

XVII

CLOUDS RIFTED WITH SILVER

HE spoke to Phœbe as she ran by him toward the open door. She hardly heard and her eyes were so full of tears that she could not see. She was too intent on finding Father Rowan to notice any one else.

The new minister followed, keeping at her side to the door: "The old gentleman isn't there. He has gone. That is—but let me tell you how it was."

She stopped now more alarmed than ever.

"Don't go in. Stay out on the porch. Persuade her to sit down, Mr. Wood," said Mrs. Pottle, once more in capable control. "Then wait a moment till I send away those people. There are too many. Phœbe will be better with only you and me," she said, turning back to the gate.

The kind neighbors were still standing there

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wondering, anxious to do whatever was kindest yet uncertain whether to stay or go. But the few decisive words spoken by Mrs. Pottle started them off at once though it was plain that they resented her telling them what to do.

She cared nothing for that thinking only of Phœbe: "There now!" she said sitting down close to her side, and looking eagerly at the new minister. "Tell us all about it."

"I was sitting by my window when Mr. Rowan came out of the house," he began. "It surprised me to see him because I had understood that he could not walk alone. And he did so with difficulty by holding on to the fence. When he reached the front gate he stopped and looked quickly up and down the big road in an agitated sort of way. I thought he needed aid of some sort and hurried downstairs. But the squire came in sight just then driving home as usual at that hour and the old gentleman hailed him. I have often heard them chatting through the window and so I paused. It seemed to me that the old gentleman made some request. I saw the squire hesitate though I did not hear what he

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said at first. But after a little more talk he nodded heartily and drove off saying loud enough for me to hear, that it was a pleasure to loan the horse and buggy, and that he would send them back at once — just as soon as he reached home — and with them a trusty man to drive.”

So far all was quite clear and usual, to borrow and lend being entirely in the regular order in this country where there was nothing for hire. Then it was well known how obliging the squire was to every one and that he already had a great liking for Father Rowan. It was therefore evident that his momentary hesitation must have been solely on account of this borrower's helplessness. He had, however, thought to provide for that in sending the reliable servant.

“And he did send him — didn't he?” urged Phœbe wringing her hands. “The squire always keeps his word. He certainly sent the man to drive and take care of Father Rowan — surely, surely the squire knew that he wasn't able yet to take care of himself.”

“Yes,” he said. “The man helped him into the buggy most carefully and started to get in

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after him. But the old gentleman suddenly seized the reins, struck the horse with the whip — almost running over the driver — and was off and nearly out of sight before the man could jump up out of the dust. I was so taken by surprise that I didn't know what to do. When I ran to help the driver and asked what it meant, he merely shook his head — saying he must make haste to tell his master — and limped off toward home. But he had barely had time to get there when I saw the horse coming back — quietly jogging along — without the old gentleman and all that was left of the buggy was one wheel and the shafts.”

Beyond this he knew no more than the others, but said what he could to comfort Phœbe. He thought that the quiet return of the horse gave reason to hope that there had been no runaway. Mrs. Pottle, hastily doing what she could too, said that it was most likely that the horse had merely pulled the hitch-rein in two after being tied and had broken the buggy by striking the fence in his haste to get to the stable. Then she added with a touch of asperity that she had warned the squire of that very thing over and over.

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Those Gold-dust Morgans always were restless in harness, she went on. They hated it anyway and said so just as plainly as if they could talk. Though the finest of saddle-horses they never could bear to be hitched to any vehicle. Somehow or other they always managed to get rid of it yet they were not at all vicious. Most likely, so she argued again, this horse had simply pulled the hitch-rein in two after the old gentleman had tied him somewhere, and the buggy had been broken by coming in contact with a stump. She was quite sure that nothing serious had happened. But she suddenly thought of her husband's absence and at once said that she must hurry home. So large a place with so many retainers could not be left without a head when evening was coming on. And she got up hastily and went away, promising to come back as soon as she could.

After she had gone Phœbe paced the porch in misery that could not rest straining her eyes toward the hill over which the searchers had driven. Then she turned to the new minister and asked him to go with her to the top of the hill. Helpless waiting might not be such tor-

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ture if she could see farther off. He arose instantly and they started in silence. On the hillside he saw that her strength flagged and drew her hand to his arm and held it there — such a small hand and trembling so. It was growing late now and the last light lingered on the hilltop when they reached the summit and stood still. There were clouds lying like slender steel bars across the western windows of heaven shutting in its golden treasury. But they did not notice these slight signs of a storm and she had forgotten that her hand yet lay on his arm. Thus they stood, looking silently down the other side of the hill into a deep valley, wherein the white mists strove with the black shadows.

