Cynthia incapable of answering. "We're only to have her for one short winter, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Worthington, gravely. "I'll see old Ephraim, and tell him you're well, and what a marvel of learning you've become. And — and I'll go to Coniston if that will please you."

"Oh, no, Bob, you mustn't do anything of the kind," answered Cynthia, trying to keep back the tears. "I — I write to Uncle Jethro very often. Good-by. I hope you will enjoy your holidays."

"I'm coming to see you the minute I get back and tell you all about everybody," said he.

How was she to forbid him to come before Susan and Jane! She could only be silent.

"Do come, Mr. Worthington," said Susan, warmly, wondering at Cynthia's coldness and, indeed, misinterpreting it. "I am sure she will be glad to see you. And we shall always make you welcome, at any rate."

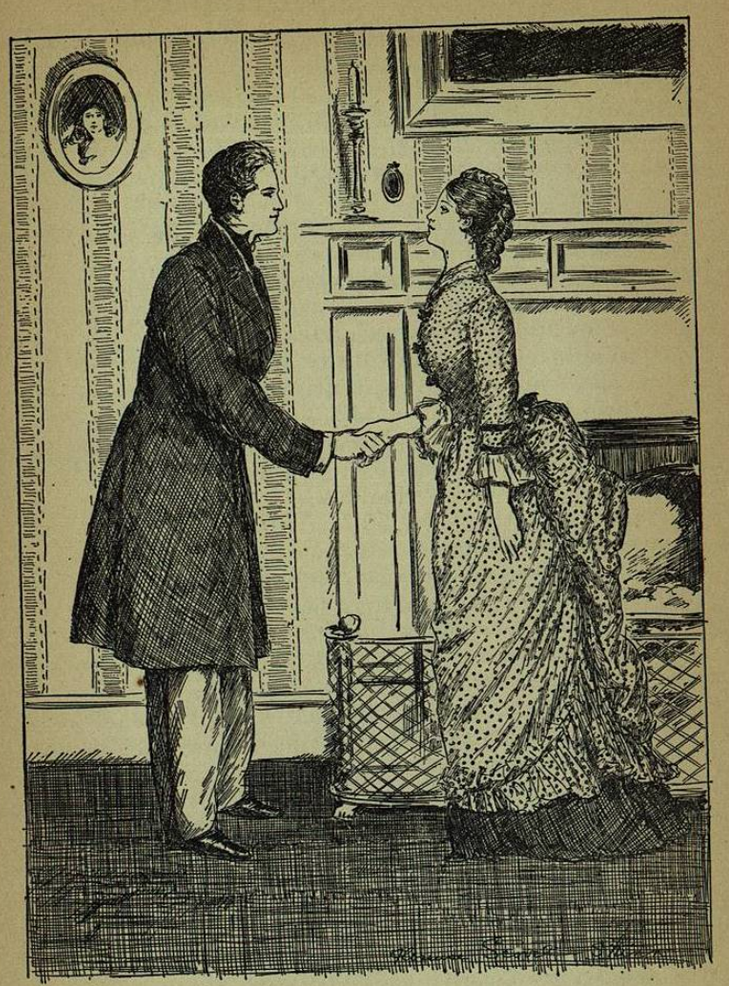
As soon as he was out of the door, Susan became very repentant, and slipped her hand about Cynthia's waist.

"We shouldn't have come in at all if we had known he would go so soon, indeed we shouldn't, Cynthia." And seeing that Cynthia was still silent, she added: "I wouldn't do such a mean thing, Cynthia, I really wouldn't. Won't you believe me and forgive me?"

Cynthia scarcely heard her at first. She was thinking of Coniston mountain, and how the sun had just set behind it. The mountain would be ultramarine against the white fields, and the snow on the hill pastures to the east stained red as with wine. What would she not have given to be going back to-morrow — yes, with Bob. She confessed — though startled by the very boldness of the thought — that she would like to be going there with Bob. Susan's appeal brought her back to Boston and the gas-lit parlor.

"Forgive you, Susan! There's nothing to forgive. I wanted him to go."

