

in the morning? And because he felt guilty he felt cross with Mirandy, and to her remark about Hannah he only replied that "Hannah was a smart girl."

"Yes," said Mirandy, "Bud thinks so."

"Does he?" said Ralph.

"I should say so. What's him and her been a-courtin' fer for a year ef he didn't think she was smart? Marm don't like it; but ef Bud and her does, and they seem to, I don't see as it's marm's lookout."

When one is wretched, there is a pleasure in being entirely wretched. Ralph felt that he must have committed some unknown crime, and that some Nemesis was following him. Was Hannah deceitful? At least, if she were not, he felt sure that he could supplant Bud. But what right had he to supplant Bud?

"Did you hear the news?" cried Shocky, running out to meet him. "The Dutchman's house was robbed last night."

Ralph thought of the three men on horseback, and to save his life he could not help associating Dr. Small with them. And then he remembered the sorrel horse with the left forefoot and muzzle white, and he recalled the sound he had heard as of the lifting of a latch. And it really seemed to him that in knowing what he did he was in some sense guilty of the robbery.

CHAPTER VII.

OMINOUS REMARKS OF MR. JONES.

THE school-master's mind was like ancient Gaul—divided into three parts. With one part he mechanically performed his school duties. With another he asked himself, What shall I do about the robbery? And with the third he debated about Bud and Hannah. For Bud was not present, and it was clear that he was angry, and there was a storm brewing. In fact, it seemed to Ralph that there was a storm brewing all round the sky. For Pete Jones was evidently angry at the thought of having been watched, and it was fair to suppose that Dr. Small was not in any better humor than usual. And so, between Bud's jealousy and revenge and the suspicion and resentment of the men engaged in the robbery at "the Dutchman's" (as the only German in the whole region was called), Ralph's excited nerves had cause for tremor. At one moment he would resolve to have Hannah at all costs. In the next his conscience would question the rightfulness of the conclusion. Then he would make

up his mind to tell all he knew about the robbery. But if he told his suspicions about Small, nobody would believe him. And if he told about Pete Jones, he really could tell only enough to bring vengeance upon himself. And how could he explain his own walk through the pasture and down the road? What business had he being out of bed at two o'clock in the morning? The circumstantial evidence was quite as strong against him as against the man on the horse with the white left forefoot and the white nose. Suspicion might fasten on himself. And then what would be the effect on his prospects? On the people at Lewisburg? On Hannah? It is astonishing how much instruction and comfort there is in a bulldog. This slender school-master, who had been all his life repressing the animal and developing the finer nature, now found a need of just what the bulldog had. And so, with the thought of how his friend the dog would fight in a desperate strait, he determined to take hold of his difficulties as Bull took hold of the raccoon. Moral questions he postponed for careful decision. But for the present he set his teeth together in a desperate, bulldog fashion, and he set his feet down slowly, positively, bulldoggedly. After a wretched supper at Pete Jones's he found himself at the spelling-school, which, owing to the absence of Hannah,

and the excitement about the burglary, was a dull affair. Half the evening was spent in talking in little knots. Pete Jones had taken the afflicted "Dutchman" under his own particular supervision.

"I s'pose," said Pete, "that them air fellers what robbed your house must a come down from Jinkins Run. They're the blamedest set up there I ever see."

"Ya-as," said Schroeder, "put how did Yinkins vellers know dat I sell te medder to te Shquire, hey? How tid Yinkins know anyting 'bout the Shquire's bayin' me dree huntert in te hard gash—hey?"

"Some scoundrels down in these 'ere parts is a-layin' in with Jinkins Run, I'll bet a hoss," said Pete. Ralph wondered whether he'd bet the one with the white left forefoot and the white nose. "Now," said Pete, "ef I could find the feller that's a-helpin' them scoundrels rob us folks, I'd help stretch him to the nearest tree."

"So vood I," said Schroeder. "I'd shtretch him dill he baid me my dree huntert tollars pack, so I vood."

And Betsey Short, who had found the whole affair very funny, was transported with a fit of tit-ttering at poor Schroeder's English. Ralph, fearing that his silence would excite suspicion, tried to talk.

