Mercy Philbrick's Choice eBook

Mercy Philbrick's Choice by Helen Hunt Jackson

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But unto him who finds men's souls astray
In night that they know not is night at all,
Walking, with reckless feet, where they may fall
Each moment into deadlier deaths than slay
The flesh,—to him whose truth can rend away
From such lost souls their moral night's black pall,—
Oh, unto him what words can hearts recall
Which their deep gratitude finds fit to say?
No words but these,—and these to him are best:—
That, henceforth, like a quenchless vestal flame,
His words of truth shall burn on Truth's pure shrine;
His memory be truth worshipped and confessed;
Our gratitude and love, the priestess line,
Who serve before Truth's altar, in his name.

Mercy Philbrick's Choice.

Chapter I.

It was late in the afternoon of a November day. The sky had worn all day that pale leaden gray color, which is depressing even to the least sensitive of souls. Now, at sunset, a dull red tint was slowly stealing over the west; but the gray cloud was too thick for the sun to pierce, and the struggle of the crimson color with the unyielding sky only made the heavens look more stern and pitiless than before.

Stephen White stood with his arms folded, leaning on the gate which shut off, but seemed in no wise to separate, the front yard of the house in which he lived from the public highway. There is something always pathetic in the attempt to enforce the idea of seclusion and privacy, by building a fence around houses only ten or twelve feet away from the public road, and only forty or fifty feet from each other. Rows of picketed palings and gates with latches and locks seem superfluous, when the passer-by can look, if he likes, into the very centre of your sitting-room, and your neighbors on the right hand and on the left can overhear every word you say on a summer night, where windows are open.

One cannot walk through the streets of a New England village, without being impressed by a sense of this futile semblance of barrier, this touching effort at withdrawal and reticence. Often we see the tacit recognition of its uselessness in an old gate shoved back to its farthest, and left standing so till the very grass roots have embanked themselves on each side of it, and it can never again be closed without digging away

the sods in which it is wedged. The gate on which Stephen White was leaning had stood open in that way for years before Stephen rented the house; had stood open, in fact, ever since old Billy Jacobs, the owner of the house, had been carried out of it dead, in a coffin so wide that at first the bearers had thought it could not pass through the gate; but by huddling close, three at the head and three at the feet, they managed to tug the heavy old man through without taking down the palings. This was so long ago that now there was nobody left who

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remembered Billy Jacobs distinctly, except his widow, who lived in a poor little house on the outskirts of the town, her only income being that derived from the renting of the large house, in which she had once lived in comfort with her husband and son. The house was a double house; and for a few years Billy Jacobs's twin brother, a sea captain, had lived in the other half of it. But Mrs. Billy could not abide Mrs. John, and so with a big heart wrench the two brothers, who loved each other as only twin children can love, had separated. Captain John took his wife and went to sea again. The ship was never heard of, and to the day of Billy Jacobs's death he never forgave his wife. In his heart he looked upon her as his brother's murderer. Very much like the perpetual presence of a ghost under her roof it must have been to the woman also, the unbroken silence of those untenanted rooms, and that never opened door on the left side of her hall, which she must pass whenever she went in or out of her house. There were those who said that she was never seen to look towards that door; and that whenever a noise, as of a rat in the wall, or a blind creaking in the wind, came from that side of the house, Mrs. Billy turned white, and shuddered. Well she might. It is a fearful thing to have lying on one's heart in this life the consciousness that one has been ever so innocently the occasion, if not the cause, of a fellow-creature's turning aside into the path which was destined to take him to his death.

The very next day after Billy Jacobs's funeral, his widow left the house. She sold all the furniture, except what was absolutely necessary for a very meagre outfitting of the little cottage into which she moved. The miserly habit of her husband seemed to have suddenly fallen on her like a mantle. Her life shrank and dwindled in every possible way; she almost starved herself and her boy, although the rent of her old homestead was quite enough to make them comfortable. In a few years, to complete the poor woman's misery, her son ran away and went to sea. The sea-farer's stories which his Uncle John had told him, when he was a little child, had never left his mind; and the drearier his mother made life for him on land, the more longingly he dwelt on his fancies of life at sea, till at last, when he was only fifteen, he disappeared one day, leaving a note, not for his mother, but for his Sunday-school teacher,—the only human being he loved. This young woman carried the note to Mrs. Jacobs. She read it, made no comment, and handed it back. Her visitor was chilled and terrified by her manner.

"Can I do any thing for you, Mrs. Jacobs?" she said. "I do assure you I sympathize with you most deeply. I think the boy will soon come back. He will find the sea life very different from what he has dreamed."

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“No, you can do nothing for me,” replied Mrs. Jacobs, in a voice as unmoved as her face. “He will never come back. He will be drowned.” And from that day no one ever heard her mention her son. It was believed, however, that she had news from him, and that she sent him money; for, although the rents of her house were paid to her regularly, she grew if possible more and more penurious every year, allowing herself barely enough food to support life, and wearing such tattered and patched clothes that she was almost an object of terror to children when they met her in lonely fields and woods, bending down to the ground and searching for herbs like an old witch. At one time, also, she went in great haste to a lawyer in the village, and with his assistance raised three thousand dollars on a mortgage on her house, mortgaging it very nearly to its full value. In vain he represented to her that, in case the house should chance to stand empty for a year, she would have no money to pay the interest on her mortgage, and would lose the property. She either could not understand, or did not care for what he said. The house always had brought her in about so many dollars a year; she believed it always would; at any rate, she wanted this money. And so it came to pass that the mortgage on the old Jacobs house had come into Stephen White’s hands, and he was now living in one half of it, his own tenant and landlord at once, as he often laughingly said.

