

Again came a far-off rattle, like stones falling from a great height down a rocky bluff.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"They're fighting at McAfee's Station," said Polly Ann. She put her cool hand on my head, and little Tom climbed up on the bed and looked up into my face, wistfully calling my name.

"Oh, Davy," said his mother, "I thought ye were never coming back."

"And the redskins?" I asked.

She drew the child away, lest he hurt me, and shuddered.

"I reckon 'twas only a war-party," she answered. "The rest is at McAfee's. And if they beat 'em off—" she stopped abruptly.

"We shall be saved," I said.

I shall never forget that day. Polly Ann left my side only to feed the children and to keep watch out of the loopholes, and I lay on my back, listening and listening to the shots. At last these became scattered. Then, though we strained our ears, we heard them no more. Was the fort taken? The sun slid across the heavens and shot narrow blades of light, now through one loophole and now through another, until a ray slanted from the western wall and rested upon the red-and-black paint of two dead bodies in the corner. I stared with horror.

"I was afeard to open the door and throw 'em out," said Polly Ann, apologetically.

Still I stared. One of them had a great cleft across his face.

"But I thought I hit him in the shoulder," I exclaimed.

Polly Ann thrust her hand, gently, across my eyes.

"Davy, ye mustn't talk," she said; "that's a dear."

Drowsiness seized me. But I resisted.

"You killed him, Polly Ann," I murmured, "you?"

"Hush," said Polly Ann.

And I slept again.

CHAPTER II

"THE BEGGARS ARE COME TO TOWN"

"THEY was that destitute," said Tom, "'twas a pity to see 'em."

"And they be grand folks, ye say?" said Polly Ann.

"Grand folks, I reckon. And helpless as babes on the Wilderness Trail. They had two niggers—his nigger an' hers—and they was tuckered, too, fer a fact."

"Lawdy!" exclaimed Polly Ann. "Be still, honey!" Taking a piece of corn-pone from the cupboard, she bent over and thrust it between little Peggy's chubby fingers. "Be still, honey, and listen to what your Pa says. Whar did ye find 'em, Tom?"

"'Twas Jim Ray found 'em," said Tom. "We went up to Crab Orchard, accordin' to the Colonel's orders, and we was thar three days. Ye ought to hev seen the trash we turned back, Polly Ann! Most of 'em was scared plum' crazy, and they was fer gittin' 'out 'n Kaintuckee at any cost. Some was fer fightin' their way through us."

"The skulks!" exclaimed Polly Ann. "They tried to kill ye? What did ye do?"

Tom grinned, his mouth full of bacon.

"Do?" says he; "we shot a couple of 'em in the legs and arms, and bound 'em up again. They was in a t'arin' rage. I'm more afeard of a scar't man,—a real scar't man—nor a rattler. They cussed us till they was hoarse. Said they'd hev us hung, an' Clark, too."

Said they hed a right to go back to Virginny if they hed a mind."

"An' what did ye say?" demanded Polly Ann, pausing in her work, her eyes flashing with resentment. "Did ye tell 'em they was cowards to want to settle lands, and not fight for 'em? Other folks' lands, too."

"We didn't tell 'em nothin'," said Tom; "jest sent 'em kitin' back to the stations whar they come from."

"I reckon they won't go foolin' with Clark's boys again," said Polly Ann, resuming a vigorous rubbing of the skillet. "Ye was tellin' me about these fine folks ye fetched home." She tossed her head in the direction of the open door, and I wondered if the fine folks were outside.

"Oh, ay," said Tom; "they was comin' this way, from the Carolinys. Jim Ray went out to look for a deer, and found 'em off 'n the trail. By the eternal, they was tuckered. He was the wust, Jim said, lyin' down on a bed of laurels she and the niggers made. She has sperrit, that woman. Jim fed him, and he got up. She wouldn't eat nothin', and made Jim put him on his hoss. She walked. I can't mek out why them aristocrats wants to come to Kaintuckee. They're a sight too tender."

"Pore things!" said Polly Ann, compassionately. "So ye fetched 'em home."

"They hadn't a place ter go," said he, "and I reckoned 'twould give 'em time ter ketch breath, an' turn around. I told 'em livin' in Kaintuck was kinder rough."

"Mercy!" said Polly Ann, "ter think that they was use' ter silver spoons, and linen, and niggers ter wait on 'em. Tom, ye must shoot a turkey, and I'll do my best to give 'em a good supper." Tom rose obediently, and seized his coonskin hat. She stopped him with a word. "Tom."

"Ay?"

"Mayhap—mayhap Davy would know 'em. He's been to Charlestown with the gentry there."

"Mayhap," agreed Tom. "Pore little deevil," said he, "he's hed a hard time."

