

XXIII

SPRING, who breaks all promises in the beginning to keep them in the end, had ceased from chilling caprice and withdrawals: the whole land was now the frank revelation of her loveliness. Autumn—the hours of falling and of departing; spring—season of rise and of return. The rise of sap from root to summit; the rise of plant from soil to sun; the rise of bud from bark to bloom; the rise of song from heart to hearing: vital days. And days when things that went away come back, when woods, fields, thickets, and streams are full of returns.

Gabriella was not disappointed. Those provident old tree-mothers on the orchard slope, whose red-cheeked children are autumn apples, had not let themselves be fatally surprised by the great February frost: their bark-cradled bud-infants had only been wrapped away the more warmly till danger was over. For many days now

the hillside had been a grove of pink and white domes under each of which hung faint fragrance: the great silent marriage-bells of the trees.

After the early family supper, Gabriella, if there had been no shower, would take her shawl to sit on and some bit of work for companionship. She would go out to the edge of this orchard away from the tumult of the house. The hill sloped down into a wide green valley winding away toward the forest below. Through this valley a stream of white spring water, drunk by the stock, ran within banks of mint and over a bed of rocks and moss. On the hillside opposite was a field of young hemp stretching westward—soon to be a low sea of rippling green. Beyond this field was the sunset; over it flashed the evening star; and for the past few days beside the star had hung the inconstant, the constant, crescent of ages.

She liked to spread her shawl on the edge of the orchard overlooking the valley—a deep carpet of grass sprinkled with

wind-blown petals; to watch the sky kindle and burn out; see the recluse Evening come forth before the Night and walk softly down the valley toward the woods; feel as an elixir about her the air, sweet from the trees, sweet with earth odors, sweet with all the lingering history of the day. Nearer, ever nearer would swing the stars into her view. The moon, late a bow of thinnest, mistiest silver, now of broadening, brightening gold, would begin to drive the darkness downward from the white domes of the trees till it lay as a faint shadow beneath them. These were hours fraught with peace and rest to her tired mind and tired body.

One day she was sitting thus, absently knitting herself some bleaching gloves. (Gabriella's hands were as if stained by all the mixed petals of the boughs.) The sun was going down beyond the low hills. In the orchard behind her she could hear the flutter of wings and the last calls of quieting birds.

She had dropped the threads of her

handiwork into her lap, and with folded hands was knitting memories.

At twilights such as this in years gone by, she, a little girl, had been used to drive out into the country with her grandmother—often choosing the routes herself and ordering the carriage to be stopped on the road as her fancy pleased. For in those aristocratic days, Southern children, like those of royal families, were encouraged early in life to learn how to give orders and to exact obedience and to rule: when they grew up they would have many under them: and not to reign was to be ruined. So that the infantile autocrat Gabriella was being instructed in this way and in that way by the powerful, strong-minded, efficient grandmother as a tender old lioness might train a cub for the mastering of its dangerous world. She recalled these twilight drives when the fields along the turnpikes were turning green with the young grain; the homeward return through the lamp-lit town to the big iron entrance-gate, the parklike

lawn; the brilliant supper in the great house, the noiseless movements, the perfect manners of the many servants; later in the evening the music, the dancing, the wild joy—fairyland once more. But how far, far away now! And how the forces of life had tossed things since then like straws on the eddies of a tempest: her grandmother killed, thousands of miles away, with sorrow; her uncles with their oldest sons, mere boys, fighting and falling together; tears, poverty, ruin everywhere: and she, after years of struggle, cast completely out of the only world she had ever known into another that she had never imagined.

Gabriella felt this evening what often came to her at times: a deep yearning for her own people of the past, for their voices, their ways of looking at life; for the gentleness and courtesy, and the thousand unconscious moods and acts that rendered them distinguished and delightful. She would have liked to slip back into the old elegance, to have been surrounded by the old rich

and beautiful things. The child-princess who was once her sole self was destined to live within Gabriella always.

But she knew that the society in which she had moved was lost to her finally. Not alone through the vicissitudes of the war; for after the war, despite the overthrow, the almost complete disappearance, of many families, it had come together, it had reconstituted itself, it flourished still. It was lost to her because she had become penniless and because she had gone to work. When it transpired that she had declined all aid, thrown off all disguises, and taken her future into her own hands, to work and to receive wages for her work, in the social world where she was known and where the generations of her family had been leaders, there were kind offers of aid, secret condolences, whispered regrets, visible distress: her resolve was a new thing for a girl in those years. She could, indeed, in a way, have kept her place; but she could not have endured the sympathy, the change, with which she would have been welcomed

—and discarded. She made trial of this a few times and was convinced: up to the day of the cruel discovery of that, Gabriella had never dreamed what her social world could be to one who had dropped out of it.