"You wanted him to go?" repeated Susan, amazed. She may be pardoned if she did not believe this, but a



"'I'm coming to see you the minute I get back.'"

glance at Cynthia's face scarcely left a room for doubt. "Cynthia Wetherell, you're the strangest girl I've ever known in all my life. If I had a — a friend" (Susan had another word on her tongue) "if I had such a friend as Mr. Worthington, I shouldn't be in a hurry to let him leave me. Of course," she added, "I shouldn't let him know it."

Cynthia's heart was very heavy during the next few days, heavier by far than her friends in Mount Vernon Street imagined. They had grown to love her almost as one of themselves, and because of the sympathy which comes of such love they guessed that her thoughts would be turning homeward at Christmastide. At school she had listened, perforce, to the festival plans of thirty girls of her own age; to accounts of the probable presents they were to receive, the cost of some of which would support a family in Coniston for several months; to arrangements for visits, during which there were to be theatre-parties and dances and other gayeties. Cynthia could not help wondering, as she listened in silence to this talk, whether Uncle Jethro had done wisely in sending her to Miss Sadler's; whether she would not have been far happier if she had never known about such things.

Then came the last day of school, which began with leave-takings and embraces. There were not many who embraced Cynthia, though, had she known it, this was largely her own fault. Poor Cynthia! how was she to know it? Many more of them than she imagined would have liked to embrace her had they believed that the embrace would be returned. Secretly they had grown to admire this strange, dark girl, who was too proud to bend for the good opinion of any one — even of Miss Sally Broke. Once during the term Cynthia had held some of them in the hollow of her hand, and had incurred the severe displeasure of Miss Sadler by refusing to tell what she knew of certain mischief-makers.

Now, Miss Sadler was going about among them in the school parlor saying good-by, sending particular remembrances to such of the fathers and mothers as she

thought worthy of that honor; kissing some, shaking hands with all. It was then that a dramatic incident occurred — dramatic for a girls' school, at least. Cynthia deliberately turned her back on Miss Sadler and looked out of the window. The chatter in the room was hushed, and for a moment a dangerous wrath flamed in Miss Sadler's eyes. Then she passed on with a smile, to send most particular messages to the mother of Miss Isabel Burrage.

Some few moments afterward Cynthia felt a touch on her arm, and turned to find herself confronted by Miss Sally Broke. Unfortunately there is not much room for Miss Broke in this story, although she may appear in another one yet to be written. She was extremely good-looking, with real golden hair and mischievous blue eyes. She was, in brief, the leader of Miss Sadler's school.

"Cynthia," she said, "I was rude to you when you first came here, and I'm sorry for it. I want to beg your pardon." And she held out her hand.

There was a moment's suspense for those watching to see if Cynthia would take it. She did take it.

"I'm sorry, too," said Cynthia, simply, "I couldn't see what I'd done to offend you. Perhaps you'll explain now."

Miss Broke blushed violently, and for an instant looked decidedly uncomfortable. Then she burst into laughter, — merry, irresistible laughter that carried all before it.

"I was a snob, that's all," said she, "just a plain, low-down snob. You don't understand what that means, because you're not one." (Cynthia did understand, nevertheless.) "But I like you, and I want you to be my friend. Perhaps when I get to know you better, you will come home with me sometime for a visit."

Go home with her for a visit to that house in Washington Square with the picture gallery!

"I want to say that I'd give my head to have been able to turn my back on Miss Sadler as you did," continued Miss Broke; "if you ever want a friend, remember Sally Broke."

Some of Cynthia's trouble, at least, was mitigated by

this episode; and Miss Broke having led the way, Miss Broke's followers came shyly, one by one, with proffers of friendship. To the good-hearted Merrill girls the walk home that day was a kind of a triumphal march, a victory over Miss Sadler and a vindication of their friend. Mrs. Merrill, when she heard of it, could not find it in her heart to reprove Cynthia. Miss Sadler had got her just deserts. But Miss Sadler was not a person who was likely to forget such an incident. Indeed, Mrs. Merrill half expected to receive a note before the holidays ended that Cynthia's presence was no longer desired at the school. No such note came, however.

If one had to be away from home on Christmas, there could surely be no better place to spend that day than in the Merrill household. Cynthia remembers still, when that blessed season comes around, how each member of the family vied with the others to make her happy; how they showered presents on her, and how they strove to include her in the laughter and jokes at the big family dinner. Mr. Merrill's brother was there with his wife, and Mrs. Merrill's aunt and her husband, and two broods of cousins. It may be well to mention that the Merrill relations, like Sally Broke, had overcome their dislike for Cynthia.

