

that he could never think of a reply to her arguments until relieved of her presence, when the true answer flashed upon him.

“‘Of coorse, Mis Coolidge, I know what Marion is, an’ what I am, an’ that I ain’t, an’ never can be, equal to her,’ he said in his humble, honest way.

“‘Dear Mr. Risney, I never meant to draw comparisons,’ murmured the other.

“‘Did n’t you? Well, I kinder thought you did. ’T is natchural that folks should.’

“‘I merely meant that with such talent she should have advantages. You do your best by her, I know; but you cannot give her what we can. It hardly seems fair to withhold these advantages from her; and when she is older she may regret them, and blame you.’

“‘If Marion wants to go to you, I’ll never say a word to hinder,’ said Reuben. ‘But, Mis Coolidge, I know that girl better ’n you can; I know what a lovin’ heart she has. Ever since the day she came to me (I thank the Lord for it), awkward as I am, she has been to me a tender daughter. Let Marion choose between us.’

“‘But she should not make the choice without a knowledge of what she is choos-

ing. Let me take her abroad with Herbert, and she will see what she will renounce in remaining with you.’

“‘Let’s set down, Mis Coolidge.’ There was the sound of chairs being dragged along the porch, and the old man went on. ‘I feel sorter tired, somehow. These warm spring days is tryin’, ain’t they?’

“A long silence followed, — so long that the robins were emboldened to return to the apple-tree, and Marion lost patience. At length Reuben asked, —

“‘How much do you figger up the cost of taking a girl over there, and doing for her as you lay out to do for Marion?’

“‘I really don’t know,’ answered Mrs. Coolidge; ‘but of course I shall pay all her expenses.’

“‘Your husband has offered me, more ’n once, three hundred dollars for that lot of mine down by the river, with the big oaks on it. I reckon now I’ll let him have it. Three hundred dollars, mebbe, won’t pay for all you’ll give Marion, but ’t will pay for the solid part of it. I don’t want she should feel so beholden to you that ’t will be a trouble to her when she comes to give you her answer.’

“Oh, father! father! how can you be so sure of me!” moaned poor Marion.

She left the window, and going to the farthest part of the room, buried her head in her hands for very shame. Her father's trust in her made her unworthiness look so great; for none knew, as well as she, how little she deserved the love that was ready to make any sacrifice for her happiness. But she did not mean to accept this sacrifice; she meant, oh, she meant to be good and true; she meant to stay and grieve with him for that sweet saint whom she had called mother. But with each resolve she stifled a sigh for the pleasures she would forego.

“When her father told her of the trip that had been planned for her, Marion declared that she would not go; but she let him see — perhaps it would not have been possible to deceive his loving watchfulness — that she was denying herself for his sake, and it ended in her sailing with the Coolidges.

“The year passed like a happy dream. Marion saw everything worth seeing in that old world of which she had read and studied. The Coolidges travelled like princes, and the children had money to buy

whatever pleased their childish fancy. Marion's trunk was loaded with the oddest collection ever passed through the custom house, but the indulgence of these friends knew no limit. The brightness of the year was only bedimmed by the thought of her home, — the old, tiresome farm on the Oglethorpe hills, and the decision she must make on her return there. At first, the idea that she would ever desert her father seemed too preposterous to be entertained for a moment; then the contrast between the life of Mr. Coolidge's daughter and the child of Reuben Risney hardened her heart toward the old man's need of her. She pitied herself, and wished that his great love was less, that he would not feel her loss; and presently the resolve to gratify her own wish crystallized into shape.

“Of this inward conflict poor Marion spoke to no one; but Mrs. Coolidge knew that every day, every pleasure, every pretty toy, weakened the tie between her and the old home.

“In speaking of Marion, people now said that she was wonderfully improved. I grant that she was well kept and handsome, and also that she had acquired some exter-

nal graces, but her heart had grown hard and selfish. Oh, yes, I know she had fitful impulses of generosity, and that there were moments when she still aspired to noble living; but her aspirations collapsed like windbags at the first pin-prick of a test. By the time the Coolidges took passage for America, her mind was wholly made up to desert her father.