These old rumors and sayings about the Jacobs’s family history were running in Stephen’s head this evening, as he stood listlessly leaning on the gate, and looking down at the unsightly spot of bare earth still left where the gate had so long stood pressed back against the fence.

“I wonder how long it’ll take to get that old rut smooth and green like the rest of the yard,” he thought. Stephen White absolutely hated ugliness. It did not merely irritate and depress him, as it does everybody of fine fastidiousness: he hated not only the sight of it, he hated it with a sort of unreasoning vindictiveness. If it were a picture, he wanted to burn the picture, cut it, tear it, trample it under foot, get it off the face of the earth immediately, at any cost or risk. It had no business to exist: if nobody else would make way with it, he must. He often saw places that he would have liked to devastate, to blot out of existence if he could, just because they were barren and unsightly. Once, when he was a very little child, he suddenly seized a book of his father’s,—an old, shabby, worn dictionary,—and flung it into the fire with uncontrollable passion; and, on being asked why he did it, had nothing to say in justification of his act, except this extraordinary statement: “It was an ugly book; it hurt me. Ugly books ought to go in the fire.” What the child suffered, and, still more, what the man suffered from this hatred of ugliness, no words could portray. Ever since he could remember, he had been unhappy

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from the lack of the beautiful in the surroundings of his daily life. His father had been poor; his mother had been an invalid; and neither father nor mother had a trace of the artistic temperament. From what long-forgotten ancestor in his plain, hard-working family had come Stephen's passionate love of beauty, nobody knew. It was the despair of his father, the torment of his mother. From childhood to boyhood, from boyhood to manhood, he had felt himself needlessly hurt and perversely misunderstood on this one point. But it had not soured him: it had only saddened him, and made him reticent. In his own quiet way, he went slowly on, adding each year some new touch of simple adornment to their home. Every dollar he could spare out of his earnings went into something for the eye to feast on; and, in spite of the old people's perpetual grumbling and perpetual antagonism, it came about that they grew to be, in a surly fashion, proud of Stephen's having made their home unlike the homes of their neighbors.

"That's Stephen's last notion. He's never satisfied without he's sticking up suthin' new or different," they would say, as they called attention to some new picture or shelf or improvement in the house. "It's all tom-foolery. Things was well enough before." But in their hearts they were secretly a little elate, as in latter years they had come to know, by books and papers which Stephen forced them to hear or to read, that he was really in sympathy with well-known writers in this matter of the adornment of homes, the love of beautiful things even in every-day life.

A little more than a year before the time at which our story begins, Stephen's father had died. On an investigation of his affairs, it was found that after the settling of the estate very little would remain for Stephen and his mother. The mortgage on the old Jacobs house was the greater part of their property. Very reluctantly Stephen decided that their wisest—in fact, their only—course was to move into this house to live. Many and many a time he had walked past the old house, and thought, as he looked at it, what a bare, staring, hopeless, joyless-looking old house it was. It had originally been a small, square house. The addition which Billy Jacobs had made to it was oblong, running out to the south, and projecting on the front a few feet beyond the other part. This obtrusive jog was certainly very ugly; and it was impossible to conceive of any reason for it. Very possibly, it was only a carpenter's blunder; for Billy Jacobs was, no doubt, his own architect, and left all details of the work to the builders. Be that as it may, the little, clumsy, meaningless jog ruined the house,—gave it an uncomfortably awry look, like a dining-table awkwardly pieced out for an emergency by another table a little too narrow.

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The house had been for several years occupied by families of mill operatives, and had gradually acquired that indefinable, but unmistakable tenement-house look, which not even neatness and good repair can wholly banish from a house. The orchard behind the house had so run down for want of care that it looked more like a tangle of wild trees than like any thing which had ever been an orchard. Yet the Roxbury Russets and Baldwins of that orchard had once been Billy Jacobs's great pride, the one point of hospitality which his miserliness never conquered. Long after it would have broken his heart to set out a generous dinner for a neighbor, he would feast him on choice apples, and send him away with a big basket full in his hands. Now every passing school-boy helped himself to the wan, withered, and scanty fruit; and nobody had thought it worth while to mend the dilapidated fences which might have helped to shut them out.

Even Mrs. White, with all her indifference to externals, rebelled at first at the idea of going to live in the old Jacobs house.

"I'll never go there, Stephen," she said petulantly. "I'm not going to live in half a house with the mill people; and it's no better than a barn, the hideous, old, faded, yellow thing!"

If it crossed Stephen's mind that there was a touch of late retribution in his mother's having come at last to a sense of suffering because she must live in an unsightly house, he did not betray it.

He replied very gently. He was never heard to speak other than gently to his mother, though to every one else his manner was sometimes brusque and dictatorial.

"But, mother, I think we must. It is the only way that we can be sure of the rent. And, if we live ourselves in one half of it, we shall find it much easier to get good tenants for the other part. I promise you none of the mill people shall ever live there again. Please do not make it hard for me, mother. We must do it."

When Stephen said "must," his mother never gainsaid him. He was only twenty-five, but his will was stronger than hers,—as much stronger as his temper was better. Persons judging hastily, by her violent assertions and vehement statements of her determination, as contrasted with Stephen's gentle, slow, almost hesitating utterance of his opinions or intentions, might have assumed that she would always conquer; but it was not so. In all little things, Stephen was her slave, because she was a suffering invalid and his mother. But, in all important decisions, he was the master; and she recognized it, and leaned upon it in a way which was almost ludicrous in its alternation with her petulance and perpetual dictating to him in trifles.

And so they went to live in the old Jacobs house. They took the northern half of it, the part in which the sea captain and his wife had lived. This half of the house was not so pleasant as the other, had less sun, and had no door upon the street; but it was smaller and better suited to their needs, and moreover, Stephen said to his mother,—

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“We must live in the half we should find it hardest to rent to a desirable tenant.”

