

XXII

WHEN one sets out to walk daily across a wood or field in a fresh direction, starting always at the same point and arriving always at the same, without intention one makes a path; it may be long first, but in time the path will come. It commences at the home gate or bars and reaches forward by degrees; it commences at the opposite goal and lengthens backward thence: some day the ends meet and we discover with surprise how slightly we have deviated in all those crossings and recrossings. The mind has unconsciously marked a path long before the feet have traced it.

When Gabriella had begun teaching, she passed daily out of the yard into an apple orchard and thence across a large woodland pasture, in the remote corner of which the schoolhouse was situated. Through this woods the children had made their path: the straight instinctive path of childhood. But Gabriella, leaving



"INTO ITS LARGENESS, ITS WOODLAND ODORS,
AND TWILIGHT PEACE."

this at the woods-gate, had begun to make one for herself. She followed her will from day to day; now led in this direction by some better vista; now drawn aside toward a group of finer trees; or seeing, farther on, some little nooklike place. In time, she had out of short disjointed threads sown a continuous path; it was made up of her loves, and she loved it. Of mornings a brisk walk along this braced her mind for the day; in the evening it quieted jangled nerves and revived a worn-out spirit: shedding her toil at the school-house door as a heavy suffocating garment, she stepped gratefully out into its largeness, its woodland odors, and twilight peace.

On the night of the sleet tons of timber altogether had descended across this by-way. When the snow fell the next night, it brought down more. But the snow melted, leaving the ice; the ice melted, leaving the dripping boughs and bark. In time these were warmed and dried by sun and wind. New edges of greenness

appeared running along the path. The tree-tops above were tossing and roaring in the wild gales of March. Under loose autumn leaves the earliest violets were dim with blue. But Gabriella had never once been there to realize how her path had been ruined, or to note the birth of spring.

It was perhaps a month afterward that one morning at the usual school hour her tall lithe figure, clad in gray hood and cloak, appeared at last walking along this path, stepping over or passing around the fallen boughs. She was pale and thin, but the sweet warm womanliness of her, if possible, lovelier. There was a look of religious gratitude in the eyes, but about her mouth new happiness.

Her duties were done earlier than usual that afternoon, for not much could be accomplished on this first day of reassembling the children. They were gone; and she stood on the steps of the school-house, facing toward a gray field on a distant hillside, which caught the faint sun-

shine. It drew her irresistibly in heart and foot, and she set out toward it.

The day was one of those on which the seasons meet. Strips of snow ermined the field; but on the stumps, wandering and warbling before Gabriella as she advanced, were bluebirds, those wings of the sky, those breasts of earth. She reached the spot she was seeking, and paused. There it was—the whole pitiful scene! His hemp brake; the charred rind of a stump where he had kindled a fire to warm his hands; the remnant of the shock fallen over and left unfinished that last afternoon; trailing across his brake a handful of hemp partly broken out.

She surveyed it all with wistful tenderness. Then she looked away to the house. She could see the window of his room at which she had sat how many days, gazing out toward this field! On his bed in that room he was now stretched weak and white, but struggling back into health.

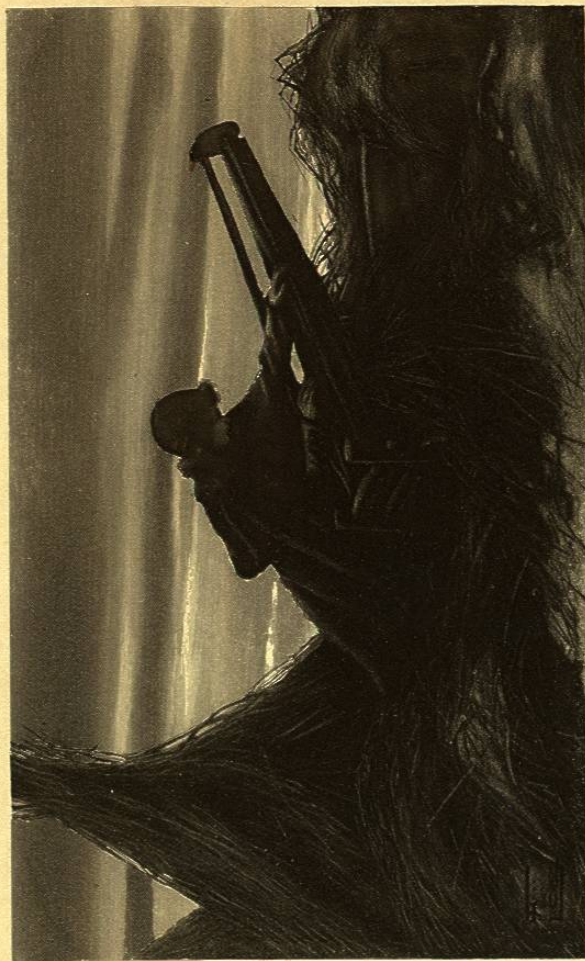
She came closer and gazed down at his frozen boot prints. How near his feet

had drawn to that long colder path which would have carried him away from her. How nearly had his young life been left, like the hand of hemp he last had handled — half broken out, not yet ready for strong use and good service. At that moment one scene rose before her memory: a day at Bethlehem nigh Jerusalem; a young Hebrew girl issuing from her stricken house and hastening to meet Him who was the Resurrection and the Life; then in her despair uttering her one cry: —

"Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

The mist of tears blinded Gabriella, whose love and faith were as Martha's. She knelt down and laid her cheek against the coarse hemp where it had been wrapped about his wrist.

"Lord," she said, "hadst Thou not been here, hadst Thou not heard my prayer for him, he would have died!"



GABRIELLA WHOSE LOVE AND FAITH WERE AS MARTHA'S.