But he could not tell what he knew, and all that he said sounded so hollow and hypocritical that it made him feel guilty. And so he shut his mouth, and meditated profitably on the subject of bulldogs. And when later he overheard the garrulous Jones declare that he'd bet a hoss he could p'int out somebody as know'd a blamed sight more'n they keerd to tell, he made up his mind that if it came to p'inting out he should try to be even with Jones.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

It was a long, lonesome, fearful night that the school-master passed, lying with nerves on edge and eyes wide open in that comfortless bed in the "furdest corner" of the loft of Pete Jones's house, shivering with cold, while the light snow that was falling sifted in upon the ragged patch-work quilt that covered him. Nerves broken by sleeplessness imagine many things, and for the first hour Ralph felt sure that Pete would cut his throat before morning.

And you, friend Callow, who have blunted your palate by swallowing the Cayenne pepper of the penny-dreadfuls, you wish me to make this night exciting by a hand-to-hand contest between Ralph and a robber. You would like it better if there were a trap-door. There's nothing so convenient as a trap-door, unless it be a subterranean passage. And you'd like something of that sort just here. It's so pleasant to have one's hair stand on end, you know, when one is safe from danger to one's self. But if you want each individual hair to bristle with

such a "Struggle in the Dark," you can buy trap-doors and subterranean passages dirt cheap at the next news-stand. But it was, indeed, a real and terrible "Struggle in the Dark" that Ralph fought out at Pete Jones's.

When he had vanquished his fears of personal violence by reminding himself that it would be folly for Jones to commit murder in his own house, the question of Bud and Hannah took the uppermost place in his thoughts. And as the image of Hannah spelling against the master came up to him, as the memory of the walk, the talk, the box-elder tree, and all the rest took possession of him, it seemed to Ralph that his very life depended upon his securing her love. He would shut his teeth like the jaws of a bulldog, and all Bud's muscles should not prevail over his resolution and his stratagems.

It was easy to persuade himself that this was right. Hannah ought not to throw herself away on Bud Means. Men of some culture always play their conceit off against their consciences. To a man of literary habits it usually seems to be a great boon that he confers on a woman when he gives her his love. Reasoning thus, Ralph had fixed his resolution, and if the night had been shorter, or sleep possible, the color of his life might have been changed.

But some time along in the tedious hours came the memory of his childhood, the words of his mother, the old Bible stories, the aspiration after nobility of spirit, the solemn resolutions to be true to his conscience. These angels of the memory came flocking back before the animal, the bulldoggedness, had "set," as workers in plaster say. He remembered the story of David and Nathan, and it seemed to him that he, with all his abilities and ambitions and prospects, was about to rob Bud of the one ewe-lamb, the only thing he had to rejoice in in his life. In getting Hannah, he would make himself unworthy of Hannah. And then there came to him a vision of the supreme value of a true character; how it was better than success, better than to be loved, better than heaven. And how near he had been to missing it! And how certain he was, when these thoughts should fade, to miss it! He was as one fighting for a great prize who feels his strength failing and is sure of defeat.

This was the real, awful "Struggle in the Dark." A human soul fighting with heaven in sight, but certain of slipping inevitably into hell! It was the same old battle. The Image of God fought with the Image of the Devil. It was the same fight that Paul described so dramatically when he represented the Spirit as contending with the Flesh. Paul also

called this dreadful something the Old Adam, and I suppose Darwin would call it the remains of the Wild Beast. But call it what you will, it is the battle that every well-endowed soul must fight at some point. And to Ralph it seemed that the final victory of the Evil, the Old Adam, the Flesh, the Wild Beast, the Devil, was certain. For, was not the pure, unconscious face of Hannah on the Devil's side? And so the battle had just as well be given up at once, for it must be lost in the end.

But to Ralph, lying there in the still darkness, with his conscience as wide awake as if it were the Day of Doom, there seemed something so terrible in this overflow of the better nature which he knew to be inevitable as soon as the voice of conscience became blunted, that he looked about for help. He did not at first think of God; but there came into his thoughts the memory of a travel-worn Galilean peasant, hungry, sleepy, weary, tempted, tried, like other men, but having a strange, divine Victory in him by which everything evil was vanquished at his coming. He remembered how He had reached out a Hand to every helpless one, how He was the Helper of every weak one. And out of the depths of his soul he cried to the Helper, and found comfort. Not victory, but, what is better, strength. And so, without a thought of the niceties of theo-

logical distinctions, without dreaming that it was the beginning of a religious experience, he found what he needed, help. And the Helper gave His beloved sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

HAS GOD FORGOTTEN SHOCKY?