For the first six months after they moved in, the “wing,” as Mrs. White persisted in calling it, though it was larger by two rooms than the part she occupied herself, stood empty. There would have been plenty of applicants for it, but it had been noised in the town that the Whites had given out that none but people as good as they were themselves would be allowed to rent the house. This made a mighty stir among the mill operatives and the trades-people, and Stephen got many a sour look and short answer, whose real source he never suspected.

“Ahem! there he goes with his head in the clouds, damn him!” muttered Barker the grocer, one day, as Stephen in a more than ordinarily absent-minded fit had passed Mr. Barker’s door without observing that Mr. Barker stood in it, ready to bow and smile to the whole world. Mr. Barker’s sister had just married an overseer in the mill; and they had been very anxious to set up housekeeping in the Jacobs house, but had been prevented from applying for it by hearing of Mrs. White’s determination to have no mill people under the same roof with herself.

“Mill people, indeed!” exclaimed Jane Barker, when her lover told her, in no very guarded terms, the reason they could not have the house on which she had set her heart.

“Mill people, indeed! I’d like to know if they’re not every whit’s good’s an old shark of a lawyer like Hugh White was! I’ll be bound, if poor old granny Jacobs hadn’t lost what little wit she ever had, it ’ud be very soon seen whether Madam White’s got the right to say who’s to come and who’s to go in that house. It’s a nasty old yaller shell anyhow, not to say nothin’ o’ it’s bein’ haunted, ’s like ’s not. But there ain’t no other place so handy to the mill for us, an’ I guess our money’s good ez any lawyer’s money, o’ the hull on ’em any day. Mill people, indeed! I’ll jest give Steve White a piece o’ my mind, the first time I see him on the street.”

Jane and her lover were sitting on the tops of two barrels just outside the grocery door, when this conversation took place. Just as the last words had left her lips, she looked up and saw Stephen approaching at a very rapid pace. The unusual sight of two people perched on barrels on the sidewalk roused Stephen from the deep reverie in which he habitually walked. Lifting his hat as courteously as if he were addressing the most distinguished of women, he bowed, and said smiling, “How do you do, Miss Jane?” and “Good-morning, Mr. Lovejoy,” and passed on; but not before Jane Barker had had time to say in her gentlest tones, “Very well, thank you, Mr. Stephen,” while an ugly sneer spread over the face of Reuben Lovejoy.

“Woman all over!” he muttered. “Never saw one on ye yet thet wasn’t caught by a bow from a palaverin’ fool.”

Jane laughed nervously. She herself felt ashamed of having so soon given the lie to her own words of bravado; but she was woman enough not to admit her mortification.

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“I know he’s a palaverin’ fool’s well’s you do; but I reckon I’ve got some manners o’ my own, ’s well’s he. When a man bids me a pleasant good-mornin’, I ain’t a-goin’ to take that time to fly out at him, however much I’ve got agin him.”

And Reuben was silenced. The under-current of ill-feeling against Stephen and his mother went steadily on increasing. There is a wonderful force in these slow under-currents of feeling, in small communities, for or against individuals. After they have once become a steady tide, nothing can check their force or turn their direction. Sometimes they can be traced back to their spring, as a stream can: one lucky or unlucky word or deed, years ago, made a friend or an enemy of one person, and that person’s influence has divided itself again and again, as brooks part off and divide into countless rivulets, and water whole districts. But generally one finds it impossible to trace the like or dislike to its beginning. A stranger, asking the reason of it, is answered in an off-hand way,—“Oh, everybody’ll tell you the same thing. There isn’t a soul in the town but hates him;” or, “Well, he’s just the most popular man in the town. You’ll never hear a word said against him,—never; not if you were to settle right down here, and live.”

It was months before Stephen realized that there was slowly forming in the town a dislike to him. He was slow in discovering it, because he had always lived alone; had no intimate friends, not even when he was a boy. His love of books and his passionate love of beauty combined with his poverty to hedge him about more effectually than miles of desert could have done. His father and mother had lived upon fairly good terms with all their neighbors, but had formed no very close bonds with any. In the ordinary New England town, neighborhood never means much: there is a dismal lack of cohesion to the relations between people. The community is loosely held together by a few accidental points of contact or common interest. The individuality of individuals is, by a strange sort of paradox, at once respected and ignored. This is indifference rather than consideration, selfishness rather than generosity; it is an unsuspected root of much of our national failure, is responsible for much of our national disgrace. Some day there will come a time when it will have crystallized into a national apathy, which will perhaps cure itself, or have to be cured, as indurations in the body are, by sharp crises or by surgical operations. In the mean time, our people are living, on the whole, the dullest lives that are lived in the world, by the so-called civilized; and the climax of this dulness of life is to be found in just such a small New England town as Penfield, the one of which we are now speaking.

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When it gradually became clear to Stephen that he and his mother were unpopular people, his first feeling was one of resentment, his second of calm acquiescence: acquiescence, first, because he recognized in a measure the justice of it,—they really did not care for their neighbors; why should their neighbors care for them? secondly, a diminished familiarity of intercourse would have to him great compensations. There were few people in the town, whose clothes, whose speech, whose behavior, did not jar upon his nerves. On the whole, he would be better content alone; and if his mother could only have a little more independence of nature, more resource within herself, “The less we see of them, the better,” said Stephen, proudly.

He had yet to learn the lesson which, sooner or later, the proudest, most scornful, most self-centred of human souls must learn, or must die of loneliness for the want of learning, that humanity is one and indivisible; and the man who shuts himself apart from his fellows, above all, the man who thus shuts himself apart because he thinks of his fellows with pitying condescension as his inferiors, is a fool and a blasphemer,—a fool, because he robs himself of that good-fellowship which is the leaven of life; a blasphemer, because he virtually implies that God made men unfit for him to associate with. Stephen White had this lesson yet to learn.

