose solemnly, apparently unmoved by his triumph in a somewhat remarkable transaction, and William long remembered how he towered over all of them. He held the locket out to Mr. Judson, who stared at it, astonished.

"What's this?" said that gentleman; "you don't want it?"

"Guess I'll have it marked," said Jethro, "ef it don't cost extry."

"Marked!" gasped Mr. Judson, "marked!"

"Ef it don't cost extry," Jethro repeated.

"Well, I'll —" exclaimed Mr. Judson, and suddenly recalled the fact that he was a church member. "What inscription do you wish put into it?" he asked, recovering himself with an effort.

Jethro thrust his hand into his pocket, and again the cowhide wallet came out. He tendered Mr. Judson a somewhat soiled piece of paper, and Mr. Judson read: —

"*Cynthy, from Jethro*"

"*Cynthy*," Mr. Judson repeated, in a tremulous voice, "*Cynthy*, not *Cynthia*."

"H-how is it written," said Jethro, leaning over it, "h-how is it written?"

"*Cynthy*," answered Mr. Judson, involuntarily.

"Then make it *Cynthy* — make it *Cynthy*."

"*Cynthy* it shall be," said Mr. Judson, with conviction.

"When'll you have it done?"

"To-night," replied Mr. Judson, with a twinkle in his eye, "to-night, as a special favor."

"What time — w-what time?"

"Seven o'clock, sir. May I send it to your hotel? The Tremont House, I suppose?"

"I — I'll call," said Jethro, so solemnly that Mr. Judson kept his laughter until he was gone.

From the door they watched him silently as he strode across the street and turned the corner. Then Mr. Judson turned. "That man will make his mark, William," he said; and added thoughtfully, "but whether for good or evil, I know not."

CHAPTER IV

ENTER A GREAT MAN, INCOGNITO

WHAT Cynthia may have thought or felt during Jethro's absence in Boston, and for some months thereafter, she kept to herself. Honest Moses Hatch pursued his courting untroubled, and never knew that he had a rival. Moses would as soon have questioned the seasons or the weather as Cynthia's changes of moods, — which were indeed the weather for him, and when storms came he sat with his back to them, waiting for the sunshine. He had long ceased proposing marriage, in the firm belief that Cynthia would set the day in her own good time. Thereby he was saved much suffering.

The summer flew on apace, for Coniston. Fragrant hay was cut on hillsides won from rock and forest, and Coniston Water sang a gentler melody — save when the clouds floated among the spruces on the mountain and the rain beat on the shingles. During the still days before the turn of the year, — days of bending fruit boughs, crab-apples glistening red in the soft sunlight, — rumor came from Brampton to wrinkle the forehead of Moses Hatch as he worked among his father's orchards.

The rumor was of a Mr. Isaac Dudley Worthington, a name destined to make much rumor before it was to be carved on the marble. Isaac D. Worthington, indeed, might by a stretch of the imagination be called the pioneer of all the genus to be known in the future as City Folks, who were, two generations later, to invade the country like a devouring army of locusts.

At that time a stranger in Brampton was enough to set the town agog. But a young man of three and twenty,