"He'll be right again soon," said Polly Ann. "He's

been sleepin' that way, off and on, fer a week." Her voice faltered into a note of tenderness as her eyes rested on me.

"I reckon we owe Davy a heap, Polly Ann," said he.

I was about to interrupt, but Polly Ann's next remark arrested me.

"Tom," said she, "he oughter be eddicated."

"Eddicated!" exclaimed Tom, with a kind of dismay.

"Yes, eddicated," she repeated. "He ain't like you and me. He's different. He oughter be a lawyer, or somethin'."

Tom reflected.

"Ay," he answered, "the Colonel says that same thing. He oughter be sent over the mountain to git l'arnin'."

"And we'll be missing him sore," said Polly Ann, with a sigh.

I wanted to speak then, but the words would not come.

"Whar hev they gone?" said Tom.

"To take a walk," said Polly Ann, and laughed. "The gentry has sech fancies as that. Tom, I reckon I'll fly over to Mrs. McCann's an' beg some of that prime bacon she has."

Tom picked up his rifle, and they went out together. I lay for a long time reflecting. To the strange guests whom Tom in the kindness of his heart had brought back and befriended I gave little attention. I was overwhelmed by the love which had just been revealed to me. And so I was to be educated. It had been in my mind these many years, but I had never spoken of it to Polly Ann. Dear Polly Ann! My eyes filled at the thought that she herself had determined upon this sacrifice.

There were footsteps at the door, and these I heard, and heeded not. Then there came a voice,—a woman's voice, modulated and trained in the perfections of speech and in the art of treating things lightly. At the sound of that voice I caught my breath.

"What a pastoral! Harry, if we have sought for virtue in the wilderness, we have found it."

"When have we ever sought for virtue, Sarah?"

It was the man who answered and stirred another chord of my memory.

"When, indeed!" said the woman; "'tis a luxury that is denied us, I fear me."

"Egad, we have run the gamut, all but that."

I thought the woman sighed.

"Our hosts are gone out," she said, "bless their simple souls! 'Tis Arcady, Harry, 'where thieves do not break in and steal.' That's Biblical, isn't it?" She paused, and joined in the man's laugh. "I remember—" She stopped abruptly.

"Thieves!" said he, "not in our sense. And yet a fortnight ago this sylvan retreat was the scene of murder and sudden death."

"Yes, Indians," said the woman; "but they are beaten off and forgotten. Troubles do not last here. Did you see the boy? He's in there, in the corner, getting well of a fearful hacking. Mrs. McChesney says he saved her and her brats."

"Ay, McChesney told me," said the man. "Let's have a peep at him."

In they came, and I looked on the woman, and would have leaped from my bed had the strength been in me. Superb she was, though her close-fitting travelling gown of green cloth was frayed and torn by the briers, and the beauty of her face enhanced by the marks of I know not what trials and emotions. Little, dark-pencilled lines under the eyes were nigh robbing these of the haughtiness I had once seen and hated. Set high on her hair was a curving, green hat with a feather, ill-suited to the wilderness.

I looked on the man. He was as ill-equipped as she. A London tailor must have cut his suit of gray. A single band of linen, soiled by the journey, was wound about his throat, and I remember oddly the buttons stuck on his knees and cuffs, and these silk-embroidered in a criss-cross pattern of lighter gray. Some had been torn off. As for

his face, 'twas as handsome as ever, for dissipation sat well upon it.

My thoughts flew back to that day long gone when a friendless boy rode up a long drive to a pillared mansion. I saw again the picture. The horse with the craning neck, the liveried servant at the bridle, the listless young gentleman with the shiny boots reclining on the horse-block, and above him, under the portico, the grand lady whose laugh had made me sad. And I remembered, too, the wild, neglected lad who had been to me as a brother, warm-hearted and generous, who had shared what he had with a foundling, who had wept with me in my first great sorrow. Where was he?

For I was face to face once more with Mrs. Temple and Mr. Harry Riddle!

The lady started as she gazed at me, and her tired eyes widened. She clutched Mr. Riddle's arm.

"Harry!" she cried, "Harry, he puts me in mind of— of some one—I cannot think."

Mr. Riddle laughed nervously.

"There, there, Sally," says he, "all brats resemble somebody. I have heard you say so a dozen times."

She turned upon him an appealing glance.

"Oh!" she said, with a little catch of her breath, "is there no such thing as oblivion? Is there a place in the world that is not haunted? I am cursed with memory."

"Or the lack of it," answered Mr. Riddle, pulling out a silver snuff-box from his pocket and staring at it ruefully. "Damme, the snuff I fetched from Paris is gone, all but a pinch. Here is a real tragedy."

