

The Little Hills

lady was the jumble that old Mrs. Crabtree sent in her usual lazy, lavish, offhand way, maliciously topping the whole with some fine tobacco and a bottle of old bourbon.

"Ten to one that that old tartar will send it all back," she had drawled. "But what's the odds? You can see what she does and hear what she says, and I don't care a rap about anything else. I'd go myself if it wasn't so far and so hot. For I haven't made the most of my extraordinary opportunity. It's really too bad that she's going away. Now notice and remember everything that she says and does. Don't go mooning, Anne."

As for Mrs. Pottle—that generous and magnanimous soul had been sweltering over the kitchen fire since early dawn, seeing to the perfect cooking of many delicacies and to the packing of a large basket. The squire, accidentally learning what she was busy about, said that he hardly would have supposed that she liked Mother Rowan so much. On this the squire's lady had turned from her ardent labors long enough to say that she would gladly provide enough of the very best she had, to feed the old woman and "him too" clear

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to the ends of the earth, out of pure gratitude for their leaving that foolish child in peace.

Hillery Kibbey drove by to get this largest basket. It was safely inside the stage when he drew up in front of Phœbe's gate, cutting the widest possible swath in turning. He felt his important part in this tremendous event. It was he who had brought here these two old people, to whom this marvellous fortune had fallen as if it had dropped from the sky. Without him none of the others ever would have heard of that enchanted well flowing with liquid gold. The fullest consciousness of all this was in his bearing, in the very way that he had put on his broad-brimmed hat, to say nothing of the manner in which he sat the driver's seat and handled the reins. He hesitated a little when he reached the gate where something was said about bringing out the hair-covered trunk which he had taken into the house. Under the altered circumstances it seemed to him hardly fitting that he should get down now to fetch it. And so he sat still and told one of the squire's black boys to get it and also directed him how to tie it quite

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securely on the back of the stage. Meantime many willing hands were outstretched to help the travellers into their comfortable places. Mother Rowan rather resented the commotion, but it pleased Father Rowan so much that the embarrassment with which he made his first appearance — after the night before — was at once forgotten by everybody. He put his gray head far out of the window to nod and smile at the semicircle of smiling faces. It was hardly noticed that Mother Rowan sat still and stiff in her corner and only Phœbe, who stood close to the wheel, heard her say that she always had hated a fuss. The harsh words were lost in the sound of many kind voices bidding good-by, and inviting the travellers to come again. Arabella's cheery tones rang high saying that the captain would surely be there to receive them. Phœbe alone said nothing because she dared not trust her voice. She could not see very clearly either for her eyes were brimming with tears. But she was smiling bravely and loyally kept her face turned the way they were going, as the stage started and rumbled off down the big road. Then she stood — watching it go farther and

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farther — till the new minister gently drew her away, reminding her that it would bring bad luck to watch the old people out of sight.

He expected to stay after the others were gone but she shook her head. It was best for her to be alone for a while — so she plead. She wanted time and solitude to think over all that had happened; time to see whether her task was indeed done as it seemed to be; whether she had after all performed it to the very best of her ability; whether she really was no longer bound to live any other life than her own, as he had whispered at the very moment that the stage started; whether she was in truth quite free now to love him instead of merely letting him love her, as he had urged while the cloud of dust was still afloat; whether it could be true that not one shadow of conscience was left between them, as he said now with his lips close to hers, the instant that they were alone behind the flowering vines. And so she stood quite firm with that immovable gentleness of hers. He could not resist the pleading of those soft eyes that smiled shyly through the long lashes which were still heavy with tears. But he turned when

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halfway across the big road as if to go back, and she was tempted to call him. Then she suddenly vanished through the door, closing it after her and he heard the turning of the key in the lock.

It seemed to him that the door never would open again. He could not see it very clearly through the vines, as he sat watching and waiting beside his study window. Yet he was listening too, so intently that he must have heard the slightest sound. Then it was very still. The neighbors were gone indoors now that the sun had climbed so high in the arching blue. Only the love-song that a happy robin was singing over in the meadow, kept him from hearing even the first light footfall that might promise the opening of the door. What folly to close it! For a moment he was angry with her and suddenly stood up, meaning to put an end to this needless test of his patience. Then he remembered the still more cruel ordeal that her tender heart was undergoing before her stern conscience. The lovely, foolish little thing! He knew that he would not have loved her so tenderly had she been one bit wiser. It would be his privilege hereafter to

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guard her against her own sensibility. Never again should she suffer anything that he could shield her from. He stood up once more and started to go to her. One masterful knock on the door would induce her to open it. Then he was not so sure and, smiling rather ruefully, sat down again recalling the invincible strength of her gentle weakness. There was nothing for him to do but leave her alone as long as she wished. And so the endless hours dragged along into afternoon. Now and then he turned to look at the clock to see whether time moved at all. At last came the slow strokes of five. And he had thought the days too short in June when he had first fallen in love! In reality they were much shorter now and after a while dim purple shadows began to creep along the big road under the great trees. Then suddenly the flowering curtain that covered her front porch was softly moved. But perhaps it was only the evening breeze gently stirring the fragrant folds. Yes, it was late enough now for the evening breeze to drift down from the misty hills and waft the breath of the spice pinks beyond the old garden. Still — it might be Phœbe — and he bent for-

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ward with quickened heart-beats, trying to see through the rippling leaves and swinging flowers. Then he drew back with a sigh. There was no little figure in black sitting alone in the familiar place. Yet it was near the time when she always came out—aye! past the time. Then the first pang of doubt smote him. He wondered blankly what he would do, how he could bear it, if she should never open the door to him. And this too might be. Perhaps he had been overly sure of her love because his own was so great. Once again he turned drearily to look at the clock, but he could not see it through the gloom which the twilight was—at last—bearing into the room. For the swallows were already circling her chimney. Miserably he watched them slowly dropping down into their quiet resting-place, closer to hers than he ever might hope to come. Despairingly his gaze sank to the flowering curtain, but the dusk was so deep now that he could barely see a great white moth fluttering about the very spot in which he had hoped to sit by her side. But was it a white moth? He sprang up and ran down the stairs and out to the gate to

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make sure. There again he hesitated, still doubting. Yet surely no white moth's wings would hover so long around the same place, even though Phœbe might be near. Could it be the flutter of a white dress? With this thought he was across the big road and up the porch step and behind the flowering curtain. And there he found her—waiting in the fragrant dusk—all in white like a bride.

THE END

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