lay ready to be hatched under Mr. Worthington's eye. A letter in the bold and upright hand of his son was on the top of the pile, placed there by Mr. Flint himself, who had examined Mr. Worthington's face closely when he came in to see how much he might know of its contents. He had decided that Mr. Worthington was in too good a humor to know anything of them. Mr. Flint had not steamed the letter open, and read the news; but he could guess at them pretty shrewdly, and so could have the biggest fool in Brampton. That letter contained the opening scene of the next act in the drama.

Mr. Worthington cut the envelope and began to read, and while he did so Mr. Flint, who was not afraid of man or beast, looked at him. It was a manly and straightforward letter, and Mr. Worthington, no matter what his opinions on the subject were, should have been proud of it. Bob announced, first of all, that he was going to marry Cynthia Wetherell; then he proceeded with praiseworthy self-control (for a lover) to describe Cynthia's character and attainments: after which he stated that Cynthia had refused him — twice, because she believed that Mr. Worthington would oppose the marriage, and had declared that she would never be the cause of a breach between father and son. Bob asked for his father's consent, and hoped to have it, but he thought it only right to add that he had given his word and his love, and did not mean to retract either. He spoke of his visit to Brampton, and explained that Cynthia was teaching school there, and urged his father to see her before he made a decision. Mr. Worthington read it through to the end, his lips closing tighter and tighter until his mouth was but a line across his face. There was pain in the face, too, the kind of pain which anger sends, and which comes with the tottering of a pride that is false. Of what gratification now was the overthrow of Jethro Bass?

He stared at the letter for a moment after he had finished it, and his face grew a dark red. Then he seized the paper and tore it slowly, deliberately, into bits.

Dudley Worthington was not thinking then — not he! — of the young man in the white beaver who had called at the Social Library many years before to see a young woman whose name, too, had been Cynthia. He was thinking, in fact, for he was a man to think in anger, whether it were not possible to remove this Cynthia from the face of the earth — at least to a place beyond his horizon and that of his son. Had he worn the chain mail instead of the frock coat he would have had her hung outside the town walls.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. And the words sounded profane indeed as he fixed his eyes upon Mr. Flint. "You knew that Robert had been to Brampton?"

"Yes," said Flint, "the whole village knew it."

"Good God!" cried Mr. Worthington again, "why was I not informed of this? Why was I not warned of this? Have I no friends? Do you pretend to look after my interests and not take the trouble to write me on such a subject?"

"Do you think I could have prevented it?" asked Mr. Flint, very calmly.

"You allow this — this woman to come here to Brampton and teach school in a place where she can further her designs? What were you about?"

"When the prudential committee appointed her, nothing of this was known, Mr. Worthington."

"Yes, but now — now! What are you doing, what are they doing to allow her to remain? Who are on that committee?"

Mr. Flint named the men. They had been reëlected, as usual, at the recent town-meeting. Mr. Errol, who had also been reëlected, had returned but had not yet issued the certificate or conducted the examination.

"Send for them, have them here at once," commanded Mr. Worthington, without listening to this.

"If you take my advice, you will do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Flint, who, as usual, had the whole situation at his fingers' ends. He had taken the trouble to inform himself about the girl, and he had discovered,

shrewdly enough, that she was the kind which might be led, but not driven. If Mr. Flint's advice had been listened to, this story might have had quite a different ending. But Mr. Flint had not reached the stage where his advice was always listened to, and he had a maddened man to deal with now. At that moment, as if fate had determined to intervene, the housemaid came into the room.

"Mr. Dodd to see you, sir," she said.

"Show him in," shouted Mr. Worthington; "show him in!"

Mr. Dodd was not a man who could wait for a summons which he had felt in his bones was coming. He was ordinarily, as we have seen, officious. But now he was thoroughly frightened. He had seen the great man in the barouche as he drove past the hardware store, and he had made up his mind to go up at once, and have it over with. His opinions were formed now. He put a smile on his face when he was a foot outside of the library door.

"This is a great pleasure, Mr. Worthington, a great pleasure, to see you back," he said, coming forward. "I callated —"

But the great man sat in his chair, and made no attempt to return the greeting.

"Mr. Dodd, I thought you were my friend," he said.

Mr. Dodd went all to pieces at this reception.