“How still it is,” she sighed at last. “There isn't a living thing to be seen or heard. Those moving dark spots 'way down yonder are only small bushes swayed by the wind.” Then she shivered a little at a faint, far-off, long-drawn sound. “I wonder why we always think of trouble — and bad luck — when we hear a dog howl?”

“Perhaps it's because he is in trouble himself and having bad luck — he doesn't howl if he isn't.”

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But his light tone did not win the smile that he hoped to see.

He tried again: "Or maybe the dog's howling touches some subtle chord of sympathy between the brute and the human. Yet I rather think that it reaches the superstition bred in the southern bone. I never deny that it's in the very marrow of my own. Why should I—or anybody else? It proves imagination," he said smiling. "And that's a good thing to have."

She was bending forward, gazing intently into the shadowy valley. But she shrank back, clinging closer to his arm as a bat flew by almost touching her bare head.

"See!" he cried gayly. "There is the same thing in another form. Your black nurses told you that if a bat once touched your beautiful hair, you could never get rid of it without losing some of those lovely locks."

This time she laughed a little too as if to keep from crying and she did not try to speak. She dared not trust her own voice feeling the danger of breaking down. For she had endured about as much as she was strong enough to bear. Her slight strength of mind and body

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was wholly exhausted. And her far greater strength of heart and spirit also was near failing. Both of these had been heavily taxed of late. This last and heaviest strain had drawn them quite to the breaking point. It was only by utter silence that she still kept a semblance of self-control at this moment. And now out of the whitened dimness there rose—unutterably desolate, mysterious and melancholy—the cry of a whip-poor-will. It smote her very heartstrings like a powerful touch on an overstrung harp—and set all her dumb anguish quivering into sobbing words.

"What shall I do—if—harm has come to him! The kind old man—" she said brokenly. "And I thought he was beginning to like me—and that I could make up for the wrong I had done. But this is worse. It was a mistake to bring the old people to a strange place. And I did it only to ease my conscience."

He did not know what was in her mind, but he loved her and love can always divine somewhat. Then he was tender-hearted and could not see such piteous distress unmoved. But the little hand on his arm was fluttering as if it

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might be withdrawn at any moment. And so he stood still, fearing lest she might feel the plunging of his heart against her quivering fingers.

"All the trouble has come from my own lack of moral courage," she went on more slowly much at a loss how to put her feeling into words. "I never could bear to hurt any one even when it was right. I wasn't strong enough to resist doing wrong—though I didn't want to do it—when I knew it would relieve another's pain. But—sometimes—it is so hard to tell whether you *have* a right to consult your own—" she murmured, faltering into bewildered, wordless silence.

Yet somehow, part of the truth flashed from her heart to his. He instantly understood far better than she ever could understand. It now came to him with wonderful clearness that this soft little soul was blindly trying to solve one of the greatest problems of spiritual life: that appalling problem which sets what we owe to ourselves against what we owe to some one else. None of us perhaps—not even the wisest and strongest—have ever been able to see the way in this quite clearly. Poor little Phœbe could

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only spread the wings of her spirit toward the unseen path like a storm-beaten bird flying in the dark.

Yet she was still fluttering toward the light: "For I didn't want to marry him," she said so faintly that the words were barely a sighing breath. "I never would—if there had been any other way to set his mind at rest. Oh, I couldn't—*couldn't*—if there had been the least chance of his living—poor fellow. That's just what makes it so bad." The little brown head sank very low now and she took her hand from his arm to cover her face.

It was all that he could do to keep from taking her in his strong arms and trying to soothe her like a suffering child. She looked so small and desolate and helpless standing there alone on the hilltop against the darkening sky.

"It's a sin to marry without love—even to give peace to the dying," she murmured.

He could not see her face distinctly for dusk had fallen, but there was something in her voice that made him forget caution. He took her hand and drew it within his arm and held it close. The tender, protecting clasp gave her courage and she told him the whole truth as

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well as she could, as fully indeed as she understood it herself. He said nothing for some time. A sense of awe, a feeling that he stood in the presence of The Mysteries held him silent and motionless. He dared not lay hand on the rent veil of this soul's temple. Hardly might he lift his eyes to the white light that shone from it.

"For it isn't true that pity is akin to love," she said after a while.

"Others have confused the two," he said quickly. "You shouldn't reproach yourself for making a mistake that so many have made."

"But it wasn't a mistake," she said simply. "I knew better. I knew even then that love and pity were not at all the same though I didn't know what love was like."

"Do you know now?" he said still more quickly. "I hope so for I do — since I've known you."

