

CHAPTER V.

THE WALK HOME.

YOU expect me to describe that walk. You have had enough of the Jack Meanses and the Squire Hawkinses, and the Pete Joneses, and the rest. You wish me to tell you now of this true-hearted girl and her lover; of how the silvery moonbeams came down in a shower—to use Whittier's favorite metaphor—through the maple boughs, flecking the frozen ground with light and shadow. You would have me tell of the evening star, not yet gone down, which shed its benediction on them. But I shall do no such thing. For the moon was not shining, neither did the stars give their light. The tall, black trunks of the maples swayed and shook in the wind, which moaned through their leafless boughs. Novelists always make lovers walk in the moonlight. But if love is not, as the cynics believe, all moonshine, it can at least make its own light. Moonlight is never so little needed or heeded, never so much of an impertinence, as in a love-scene. It was at the bottom of the first hollow

beyond the school-house that Ralph overtook the timid girl walking swiftly through the dark. He did not ask permission to walk with her. Love does not go by words, and there are times when conventionality is impossible. There are people who understand one another at once. When one soul meets another, it is not by pass-word, nor by hailing sign, nor by mysterious grip that they recognize. The subtlest freemasonry in the world is this freemasonry of the spirit.

Ralph and Hannah knew and trusted. Ralph had admired and wondered at the quiet drudge. But it was when, in the unaccustomed sunshine of praise, she spread her wings a little, that he loved her. He had seen her awake.

You, Miss Amelia, wish me to repeat all their love-talk. I am afraid you'd find it dull. Love can pipe through any kind of a reed. Ralph talked love to Hannah when he spoke of the weather, of the crops, of the spelling-school. Weather, crops, and spelling-school—these were what his words would say if reported. But below all these commonplaces there vibrated something else. One can make love a great deal better when one doesn't speak of love. Words are so poor! Tones and modulations are better. It is an old story that Whitefield could make an audience weep by his

way of pronouncing the word Mesopotamia. A lover can sound the whole gamut of his affection in saying Good-morning. The solemnest engagements ever made have been without the intervention of speech.

And you, my Gradgrind friend, you think me sentimental. Two young fools they were, walking so slowly though the night was sharp, dallying under the trees, and dreaming of a heaven they could not have realized if all their wishes had been granted. Of course they were fools! Either they were fools to be so happy, or else some other people are fools not to be. After all, dear Gradgrind, let them be. There's no harm in it. They'll get trouble enough before morning. Let them enjoy the evening. I am not sure but these lovers whom we write down fools are the only wise people, after all. Is it not wise to be happy? Let them alone.

For the first time in three years, for the first time since she had crossed the threshold of "Old Jack Means" and come under the domination of Mrs. Old Jack Means, Hannah talked cheerfully, almost gayly. It was something to have a companion to talk to. It was something to be the victor even in a spelling-match, and to be applauded even by Flat Creek. And so, chatting earnestly about the most uninteresting themes, Ralph courteously

helped Hannah over the fence, and they took the usual short-cut through the "blue-grass pasture." There came up a little shower, hardly more than a sprinkle, but then it was so nice to have a shower just as they reached the box-elder tree by the spring! It was so thoughtful in Ralph to suggest that the shade of a box-elder is dense, and that Hannah might take cold! And it was so easy for Hannah to yield to the suggestion! Just as though she had not milked the cows in the open lot in the worst storms of the last three years! And just as though the house were not within a stone's-throw! Doubtless it was not prudent to stop here. But let us deal gently with them. Who would not stay in an earthy paradise ten minutes longer, even though it did make purgatory the hotter afterward? And so Hannah stayed.

"Tell me your circumstances," said Ralph, at last. "I am sure I can help you in something."

"No, no! you cannot," and Hannah's face was clouded. "No one can help me. Only time and God. I must go, Mr. Hartsook." And they walked on to the front gate in silence and in some constraint. But still in happiness.

As they came to the gate, Dr. Small pushed past them in his cool, deliberate way, and mounted his horse. Ralph bade Hannah good-night, having en-

tirely forgotten the errand which had been his excuse to himself for coming out of his way. He hastened to his new home, the house of Mr. Pete Jones, the same who believed in the inseparableness of "lickin' and larnin'."