"PAP wants to know ef you would spend to-morry and Sunday at our house?" said one of Squire Hawkins's girls, on the very next evening, which was Friday. The old Squire was thoughtful enough to remember that Ralph would not find it very pleasant "boarding out" all the time he was entitled to spend at Pete Jones's. For in view of the fact that Mr. Pete Jones sent seven children to the school, the "master" in Flat Creek district was bound to spend two weeks in that comfortable place, sleeping in a preoccupied bed, in the "furest corner," with insufficient cover, under an insufficient roof, and eating floating islands of salt pork fished out of oceans of hot lard. Ralph was not slow to accept the relief offered by the hospitable justice of the peace, whose principal business seemed to be the adjustment of the pieces of which he was composed. And as Shocky traveled the same road, Ralph took advantage of the opportunity to talk with him. The master could not dis-

miss Hannah wholly from his mind. He would at least read the mystery of her life, if Shocky could be prevailed on to furnish the clue.

"Poor old tree!" said Shocky, pointing to a crooked and gnarled elm standing by itself in the middle of a field. For when the elm, naturally the most graceful of trees, once gets a "bad set," it can grow to be the most deformed. This solitary tree had not a single straight limb.

"Why do you say 'poor old tree'?" asked Ralph.

"'Cause it's lonesome. All its old friends is dead and chopped down, and there's their stumps a-standin' jes like grave-stones. It *must* be lonesome. Some folks says it don't feel, but I think it does. Everything seems to think and feel. See it nodding its head to them other trees in the woods, and a-wantin' to shake hands! But it can't move. I think that tree must a growed in the night."

"Why, Shocky?"

"'Cause it's so crooked," and Shocky laughed at his own conceit; "must a growed when they was no light so as it could see how to grow."

And then they walked on in silence a minute. Presently Shocky began looking up into Ralph's eyes to get a smile. "I guess that tree feels just like me. Don't you?"

"Why, how do you feel?"

"Kind o' bad and lonesome, and like as if I wanted to die, you know. Felt that way ever sence they put my father into the graveyard, and sent my mother to the poor-house and Hanner to ole Miss Means's. What kind of a place is a poor-house? Is it a poorer place than Means's? I wish I was dead and one of them clouds was a-carryin' me and Hanner and mother up to where father's gone, you know! I wonder if God forgets all about poor folks when their father dies and their mother gits into the poor-house? Do you think He does? Seems so to me. Maybe God lost track of my father when he come away from England and crossed over the sea. Don't nobody on Flat Creek keer fer God, and I guess God don't keer fer Flat Creek. But I would, though, ef he'd git my mother out of the poor-house and git Hanner away from Means's, and let me kiss my mother every night, you know, and sleep on my Hanner's arm, jes like I used to afore father died, you see."

Ralph wanted to speak, but he couldn't. And so Shocky, with his eyes looking straight ahead, and as if forgetting Ralph's presence, told over the thoughts that he had often talked over to the fence-rails and the trees. "It was real good in Mr. Pearson to take me, wasn't it? Else I'd a been

bound out tell I was twenty-one, maybe, to some mean man like Ole Means. And I a'n't but seven. And it would take me fourteen years to git twenty-one, and I never could live with my mother again after Hanner gets done her time. 'Cause, you see, Hanner'll be through in three more year, and I'll be ten and able to work, and we'll git a little place about as big as Granny Sanders's, and——"

Ralph did not hear another word of what Shocky said that afternoon. For there, right before them, was Granny Sanders's log-cabin, with its row of lofty sunflower stalks, now dead and dry, in front, with its rain-water barrel by the side of the low door, and its ash-barrel by the fence. In this cabin lived alone the old and shriveled hag whose hideousness gave her a reputation for almost supernatural knowledge. She was at once doctress and newspaper. She collected and disseminated medicinal herbs and personal gossip. She was in every regard indispensable to the intellectual life of the neighborhood. In the matter of her medical skill we cannot express an opinion, for her "yarbs" are not to be found in the pharmacopœia of science.

What took Ralph's breath was to find Dr. Small's fine, faultless horse standing at the door. What did Henry Small want to visit this old quack for?