

into the silence of the wood a little girl came dancing. — PAGE 45.

## THE GIRL WITHOUT A CONSCIENCE.

INTO the silence of the wood a little girl came dancing; she could not have seen more than twelve or thirteen years of life; but she was well grown, and her beauty was of that vivid type that impresses itself emphatically upon the beholder. Her dress was of coarse material, but on her left hand she wore a jewelled ring, which she held up to the sunlight, whenever it sifted through the branches of the pine tops. Once she kissed it so fervently that one might have reconciled its possession by the wearer of the coarse gown as the gift of some dear friend, instead of seeing in the act only a childish expression of keen delight in beauty. The same deep enjoyment, however, that she found in the sparkle of the gem, she received from the soft-colored loveliness of the grove, with the quivering



splendor of the sunshine and the delicious variety of its tones, softly pale or silvery, shot with amethyst or emerald, iridescent as doves' necks, lighter, darker, sliding from tone to tone in an enchanting harmony. Perhaps the solemnity of the solitude touched her spirit also; for presently her step was less buoyant, her air more subdued; and at length, with sudden seriousness, she sat down in one of the duskiest spots in the wood.

Immediately there seemed to arise before her a vague and indescribable form, — indescribable because language is inadequate to describe an object that bears no resemblance to anything the eye has seen.

The Indescribable sat down opposite the little girl, looked at her squarely, and said,

"I am the conscience of Marion Risney."

"Go away!" said the little girl, violently, "I won't hear you!"

"I am about to relate to you the story of a life. When it is told, I shall never seek you again. Listen!

"From my own recollection," began the voice, "I can tell you nothing of Marion's earliest childhood; but there are reasons for believing that she was not well born. I

have found a taint in her blood, — the taint of selfishness, vanity, and love of luxury; from which faults the ugly acts of her life have sprung. Many times she has sought to excuse them to me, on the plea of these faults being native to her, as the cruelty of the cat or the craftiness of the fox; but I have invariably answered: 'Unlike them, you have a clear perception of right and wrong, and you have a strong will. If you become vicious, it will be from choice.'

"It was when she was about three years old, that, in company with two other children, she was brought from a charitable institution to Reuben Risney's farm, for a week of country air.

"At this time Reuben was in comfortable circumstances, living in the joyous independence of those who draw the means of life direct from nature, on his farm, which he loved better than any other spot on earth. He had little education, but had learned a simple wisdom from the earnest experience of our common, every-day life, and he wore the serene beauty of great and tender souls.

"Marion was the youngest and puniest of the three children, and when the week had



passed, and she was to be removed to the institution, she clung to him like a poor kitten whose eyes have not yet opened. Then Reuben, putting his great protecting arm around her, declared he would keep her, and bring her up as a child of his own.

"I well remember a neighbor once saying to him that adopted children are prone to turn out ungrateful.

"'It's the way with all young critters, to take what's given 'em as a matter of coorse,' answered Reuben, drawing Marion up to him, and, with his great hand, tenderly pressing her little head against his breast. 'I ain't goin' to have her burdened with no notions about gratitude.'

"He had never had a child of his own, and he gave Marion the love he would have given his first-born. In caring for the little adopted one, the rose of mother joy blossomed in his wife's heart; thus they fully repaired the fault in her fortunes that had left her, a tender girl baby, without love and home.

"For the first few years of life, I let Marion severely alone, and I distinctly recall the first time I ever spoke to her; it was the second year after she had been

brought to the Risney farm, and hard times, because of the great drought of the preceding summer. She had been teasing for some foolish personal ornament; for even then the love of dress was strong in her. At first her father had refused, but finally consented to buy the trinket.

"'I don't know how you are a-going to manage it, Reuben,' said the mother, smiling at Marion, who was dancing up and down, in her delight, like a big mote, in the broad sunshine that lay across the kitchen floor.