Then he drew her softly into his arms and held her close, bending his head down till his cheek touched hers. Such a soft little cheek and so wet with tears! The deepest tenderness within him was stirred to its depths. Her

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curly head was just as high as his heart and lay against it at rest for a while. She was so utterly desolate that she could no more refuse the offer of love than a desert wanderer could resist a life-giving draught. But presently she drew away from his clinging arms with such gentleness that he let her go with a smile. There was no great need of haste now that he had only to bide his time. Then the falling of a few big drops of rain warned him that they should hasten to get under shelter. Nothing was to be gained by longer waiting and watching on the hilltop.

The rain had already driven the neighbors indoors. Only the dim lights glimmering through rarely lighted windows told of the general uneasiness. Her house was deserted but the porch was dry sheltered by the thick vines. There the lovers sat down to watch and wait — just as before ascending the heights — yet there was a great difference to them both, as there always is to all of us. She felt no less anxious, but the bitter unrest of lonely trouble had given place to the sad peace that distress finds in love's company. He felt perfectly happy forgetting that there was any cause to be other-

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wise, till she reminded him of it when he spoke of marriage. Then indeed there was something very near dislike of the old people in his heart, when she said that she could never marry him because her whole life was pledged to them. He protested — startled — saying that to care for them should henceforth be his privilege. There need be no question of means he urged. But she answered very gently and quite firmly that she could never shift her duty to other shoulders however able. The father and mother of the man whom she had married must not be dependent where they had no claim. This, she said sadly, was the very thing that he had been miserable over. To give them a claim had been her sole justification — if she had any at all — and through it they were entitled to everything that she could do so long as they should need it.

XVIII

POOR FATHER ROWAN! POOR MOTHER ROWAN,
TOO!

AT midnight the rain ceased and the wind went down. In the warm, still darkness it seemed as if the sweet odors from the sleeping flowers were softly astir among the wet leaves. But it was not long after the turn of the night when a faint echo came from afar and rose rapidly into the sound of approaching wheels. Phoebe was the quicker to spring up, but the minister passed her on her way to the gate. It was too dark to see what was coming. But there was only a moment's wait before they heard Mother Rowan's voice, and something in its tone relieved their worse fears though they could not hear what she said. The carriage came on very fast and soon drew up at the gate. As it stopped the squire called out:

"Who's that? If that's a man there — come here. I need a man's help. Here — round on the other side," he directed.

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Phœbe was already hanging over the wheels imploring to be told what had happened. Through the blackness she could barely make out a limp form leaning against Mother Rowan. "Oh—is that Father Rowan?" she entreated. "And is he much hurt?"

"Fetch a lantern and don't stand there a-talking and making a fuss!" cried Mother Rowan. "How do you expect us to get out—when we can't see our hands before our faces? Some people never think of anything but making a commotion. Stop all this one and fetch a lantern!"

Phœbe ran to do as she was told and ran back with the lantern lighted in great haste by her shaking fingers. But she found the squire and the minister already bearing their helpless burden through the gate and up the porch steps. She held the lantern higher to give better light, and saw Mother Rowan leading the way with her small head high in the air; and heard her throw open the chamber door without any of the gentle care that the sternest use in the presence of a real calamity. Then, when the brighter light of the lamp burning within the bedroom shone on the

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strange little face and Phœbe saw the look that it wore, her alarm turned into bewilderment. She shrank silently round behind the bed on which the two men laid the old man. In silence she did what she could to help. Then when there was nothing else to do she stood with tightly clasped hands, looking uneasily from one grave face to another, anxiously seeking the truth and slowly beginning to divine it.

The minister hastily put out his hand to lead her from the room: "You are so pale and look so tired," he said gently. "Come out where it is cooler and sit down. There isn't anything more to do. Nothing that any one could do."

"Not a single thing," the squire said also looking at her. "It is best for all concerned that the old gentleman should be left in quiet to sleep off—his fatigue. It's been a hard night for him and everybody. We are all worn out."

Then he turned suddenly and looked at Mother Rowan, kindly but uncertainly. "Yet if there is the least help that we can give you, Madam," he faltered. "If we can relieve you by staying—but perhaps you know better—"

"Well, I ought to," said Mother Rowan

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shortly and with snapping eyes. "I've done it often enough. But I must say that I never expected to have to go through with the whole thing again — at my age — and him as gray as a badger — and with a broken leg to boot. Yes, I will confess I thought he was tamed at last. It never entered my head that he could walk without help, and I don't believe he would have tried to, if it hadn't been for meddling people, always so accommodating about what don't concern 'em — and always so ready to lend top-heavy buggies and skittish horses. If other folks attended to their own concerns — as strictly as I've always attended to mine — there'd be a good deal less trouble in this world. But there's no use crying over spilt milk. And I'll lay he never gets *another* chance!"