The practical inconvenience of being unpopular, however, he began to feel keenly, as month after month passed by, and nobody would rent the other half of the house in which he and his mother lived. Small as the rent was, it was a matter of great moment to them; for his earnings as clerk and copyist were barely enough to give them food. He was still retained by his father’s partner in the same position which he had held during his father’s life. But old Mr. Williams was not wholly free from the general prejudice against Stephen, as an aristocratic fellow, given to dreams and fancies; and Stephen knew very well that he held the position only as it were on a sort of sufferance, because Mr. Williams had loved his father. Moreover, law business in Penfield was growing duller and duller. A younger firm in the county town, only twelve miles away, was robbing them of clients continually; and there were many long days during which Stephen sat idle at his desk, looking out in a vague, dreamy way on the street below, and wondering if the time were really coming when Mr. Williams would need a clerk no longer; and, if it did come, what he could possibly find to do in that town, by which he could earn money enough to support his mother. At such times, he thought uneasily of the possibility of foreclosing the mortgage on the old Jacobs house, selling the house, and reinvesting the money in a more advantageous way. He always tried to put the thought away from him as a dishonorable one; but it had a fatal persistency. He could not banish it.

“Poor, half-witted old woman! she might a great deal better be in the poor-house.”

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“There is no reason why we should lose our interest, for the sake of keeping her along.”

“The mortgage was for too large a sum. I doubt if the old house could sell to-day for enough to clear it, anyhow.” These were some of the suggestions which the devil kept whispering into Stephen’s ear, in these long hours of perplexity and misgiving. It was a question of casuistry which might, perhaps, have puzzled a finer moral sense than Stephen’s. Why should he treat old Mrs. Jacobs with any more consideration than he would show to a man under the same circumstances? To be sure, she was a helpless old woman; but so was his own mother, and surely his first duty was to make her as comfortable as possible.

Luckily for old Mrs. Jacobs, a tenant appeared for the “south wing.” A friend of Stephen’s, a young clergyman living in a seaport town on Cape Cod, had written to him, asking about the house, which he knew Stephen was anxious to rent. He made these inquiries on behalf of two women, parishioners of his, who were obliged to move to some inland town on account of the elder woman’s failing health. They were mother and daughter, but both widows. The younger woman’s marriage had been a tragically sad one, her husband having died suddenly, only a few days after their marriage. She had returned at once to her mother’s house, widowed at eighteen; “heart-broken,” the young clergyman wrote, “but the most cheerful person in this town,—the most cheerful person I ever knew; her smile is the sunniest and most pathetic thing I ever saw.”

Stephen welcomed most gladly the prospect of such tenants as these. The negotiations were soon concluded; and at the time of the beginning of our story the two women were daily expected.

A strange feverishness of desire to have them arrive possessed Stephen’s mind. He longed for it, and yet he dreaded it. He liked the stillness of the house; he felt a sense of ownership of the whole of it: both of these satisfactions were to be interfered with now. But he had a singular consciousness that some new element was coming into his life. He did not define this; he hardly recognized it in its full extent; but if a bystander could have looked into his mind, following the course of his reverie distinctly, as an unbiassed outsider might, he would have said, “Stephen, man, what is this? What are these two women to you, that your imagination is taking these wild and superfluous leaps into their history?”

There was hardly a possible speculation as to their past history, as to their looks, as to their future life under his roof, that Stephen did not indulge in, as he stood leaning with his folded arms on the gate, in the gray November twilight, where we first found him. His thoughts, as was natural, centred most around the younger woman.

“Poor thing! That was a mighty hard fate. Only nineteen years old now,—six years younger than I am; and how much more she must know of life than I do. I suppose she

can’t be a lady, exactly,—being a sea captain’s wife. I wonder if she’s pretty? I think Harley might have told me more about her. He might know I’d be very curious.

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“I wonder if mother’ll take to them? If she does, it will be a great comfort to her. She ’s so alone.” And Stephen’s face clouded, as he reflected how very seldom the monotony of the invalid’s life was broken now by a friendly visit from a neighbor.

“If they should turn out really social, neighborly people that we liked, we might move away the old side-board from before the hall door, and go in and out that way, as the Jacobses used to. It would be unlucky though, I reckon, to use that door. I guess I’ll plaster it up some day.” Like all people of deep sentiment, Stephen had in his nature a vein of something which bordered on superstition.

The twilight deepened into darkness, and a cold mist began to fall in slow, drizzling drops. Still Stephen stood, absorbed in his reverie, and unmindful of the chill.

The hall door opened, and an old woman peered out. She held a lamp in one hand; the blast of cold air made the flame flicker and flare, and, as she put up one hand to shade it, the light was thrown sharply across her features, making them stand out like the distorted features of a hideous mask.

“Steve! Steve!” she called, in a shrill voice. “Supper’s been waitin’ more ‘n half an hour. Lor’s sake, what’s the boy thinkin’ on now, I wonder?” she muttered in an impatient lower tone, as Stephen turned his head slowly.