"So I be, Mr. Worthington — so I be," he cried. "That's why I'm here now. I've b'en a friend of yours ever since I can remember — never fluctuated. I'd rather have chopped my hand off than had this happen — so I would. If I could have foreseen what she was, she'd never have had the place, as sure as my name's Levi Dodd."

If Mr. Dodd had taken the trouble to look at the seneschal's face, he would have seen a well-defined sneer there.

"And now that you know what she is," cried Mr. Worthington, rising and smiting the pile of letters on his desk, "why do you keep her there an instant?"

Mr. Dodd stopped to pick up the letters, which had

flown over the floor. But the great man was now in the full tide of his anger.

"Never mind the letters," he shouted; "tell me why you keep her there."

"We callated we'd wait and see what steps you'd like taken," said the trembling townsman.

"Steps! Steps! Good God! What kind of man are you to serve in such a place when you allow the professed ward of Jethro Bass — of Jethro Bass, the most notoriously depraved man in this state, to teach the children of this town. Steps! How soon can you call your committee together?"

"Right away," answered Mr. Dodd, breathlessly. He would have gone on to exculpate himself, but Mr. Worthington's inexorable finger was pointing at the door.

"If you are a friend of mine," said that gentleman, "and if you have any regard for the fair name of this town, you will do so at once."

Mr. Dodd departed precipitately, and Mr. Worthington began to pace the room, clasping his hands now in front of him, now behind him, in his agony: repeating now and again various appellations which need not be printed here, which he applied in turn to the prudential committee, to his son, and to Cynthia Wetherell.

"I'll run her out of Brampton," he said at last.

"If you do," said Mr. Flint, who had been watching him apparently unmoved, "you may have Jethro Bass on your back."

"Jethro Bass?" shouted Mr. Worthington, with a laugh that was not pleasant to hear, "Jethro Bass is as dead as Julius Cæsar."

It was one thing for Mr. Dodd to promise so readily a meeting of the committee, and quite another to decide how he was going to get through the affair without any more burns and scratches than were absolutely necessary. He had reversed the usual order, and had been in the fire — now he was going to the frying-pan. He stood in the street for some time, pulling at his tuft, and then made his way to Mr. Jonathan Hill's feed store. Mr. Hill was

reading "Sartor Resartus" in his little office, the temperature of which must have been 95°, and Mr. Dodd was perspiring when he got there.

"It's come," said Mr. Dodd, sententiously.

"What's come?" inquired Mr. Hill, mildly.

"Isaac D.'s come, that's what," said Mr. Dodd. "I hain't b'en sleepin' well of nights, lately. I can't think what we was about, Jonathan, puttin' that girl in the school. We'd ought to've knowed she wahn't fit."

"What's the matter with her?" inquired Mr. Hill.

"Matter with her!" exclaimed his fellow-committeeman, "she lives with Jethro Bass — she's his ward."

"Well, what of it?" said Mr. Hill, who never bothered himself about gossip or newspapers, or indeed about anything not between the covers of a book, except when he couldn't help it.

"Good God!" exclaimed Mr. Dodd, "he's the most notorious, depraved man in the state. Hain't we got to look out for the fair name of Brampton?"

Mr. Hill sighed and closed his book.

"Well," he said, "I'd hoped we were through with that. Let's go up and see what Judge Graves says about it."

"Hold on," said Mr. Dodd, seizing the feed dealer by the coat, "we've got to get it fixed in our minds what we're goin' to do, first. We can't allow no notorious people in our schools. We've got to stand up to the jedge, and tell him so. We app'inted her on his recommendation, you know."

"I like the girl," replied Mr. Hill; "I don't think we ever had a better teacher. She's quiet, and nice appearin', and attends to her business."

Mr. Dodd pulled his tuft, and cocked his head.

"Mr. Worthington holds a note of yours, don't he, Jonathan?"

Mr. Hill reflected. He said he thought perhaps Mr. Worthington did.

"Well," said Mr. Dodd, "I guess we might as well go along up to the jedge now as any time."

But when they got there Mr. Dodd's knock was so timid

that he had to repeat it before the judge came to the door and peered at them over his spectacles.

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?" he asked, severely, though he knew well enough. He had not been taken by surprise many times during the last forty years. Mr. Dodd explained that they wished a little meeting of the committee. The judge ushered them into his bedroom, the parlor being too good for such an occasion.

