XIII

A BED of crimson coals in the bottom of the grate was all that survived of his own fire.

He sat down before it, not seeing it, his candle unlighted in his hand, a tragedy in his eyes.

A comfortless room. Rag carpeting on the floor. No rug softening the hearthstones. The sashes of the windows loose in the frames and shaken to-night by twisty gusts. A pane of glass in one had been broken and the opening pasted over with a sheet of letter paper. This had been burst by an indolent hand, thrust through to close the shutters outside; and a current of cold air now swept across the small room. The man felt it, shook himself free of depressing thoughts, rose resolutely. He took from a closet one of his most worthless coats, and rolling it into a wad, stopped the hole.

Going back to the grate, he piled on the

wood, watching the blaze as it rushed up over the logs, devouring the dried lichens on the bark; then sinking back to the bottom rounds, where it must slowly rise again, reducing the wood to ashes.

Beside him as he sat in his rush-bottomed chair stood a small square table and on this a low brass candlestick, the companion of the one in the dining room. A half-burnt candle rose out of the socket. As David now lighted it and laid the long fresh candle alongside the snuffers, he measured with his eye the length of his luminaries and the amount of his wood — two friends. The little grate had commenced to roar at him bravely, affectionately; and the candle sputtered to him and threw sparks into the air — the rockets of its welcoming flame.

It was not yet ten o'clock: two hours of the long winter evening remained. He turned to his treasury.

This was a trunk in a corner, the trunk he had bought while at college, small and cheap in itself, not in what it held. For

here were David's books — the great grave books which had been the making of him, or the undoing of him, according as one may have enough of God's wisdom and mercy to decide whether it were the one or the other.

As the man now moved his chair over, lifted the lid, and sat gazing down at the backs of them, arranged in a beautiful order of his own, there was in the lofty, solemn look of him some further evidence of their power over him. The coarse toil of the day was forgotten; his loved dependent animals in the wind-swept barn forgotten; the evening with his father and mother, the unalterable emptiness of it, the unkindness, the threatening tragedy, forgotten. Not that desolate room with firelight and candle; not the poor farmhouse; not the meagre farm, nor the whole broad Kentucky plateau of fields and woods, heavy with winter wealth, heavy with comfortable homesteads — any longer held him as domicile, or native region: he was gone far away into the

company of his high-minded masters, the writers of those books. Choosing one, he closed the lid of the trunk reluctantly over the rest, and with the book in one hand and the chair in the other, went back to the fire.

An hour passed, during which, one elbow on the table, the shaded side of his face supported in the palm of his hand, he read, scarce moving except to snuff the wick or to lay on a fresh fagot. At the end of this time other laws than those which the writer was tracing began to assert their supremacy over David — the laws of strength and health, warmth and weariness. Sleep was descending on him, relaxing his limbs, spreading a quiet mist through his brain, caressing his eyelids. He closed the pages and turned to his dying fire. The book caused him to wrestle; he wanted rest.

And now, floating to him through that mist in his brain, as softly as a nearing melody, as radiantly as dawning light, came the image of Gabriella: after David had

pursued Knowledge awhile he was ready for Love. But knowledge, truth, wisdom before every other earthly passion — that was the very soul of him. His heart yearned for her now in this closing hour, when everything else out of his way, field-work, stable-work, wood-cutting, filial duties, study, he was alone with the thought of her, the newest influence in his life, taking heed of her solely, hearkening only to his heart's need of her. In all his rude existence she was the only being he had ever known who seemed to him worthy of a place in the company of his great books. Had the summons come to pack his effects to-morrow and, saying good-by to everything else, start on a journey to the congenial places where his mighty masters lived and wrought, he would have wished her alone to go with him, sharer of life's loftiness. Her companionship wherever he might be — to have just that; to feel that she was always with him, and always one with him; to be able to turn his eyes to hers before some vanishing firelight at

an hour like this, with deep rest near them side by side!