"The second of those two days, so deeply fixed in my memory, is the one after Marion's return to Oglethorpe. The little party had arrived at the Coolidge Villa the night previous, and with bitter compunctions she was preparing herself for the dreaded interview with her father, when she would plunge the knife into his tender heart. She dressed herself in the old coarse gown that she had worn on the day when she had last taken leave of him, and which brought up with sickening reality the coarseness of her former surroundings.

"When dressed, she went into Mrs. Coolidge's room. The lady was yet in bed, but she had her jewel box beside her, and taking out a ring that Marion had always admired, slipped it on her finger, saying, —  
 "It is yours, dear."

"'Mine!' repeated Marion, 'and whether I come back to you or not?'

"'Whether you come back or not,' said her friend; but her eyes looked confidently into Marion's, which fell in shame.

"It was a lovely morning in June, but as Marion drove over the familiar old road, with the scent of the roses and the wild-grape bloom in her nostrils, she assured herself it was the most wretched of her life.

"Reuben's farm seemed to have grown old in the year she had been away. The buildings wore a neglected, patient air, such as we see in aged persons who have outlived all natural ties. There were no signs of the work that drives the farmer in the mouth of June, and wagons, ploughs, and farming-tools were collected together near the lilacs in the yard.

"Marion sent the carriage away, and running round to the kitchen door found Mrs. Handy, who welcomed her with the remark that she was not expected for two days yet.

"'It's well you've come, though,' she added severely. 'Your father needs you now if ever he does. Why, Marion, have n't you heard about his troubles?'

“No,” answered Marion, sitting down in the nearest chair. ‘What has happened?’

“Well, you knew things were a-goin’ badly with him before you went away; you knew, for instance, that he had a mortgage on the farm. Did n’t know it? Well, he would be likely to keep anything from you that might be a worry. Why, Coolidge, he took that mortgage years ago, when you were a mite of a girl. I always thought he coveted this place. Time an’ time again he tried to buy it, but Risney would n’t sell, except in lots here an’ there, as he got hard pressed for money. He had a good many expenses, but his own wants was simple enough. It seemed as if Coolidge had a spite on the poor old man, but I s’pose it warn’t anythin’ more ’n the natural feelin’ a bird has when he shoves another bird off his rightful nest. Most of the old farmers now have been shoved off to Dacoty, or somewhere or other, and your father thought once of goin’ too; but he said it warn’t a fit place to bring up a girl, an’ so he stayed. Well, once gettin’ behind so, there *warn’t* any way for him to make up again; so he kep’ on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’, till las’

month he came with a bump to the groun’, an’ Coolidge foreclosed.’

“Where’s father now?” asked Marion, as the woman paused.

“I guess he’s roun’ the barn. He’s a goin’ to auction off his things termorrow, an’ calculated to get it over before you came.’

“Marion found her father sitting motionless, just inside the wide door of the barn; and the sight of Reuben Risney idle in the busy season of June, after that first sad impression of disaster, was like the black line drawn under a sentence for additional emphasis. He had altered much in the past year; his hair, which had been merely streaked with gray, was now quite white, and age, which had always seemed to creep so slowly after him, had jumped with a bound on his back.

“When he first saw Marion, he got up and made a pitiful movement, as if he would hide from her. Then he suddenly held out his arms, crying, —

“Oh, my little girl, I’ve been longin’ for you!”

“She ran to him and laid her head over the heart she meant to stab, and cried

with pity for him, and still more pity for herself.

“‘Don’t cry, my lamb; don’t!’ he said at length, in a low, suffocated voice. ‘I s’pose Mis Handy has been telling you. Lord, child! these things happen every day. We must be thankful ’t warn’t in mother’s time, an’ that you’ve got good friends to look to. I hope I’m grateful for that!’

“He began to tell her of that compact to which she had been a hidden witness, and she perceived that in his love for her he meant to take a part against himself.