There were eatables from Coniston on that board. A turkey sent by Jethro for which, Mr. Merrill declared, the table would have to be strengthened; a saddle of venison — Lem Hallowell having shot a deer on the mountain two Sundays before; and mince-meat made by Amanda Hatch herself. Other presents had come to Cynthia from the hills: a gorgeous copy of Mr. Longfellow's poems from Cousin Ephraim, and a gold locket from Uncle Jethro. This locket was the precise counterpart (had she but known it) of a silver one bought at Mr. Judson's shop many years before, though the inscription "Cynthy, from Uncle Jethro," was within. Into the other side exactly fitted that daguerreotype of her mother which her father had given her when he died. The locket had a gold chain with a clasp, and Cynthia wore it hidden beneath her gown — too intimate a possession to be shown.

There was still another and very mysterious present, this being a huge box of roses, addressed to Miss Cynthia Wetherell, which was delivered on Christmas morning. If there had been a card, Susan Merrill would certainly have found it. There was no card. There was much pretended speculation on the part of the Merrill girls as to the sender, sly reference to Cynthia's heightened color, and several attempts to pin on her dress a bunch of the flowers, and Susan declared that one of them would look stunning in her hair. They were put on the dining-room table in the centre of the wreath of holly, and under the mistletoe which hung from the chandelier. Whether Cynthia surreptitiously stole one has never been discovered.

So Christmas came and went: not altogether unhappily, deferring for a day at least the knotty problems of life. Although Cynthia accepted the present of the roses with such magnificent unconcern, and would not make so much as a guess as to who sent them, Mr. Robert Worthington was frequently in her thoughts. He had declared his intention of coming to Mount Vernon Street as soon as the holidays ended, and had been cordially invited by Susan to do so. Cynthia took the trouble to procure a Harvard catalogue from the library, and discovered that he had many holidays yet to spend. She determined to write another letter, which he would find in his rooms when he returned. Just what terrible prohibitory terms she was to employ in that letter Cynthia could not decide in a moment, nor yet in a day, or a week. She went so far as to make several drafts, some of which she destroyed for the fault of leniency, and others for that of severity. What was she to say to him? She had expended her arguments to no avail. She could wound him, indeed, and at length made up her mind that this was the only resource left her, although she would thereby wound herself more deeply. When she had arrived at this decision, there remained still more than a week in which to compose the letter.

On the morning after New Year's, when the family were

assembled around the breakfast table, Mrs. Merrill remarked that her husband was neglecting a custom which had been his for many years.

"Didn't the newspaper come, Stephen?" she asked.

Mr. Merrill had read it.

"Read it!" repeated his wife, in surprise, "you haven't been down long enough to read a column."

"It was full of trash," said Mr. Merrill, lightly, and began on his usual jokes with the girls. But Mrs. Merrill was troubled. She thought his jokes not as hearty as they were wont to be, and disquieting surmises of business worries filled her mind. The fact that he beckoned her into his writing room as soon as breakfast was over did not tend to allay her suspicions. He closed and locked the door after her, and taking the paper from a drawer in his desk bade her read a certain article in it.

The article was an arraignment of Jethro Bass — and a terrible arraignment indeed. Step by step it traced his career from the beginning, showing first of all how he had debauched his own town of Coniston; how, enlarging on the same methods, he had gradually extended his grip over the county and finally over the state; how he had bought and sold men for his own power and profit, deceived those who had trusted in him, corrupted governors and legislators, congressmen and senators, and even justices of the courts; how he had trafficked ruthlessly in the enterprises of the people. Instance upon instance was given, and men of high prominence from whom he had received bribes were named, not the least important of these being the Honorable Alva Hopkins of Gosport.

Mrs. Merrill looked up from the paper in dismay.

"It's copied from the *Newcastle Guardian*," she said, for lack of immediate power to comment. "Isn't the *Guardian* the chief paper in that state?"

"Yes, Worthington's bought it, and he instigated the article, of course. I've been afraid of this for a long time, Carry," said Mr. Merrill, pacing up and down. "There's a bigger fight than they've ever had coming on up there, and this is the first gun. Worthington, with

Duncan behind him, is trying to get possession of and consolidate all the railroads in the western part of that state. If he succeeds, it will mean the end of Jethro's power. But he won't succeed."