"Now, gentlemen," said he, "let us get down to business. Mr. Worthington arrived here to-day, he has seen Mr. Dodd, and Mr. Dodd has seen Mr. Hill. Mr. Worthington is a political opponent of Jethro Bass, and wishes Miss Wetherell dismissed. Mr. Dodd and Mr. Hill have agreed, for various reasons which I will spare you, that Miss Wetherell should be dismissed. Have I stated the case, gentlemen, or have I not?"

Mr. Graves took off his spectacles and wiped them, looking from one to the other of his very uncomfortable fellow-members. Mr. Hill did not attempt to speak; but Mr. Dodd, who was not sure now that this was not the fire and the other the frying-pan, pulled at his tuft until words came to him.

"Jedge," he said finally, "I must say I'm a mite surprised. I must say your language is unwarranted."

"The truth is never unwarranted," said the judge.

"For the sake of the fair name of Brampton," began Mr. Dodd, "we cannot allow —"

"Mr. Dodd," interrupted the judge, "I would rather have Mr. Worthington's arguments from Mr. Worthington himself, if I wanted them at all. There is no need of prolonging this meeting. If I were to waste my breath until six o'clock, it would be no use. I was about to say that your opinions were formed, but I will alter that, and say that your minds are fixed. You are determined to dismiss Miss Wetherell. Is it not so?"

"I wish you'd hear me, Jedge," said Mr. Dodd, desperately.

"Will you kindly answer me *yes* or *no* to that question," said the judge; "my time is valuable."

"Well, if you put it that way, I guess we are agreed that she hadn't ought to stay. Not that I've anything against her personally — "

"All right," said the judge, with a calmness that made them tremble. They had never bearded him before. "All right, you are two to one and no certificate has been issued. But I tell you this, gentlemen, that you will live to see the day when you will bitterly regret this injustice to an innocent and a noble woman, and Isaac D. Worthington will live to regret it. You may tell him I said so. Good day, gentlemen."

They rose.

"Jedge," began Mr. Dodd again, "I don't think you've been quite fair with us."

"Fair!" repeated the judge, with unutterable scorn. "Good day, gentlemen." And he slammed the door behind them.

They walked down the street some distance before either of them spoke.

"Goliah," said Mr. Dodd, at last, "did you ever hear such talk? He's got the drattedest temper of any man I ever knew, and he never callates to make a mistake. It's a little mite hard to do your duty when a man talks that way."

"I'm not sure we've done it," answered Mr. Hill.

"Not sure!" ejaculated the hardware dealer, for he was now far enough away from the judge's house to speak in his normal tone, "and she connected with that depraved— "

"Hold on," said Mr. Hill, with an astonishing amount of spirit for him, "I've heard that before."

Mr. Dodd looked at him, swallowed the wrong way and began to choke.

"You hain't wavered, Jonathan?" he said, when he got his breath.

"No, I haven't," said Mr. Hill, sadly; "but I wish to hell I had."

Mr. Dodd looked at him again, and began to choke again. It was the first time he had known Jonathan Hill to swear.

"You're a-goin' to stick by what you agreed — by your principles?"

"I'm going to stick by my bread and butter," said Mr. Hill, "not by my principles. I wish to hell I wasn't."

And so saying that gentleman departed, cutting diagonally across the street through the snow, leaving Mr. Dodd still choking and pulling at his tuft. This third and totally unexpected shaking-up had caused him to feel somewhat deranged internally, though it had not altered the opinions now so firmly planted in his head. After a few moments, however, he had collected himself sufficiently to move on once more, when he discovered that he was repeating to himself, quite unconsciously, Mr. Hill's profanity "I wish to hell I wasn't." The iron mastiffs glaring at him angrily out of the snow banks reminded him that he was in front of Mr. Worthington's door, and he thought he might as well go in at once and receive the great man's gratitude. He certainly deserved it. But as he put his hand on the bell Mr. Worthington himself came out of the house, and would actually have gone by without noticing Mr. Dodd if he had not spoken.

"I've got that little matter fixed, Mr. Worthington," he said, "called the committee, and we voted to discharge the — the young woman." No, he did not deliver Judge Graves's message.

"Very well, Mr. Dodd," answered the great man, passing on so that Mr. Dodd was obliged to follow him in order to hear, "I'm glad you've come to your senses at last. Kindly step into the library and tell Miss Bruce from me that she may fill the place to-morrow."

