

"Did it make any difference to you whether your life were taken by dog or man? The dog killing you from instinct and famine; a man killing you as a luxury and with a fine calculation? And who is to blame now for your death, if blame there be? I who went to college instead of building a stable? Or the storm which deprived these prowlers of nearer food and started them on a far hunt, desperate with hunger? Or man who took you from wild Nature and made you more defenceless under his keeping? Or Nature herself who edged the tooth and the mind of the dog-wolf in the beginning that he might lengthen his life by shortening yours? Where and with what purpose began on this planet the taking of life that there might be life? Poor questions that never troubled you, poor sheep! But that follow, as his shadow, pondering Man, who no more knows the reason of it all than you did."

The fighting of the dogs had for the first few moments sounded farther and

farther away, retreating through the barn and thence into the lot; and by and by the shepherd ran around and stood before David, awaiting orders. David seized the sheep by the feet and dragged it into the saddle-house; sent the dog to watch the rest of the flock; and ran back to the house, drawing his overcoat more tightly about him. As quickly as possible he got into bed and covered up warmly. Something caused him to recollect just then the case of one of the Bible students.

"Now I am in for it," he said.

And this made him think of his great masters and of Gabriella; and he lay there very anxious in the night.

## XXI

TWILIGHT had three times descended on the drear land. Three times Gabriella, standing at her windows and looking out upon the snow and ice, had seen everything disappear. How softly white were the snow-covered trees; how soft the black



that thickened about them till they were effaced. Gabriella thought of them as still perfectly white out there in the darkness. Three evenings with her face against the pane she had watched for a familiar figure to stalk towering up the yard path, and no familiar figure had come. Three evenings she had returned to her firelight, and sat before it with an ear on guard for the sound of a familiar step on the porch below; but no step had been heard.

On the first night she had all but hoped that he would not seek her; the avowal of their love for each other had well-nigh left it an unendurable joy. But the second night she had begun to expect him confidently; and when the hour had passed and he had not come, Gabriella sat long before her fire with a new wound—she who had felt so many. By the third day she had reviewed all that she had ever heard of him or known of him: gathered it all afresh as a beautiful thing for receiving him with when he should come to her

that night. Going early to her room she had taken her chair to the window and with her face close to the pane had watched again—watched that white yard; and again nothing moved in that white yard but the darkness.

She sprang up and began to walk to and fro.

“If he does not come to-night, something has happened. I know, I know, I know! Something is wrong. My heart is not mistaken. Oh, if anything were to happen to *him*! I must not think of it! I have borne many things; but *that*! I must not think of it!”

She sank into her chair with her ear strained toward the porch below. For a long time there was no sound. Then she heard the noise of heavy boots—a tapping of the toes against the pillars, to knock off the snow, and then the slow creaking of soles across the frozen boards. She started up. “It is some one else,” she cried, wringing her hands. “Something has happened to him.”



She stopped still in the middle of the room, her arms dropped at her sides, her eyes stretched wide.

The house girl's steps were heard running upstairs. Gabriella jerked the door open in her face.

"What is the matter?" she cried.

A negro man had come with a message for her. The girl looked frightened. Gabriella ran past her down into the hall. "What is the matter?" she asked.

His Marse David had sent for her and wanted her to come at once. He had brought a horse for her.

"Is he ill — seriously ill?"

He had had a bad cold and was worse.

"The doctor — has he sent for the doctor?"

The negro said that he was to take her back first and then go for the doctor.

"Go at once."

It was very dark, he urged, and slippery.

"Go on for the doctor! Where have you left the horse?"

The horse was at the stiles. The negro insisted that it would be better for him to go back with her.

"Don't lose time," she said, "and don't keep me waiting. Go! as quickly as you can!"

The negro cautioned her to dismount at the frozen creek.

When Gabriella, perhaps an hour later, knocked at the side door of David's home, — his father's and mother's room, — there was no summons to enter. She turned the knob and walked in. The room was empty; the fire had burned low; a cat lay on the hearthstones. It raised its head halfway and looked at her through the narrow slits of its yellow eyes and curled the tip of its tail — the cat which is never inconvenienced, which shares all comforts and no troubles. She sat down in a chair, overcome with excitement and hesitating what to do. In a moment she noticed that the door opening on the foot of the staircase stood ajar. It led to his room. Not a sound reached her from above. She



summoned all her self-control, mounted the stairway, and entered.