"You're a purty gal, a'n't you? You're a purty gal, a'n't you? *You air!* Yes, you *air!!*" and Mrs. Means seemed so impressed with Hannah's prettiness that she choked on it, and could get no further. "A purty gal! you! Yes! you air a mighty purty gal!" and the old woman's voice rose till it could have been heard half a mile. "To be a-santerin' along the big road after ten o'clock with the master! Who knows whether he's a fit man fer anybody to go with? Arter all I've been and gone and done fer you! That's the way you pay me! Disgrace me! Yes, I say disgrace me! You're a mean, deceitful thing. Stuck up bekase you spelt the master down. Ketch *me* lettin' you got to spellin'-school to-morry night! Ketch *ME!* Yes, ketch *ME*, I say!"

"Looky here, marm," said Bud, "it seems to me you're a-makin' a blamed furss about nothin'. Don't yell so's they'll hear you three or four mile. You'll have everybody 'tween here and Clifty waked up." For Mrs. Means had become so excited over the idea of being caught allowing Hannah to go to

spelling-school that she had raised her last "Ketch me!" to a perfect whoop.

"That's the way I'm treated," whimpered the old woman, who knew how to take the "injured innocence" dodge as well as anybody. "That's the way I'm treated. You allers take sides with that air hussy agin your own flesh and blood. You don't keer how much trouble I have. Not you. Not a dog-on'd bit. I may be disgraced by that air on-grateful critter, and you set right here in my own house and sass me about it. A purty fellow you air! An' me a-delvin' and a-drudgin' fer you all my born days. A purty son, a'n't you?"

Bud did not say another word. He sat in the chimney-corner and whistled "Dandy Jim from Caroline." His diversion had produced the effect he sought: for while his tender-hearted mother poured her broadside into his iron-clad feelings, Hannah had slipped up the stairs to her garret bedroom, and when Mrs. Means turned from the callous Bud to finish her assault upon the sensitive girl, she could only gnash her teeth in disappointment.

Stung by the insults to which she could not grow insensible, Hannah lay awake until the memory of that walk through the darkness came into her soul like a benediction. The harsh voice of the scold died out, and the gentle and courteous voice of

Hartsook filled her soul. She recalled piece by piece the whole conversation—all the commonplace remarks about the weather; all the insignificant remarks about the crops; all the unimportant words about the spelling-school. Not for the sake of the remarks. Not for the sake of the weather. Not for the sake of the crops. Not for the sake of the spelling-school. But for the sake of the undertone. And then she traveled back over the three years of her bondage and forward over the three years to come, and fed her heart on the dim hope of rebuilding in some form the home that had been so happy. And she prayed, with more faith than ever before, for deliverance. For love brings faith. Somewhere on in the sleepless night she stood at the window. The moon was shining now, and there was the path through the pasture, and there was the fence, and there was the box-elder.

She sat there a long time. Then she saw some one come over the fence and walk to the tree, and then on toward Pete Jones's. Who could it be? She thought she recognized the figure. But she was chilled and shivering, and she crept back again into bed, and dreamed not of the uncertain days to come, but of the blessed days that were past—of a father and a mother and a brother in a happy home. But somehow the school-master was there too.

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT AT PETE JONES'S.

WHEN Ralph got to Pete Jones's he found that sinister-looking individual in the act of kicking one of his many dogs out of the house.

"Come in, stranger, come in. You'll find this 'ere house full of brats, but I guess you kin kick your way around among 'em. Take a cheer. Here, git out! go to thunder with you!" And with these mild imperatives he boxed one of his boys over in one direction and one of his girls over in the other. "I believe in trainin' up children to mind when they're spoke to," he said to Ralph apologetically. But it seemed to the teacher that he wanted them to mind just a little before they were spoken to.

"P'raps you'd like a bed. Well, jest climb up the ladder on the outside of the house. Takes up a thunderin' sight of room to have a stairs inside, and we ha'n't got no room to spare. You'll find a bed in the furdest corner. My Pete's already got half of it, and you can take t'other half. Ef Pete goes to takin' his half in the middle, and tryin' to make you take yourn on both sides, jest kick him."