He lingered over the first time he had ever seen her; that memorable twilight in the town, the roofs and chimneys of the houses, half-white, half-brown with melting snow, outlined against the low red sunset sky. He had not long before left the room in the university where his trial had taken place, and where he had learned that it was all over with him. He was passing along one of the narrow cross streets, when at a certain point his course was barred by a heap of fresh cedar boughs, just thrown out of a wagon. Some children were gay and busy, carrying them through the side doors, the sexton aiding. Other children inside the lighted church were practising a carol to organ music; the choir of their voices swelled out through the open doors, and some of the little ones, tugging at the cedar, took up the strain.

She was standing on the low steps of the church, in charge of the children. In

one hand she held an unfinished wreath, and she was binding the dark, shining leaves with the other. A swarm of snow-flakes, scarce more than glittering crystals, danced merrily about her head and flecked her black fur on one shoulder. As David, not very mindful just then of whither he was going, stepped forward across the light and paused before the pile of cedar boughs, she glanced at him with a smile, seeing how his path was barred. Then she said to them: —

"Hurry, children! The night comes when we cannot work!"

It was an hour of such good-will on earth to men that no one could seem a stranger to her. He instantly became a human brother, next of kin to her — that was all; she was wholly under the influence of the innocence and purity within and without.

As he made no reply and for a moment did not move, she glanced quickly at him, regretting the smile. When she saw his face, he saw the joy go down out of hers;

and he felt, as he turned off, that she went with him along the black street: alone, he seemed not alone any more.

Though he had been with her many times since, no later impression had effaced one line of that first picture. There she stood ever to him, and would stand: on the step of the church, smiling in her mourning, binding her wreath, the jets of the chandelier streaming out on her snow-sprinkled shoulder, the children carolling among the fragrant cedar boughs scattered at her feet; she there, decorating the church, happy to be of pious service. Ah, to have her there in the room with him now; to be able to turn his eyes to hers in the vanishing firelight, near sleep awaiting them, side by side.

There was the sound of a scratching on David's window shutters, as though a stiff brush were being moved up and down across the slats. He became aware that this sound had reached him at intervals several times already, but as often happens, had been disregarded by him

owing to his preoccupation. Now it was so loud as to force itself positively upon his attention.

He listened, puzzled, wondering. His window stood high from the ground and clear of any object. In a few moments, the sound made itself audible again. He sprang up, wide awake now, and raising the sash, pushed open the shutters — one of them easily; against the other there was resistance from outside. This yielded before his pressure; and as the shutter was forced wide open and David peered out, there swung heavily against his cheek what felt like an enormous brush of thorns, covered with ice. It was the end of one of the limbs of the cedar tree which stood several feet from his window on one side, and close to the wall of the house. Before David was born, it had been growing there, a little higher, more far-reaching laterally, every year, until several topmost boughs had long since risen above the level of the eaves and dropped their dry needles on the rotting shingles. Now one of the

limbs, bent over sidewise under its ice-freighted berries and twigs, hung as low as his window, and the wind was tossing it.

Sleet! This, then, was the nature of the threatening storm, which all day had made man and beast foreboding and distressed. David held out his hand: rain was falling steadily, each drop freezing on whatsoever it fell, adding ice to ice. The moon rode high by this time; and its radiance pouring from above on the roof of riftless cloud, diffused enough light below to render large objects near at hand visible in bulk and outline. A row of old cedars stretched across the yard. Their shapes, so familiar to him, were already disordered. The sleet must have been falling for hours to have weighed them down this way and that. A peculiarity of the night was the wind, which increased constantly, but with fitful violence, giving no warning of its high swoop, seizure, and wrench.

Sleet! Scarce a winter but he had

seen some little: once, in his childhood, a great one. He had often heard his father talk of others which *he* remembered — with comment on the destruction they had wrought far and wide, on the suffering of all stock and of the wild creatures. The ravage had been more terrible in the forests, his father had thought, than what the cyclones cause when they rush upon the trees, heavy in their full summer-leaves, and sweep them down as easily as umbrellas set up on the ground. So much of the finest forests of Kentucky had been lost through its annual summer tempests and its rarer but more awful wintry sleets.