“Yes, yes, Marty. Tell my mother I will be there in a moment,” replied Stephen, as he walked slowly toward the house; even then noting, with the keen and relentless glance of a beauty-worshipper, how grotesquely ugly the old woman’s wrinkled face became, lighted up by the intense cross-light. Old Marty’s face had never looked other than lovingly into Stephen’s since he first lay in her arms, twenty-five years ago, when she came, a smooth-cheeked, rosy country-woman of twenty-five, to nurse his mother at the time of his birth. She had never left the home since. With a faithfulness and devotion only to be accounted for by the existence of rare springs of each in her own nature, surely not by any uncommon lovableness in either Mr. or Mrs. White, or by any especial comforts in her situation, she had stayed on a quarter of a century, in the hard position of woman of all work in a poor family. She worshipped Stephen, and, as I said, her face had never once looked other than lovingly into his; but he could not remember the time when he had not thought her hideous. She had a big brown mole on her chin, out of which grew a few bristling hairs. It was an unsightly thing, no doubt, on a woman’s chin; and sometimes, when Marty was very angry, the hairs did actually seem to bristle, as a cat’s whiskers do. When Stephen could not speak plain, he used to point his little dimpled finger at this mole and say, “Do doe away,—doe away;” and to this day it was a torment to him. His eyes seemed morbidly drawn toward it at times.. When he was ill, and poor Marty bent over his bed, ministering to him as no one but a loving old nurse can, he saw only the mole, and had to make an effort not to shrink from her. To-night, as she lingered on the threshold, affectionately waiting to light his path, he was thinking

only of her ugliness. But when she exclaimed, with the privileged irritability of an old servant,—

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“Jest look at your feet, Steve! they’re wet through, an’ your coat too, a standin’ out in that drizzle. Anybody ’ud think you hadn’t common sense,” he replied with perfect good nature, and as heartily loving a tone as if he had been feasting on her beauty, instead of writhing inwardly at her ugliness,—

“All right, Marty,—all right. I’m not so wet as I look. I’ll change my coat, and come in to supper in one minute. Don’t you fidget about me so, good Marty.” Never was Stephen heard to speak discourteously or even ungently to a human being. It would have offended his taste. It was not a matter of principle with him,—not at all: he hardly ever thought of things in that light. A rude or harsh word, a loud, angry tone, jarred on his every sense like a discord in music, or an inharmonious color; so he never used them. But as he ran upstairs, three steps at a time, after his kind, off-hand words to Marty, he said to himself, “Good heavens! I do believe Marty gets uglier every day. What a picture Rembrandt would have made of her old face peering out into the darkness there to-night! She would have done for the witch of Endor, watching to see if Samuel were coming up.” And as he went down more slowly, revolving in his mind what plausible excuse he could give to his mother for his tardiness, he thought, “Well, I do hope she’ll be at least tolerably good-looking.”

Already the younger of the two women who were coming to live under his roof was “she,” in his thoughts.

Chapter II.

In the mean time, the young widow, Mercy Philbrick, and her old and almost childish mother, Mercy Carr, were coming by slow and tiring stage journeys up the dreary length of Cape Cod. For thirty years the elder woman had never gone out of sight of the village graveyard in which her husband and four children were buried. To transplant her was like transplanting an old weather-beaten tree, already dead at the top. Yet the physicians had said that the only chance of prolonging her life was to take her away from the fierce winds of the sea. She herself, while she loved them, shrank from them. They seemed to pierce her lungs like arrows of ice-cold steel, at once wounding and benumbing. Yet the habit and love of the seashore life were so strong upon her that she would never have been able to tear herself away from her old home, had it not been for her daughter’s determined will. Mercy Philbrick was a woman of slight frame, gentle, laughing, brown eyes, a pale skin, pale ash-brown hair, a small nose; a sweet and changeful mouth, the upper lip too short, the lower lip much too full; little hands, little feet, little wrists. Not one indication of great physical or great mental strength could you point out in Mercy Philbrick; but she was rarely ill; and she had never been known to give up a point, small or great, on which her will had been fully set. Even the cheerfulness of which her minister, Harley Allen, had written to Stephen, was very largely a matter of will with Mercy. She confronted grief as she would confront an antagonist force of any sort: it was something to be battled with, to be conquered. Fate

should not worst her: come what might, she would be the stronger of the two. When the doctor said to her,—

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“Mrs. Philbrick, I fear that your mother cannot live through another winter in this climate,” Mercy looked at him for a moment with an expression of terror. In an instant more, the expression had given place to one of resolute and searching inquiry.

“You think, then, that she might be well in a different climate?”

“Perhaps not well, but she might live for years in a dryer, milder air. There is as yet no actual disease in her lungs,” the doctor replied.

Mercy interrupted him.

“You think she might live in comparative comfort? It would not be merely prolonging her life as a suffering invalid?” she said; adding in an undertone, as if to herself, “I would not subject her to that.”

“Oh, yes, undoubtedly,” said the doctor. “She need never die of consumption at all, if she could breathe only inland air. She will never be strong again, but she may live years without any especial liability to suffering.”

“Then I will take her away immediately,” replied Mercy, in as confident and simple a manner as if she had been proposing only to move her from one room into another. It would not seem so easy a matter for two lonely women, in a little Cape Cod village, without a male relative to help them, and with only a few thousand dollars in the world, to sell their house, break up all their life-long associations, and go out into the world to find a new home. Associations crystallize around people in lonely and out of the way spots, where the days are all alike, and years follow years in an undeviating monotony. Perhaps the process might be more aptly called one of petrifaction. There are pieces of exquisite agate which were once soft wood. Ages ago, the bit of wood fell into a stream, where the water was largely impregnated with some chemical matter which had the power to eat out the fibre of the wood, and in each spot thus left empty to deposit itself in an exact image of the wood it had eaten away. Molecule by molecule, in a mystery too small for human eye to detect, even had a watchful human eye been lying in wait to observe, the marvellous process went on; until, after the lapse of nobody knows how many centuries, the wood was gone, and in its place lay its exact image in stone,—rings of growth, individual peculiarities of structure, knots, broken slivers and chips; color, shape, all perfect. Men call it agatized wood, by a feeble effort to translate the mystery of its existence; but it is not wood, except to the eye. To the touch, and in fact, it is stone,—hard, cold, unalterable, eternal stone. The slow wear of monotonous life in a set groove does very much such a thing as this to human beings. To the eye they retain the semblance of other beings; but try them by touch, that is by contact with people, with events outside their groove, and they are stone,—agatized men and women. Carry them where you please, after they have reached middle or old age, and they will not change. There is no magic water, a drop of which will restore to them the vitality and

pliability of their youth. They last well, such people,—as well, almost, as agatized wood on museum shelves; and the most you can do for them is to keep them well dusted.