"Stephen," said his wife, "do you mean to say that Jethro Bass will try to defeat this consolidation simply to keep his power?"

"Well, my dear," answered Mr. Merrill, still pacing, "two wrongs don't make a right, I admit. I've known these things a long time, and I've thought about them a good deal. But I've had to run along with the tide, or give place to another man who would, and — and starve."

Mrs. Merrill's eyes slowly filled with tears.

"Stephen," she began, "do you mean to say —?" There she stopped, utterly unable to speak. He ceased his pacing and sat down beside her and took her hand.

"Yes, my dear, I mean to say I've submitted to these things. God knows whether I've been right or wrong, but I have. I've often thought I'd be happier if I resigned my office as president of my road and became a clerk in a store. I don't attempt to excuse myself, Carry, but my sin has been in holding on to my post. As long as I remain president I have to cope with things as I find them."

Mr. Merrill spoke thickly, for the sight of his wife's tears wrung his heart.

"Stephen," she said, "when we were first married and you were a district superintendent, you used to tell me everything."

Stephen Merrill was a man, and a good man, as men go. How was he to tell her the degrees by which he had been led into his present situation? How was he to explain that these degrees had been so gradual that his conscience had had but a passing wrench here and there? Politics being what they were, progress and protection had to be obtained in accordance with them, and there was a duty to the holders of bonds and stocks.

His wife had a question on her lips, a question for which

she had to summon all her courage. She chose that form for it which would hurt him least.

"Mr. Worthington is going to try to change these things?"

Mr. Merrill roused himself at the words, and his eyes flashed. He became a different man.

"Change them!" he cried bitterly, "change them for the worse, if he can. He will try to wrest the power from Jethro Bass. I don't defend him. I don't defend myself. But I like Jethro Bass. I won't deny it. He's human, and I like him, and whatever they say about him I know that he's been a true friend to me. And I tell you as I hope for happiness here and hereafter, that if Worthington succeeds in what he is trying to do, if the railroads win in this fight, there will be no mercy for the people of that state. I'm a railroad man myself, though I have no interest in this affair. My turn may come later. Will come later, I suppose. Isaac D. Worthington has a very little heart or soul or mercy himself; but the corporation which he means to set up will have none at all. It will grind the people and debase them and clog their progress a hundred times more than Jethro Bass has done. Mark my words, Carry. I'm running ahead of the times a little, but I can see it all as clearly as if it existed now."

Mrs. Merrill went about her duties that morning with a heavy heart, and more than once she paused to wipe away a tear that would have fallen on the linen she was sorting. At eleven o'clock the doorbell rang, and Ellen appeared at the entrance to the linen closet with a card in her hand. Mrs. Merrill looked at it with a flurry of surprise. It read:—

MISS LUCRETIA PENNIMAN

The Woman's Hour

CHAPTER X

OF AN UNEXPECTED RETURN

It was certainly affinity that led Miss Lucretia to choose the rosewood sofa of a bygone age, which was covered with horsehair. Miss Lucretia's features seemed to be constructed on a larger and more generous principle than those of women are nowadays. Her face was longer. With her curls and her bonnet and her bombazine,—which she wore in all seasons,—she was in complete harmony with the sofa. She had thrown aside the storm cloak which had become so familiar to pedestrians in certain parts of Boston.

"My dear Miss Penniman," said Mrs. Merrill, "I am delighted and honored. I scarcely hoped for such a pleasure. I have so long admired you and your work, and I have heard Cynthia speak of you so kindly."

"It is very good of you to say so, Mrs. Merrill," answered Miss Lucretia, in her full, deep voice. It was by no means an unpleasant voice. She settled herself, though she sat quite upright, in the geometrical centre of the horsehair sofa, and cleared her throat. "To be quite honest with you, Mrs. Merrill," she continued, "I came upon a particular errand, though I believe it would not be a perversion of the truth if I were to add that I have had for a month past every intention of paying you a friendly call."

Good Mrs. Merrill's breath was a little taken away by this extremely scrupulous speech. She also began to feel a misgiving about the cause of the visit, but she managed to say something polite in reply.

"I have come about Cynthia," announced Miss Lucretia, without further preliminaries.