The two negro women were standing inside with their backs to the door. On one side of the bed sat David's mother, on the other his father. Both were looking at David. He lay in the middle of the bed, his eyes fixed restlessly on the door. As soon as he saw her, he lifted himself with an effort and stretched out his arms and shook them at her with hoarse little cries.

"Oh! oh! oh! oh!"

The next moment he locked his arms about her.

"Oh, it has been so long!" he said, drawing her close, "so long!"

"Ah, why did you not send for me? I have waited and waited."

He released her and fell back upon the pillows; then with a slight gesture he said to his father and mother:—

"Will you leave us alone?"

When they had gone out, he took one of her hands and pressed it against his cheek and lay looking at her piteously.

Gabriella saw the change in him: his anxious expression, his cheeks flushed with a red spot, his restlessness, his hand burning. She could feel the big veins throbbing too fast, too crowded. But a woman smiles while her heart breaks.

He propped himself a little higher on the pillows and turned on his side, clutching at his lung.

"Don't be frightened," he said, searching her face, "I've got something to tell you. Promise."

"I promise."

"I am going to have pneumonia, o I have it now. You are not frightened?"

Her eyes answered for her.

"I had a cold. I had taken something to throw me into a sweat—that was the night after I saw you."

At the thought of their last interview, he took her hand again and pressed it to his lips, looking tenderly at it.

"The dogs were killing the sheep, and I got up and went out while I was in a perspiration. I know it's pneumonia. I



have had a long, hard chill. My head feels like it would burst, and there are other symptoms. This lung! It's pneumonia. One of the Bible college students had it. I helped to nurse him. Oh, he got well," he said, shaking his head at her with a smile, "and so will I!"

"I know it," she murmured, "I'm sure of it."

"What I want to ask is, Will you stay with me?"

"Ah, nothing could take me from you."

"I don't want you to leave me. I want to feel that you are right here by me through it all. I have to tell you something else: I may be delirious and not know what is going on. I have sent for the doctor. But there is a better one in Lexington. You try to get him to come. I know that he goes wherever he is called and stays till the danger is past or—or till it is settled. Don't spare anything that can be done for me. I am in danger, and I must live. I must not lose all the greatness of life and lose you."

"Ah," she implored, seeing how ill he was. "Everything that can be done shall be done. Now oughtn't you to be quiet and let me make you comfortable till the doctor comes?"

"I must say something else while I can, and am sure. I might not get over this—"

"Ah—"

"Let me say this: I *might* not! If I should not, have no fear about the future; I have none; it will all be well with *me* in Eternity."

He lay quiet a moment, his face turned off. She had buried hers on the bed. The flood of tears would come. He turned over, and seeing it laid his hand on it very lightly.

"If it be so, Gabriella, I hope all the rest of your life you will be happy. I hope no more trouble will ever come to you."

Suddenly he sat up, lifted her head, and threw his arms around her again. "Oh, Gabriella!" he cried, "you have been all there is to me."



"Some day," he continued a moment later, "if it turns out that way, come over here to see my father and mother. And tell them I left word that perhaps they had never quite understood me and so had never been able to do me justice. Now, will you call my mother?"

"Mother," he said, taking her by the hand and placing it in Gabriella's, "this is my wife, as I hope she will be, and your daughter; and I have asked her to stay and help you to nurse me through this cold."

Three twilights more and there was a scene in the little upper room of the farmhouse: David drawn up on the bed; at one side of it, the poor distracted mother, rocking herself and loudly weeping; for though mothers may not greatly have loved their grown sons, when the big men lie stricken and the mothers once more take their hands to wash them, bathe their faces with a cloth, put a spoon to their lips, memory brings back the days when those huge erring bodies lay across their breasts.

They weep for the infant, now an infant again and perhaps falling into a long sleep.

On the other side of the bed sat David's father, bending over toward, trying now, as he had so often tried, to reach his son; thinking at swift turns of the different will he would have to make and of who would write it; of his own harshness; and also not free from the awful dread that this was the summons to his son to enter Eternity with his soul unprepared. At the foot of the bed were the two doctors, watchful, whispering to each other, one of whom led the mother out of the room; over by the door the two negro women and the negro man. Gabriella was not there.

Gabriella had gone once more to where she had been many times: gone to pour out in secret the prayer of her church, and of her own soul for the sick — with faith that her prayer would be answered.

A dark hour: a dog howling on the porch below; at the stable the cries of hungry, neglected animals; the winter hush settling over the great evening land.