"I'll lay so too, Madam," agreed the squire heartily, bowing and backing toward the door. "I am quite sure of that."

The minister had already made his escape from the chamber. He stood in the passage that was dimly lighted by the lantern which hung on the back of a chair. When the squire now slid out of the bedroom backwards in such haste, they looked at one another and glanced

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at the chamber door. Then their eyes met again and they smiled, as the best of men will smile at any open showing of another man's subjection by a woman. It made no difference that they, themselves, were at that very moment in routed retreat before the same feminine force which had subdued Father Rowan. For somehow or other no man ever does regard himself in quite the same humorous light in this delicate matter.

But the minister's smile faded quickly and he stood in troubled silence looking down at the passage floor. It distressed him that this last unbearable weight should have been added to the burden which Phœbe was struggling so hard to bear. The undertaking had been beyond her power from the first and this must make it utterly overwhelming. Yet there was a grain of comfort in his troubled perplexity. Being in love he could not help hoping that the very fact of her helplessness might plead his cause. For love that can look first at anything else than its own aim is not love at all. Later perhaps — and in the nobler natures — love may look toward self-sacrifice but it never can on first impulse. To give up self the noblest

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must have time to think and thinking takes longer than feeling. So that this lover's heart suddenly leapt high with hope. She could no longer deny the need of help. No woman however strong could bear such a load as this alone. She must consent to let him lift it from her tender shoulders. In his burning eagerness to urge his fresh claim he could hardly wait till she came from the chamber. His pulses were beating fast and his eyes glowing with new light. Unconsciously he glanced at the squire with a proud lift of his head and a radiant smile. The squire also smiled, though in rather a different manner since he was thinking of something very different indeed. But both the men's faces suddenly grew very grave, and they looked down feeling ashamed of their levity, when Phoebe appeared and they saw her transparent face.

For it was only too plain that she knew the whole truth. She had divined it by degrees. This was the first time that she had ever come close to the sad sight; a sadder one than almost any of the many sad ones that wring good women's hearts; and saddest of all when seen in age—which seems to add despair. The

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very whiteness of the head on the pillow had wrung her tender heart. It moved her so deeply that she forgot to be afraid. Then her eyes were so blinded by tears that she could not see just how grimly forbidding that gaunt figure was—standing on the other side of the bed—motionless as if carved out of stone. Blindly and bravely she felt her way round the bed, and went straight to the old woman and put up her soft arms and tried to draw down the unbending neck. When she could not do that, she stood on tiptoe and pressed her sweet lips to the wrinkled cheek in wistful tenderness that would not be denied. She felt the sudden quiver that went over the tall form while she clung to it. But there was not one word to give her courage to say something in comfort and love as she longed to do. She could only let her arms drop with a helpless sigh and turn away. And so she had gone out of the silent chamber, looking back with yearning sympathy.

The minister did not find his words as ready as he had thought they would be. The squire also found himself suddenly embarrassed. It flashed across his mind that his wife would

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have to know what had happened. She was ever watchful of his going and coming and never in the least backward in saying exactly what she thought of them. He flinched, remembering the amusement of the loafers who hung around the groggery at the cross-roads where the truant had been found. They had laughed as long and loud as they dared — with Mother Rowan within hearing — when he and she had tracked the artful runaway to his hiding-place among the tall iron weeds near by. All this was certainly most undignified — even ridiculous — for a man of his years and position to have been engaged in. Of course it would come to his wife's ears and she might make reference to a wild-goose chase — or even a fool's errand — on a stormy night. For one moment of panic he thought of going back to his office, daylight being now not far off, instead of driving on home. From the passage door he could see a light in one of the windows of his house and knew that his wife was up, still waiting and more than ready. Seriously he considered flight. No one is ever so much afraid of being laughed at as he who is always laughing at others. Then all of a sudden he remem-

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bered how rarely his wife laughed or saw anything to laugh at. It was a great relief. Perhaps many a man has found security in his wife's slowness to see the ridiculous, and certainly not one ever loved her the less on that account. The squire now straightened up and laughed himself, a little sheepishly. Then he said that it was time to be getting home, the east was already gray with the dawn. And so he drove off with a cheerful good-night — whistling — to let the neighbors who heard him pass know that there was nothing wrong.

The minister lingered a few minutes longer. He could not bear to leave her standing there looking so tired and white, so utterly spent in flesh and spirit. Yet at the same time he knew that he must for the time forego urging his claims — his new right to help her. It was rest that she needed far more than any aid or comfort that he could give her. And he finally brought himself to go in silence and with merely a clasp of her hand. But at the parsonage gate he paused and called back wishing her sweet sleep and sweeter dreams. Then he stood still under the dripping trees to watch and wait till the lantern-light went slowly along