Her church and the new life—these two had been left her. She no longer had a pew, but she had her faith and this was enough; for it always gave her, wherever she was, some secret place in which to kneel and from which to rise strengthened and comforted. As for the fearful fields of work into which she had come, a strange and solitary learner, these had turned into the abiding, the living landscapes of life now. Here she had found independence—sweet, wholesome crust; found another self within herself; and here found her mission for the future—David. So that looking upon the disordered and planless years, during which it had often seemed that she was struggling unwatched, Gabriella now believed that through them she had most been guided. When many hands had let hers go, One

had taken it; when old pathways were closed, a new one was opened; and she had been led along it — home.

David's illness had deepened beyond any other experience her faith in an overruling Providence. His return to health was to her a return from death: it was an answer to her prayers: it was a resurrection. Henceforth his life was a gift for the second time to himself, to her, to the world for which he must work with all his powers and work aright. And her pledge, her compact with the Divine, was to help him, to guide him back into the faith from which he had wandered. Outside of prayer, days and nights at his bedside had made him hers: vigils, nursing, suffering, helplessness, dependence — all these had been as purest oil to that alabaster lamp of love which burned within her chaste soul.

The sun had gone down. The hush of twilight was descending from the clear sky, in the depths of which the brightest stars began to appear as points of silvery

flame. The air had the balm of early summer, the ground was dry and warm.

Gabriella began to watch. The last time she had gone to see him, as he walked part of the way back with her, he had said:—

"I am well now; the next time *I* am coming to see *you*."

Soon, along the edge of the orchard from the direction of the house, she saw him walking slowly toward her, thin, gaunt; he was leaning on a rough, stout hickory, as long as himself, in the manner of an old man.

She rose quickly and hastened to him.

"Did you walk?"

"I rode. But I am walking now — barely. This young tree is escorting me."

They went back to her shawl, which she opened and spread, making a place for him. She moved it back a little, for safety, so that it was under the boughs of one of the trees.

How quiet the land was, how beautiful the evening light, how sweet the air!

Now and then a petal from some finished blossom sifted down on Gabriella.

They were at such peace: their talk was interrupted by the long silences which are peace.

"Gabriella, you saved my life."

"It is not I who have power over life and death."

"It was your nursing."

"It was my prayers," murmured Gabriella.

"And you gave me the will to get well: that also was a great help: without you I should not have had that same will to live."

"It was a higher Will than yours or mine."

"And the doctor from town who stayed with me."

"And a Greater Physician who stayed also."

He made no reply for a while, but then asked, turning his face toward her uneasily:—

"Our different ways of looking at

things—will they never make any difference with you?"

"Some day there will be no difference."

"You will agree with me?" he exclaimed joyfully.

"You will agree with me."

"Do not expect that! Do not expect that I shall ever again believe in the old things."

"I expect you to believe in God, in the New Testament, in the Resurrection, in the answer to prayer."

"If I do not?"

"Then you will in the Life to come."

"But will this separate us?"

"You will need me all the more."

The light was fading: they could no longer see the green of the valley. A late bird fluttered into the boughs overhead and more petals came down.

"It is a nest," said David, softly, "a good thing to go home to, a night like this."

"And now," he continued, "there are matters about which I must consult you."

You will be glad to know that things are pleasanter at home. Since my illness my father and mother have changed toward me. Sickness, nearness to death, is a great reconciler. Your being in the house had much to do with this—especially your influence over my mother. My father was talked to by the doctor from town. During the days and nights he stayed with me, he got into my trunk of books, for he is a great reader; and—as he told me before leaving—a believer in the New Science, an evolutionist. He knew of my expulsion, of course, and of the reasons. I think he explained a great deal to my father, who said to me one day simply that the doctor had talked to him.”

“He talked to me, also,” said Gabriella.

“And did not persuade you?”

“He said I almost persuaded him!”

“And then, too, my father and I have arranged the money trouble. It is not the best, but the best possible. When I came home from college, I brought with me almost half the money I had accumulated.