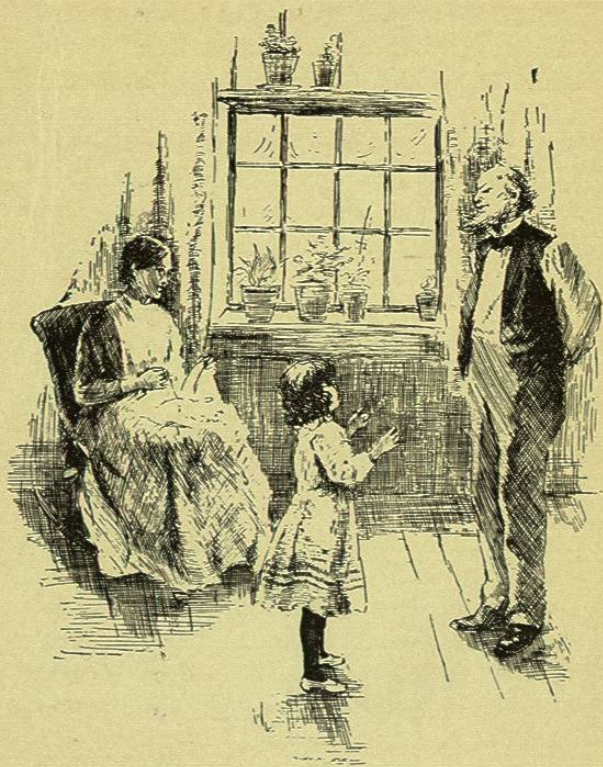
"'Well,' said Reuben, 'I've been thinkin' that I might jest as well give up a takin' the "Herald," since the minute I set down to it, I fall asleep. There's a plenty of jest as good news in that pile o' papers up in the garret, as they put in now. I ain't a-goin' to renew my subscription this Janooary, an' I guess I can manage to give that ere fairy girl o' ours the gewgaw she has set her heart on.'

"Then it was I spoke.

"'You could n't be so selfish as to take it?'

"She stopped dancing directly, and, sitting down on the old sofa, argued with me as if for her life. Her heart was young and





tender, and her will had not been weakened by repeated acts of self-indulgence; so, in the end, I conquered. She ran up to her father and said:—

“ ‘Nice ole man’ (this had been her first name for Reuben, who liked it), ‘I don’t want the trinket. I want you to have the newspaper.’ ”

“ ‘Mother! mother!’ cried Reuben, ‘do you hear that?’ ”

“It is curious that it is those who constantly deny themselves, as a matter of course, who are most touched by generosity in others. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his head on one side, with his eyes looking tenderly down on Marion, and his voice trembled a little as he added, ‘She is jest a-goin’ to give up what she has set her heart on, for *me*.’ ”

“That afternoon, when he came home from town, he brought Marion the trinket.

“The second time I spoke to her, it was upon an occasion when the mother would have denied herself for the child’s pleasure. Marion obeyed me readily, but it seemed with the expectation that the affair would turn out as the foregoing; for when her sacrifice was accepted, she was disappointed and unhappy, and in the end her wish was gratified.

“When Reuben adopted this child, the Risney farm included eighty or more acres;



its boundary lines were the river and the road on the north and south respectively. A little romping brook led you along its eastern limit, and the farm of Nathan Jordan joined it on the west. The natives of Oglethorpe were plain, unsophisticated country people, who still held the primitive belief in the equality of American citizens; but the place was within fifteen miles of Boston, and soon Boston men began to build Queen Anne houses on the soft slopes of the Oglethorpe hills, and with their money, their manners of society, and their sumptuous living, established uncomfortable standards of comparison. The Jordan farm passed into the hands of a man named Coolidge, who, as his poorer neighbors said, 'farmed for fun.'

"The misfortunes of Marion's father began at this time. Drought spoiled his crops, disease carried off his cattle; and his cranberry meadow, on which he relied for a large part of his income, was ruined by the system of ditching on the adjacent land of Coolidge. Farming is a precipice on which, if one false step is made, it is difficult to recover one's footing. Reuben was forced to saddle himself with a mortgage on his

property, which is the usual opening act in the tragedy of the American farmer, destiny being indifferent as to whether or not her plots are hackneyed.

"Reuben and his wife bore their trials with perfect patience, and allowed no chilly depression to rob Marion's childhood of its rosy bloom. That she should be happy was the only return their love demanded. She grew strong and handsome, and had the gift of adapting herself so perfectly to those around her as to establish ties as strong as those of blood.