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Old Mrs. Carr belonged, in a degree, to this order of persons. Only the coming of Mercy's young life into the feeble current of her own had saved it from entire stagnation. But she was already past middle age when Mercy was born; and the child with her wonderful joyousness, and the maiden with her wondrous cheer, came too late to undo what the years had done. The most they could do was to interrupt the process, to stay it at that point. The consequence was that Mrs. Carr at sixty-five was a placid sort of middle-aged old lady, very pleasant to talk with as you would talk with a child, very easy to take care of as you would take care of a child, but, for all purposes of practical management or efficient force, as helpless as a baby.

When Mercy told her what the doctor had said of her health, and that they must sell the house and move away before the winter set in, she literally opened her mouth too wide to speak for a minute, and then gasped out like a frightened child,—

"O Mercy, don't let's do it!"

As Mercy went on explaining to her the necessity of the change, and the arrangements she proposed to make, the poor old woman's face grew longer and longer; but, some time before Mercy had come to the end of her explanation, the childish soul had accepted the whole thing as fixed, had begun already to project itself in childish imaginations of detail; and to Mercy's infinite relief and half-sad amusement, when she ceased speaking, her mother's first words were, eagerly,—

"Well, Mercy, if we go 'n the stage, 'n' I s'pose we shall hev to, don't ye think my old brown merino'll do to wear?"

Fortune favored Mercy's desire to sell the house. Stephen's friend, the young minister, had said to himself many times, as he walked up to its door between the quaint, trim beds of old-fashioned pinks and ladies' delights and sweet-williams which bordered the little path, "This is the only house in this town I want to live in." As soon as he heard that it was for sale, he put on his hat, and fairly ran to buy it. Out of breath, he took Mercy's hands in his, and exclaimed,—

"O Mercy, do you really want to sell this house?"

Very unworldly were this young man and this young woman, in the matter of sale and purchase. Adepts in traffic would have laughed, had they overheard the conversation.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Allen, I do. I must sell it; and I am afraid I shall have to sell it for a great deal less than it is worth," replied Mercy.

"No, you sha'n't, Mercy! I'll buy it myself. I've always wanted it. But why in the world do you want to sell it? Where will you live yourself? There isn't another house in the village you'd like half so well. Is it too large for you?" continued Mr. Allen, hurriedly.

Then Mercy told him all her plans, and the sad necessity for her making the change. The young minister did not speak for some moments. He seemed lost in thought. Then he exclaimed,—

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“I do believe it’s a kind of Providence!” and drew a letter from his pocket, which he had only two days before received from Stephen White. “Mercy,” he went on, “I believe I’ve got the very thing you want right here;” and he read her the concluding paragraph of the letter, in which Stephen had said: “Meantime, I am waiting as patiently as I can for a tenant for the other half of this house. It seems to be very hard to find just the right sort of person. I cannot take in any of the mill operatives. They are noisy and untidy; and the bare thought of their being just the other side of the partition would drive my mother frantic. I wish so much I could get some people in that would be real friends for her. She is very lonely. She never leaves her bed; and I have to be away all day.”

Mercy’s face lighted up. She liked the sound of each word that this unknown man wrote. Very eagerly she questioned Mr. Allen about the town, its situation, its healthfulness, and so forth. As he gave her detail after detail, she nodded her head with increasing emphasis, and finally exclaimed: “That is precisely such a spot as Dr. Wheeler said we ought to go to. I think you’re right, Mr. Allen. It’s a Providence. And I’d be so glad to be good to that poor old woman, too. What a companion she’d be for mother! that is, if I could keep them from comparing notes for ever about their diseases. That’s the worst of putting invalid old women together,” laughed Mercy with a kindly, merry little laugh.

Mr. Allen had visited Penfield only once. When he and Stephen were boys at school together, he had passed one of the short vacations at Stephen’s house. He remembered very little of Stephen’s father and mother, or of their way of life. He was at the age when house and home mean little to boys, except a spot where shelter and food are obtained in the enforced intervals between their hours of out-door life. But he had never forgotten the grand out-look and off-look from the town. Lying itself high up on the western slope of what must once have been a great river terrace, it commanded a view of a wide and fertile meadow country, near enough to be a most beautiful feature in the landscape, but far enough away to prevent any danger from its moisture. To the south and south-west rose a fine range of mountains, bold and sharp-cut, though they were not very high, and were heavily wooded to their summits. The westernmost peak of this range was separated from the rest by a wide river, which had cut its way through in some of those forgotten ages when, if we are to believe the geologists, every thing was topsy-turvy on this now meek and well-regulated planet.

The town, although, as I said, it lay on the western slope of a great river terrace, held in its site three distinctly marked plateaus. From the two highest of these, the views were grand. It was like living on a mountain, and yet there was the rich beauty of coloring of the river interval. Nowhere in all New England was there a fairer country than this to look upon, nor a goodlier one in which to live.

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Mr. Allen's enthusiasm in describing the beauties of the place, and Mercy's enthusiasm in listening, were fast driving out of their minds the thought of the sale, which had been mentioned in the beginning of their conversation. Mercy was the first to recall it. She blushed and hesitated, as she said,—

"But, Mr. Allen, we can't go, you know, until I have sold this house. Did you really want to buy it? And how much do you think I ought to ask for it?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" exclaimed the young minister. "Dear me, what children we are! Mercy, I don't honestly know what you ought to ask for the house. I'll find out."