"It was the same in Rome," the lady continued, unheeding, "when we met the Izards, and at Venice that nasty Colonel Tarleton saw us at the opera. In London we must needs run into the Mannors from Maryland. In Paris—"

"In Paris we were safe enough," Mr. Riddle threw in hastily.

"And why?" she flashed back at him.

He did not answer that.

"A truce with your fancies, madam," said he. "Behold a soul of good nature! I have followed you through half the civilized countries of the globe—none of them are good enough. You must needs cross the ocean again, and come to the wilds. We nearly die on the trail, are picked up by a Samaritan in buckskin and taken into the bosom of his worthy family. And forsooth, you look at a backwoods urchin, and are nigh to swooning."

"Hush, Harry," she cried, starting forward and peering into my face; "he will hear you."

"Tut!" said Harry, "what if he does? London and Paris are words to him. We might as well be speaking French. And I'll take my oath he's sleeping."

The corner where I lay was dark, for the cabin had no windows. And if my life had depended upon speaking, I could have found no fit words then.

She turned from me, and her mood changed swiftly. For she laughed lightly, musically, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Perchance I am ghost-ridden," she said.

"They are not ghosts of a past happiness, at all events," he answered.

She sat down on a stool before the hearth, and clasping her fingers upon her knee looked thoughtfully into the embers of the fire. Presently she began to speak in a low, even voice, he looking down at her, his feet apart, his hand thrust backward towards the heat.

"Harry," she said, "do you remember all our contrivances? How you used to hold my hand in the garden under the table, while I talked brazenly to Mr. Mason? And how jealous Jack Temple used to get?" She laughed again, softly, always looking at the fire.

"Damnably jealous!" agreed Mr. Riddle, and yawned. "Served him devilish right for marrying you. And he was a blind fool for five long years."

"Yes, blind," the lady agreed. "How could he have been so blind? How well I recall the day he rode after us in the woods."

"'Twas the parson told, curse him!" said Mr. Riddle.

"We should have gone that night, if your courage had held."

"My courage!" she cried, flashing a look upwards, "my foresight. A pretty mess we had made of it without my inheritance. 'Tis small enough, the Lord knows. In Europe we should have been dregs. We should have starved in the wilderness with you a-farming."

He looked down at her curiously.

"Devilish queer talk," said he, "but while we are in it, I wonder where Temple is now. He got aboard the King's frigate with a price on his head. Williams told me he saw him in London, at White's. Have—have you ever heard, Sarah?"

She shook her head, her glance returning to the ashes.

"No," she answered.

"Faith," says Mr. Riddle, "he'll scarce turn up here."

She did not answer that, but sat motionless.

"He'll scarce turn up here, in these wilds," Mr. Riddle repeated, "and what I am wondering, Sarah, is how the devil we are to live here."

"How do these good people live, who helped us when we were starving?"

Mr. Riddle flung his hand eloquently around the cabin. There was something of disgust in the gesture.

"You see!" he said, "love in a cottage."

"But it is love," said the lady, in a low tone.

He broke into laughter.

"Sally," he cried, "I have visions of you gracing the board at which we sat to-day, patting journey-cakes on the hearth, stewing squirrel broth with the same pride that you once planned a rout. Cleaning the pots and pans, and standing anxious at the doorway staring through a sunbonnet for your lord and master."

"My lord and master!" said the lady, and there was so much of scorn in the words that Mr. Riddle winced.

"Come," he said, "I grant now that you could make pans shine like pier-glasses, that you could cook bacon to a turn—although I would have laid an hundred guineas against it some years ago. What then? Are you to be

contented with four log walls? With the intellectual companionship of the McChesneys and their friends? Are you to depend for excitement upon the chances of having the hair neatly cut from your head by red fiends? Come, we'll go back to the *Rue St. Dominique*, to the suppers and the card parties of the countess. We'll be rid of regrets for a life upon which we have turned our backs forever."

She shook her head, sadly.

"It's no use, Harry," said she, "we'll never be rid of regrets."

"We'll never have a barony like Temple Bow, and races every week, and gentry round about. But, damn it, the Rebels have spoiled all that since the war."

"Those are not the regrets I mean," answered Mrs. Temple.

"What then, in Heaven's name?" he cried. "You were not wont to be thus. But now I vow you go beyond me. What then?"

She did not answer, but sat leaning forward over the hearth, he staring at her in angry perplexity. A sound broke the afternoon stillness,—the pattering of small, bare feet on the puncheons. A tremor shook the woman's shoulders, and little Tom stood before her, a quaint figure in a butternut smock, his blue eyes questioning. He laid a hand on her arm.

Then a strange thing happened. With a sudden impulse she turned and flung her arms about the boy and strained him to her, and kissed his brown hair. He struggled, but when she released him he sat very still on her knee, looking into her face. For he was a solemn child. The lady smiled at him, and there were two splashes like raindrops on her fair cheeks.