“‘You see, little girl,’ he explained, ‘I’m goin’ to work for my cousin, out in Indianny. He’s got a big farm there, an’ there’s a little shanty on it, that I’m goin’ to have to myself, which will be pleasanter than feelin’ myself in Cousin Matildy’s way. It ain’t so small, neither, that there ain’t room for you, if it should be that you would want to go with me. You ain’t *obleged* to go to the Coolidges. You must n’t never think that.’

“He paused a moment, but Marion shivered, and said nothing; and in a lower voice he went on:—

“‘It’s a rough place, I reckon, an’ you’re tender, darlin’. [This was a delusion of Reuben’s, Marion having grown into an unusually strong and healthy girl.] You would have nothin’ to do but think of the pleasin’ that’s over. When I had that talk with Mis Coolidge, I never dreamed I’d ever part with you; but you see, my lamb, it’s best to take up with her offer.’

“‘Then you would n’t blame me, father?’

“‘Blame you! Why, Marion, you must never, never have such a thought as that! Since the day you put your little arms roun’ my neck, an’ begged to stay with your “nice ole man,” you have never done anythin’ to reproach yourself with. You have always been a lovin’ an’ dutiful child. You’ve got a true, loyal heart, an’ you’ll be a blessin’ to them that cares for you.’

“‘Oh, father, father, you shame me!’ sobbed Marion.

“‘Well, we won’t talk any more about such uncheerful subjects,’ said Reuben, patting her head, and rocking her back and forth, as one tries to comfort a little child who is hurt. ‘Let’s enjoy ourselves while we can be together.’

"When are you going to Indiana, father?"

"Well, I was only waitin' till you got back. I'll have to go very soon. I reckon I ought to go to-morrow; it's just by Coolidge's favor, you see, I stay here; an' Hiram wants me now that the work is heaviest."

"His determined cheerfulness made selfishness smooth and pleasant to Marion, who dried her tears, and filled the day with tender acts to burn into a deserted old man's memory.

"That night, when Marion went up into her own old room, I made a desperate endeavor to persuade her to take a daughter's part, and be loyal to her father in his trouble. Long I plead with her, although she begged me in agony to be silent. I made her heart ache with pity for that old man, alone in his little shanty in Indiana, and filled her with disgust at her own self-seeking; yet in the end her selfishness conquered, and in the morning she came downstairs fresh and rosy, her smooth young face giving no hint of the struggle.

"She and Reuben cooked and ate their breakfast together. Then, taking her in his

arms, he kissed and blessed her; and at length, as he had requested, when the auctioneer's old buggy drove into the yard, she slipped quietly away.

"Like one over whom an overwhelming wave has passed, Marion looked on the fair morning landscape; then, unburdened and free, danced down the slope of the hill.

"The shortest and pleasantest way to the Coolidges' house was through the pine wood that lay at the foot of the slope on which the farmhouse stood. On reaching it, Marion turned.

"There on the top of the hill, with his face uplifted and his arms stretched toward her, stood Reuben, — a pathetic image of a forsaken old man. It was quite plain that, unable to carry out his own programme, he had hurried to overtake her, eager for another look at the idol of his heart, and he had seen her go dancing away from him."

"Marion Risney, it is not too late," cried the Indescribable. "You can return."

The little girl had risen, but with arms thrust out, palms forward, as if to ward off some horrible fate.

"To live all my life in a shanty, on a

farm in Indiana? oh, I can't, I can't!" she murmured, and the voice cried:—

"Go, then, choose the base part! Be vile and faithless; stab the heart that loves you. Henceforth, be without love, without reverence, without conscience!"

But the little girl did not move; hot tears sprang to her eyes, attesting penitence and pity. For a moment she hesitated, then went bounding through the wood, her face set toward the farmhouse.

There was a hush in the forest, then a bird burst into a song of melodious sweetness, and the gentle June breeze swung the outstretched branches of the pines like arms in benediction.

