CHAPTER VI

"DEEP AS FIRST LOVE, AND WILD WITH ALL REGRET"

AND now we must go back for a chapter — a very short chapter — to the day before that town meeting which had so momentous an influence upon the history of Coniston and of the state. That Monday, too, it will be remembered, dawned in storm, the sleet hissing in the wide throats of the centre-chimneys, and bearing down great boughs of trees until they broke in agony. Dusk came early, and howling darkness that hid a muffled figure on the ice-bound road staring at the yellow cracks in the tannery door. Presently the figure crossed the yard; the door, flying open, released a shaft of light that shot across the white ground, revealed a face beneath a hood to him who stood within.

"Jethro!"

She darted swiftly past him, seizing the door and drawing it closed after her. A lantern hung on the central post and flung its rays upon his face. Her own, mercifully, was in the shadow, and burning now with a shame that was insupportable. Now that she was there, beside him, her strength failed her, and her courage — courage that she had been storing for this dread undertaking throughout the whole of that dreadful day. Now that she was there, she would have given her life to have been able to retrace her steps, to lose herself in the wild, dark places of the mountain.

"Cynthy!" His voice betrayed the passion which her presence had quickened.

The words she would have spoken would not come. She could think of nothing but that she was alone with

him, and in bodily terror of him. She turned to the door again, to grasp the wooden latch; but he barred the way, and she fell back.

"Let me go," she cried. "I did not mean to come. Do you hear? — let me go!"

To her amazement he stepped aside — a most unaccountable action for him. More unaccountable still, she did not move, now that she was free, but stood poised for flight, held by she knew not what.

"G-go if you've a mind to, Cynthy — if you've a mind to."

"I-I've come to say something to you," she faltered. It was not at all the way she had pictured herself as saying it.

"H-haven't took Moses — have you?"

"Oh," she cried, "do you think I came here to speak of such a thing as that?"

"H-haven't took — Moses, have you?"

She was trembling, and yet she could almost have smiled at this well-remembered trick of pertinacity.

"No," she said, and immediately hated herself for answering him.

"H-haven't took that Worthington cuss?"

He was jealous!

"I didn't come to discuss Mr. Worthington," she replied.

"Folks say it's only a matter of time," said he. "Made up your mind to take him, Cynthy? M-made up your mind?"

"You've no right to talk to me in this way," she said, and added, the words seeming to slip of themselves from her lips, "Why do you do it?"

"Because I'm — interested," he said.

"You haven't shown it," she flashed back, forgetting the place, and the storm, and her errand even, forgetting that Jake Wheeler, or any one in Coniston, might come and surprise her there.

He took a step toward her, and she retreated. The light struck her face, and he bent over her as though

searching it for a sign. The cape on her shoulders rose and fell as she breathed.

"'Twahn't charity, Cynthy — was it? 'Twahn't charity?"

"It was you who called it such," she answered, in a low voice.

A sleet-charged gust hurled itself against the door, and the lantern flickered.

"Wahn't it charity?"

"It was friendship, Jethro. You ought to have known that, and you should not have brought back the book."

"Friendship," he repeated, "y-you said *friendship?*"

"Yes."

"M-meant friendship?"

"Yes," said Cynthia, but more faintly, and yet with a certain delicious fright as she glanced at him shyly. Surely there had never been a stranger man! Now he was apparently in a revery.

"G-guess it's because I'm not good enough to be anything more," he remarked suddenly. "Is that it?"

"You have not tried even to be a friend," she said.

"H-how about Worthington?" he persisted. "Just friends with him?"

"I won't talk about Mr. Worthington," cried Cynthia, desperately, and retreated toward the lantern again.

"J-just friends with Worthington?"

"Why?" she asked, her words barely heard above the gust, "why do you want to know?"

He came after her. It was as if she had summoned some unseen, uncontrollable power, only to be appalled by it, and the mountain-storm without seemed the symbol of it. His very voice seemed to partake of its strength.

"Cynthy," he said, "if you'd took *him*, I'd have killed him. Cynthy, I love you — I want you to be my woman —"

"Your woman!"

He caught her, struggling wildly, terror-stricken, in his arms, beat down her hands, flung back her hood, and kissed her forehead — her hair, blown by the wind — her lips. In that moment she felt the mystery of heaven and

hell, of all kinds of power. In that moment she was like a seed flying in the storm above the mountain spruces — whither, she knew not, cared not. There was one thought that drifted across the chaos like a blue light of the spirit: Could she control the storm? Could she say whither the winds might blow, where the seed might be planted? Then she found herself listening, struggling no longer, for he held her powerless. Strangest of all, most hopeful of all, his own mind was working, though his soul rocked with passion.

"Cynthy — ever sence we stopped that day on the road in Northcutt's woods, I've thought of nothin' but to marry you — m-marry you. Then you give me that book — I hain't had much education, but it come across me if you was to help me that way — And when I seed you with Worthington, I could have killed him easy as breakin' bark."

"Hush, Jethro."

She struggled free and leaped away from him, panting, while he tore open his coat and drew forth something which gleamed in the lantern's rays — a silver locket. Cynthia scarcely saw it. Her blood was throbbing in her temples, she could not reason, but she knew that the appeal for the sake of which she had stooped must be delivered now.