"Certain," said Mr. Dodd, with his hand to his chin. He watched the great man turn in at his bank in the new block, and then he did as he was bid.

By the time school was out that day the news had leaped across Brampton Street and spread up and down both sides of it that the new teacher had been dismissed. The story ran fairly straight — there were enough clews, certainly. The great man's return, the visit of Mr. Dodd, the call on Judge Graves, all had been marked. The

fiat of the first citizen had gone forth that the ward of Jethro Bass must be got rid of; the designing young woman who had sought to entrap his son must be punished for her amazing effrontery.

Cynthia came out of school happily unaware that her name was on the lips of Brampton: unaware, too, that the lord of the place had come into residence that day. She had looked forward to living in the same town with Bob's father as an evil which was necessary to be borne, as one of the things which are more or less inevitable in the lives of those who have to make their own ways in the world. The children trooped around her, and the little girls held her hand, and she talked and laughed with them as she came up the street in the eyes of Brampton, — came up the street to the block of new buildings where the bank was. Stepping out of the bank, with that businesslike alertness which characterized him, was the first citizen — none other. He found himself entangled among the romping children and — horror of horrors — he bumped into the schoolmistress herself! Worse than this, he had taken off his hat and begged her pardon before he looked at her and realized the enormity of his mistake. And the schoolmistress had actually paid no attention to him, but with merely heightened color had drawn the children out of his way and passed on without a word. The first citizen, raging inwardly, but trying to appear unconcerned, walked rapidly back to his house. On the street of his own town, before the eyes of men, he had been snubbed by a school-teacher. And such a school-teacher!

Mr. Worthington, as he paced his library burning with the shame of this occurrence, remembered that he had had to glance at her twice before it came over him who she was. His first sensation had been astonishment. And now, in spite of his bitter anger, he had to acknowledge that the face had made an impression on him — a fact that only served to increase his rage. A conviction grew upon him that it was a face which his son, or any other man, would not be likely to forget. He himself could not forget it.

In the meantime Cynthia had reached her home, her

cheeks still smarting, conscious that people had stared at her. This much, of course, she knew — that Brampton believed Bob Worthington to be in love with her: and the knowledge at such times made her so miserable that the thought of Jethro's isolation alone deterred her from asking Miss Lucretia Penniman for a position in Boston. For she wrote to Miss Lucretia about her life and her reading, as that lady had made her promise to do. She sat down now at the cherry chest of drawers that was also a desk, to write: not to pour out her troubles, for she never had done that, — but to calm her mind by drawing little character sketches of her pupils. But she had only written the words, "My dear Miss Lucretia," when she looked out of the window and saw Judge Graves coming up the path, and ran to open the door for him.

"How do you do, Judge?" she said, for she recognized Mr. Graves as one of her few friends in Brampton. "I have sent to Boston for the new reader, but it has not come."

The judge took her hand and pressed it and led her into the little sitting room. His face was very stern, but his eyes, which had flung fire at Mr. Dodd, looked at her with a vast compassion. Her heart misgave her.

"My dear," he said, — it was long since the judge had called any woman "my dear," — "I have bad news for you. The committee have decided that you cannot teach any longer in the Brampton school."

"Oh, Judge," she answered, trying to force back the tears which would come, "I have tried so hard. I had begun to believe that I could fill the place."

"Fill the place!" cried the judge, startling her with his sudden anger. "No woman in the state can fill it better than you."

"Then why am I dismissed?" she asked breathlessly.

The judge looked at her in silence, his blue lips quivering. Sometimes even he found it hard to tell the truth. And yet he had come to tell it, that she might suffer less. He remembered the time when Isaac D. Worthington had done him a great wrong.

"You are dismissed," he said, "because Mr. Worthington has come home, and because the two other members of the committee are dogs and cowards." Mr. Graves never minced matters when he began, and his voice shook with passion. "If Mr. Errol had examined you, and you had your certificate, it might have been different. Errol is not a sycophant. Worthington does not hold his mortgage."

"Mortgage!" exclaimed Cynthia. The word always struck terror to her soul.

"Mr. Worthington holds Mr. Hill's mortgage," said Mr. Graves, more than ever beside himself at the sight of her suffering. "That man's tyranny is not to be borne. We will not give up, Cynthia. I will fight him in this matter if it takes my last ounce of strength, so help me God!"