"Deacon Jones said he thought, taking in the cranberry meadow, it was worth three thousand dollars," said Mercy; "but that seems a great deal to me: though not in a good cranberry year, perhaps," added she, ingenuously, "for last year the cranberries brought us in seventy-five dollars, besides paying for the picking."

"And the meadow ought to go with the house, by all means," said Mr. Allen. "I want it for color in the background, when I look at the house as I come down from the meeting-house hill. I wouldn't like to have anybody else own the canvas on which the picture of my home will be oftenest painted for my eyes. I'll give you three thousand dollars for the house, Mercy. I can only pay two thousand down, and pay you interest on the other thousand for a year or two. I'll soon clear it off. Will that do?"

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. Allen. It will more than do," said poor Mercy, who could not believe in such sudden good fortune; "but do you think you ought to buy it so quick? Perhaps it wouldn't bring so much money as that. I had not asked anybody except Deacon Jones."

Mr. Allen laughed. "If you don't look out for yourself sharper than this, Mercy," he said, "in the new place 'where you're going to live, you'll fare badly. Perhaps it may be true, as you say, that nobody else would give you three thousand dollars for the house, because nobody might happen to want to live in it. But Deacon Jones knows better than anybody else the value of property here, and I am perfectly willing to give you the price he set on the place. I had laid by this two thousand dollars towards my house; and I could not build such a house as this, to-day, for three thousand dollars. But really, Mercy, you must look 'out for yourself better than this."

"I don't know," replied Mercy, looking out of the window, with an earnest gaze, as if she were reading a writing a great way off,—"I don't know about that. I doubt very much if looking out for one's self, as you call it, is the best way to provide for one's self."

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That very night Mr. Allen wrote to Stephen; in two weeks, the whole matter was settled, and Mercy and her mother had set out on their journey. They carried with them but one small valise. The rest of their simple wardrobe had gone in boxes, with the furniture, by sailing vessel, to a city which was within three hours by rail of their new home. This was the feature of the situation which poor Mrs. Carr could not accept. In the bottom of her heart, she fully believed that they would never again see one of those boxes. The contents of some which she had herself packed were of a most motley description. In the beginning of the breaking up, while Mercy was at her wits' end, with the unwonted perplexities of packing the whole belongings of a house, her mother had tormented her incessantly by bringing to her every few minutes some utterly incongruous and frequently worthless article, and begging her to put it in at once, whatever she might be packing. Any one who has ever packed for a long journey, with an eager and excited child running up every minute with more and more cumbrous toys, dogs, cats, Noah's arks, and so on, to be put in among books and under-clothing, can imagine Mercy's despair at her mother's restless activity.

"Oh, mother, not in this box! Not in with the china!" would groan poor Mercy, as her mother appeared with armfuls of ancient relics from the garret, such as old umbrellas, bonnets, bundles of old newspapers, broken spinning-wheels, andirons, and rolls of remains of old wall-paper, the last of which had disappeared from the walls of the house, long before Mercy was born. No old magpie was ever a more indiscriminate hoarder than Mrs. Carr had been; and, among all her hoardings, there was none more amusing than her hoarding of old wall-papers. A scrap a foot square seemed to her too precious to throw away. "It might be jest the right size to cover suthin' with," she would say; and, to do her justice, she did use in the course of a year a most unexampled amount of such fragments. She had a mania for papering and repapering and papering again every shelf, every box, every corner she could get hold of. The paste and brush were like toys to her; and she delighted in gay combinations, sticking on old bits of borders in fantastic ways, in most inappropriate situations.

"I do believe you'll paper the pigsty next, mother," said Mercy one day: "there's nothing left you can paper except that." Mrs. Carr took the suggestion in perfect good faith, and convulsed Mercy a few days later by entering the kitchen with the following extraordinary remark,—

"I don't believe it's worth while to paper the pigsty. I've been looking at it, and the boards they're so rough, the paper wouldn't lay smooth, anyhow; and I couldn't well get at the inside o' the roof, while the pig's in. It would look real neat, though. I'd like to do it."

Mercy endured her mother's help in packing for one day. Then the desperateness of the trouble suggested a remedy. Selecting a large, strong box, she had it carried into the garret.

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“There, mother,” she said, “now you can pack in this box all the old lumber of all sorts which you want to carry. And, if this box isn’t large enough, you shall have two more. Don’t tire yourself out: there’s plenty of time; and, if you don’t get it all packed by the time I am done, I can help you.”

Then Mercy went downstairs feeling half-guilty, as one does when one has practised a subterfuge on a child.

How many times that poor old woman packed and unpacked that box, nobody could dream. All day long she trotted up and down, up and down; ransacking closets, chests, barrels; sorting and resorting, and forgetting as fast as she sorted. Now and then she would come across something which would rouse an electric chain of memories in the dim chambers of her old, worn-out brain, and she would sit motionless for a long time on the garret floor, in a sort of trance. Once Mercy found her leaning back against a beam, with her knees covered by a piece of faded blue Canton crape, on which her eyes were fastened. She did not speak till Mercy touched her shoulder.

“Oh, my! how you scared me, child!” she exclaimed. “D’ye see this ere blue stuff? I hed a gown o’ thet once: it was drefful kind o’ clingy stuff. I never felt exzackly decent in it, somehow: it hung a good deal like a night-gownd; but your father he bought it for the color. He traded off some shells for it in some o’ them furrin places. You wouldn’t think it now, but it used to be jest the color o’ a robin’s egg or a light-blue ‘bachelor’s button;’ and your father he used to stick one o’ them in my belt whenever they was in blossom, when I hed the gownd on. He hed a heap o’ notions about things matchin’. He brought me that gownd the v’yage he made jest afore Caleb was born; and I never hed a chance to wear it much, the children come so fast. It warn’t re’ly worn at all, ‘n’ I hed it dyed black for veils arterwards.”