"Jethro," she said, "do you know why I came here — why I came to *you?*"

"No," he said. "No. W-wanted me, didn't you? Wanted me — I wanted you, Cynthy."

"I would never have come to you for that," she cried, "*never.*"

"L-love me, Cynthy — love me, don't you?"

How could he ask, seeing that she had been in his arms, and had not fled? And yet she must go through with what she had come to do, at any cost.

"Jethro, I have come to speak to you about the town meeting to-morrow."

He halted as though he had been struck, his hand tightening over the locket.

"T-town meetin'?"

"Yes. All this new organization is your doing," she cried. "Do you think that I am foolish enough to believe that Fletcher Bartlett or Sam Price planned this thing? No, Jethro. I know who has done it, and I could have told them if they had asked me."

He looked at her, and the light of a new admiration was in his eye.

"Knowed it — did you?"

"Yes," she answered, a little defiantly, "I did."

"H-how'd you know it — how'd you know it, Cynthy?" How did she know it, indeed?

"I guessed it," said Cynthia, desperately, "knowing you, I guessed it."

"A-always thought you was smart, Cynthy."

"Tell me, did you do this thing?"

"Th-thought you knowed it — th-thought you knowed it."

"I believe that these men are doing your bidding."

"Hain't you guessin' a little mite too much, Cynthy?"

"Jethro," she said, "you told me just now that — that you loved me. Don't touch me!" she cried, when he would have taken her in his arms again. "If you love me, you will tell me why you have done such a thing."

What instinct there was in the man which forbade him speaking out to her, I know not. I do believe that he would have confessed, if he could. Isaac Worthington had been impelled to reveal his plans and aspirations, but Jethro Bass was as powerless in this supreme moment of his life as was Coniston Mountain to move the granite on which it stood. Cynthia's heart sank, and a note of passionate appeal came into her voice.

"Oh, Jethro!" she cried, "this is not the way to use your power, to compel men like Eben Williams and Samuel Todd and — and Lyman Hull, who is a drunkard and a vagabond, to come in and vote for those who are not fit to hold office." She was using the minister's own arguments. "We have always had clean men, and honorable and good men."

He did not speak, but dropped his hands to his sides. His thoughts were not to be fathomed, yet Cynthia took the movement for silent confession, — which it was not, — and stood appalled at the very magnitude of his accomplishment, astonished at the secrecy he had maintained. She had heard that his name had been mentioned in the meeting at the house of Moses Hatch as having taken part in the matter, and she guessed something of certain of his methods. But she had felt his force, and knew that this was not the only secret of his power.

What might he not aspire to, if properly guided? No, she did not believe him to be unscrupulous — but merely ignorant: a man who was capable of such love as she felt was in him, a man whom she could love, could not mean to be unscrupulous. Defence of him leaped to her own lips.

"You did not know what you were doing," she said. "I was sure of it, or I would not have come to you. Oh, Jethro! you must stop it — you must prevent this election."

Her eyes met his, her own pleading, and the very wind without seemed to pause for his answer. But what she asked was impossible. That wind which he himself had loosed, which was to topple over institutions, was rising, and he could no more have stopped it then than he could have hushed the storm.

"You will not do what I ask — now?" she said, very slowly. Then her voice failed her, she drew her hands together, and it was as if her heart had ceased to beat. Sorrow and anger and fierce shame overwhelmed her, and she turned from him in silence and went to the door.

"Cynthy," he cried hoarsely, "Cynthy!"

"You must never speak to me again," she said, and was gone into the storm.

Yes, she had failed. But she did not know that she had left something behind which he treasured as long as he lived.

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In the spring, when the new leaves were green on the slopes of Coniston, Priest Ware ended a life of faithful

service. The high pulpit, taken from the old meeting house, and the cricket on which he used to stand and the Bible from which he used to preach have remained objects of veneration in Coniston to this day. A fortnight later many tearful faces gazed after the Truro coach as it galloped out of Brampton in a cloud of dust, and one there was, watching unseen from the spruces on the hill, who saw within it a girl dressed in black, dry-eyed, staring from the window.

CHAPTER VII

"AND STILL THE AGES ROLL, UNMOVED"

Out of the stump of a blasted tree in the Coniston woods a flower will sometimes grow, and even so the story which I have now to tell springs from the love of Cynthia Ware and Jethro Bass. The flower, when it came to bloom, was fair in life, and I hope that in these pages it will not lose too much of its beauty and sweetness.

For a little while we are going to gallop through the years as before we have ambled through the days, although the reader's breath may be taken away in the process. How Cynthia Ware went over the Truro Pass to Boston, and how she became a teacher in a high school there, — largely through the kindness of that Miss Lucretia Penniman of whom we have spoken, who wrote in Cynthia's behalf to certain friends she had in that city; how she met one William Wetherell, no longer a clerk in Mr. Judson's jewellery shop, but a newspaper man with I know not what ambitions — and limitations in strength of body and will; how, many, many years afterward, she nursed him tenderly through a sickness and — married him, is all told in a paragraph. Marry him she did, to take care of him, and told him so. She made no secret of the maternal in this love.

One evening, the summer after their marriage, they were walking in the Mall under the great elms that border the Common on the Tremont Street side. They often used to wander there, talking of the books he was to write when strength should come and a little leisure, and sometimes their glances would linger longingly on