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AT last even the sobs ceased and in the strained stillness the crackling of a dry twig sounded very loud. Phœbe looked up with a start and saw the new minister coming round an evergreen. There was no time to recover herself for he was barely a rod away. But she sprang to her feet brushing the crushed grass from her skirt, and bravely did her best to meet him as though nothing had happened. She could not control the big tears still clinging to her long lashes, nor stop the quivering of her lips for all their brave smiling. And the flush that flew over her pale face did nothing to conceal its distress. So that the little smile which she managed to give him was a most wistfully piteous one.

It went straight to his heart. Indeed the

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very first glimpse of her had done that. Nevertheless he was sorry for having come, sorry that he had not stayed unseen on the other side of the evergreen or gone away without intruding. For he suddenly felt guilty of an unpardonable intrusion. Perhaps it was the way Mother Rowan looked at him, the open hostility with which she squared herself that made him feel this. Certainly nothing could have been more unmistakable than the challenge of her look. The rudest words could not have demanded his business more sharply than those snapping black eyes. But he hardly noticed them. He saw only that shrinking little figure in black; only that appealing little face which quickly paled again under his intent gaze; only that sweet little mouth still so sensitively a-quiver though trying hard to smile steadily; only those tender little hands fluttering like frightened white birds, till he could hardly help taking them and holding them in protecting tenderness.

Yet there was nothing for him to do except stammer out such a confused apology as he was able to offer: "We happened to be passing—my aunt and I," he said hesitatingly. "We

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have been to the woods on the other side of the hill. And seeing you — that is — I thought that perhaps you weren't well and might need some assistance."

"Well, we don't," broke in Mother Rowan tartly. "Neither of you need stay another minute on our account. You — and your aunt — can go right along home."

It was not easy for Phœbe to introduce them after that but she did — somehow — and managed moreover to say that he and his aunt were very kind.

"There she is now," he said quickly, turning with an air of relief. "She's just over there beyond that evergreen. Here Aunt Alice!" raising his voice. "This way — here we are."

Then the three of them stood silent for a moment looking at Miss Dale. She was not far away and had come in sight, but made no response nor a sign that she was aware of their presence. Drawing nearer to a trumpet-vine which had overrun a dead tree-trunk she paused to look at it. And indeed it was well worth looking at — this wonderful and beautiful symbol of life after death — this marvellous growth and magnificent flowering out of mortal

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dust. But Miss Dale was not thinking about anything of that kind, nor even of the rich green foliage with its splendid scarlet flowers. She was merely wondering why these flaming trumpets were swarming with myriads of small red ants. She was trying to find out where they came from and what they were doing. But she left off at her nephew's second call. There were very few things that she would not give up for him — temporarily. Meeting Phœbe halfway with cordially extended hand she really seemed to see her for a moment. Then she went toward Mother Rowan — gently shoved by the minister — and fully meant to shake hands with her too. But there was no meeting halfway this time and she forgot everything in watching a bird's singing flight.

"Look, John," she cried instantly all alive with interest. "Run round that tree and try to see where it goes. Did you notice where it came from? Maybe its nest is somewhere near — and I can get a look at the eggs. I'd like to have one on my string."

Mother Rowan moved off and stood grimly squaring herself, scorning even silent indorsement of such folly. "At her age too — older'n

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I am — gray as a badger — and a-cutting such capers," she muttered.

This was all lost so far as Miss Dale was concerned but it made Phœbe uneasy. Her brown eyes were very anxious indeed — till they met the new minister's and saw how frankly his gray ones were smiling. Then hers began dancing though they were not quite dry — there was the prettiest flutter of dimples — and the last trace of embarrassment vanished like light clouds under a burst of sunshine. All at once they both felt unaccountably at ease and happy. Neither could have told how or why it was, for neither knew anything of the miraculous change that love can bring about in the space of the lightning's flash. Not a thought of falling in love had crossed her mind, it was too deeply absorbed in penance for not loving. And he was barely beginning to believe that he loved her; he had not been able to see her often enough to feel quite sure. Nevertheless a pair of strong, clear gray eyes and a pair of shy, sweet brown ones can say and hear a great deal in one swift meeting with a speedy parting. And theirs had spoken and responded as frankly and freely as honest,

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innocent eyes ever did. There was a new brightness in hers and she smiled gayly while he laughed aloud for pure happiness, in turning now to see what the old ladies were doing.