I turned this over to my father, of course. It will go toward making necessary repairs. But it was not enough, and the woods has had to go. The farm shall not be sold, but the woods is rented for a term of years as hemp land, the trees must be deadened and cut down. I am sorry; it is the last of the forest of my great-grandfather. But with the proceeds, the place can be put into fairly good condition, and this is the greatest relief to my father and mother—and to me.”

“It is a good arrangement.”

After a pause, he continued in a changed tone:—

“And now while everything is pleasant at home, it is the time for me to go away. My father was right: this is no place for me. I must be where people think as I do—must live where I shall not be alone. There will soon be plenty of companions everywhere. The whole world will believe in Evolution before I am an old man.”

“I think you are right,” she said quietly.

“It is best for you to go and to go at once.”

When he spoke again, plainly he was inspired with fresh confidence by her support of his plans.

"And now, Gabriella, I must tell you what I have determined to do in life: I want your approval of that, and then I am perfectly happy."

"Ah," she said quickly, "that is what I have been wanting to know. It is very important. Your whole future depends on a wise choice."

"I am going to some college — to some northern university, as soon as possible. I shall have to work my way through, sometimes by teaching, in whatever way I can. I want to study physical science. I want to teach some branch of it. It draws me, draws all that is in me. That is to be my life-work. And now?"

He waited for her answer: it did not come at once.

"You have chosen wisely. I am so glad!"

"Oh, Gabriella!" he cried, "if you had failed me in that, I do not know what

I should have done! Science! Science! There is the fresh path for the faith of the race! For the race henceforth must get its idea of God, and build its religion to Him, from its knowledge of the laws of His universe. A million years from now! Where will our dark theological dogmas be in that radiant time? The Creator of all life, in all life He must be studied! And in the study of science there is least wrangling, least tyranny, least bigotry, no persecution. It teaches charity, it teaches a well-ordered life, it teaches the world to be more kind. It is the great new path of knowledge into the future. All things must follow whither it leads. Our religion will more and more be what our science is, and some day they will be the same."

She had no controversy to raise with him about this. She was too intently thinking of troublous problems nearer heart and home.

And these rose before him also: he fell into silence.

"But, oh, Gabriella! how long, how long

the years will be that separate me from you!"

"No!" she exclaimed, her whole nature starting up, terrified. "What do you mean? No!"

"I mean while I am going through college; while I am preparing a place for you."

"Preparing a place *for me!* You have prepared a place for me and I have taken it. My place is with you."

"Gabriella, do you know I have not a dollar in the world?"

"I have!"

"But —"

"Ah, don't! don't! That would be the first time you had ever wounded me!"

"How can I —"

"How can you go away and leave me here — here — anywhere — alone — struggling in the world alone? And you somewhere else alone? Lose those years of being together? Can you even bear the thought of it? Ah, I did not think this!"

"It was only because —"

"But it shall never be! I will not be separated from you!"

David remembered a middle-aged man at the University, working his way through college with his wife beside him. His heart melted in joy and tenderness — before the possibility of life with her so near. He could not speak.

"I will never be separated from you!"

And then, feeling her victory won, she added joyously: "And what I have shall never be separated from me! We three — I, thou, it — go together. My two years' salary — do you think I love it so little as to leave it behind when I go away with you?"

"Oh, Gabriella!" —

The domes of the trees were white with blossoms now and with moonlight. How warm and sweet the air! How sacred the words and the silences! Two children of vast and distant revolutions guided together into one life — a young pair facing toward a future of wider, better things for mankind.

"Gabriella, when a man has heard the great things calling to him, how they call and call, day and night, day and night!"

"When a woman hears them once, it is enough."

Even in this hour Gabriella was receiving the wound which is so often the pathos and the happiness of a woman's love. For even in these moments he could not forget Truth for her. And so, she said to herself with a hidden tear, it would be always. She would give him her all, she could never be all to him. Her life would be enfolded completely in his; but he would hold out his arms also toward a cold Spirit who would forever elude him — Wisdom.

The golden crescent dropped behind the dark green hills of the silent land. Where were they? Gone? or still under the trees?

"Ah, Gabriella, it is love that makes a man believe in a God of Love!"

"David! David!" —

The south wind, warm with the first thrill of summer, blew from across the

valley, from across the mighty rushing sea of the young hemp.

O Mystery Immortal! which is in the hemp and in our souls, in its bloom and in our passions; by which our poor brief lives are led upward out of the earth for a season, then cut down, rotted and broken — for Thy long service!

THE END