Mortgage! Cynthia sank down in the chair by the desk. In spite of the misery the news had brought, the thought that his father, too, who was fighting Jethro Bass as a righteous man, dealt in mortgages and coerced men to do his will, was overwhelming. So she sat for a while staring at the landscape on the old wall paper.

"I will go to Coniston to-night," she said at last.

"No," cried the judge, seizing her shoulder in his excitement, "no. Do you think that I have been your friend — that I am your friend?"

"Oh, Judge Graves —"

"Then stay here, where you are. I ask it as a favor to me. You need not go to the school to-morrow — indeed, you cannot. But stay here for a day or two at least, and if there is any justice left in a free country, we shall have it. Will you stay, as a favor to me?"

"I will stay, since you ask it," said Cynthia. "I will do what you think right."

Her voice was firmer than he expected — much firmer. He glanced at her quickly, with something very like admiration in his eye.

"You are a good woman, and a brave woman," he said, and with this somewhat surprising tribute he took his departure instantly.

Cynthia was left to her thoughts, and these were harassing and sorrowful enough. One idea, however, persisted through them all. Mr. Worthington, whose power she had lived long enough in Brampton to know, was an unjust man and a hypocrite. That thought was both sweet and bitter: sweet, as a retribution; and bitter, because he was Bob's father. She realized, now, that Bob knew these things, and she respected and loved him the more, if that were possible, because he had refrained from speaking of them to her. And now another thought came, and though she put it resolutely from her, persisted. Was she not justified now in marrying him? The reasoning was false, so she told herself. She had no right to separate Bob from his father, whatever his father might be. Did not she still love Jethro Bass? Yes, but he had renounced his ways. Her heart swelled gratefully as she spoke the words to herself, and she reflected that he, at least, had never been a hypocrite.

Of one thing she was sure, now. In the matter of the school she had right on her side, and she must allow Judge Graves to do whatever he thought proper to maintain that right. If Isaac D. Worthington's character had been different, this would not have been her decision. Now she would not leave Brampton in disgrace, when she had done nothing to merit it. Not that she believed that the judge would prevail against such mighty odds. So little did she think so that she fell, presently, into a despondency which in all her troubles had not overtaken her — the despondency which comes even to the pure and the strong when they feel the unjust strength of the world against them. In this state her eyes fell on the letter she had started to Miss Lucretia Penniman, and in desperation she began to write.

It was a short letter, reserved enough, and quite in character. It was right that she should defend herself, which she did with dignity, saying that she believed the committee had no fault to find with her duties, but that Mr. Worthington had seen fit to bring influence to bear upon them because of her connection with Jethro Bass.

It was not the whole truth, but Cynthia could not bring herself to write of that other reason. At the end she asked, very simply, if Miss Lucretia could find her something to do in Boston in case her dismissal became certain. Then she put on her coat, and walked to the post-office to post the letter, for she resolved that there could be no shame without reason for it. There was a little more color in her cheeks, and she held her head high, preparing to be slighted. But she was not slighted, and got more salutations, if anything, than usual. She was, indeed, in the right not to hide her head, and policy alone would have forbade it, had Cynthia thought of policy.

CHAPTER XV

CONTAINING A DRAMATIC CLIMAX

PUBLIC opinion is like the wind — it bloweth where it listeth. It whistled around Brampton the next day, whirling husbands and wives apart, and families into smithereens. Brampton had a storm all to itself — save for a sympathetic storm raging in Coniston — and all about a school-teacher.

Had Cynthia been a certain type of woman, she would have had all the men on her side and all of her own sex against her. It is a decided point to be recorded in her favor that she had among her sympathizers as many women as men. But the excitement of a day long remembered in Brampton began, for her, when a score or more of children assembled in front of the little house, tramping down the snow on the grass plots, shouting for her to come to school with them. Children give no mortgages, or keep no hardware stores.

Cynthia, trying to read in front of the fire, was all in a tremble at the sound of the high-pitched little voices she had grown to love, and she longed to go out and kiss them, every one. Her nature, however, shrank from any act which might appear dramatic or sensational. She could not resist going to the window and smiling at them, though they appeared but dimly — little dancing figures in a mist. And when they shouted, the more she shook her head and put her finger to her lips in reproof and vanished from their sight. Then they trooped sadly on to school, resolved to make matters as disagreeable as possible for poor Miss Bruce, who had not offended in any way.