As for Mr. Riddle, he went to the door, looked out, and took a last pinch of snuff.

"Here is the mistress of the house coming back," he cried, "and singing like the shepherdess in the opera."

It was Polly Ann indeed. At the sound of his mother's voice, little Tom jumped down from the lady's lap and

ran past Mr. Riddle at the door. Mrs. Temple's thoughts were gone across the mountains.

"And what is that you have under your arm?" said Mr. Riddle, as he gave back.

"I've fetched some prime bacon fer your supper, sir," said Polly Ann, all rosy from her walk; "what I have ain't fit to give ye."

Mrs. Temple rose.

"My dear," she said, "what you have is too good for us. And if you do such a thing again, I shall be very angry."

"Lord, ma'am," exclaimed Polly Ann, "and you use' ter dainties an' silver an' linen! Tom is gone to try to git a turkey for ye." She paused, and looked compassionately at the lady. "Bless ye, ma'am, ye're that tuckered from the mountains! 'Tis a fearsome journey."

"Yes," said the lady, simply, "I am tired."

"Small wonder!" exclaimed Polly Ann. "To think what ye've been through—yere husband near to dyin' afore yere eyes, and ye a-reskin' yere own life to save him—so Tom tells me. When Tom goes out a-fightin' red-skins I'm that fidgety I can't set still. I wouldn't let him know what I feel fer the world. But well ye know the pain of it, who love yere husband like that."

The lady would have smiled bravely, had the strength been given her. She tried. And then, with a shudder, she hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, don't!" she exclaimed, "don't!"

Mr. Riddle went out.

"There, there, ma'am," she said, "I hedn't no right ter speak, and ye fair worn out." She drew her gently into a chair. "Set down, ma'am, and don't ye stir till supper's ready." She brushed her eyes with her sleeve, and, stepping briskly to my bed, bent over me. "Davy," she said, "Davy, how be ye?"

"Davy!"

It was the lady's voice. She stood facing us, and never while I live shall I forget that which I saw in her eyes. Some resemblance it bore to the look of the hunted deer,

but in the animal it is dumb, appealing. Understanding made the look of the woman terrible to behold, — understanding, ay, and courage. For she did not lack this last quality. Polly Ann gave back in a kind of dismay, and I shivered.

"Yes," I answered, "I am David Ritchie."

"You — you dare to judge me!" she cried.

I knew not why she said this.

"To judge you?" I repeated.

"Yes, to judge me," she answered. "I know you, David Ritchie, and the blood that runs in you. Your mother was a foolish — saint" (she laughed), "who lifted her eyebrows when I married her brother, John Temple. That was her condemnation of me, and it stung me more than had a thousand sermons. A doting saint, because she followed your father into the mountain wilds to her death for a whim of his. And your father! A Calvinist fanatic who had no mercy on sin, save for that particular weakness of his own —"

"Stop, Mrs. Temple!" I cried, lifting up in bed. And to my astonishment she was silenced, looking at me in amazement. "You had your vengeance when I came to you, when you turned from me with a lift of your shoulders at the news of my father's death. And now —"

"And now?" she repeated questioningly.

"Now I thought you were changed," I said slowly, for the excitement was telling on me.

"You listened!" she said.

"I pitied you."

"Oh, pity!" she cried. "My God, that you should pity me!" She straightened, and summoned all the spirit that was in her. "I would rather be called a name than have the pity of you and yours."

"You cannot change it, Mrs. Temple," I answered, and fell back on the nettle-bark sheets. "You cannot change it," I heard myself repeating, as though it were another's voice. And I knew that Polly Ann was bending over me and calling me.

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"Where did they go, Polly Ann?" I asked.

"Acrost the Mississippi, to the lands of the Spanish King," said Polly Ann.

"And where in those dominions?" I demanded.

"John Saunders took 'em as far as the Falls," Polly Ann answered. "He 'lowed they was goin' to St. Louis. But they never said a word. I reckon they'll be hunted as long as they live."

I had thought of them much as I lay on my back recovering from the fever, — the fever for which Mrs. Temple was to blame. Yet I bore her no malice. And many other thoughts I had, probing back into childhood memories for the solving of problems there.

"I knowed ye come of gentlefolks, Davy," Polly Ann had said when we talked together.

So I was first cousin to Nick, and nephew to that selfish gentleman, Mr. Temple, in whose affectionate care I had been left in Charlestown by my father. And my father? Who had he been? I remembered the speech that he had used and taught me, and how his neighbors had dubbed him "aristocrat." But Mrs. Temple was gone, and it was not in likelihood that I should ever see her more.