"Mr. Coolidge had no daughters, and he would gladly have brought up Marion as a sister to his son; but Reuben smiled derisively at any such proposition.

"'I've sold you a good many parcels of my land, and I grant 't was an accommodation to me when you took a lien on the house; but I reckon I won't give up my girl,' he always said.

"Between the two homes Marion saw idleness and luxury on the one hand, and work and want on the other. In one she learned to appreciate the polite arts, and in the other, the unaffected beauty of simple virtue. To the Coolidges she owed those



advantages of education that she shared with Herbert; for his tutors relieved the tedium of teaching him by stimulating her talents into activity.

"Marion and Herbert Coolidge were constantly together. He was a year the older of the two, but she was stronger than he; and when he showed her the real arrogance of his nature, she convinced him of his mistake by the logic of brute force. When she grew older, she kept her dominion over him with her sharper wit, but the principle was the same.

"Perhaps it was natural that Marion should prefer the merry, easy life at the Queen Anne Villa to the plain, workaday world, as seen at the farmhouse. The luxurious surroundings pleased her taste, and the constant merrymaking, her love of pleasure. She liked the soft, well-bred manner of Herbert's mother, and the aristocratic elegance of Mr. Coolidge. But, more than any one on earth, she loved the old man who had first befriended her. Yes, she loved him, although she would sit silent while Herbert ridiculed his faults of speech or oddities of manner. (The Coolidges never would take seriously Marion's rela-

tionship to the old farmer.) She would sit silent, because she knew it would be impossible to teach Herbert Coolidge reverence for moral worth. But when she came home she would throw her arms around Reuben's neck, with the reflection that he was worth them all, and bitterly reproach herself that she was not more worthy his great love for her.

"Marion was a well-grown girl when her mother was struck by a mortal illness. For some time, although suffering intensely, she kept on with her work; and now Marion should have returned love for love, and care for care; but in her pliant selfishness she slipped too easily from duty into pleasure, and she abhorred the work of a house.

"One morning, when she was making ready for a day's pleasuring, her mother called her into the kitchen.

"'I want to teach you to-day, dear, how to make pies as your father likes them,' her mother said. 'We had better not put it off any longer.'

"She had been more feeble than usual that morning, and her face was white and drawn, and her eyes wore a new expression,



that startled Marion. Yet she shook off the fear that the strange look begat, and made excuses to evade the odious task.

"I have never tired of punishing Marion for that act of selfishness. Many a time I have cut off the thread of her merriment with the sharp point of this recollection.

"The following night her mother died.

"This bereavement seemed to stir her father's love for her into even finer tenderness. Mrs. Handy, the neighbor who came in daily to help about the housework, used often to beg her to stay at home with him, and lighten, as she only could, his sense of loneliness.

"'It ain't no common feelin' he has for you, Marion,' she would say. 'It goes down deeper 'n his heart, clear to his very stummick, an' regerlates his appetite. The folks at Coolidge's think a sight of you, I dare say, but do you s'pose any o' *them* would refuse crisp fried pertaters an' bacon because you ain't by?'

"There are two days I can never forget. One is a day in spring: it was the month after Marion's mother had died, and the hours went sadly in Reuben Risney's household. The Coolidges were going abroad

for a year, carrying with them those gay pleasure-banners under which Marion had so merrily marched; and she sat moping by her bedroom window on that unforgettable morning. Again I seem to see the soft, melting greens of the lush verdure of May. There is an apple-tree close by the farmhouse, whose blossoms filled the room with fragrance, and among whose branches two robins were chattering over the choice of a building spot. Presently the robins flew away, and Marion saw that her father and Mrs. Coolidge were advancing along the path; but she herself was shielded from them by the apple-tree. The voice of the lady fell distinctly on Marion's ear.

"'I don't understand why you should be shocked at my proposal, Mr. Risney. Marion is not of your flesh and blood, and there would be nothing unnatural in your giving her up to us. She is a magnificent little creature, and full of talent.'

"'Well, yes,' answered Reuben, slowly, 'I reckon she is.'

"Mrs. Coolidge was but a shallow worldling, but more than a match for this grandly true, but simple, child of nature. Her ready speech seemed to benumb his faculties, so