As they looked back Miss Dale came round the tree and absently linked her arm in Mother Rowan's for no other reason than that it was at hand, and calmly unconscious that it belonged to an iron image of scorn. However, the touch on the rigid arm seemed to bring it to life, and Mother Rowan at once stalked off down the hillside with no more notice of Miss Dale than if she had been an empty basket hanging on her arm. And she did not pause or even glance back when the hand suddenly let go to chase some other atom of life that crept or flew.

It was a sight to make the soberest smile but Phœbe's soft heart would not let her laugh long. "It doesn't seem quite kind or respectful," she said vaguely.

"Well, it's certainly absurd," he said. "Science itself can never make the chase of bugs and butterflies anything else in grown people, and Aunt Alice hasn't much notion of being

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scientific. Still, after all I suppose, this form of the mania — the one that she suffers from doesn't do any actual harm."

"Except to the poor butterflies," said Phœbe thinking of the row of frail little bodies that she had seen cruelly pinned on the parsonage wall.

He shook his head: "We can only hope that they don't feel a pang as great as when a giant dies. But I can't see how we are to know. There seems to be no way to get the butterflies' own point of view," he went on laughing and growing serious in the same breath. "Indeed the matter is rather a problem with me. Not on the victim's account. I'm afraid I don't think much about that. The thing perplexing me is my own responsibility."

She looked up surprised and made grave by his sudden gravity.

"You see it's like this. My aunt cares for nothing else — except myself — and never has felt any interest in anything but nature study in her whole life so far as I know. Yet she will give up even that — temporarily and partly — for me, and it does seem ungrateful and selfish on my side not to feel and show some sympathy

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with the only thing that she really cares for — outside myself — yet I can't. Sometimes I try to pretend but she always finds me out. I'm such a poor pretender," he said more lightly. "Then — to tell the whole truth — I am actually afraid to have anything to do with nature study."

Her brown eyes were very wide indeed now, and again lifted to his face.

He looked down at her in the half-earnest, half-jesting way that she had already learned to like and was fast beginning to understand: "Because I'm a minister and pledged to the service of my own kind."

"I don't know what you mean."

"That loving Nature more makes us love Humanity less."

"How in the world can that be? I don't believe it — nor that you do either," she said with shy gayety.

"In all earnestness — yes — I do. And so would you if you were to think about the matter and look into it as I have done."

She wondered silently and her uplifted face no longer smiled.

"Of course you know that I am not speaking of our full appreciation — yours and mine

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—of those golden fields and these wild flowers and that butterfly's gorgeous beauty," he said. "We would be poor creatures — and blind ones too — without that. The thing that I mean is something quite different. I am speaking of that curiously intolerant, imperviously selfish, narrowly self-sufficient being called a Naturalist. Why, in order even to *gain* that doubtful title he must draw away from the brotherhood of man — clear out of sympathy with it — and go all alone nosing after Nature. And his pursuit of her through a lifetime has never — in my judgment — brought any real benefit to mankind. So standing aloof he strikes a pose of superiority and — shirking all that he owes to humanity — looks down on his fellow-creatures' hardest striving. That's the attitude of the Naturalist. There's only one exception so far as I know. White of Selborne was a good man. But I can't help thinking that his parishioners must have had cause of complaint. And worst of all is the Naturalists' unsleeping, undying jealousy. They seem to decry and distrust each other rather more than the rest of mankind. Indeed they seldom admit each other's love. As for anything like

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a real intimacy on the part of another with the Lady-love — perish the presumption! It's only when a Naturalist dies that the others grant him even a passing acquaintance with Nature."

"Surely—" protested Phœbe. "That cannot be true. There are valuable facts about plants and animals."

His smiling gaze bantered her. "Well, the Naturalist *has* pried out of a few of his lady-love's secrets that may be useful to his brother. But I can't name one just now. And to serve his fellow-man was certainly not the object of the search. At all events I am quite sure that he never has said a kind word for his brother or his sister either. He *can't*, you see! He's compelled to belittle humanity's dues and deny its demands, in order to justify his own shameless neglect of duty to his kind. But that sounds like preaching and this is vacation for both of us."

She pressed the point, unwilling to let it go so dimly understood.

He took a slip of paper from his pocket: "This admits—in a great Naturalist's own words—the very charge that I have just made. It comes from a new book written by a man