No work for him in the hemp fields to-morrow, nor for days. No school for Gabriella; the more distant children would be unable to ride; the nearest unable to foot it through the mirrored woods; unless the weather should moderate before morning and melt the ice away as quickly as it had formed — as sometimes was the case. A good sign of this, he took it,

was the ever rising wind: for a rising wind and a falling temperature seldom appeared together. As he bent his ear listening, he could hear the wild roar of the surges of air breaking through the forest, the edge of which was not fifty yards away.

David sprang from his chair; there was a loud crack, and the great limb of the cedar swept rattling down across his shutters, twisted, snapped off at the trunk, rolled over in the air, and striking the ground on its back, lay like a huge animal knocked lifeless.

He forgot bed and sleep and replenished his fire. His ear, trained to catch and to distinguish sounds of country life, was now becoming alive to the commencement of one of those vast appalling catastrophes in Nature, for which man sees no reason and can detect the furtherance of no plan — law being turned with seeming blindness, and in the spirit of sheer wastage, upon what it has itself achieved, and spending its sublime forces in a work of self-desolation.

Of the two windows in his room, one opened upon the back yard, one upon the front. Both back yard and front contained, according to the custom of the country, much shrubbery, with aged fruit trees, mostly cherry and peach. There were locusts also at the rear of the house, the old-time yard favorite of the people; other forest trees stood around. Through both his windows there began to reach him a succession of fragile sounds; the snapping of rotten, weakest, most overburdened twigs. On fruit tree and forest tree these went down first — as is also the law of storm and trial of strength among men. The ground was now as one flooring of glass; and as some of these small branches dropped from the tree-tops, they were broken into fragments, like icicles, and slid rattling away into the nearest depressions of the ground. Starting far up in the air sometimes, they struck sheer upon other lower branches, bringing them along also; this gathering weight in turn descended upon others lower yet, until, so

augmented, the entire mass swept downward and fell, shivered against crystal flooring.

But soon these more trivial facts held his attention no longer: they were the mere reconnaissance of the elements — the first light attack of Nature upon her own weakness. By and by from the surging, roaring depths of the woods, there suddenly reverberated to him a deep boom as of a cannon: one of the great trees — two-forked at the mighty summit and already burdened in each half by its tons of timber, split in twain at the fork as though cleft by lightning; and now only the pointed trunk stood like a funeral shaft above its own ruins. For hours this went on: the light incessant rattling, closest around; the creaking, straining, tearing apart as of suffering flesh, less near; the sad, sublime booming of the forest.

Now the man would walk the floor; now drop into his chair before the fire. His last bit of candle flickered blue, deep in the socket, and sent up its smoke. His

wood was soon burnt out: only red coals in the bottom of the grate then, and these fast whitening. More than once he strode across and stood over his trunk in the shadowy corner — looking down at his books — those books that had guided him thus far, or misguided him, who can say?

When his candle gave out and later his fire, he jerked off his clothes and getting into bed, rolled himself in the bedclothes and lay listening to the mournful sublimity of the storm.

Toward three o'clock the weather grew colder, the wind died down, the booming ceased; and David, turning wearily over, with an impulse to prayer, but with no prayer, went to sleep.

XIV

When David awoke late and drowsily the next morning after the storm, he lay awhile, listening. No rending, crashing, booming in the woods now, nor rattling of his window-frames. No contemplative

twitter of winter birds about the cedars in the yard, nor caw of crow, crossing the house chimneys toward the corn shocks. All things hushed, silent, immovable.

Following so quickly upon the sublime roar and ravage of the night before, the stillness was disturbing. He sprang up and dressed quickly — admonished by the coldness of his room — before hurrying to his window to look out. When he tried the sash, it could not be raised. He thrust his hand through the broken pane and tugged at the shutters; they could not be shaken. Running downstairs to the kitchen and returning with hot water, he melted away the ice embedding the bolts and hinges.

A marvel of nature, terrible, beautiful, met his eyes: ice-rain and a great frost. Cloud, heavy still, but thinner than on the day before, enwrapped the earth. The sun, descending through this translucent roof of gray, filled the air beneath with a radiance as of molten pearl; and in this under-atmosphere of pearl all earthly things