It was from this father who used to “stick” pale-blue flowers in his wife’s belt, and whose love of delicate fabrics and tints made him courageous enough to lead her draped in Canton crape into the unpainted Cape Cod meeting-house, where her fellow-women bristled in homespun, that Mercy inherited all the artistic side of her nature. She knew this instinctively, and all her tenderest sentiment centred around the vague memory she retained of a tall, dark-bearded man, who, when she was only three years old, lifted her in his arms, called her his “little Mercy,” and kissed her over and over again. She was most loyally affectionate to her mother, but the sentiment was not a wholly filial one. There was too much reversal of the natural order of the protector and the protected in it; and her life was on too different a plane of thought, feeling, and interest from the life of the uncultured, undeveloped, childish, old woman. Yet no one who saw them together would have detected any trace of this shortcoming in Mercy’s feeling towards her mother. She had in her nature

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a fine and lofty fibre of loyalty which could never condescend even to parley with a thought derogatory to its object; was lifted above all consciousness of the possibility of any other course. This is a sort of organic integrity of affection, which is to those who receive it a tower of strength, that is impregnable to all assault except that of death itself. It is a rare type of love, the best the world knows; but the men and the women whose hearts are capable of it are often thought not to be of a loving nature. The cheaper and less lasting types of love are so much louder of voice and readier of phrase, as in cloths cheap fabrics, poor to wear, are often found printed in gay colors and big patterns.

The day before they left home, Mercy, becoming alarmed by a longer interval than usual without any sound from the garret, where her mother was still at work over her fantastic collections of old odds and ends, ran up to see what it meant.

Mrs. Carr was on her knees before a barrel, which had held rags and papers. The rags and papers were spread around her on the floor. She had leaned her head on the barrel, and was crying bitterly.

“Mother! mother! what is the matter?” exclaimed Mercy, really alarmed; for she had very few times in her life seen her mother cry. Without speaking, Mrs. Carr held up a little piece of carved ivory. It was of a creamy yellow, and shone like satin: a long shred of frayed pink ribbon hung from it. As she held it up to Mercy, a sunbeam flashed in at the garret window, and fell across it, sending long glints of light to right and left.

“What a lovely bit of carving! What is it, mother? Why does it make you cry?” asked Mercy, stretching out her hand to take the ivory.

“It’s Caley’s whistle,” sobbed Mrs. Carr. “We allus thought Patience Swift must ha’ took it. She nussed me a spell when he was a little feller, an’ jest arter she went away we missed the whistle. Your father he brought that hum the same v’yage I told ye he brought the blue crape. He knowed I was a expectin’ to be sick, and he was drefful afraid he wouldn’t get hum in time; but he did. He jest come a sailin’ into th’ harbor, with every mite o’ sail the old brig ‘d carry, two days afore Caley was born. An’ the next mornin’,—oh, dear me! it don’t seem no longer ago ’n yesterday,—while he was a dressin’, an’ I lay lookin’ at him, he tossed that little thing over to me on the bed, ‘n’ sez he,—”

“T ’ll be a boy, Mercy, I know ‘twill; an’ here’s his bos’u’n’s whistle all ready for him,’ an’ that night he bought that very yard o’ pink rebbin, and tied it on himself, and laid it in the upper drawer into one o’ the little pink socks I’d got all ready. Oh, it don’t seem any longer ago ‘n yesterday! An’ sure enough it was a boy; an’ your father he allus used to

call him ‘Bos’u’n,’ and he’d stick this ere whistle into his mouth an’ try to make him blow it afore he was a month old. But by the time he was nine months old he’d

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blow it ez loud ez I could. And his father he'd just lay back 'n his chair, and laugh 'n' laugh, 'n' call out, 'Blow away, my hearty!' Oh, my! it don't seem any longer ago'n yesterday. I wish I'd ha' known. I wa'n't never friends with Patience any more arter that. I never misgave me but what she'd got the whistle. It was such a curious cut thing, and cost a heap o' money. Your father wouldn't never tell what he gin for 't. Oh, my! it don't seem any longer ago 'n yesterday," and the old woman wiped her eyes on her apron, and struggling up on her feet took the whistle again from Mercy's hands.

"How old would my brother Caley be now, if he had lived, mother?" said Mercy, anxious to bring her mother gently back to the present.

"Well, let me see, child. Why, Caley—Caley, he'd be—How old am I, Mercy? Dear me! hain't I lost my memory, sure enough, except about these ere old things? They seem's clear's daylight."

"Sixty-five last July, mother," said Mercy. "Don't you know I gave you your new specs then?"

"Oh, yes, child,—yes. Well, I'm sixty-five, be I? Then Caley,—Caley, he'd be, let me see—you reckon it, Mercy. I wuz goin' on nineteen when Caley was born."

"Why, mother," exclaimed Mercy, "is it really so long ago? Then my brother Caleb would be forty-six years old now!" and mercy took again in her hand the yellow ivory whistle, and ran her fingers over the faded and frayed pink ribbon, and looked at it with an indefinable sense of its being a strange link between her and a distant past, which, though she had never shared it, belonged to her by right. Hardly thinking what she did, she raised the whistle to her lips, and blew a loud, shrill whistle on it. Her mother started. "O Mercy, don't, don't!" she cried. "I can't bear to hear it."

"Now, mother, don't you be foolish," said Mercy, cheerily. "A whistle's a whistle, old or young, and made to be whistled with. We'll keep this to amuse children with: you carry it in your pocket. Perhaps we shall meet some children on the journey; and it'll be so nice for you to pop this out of your pocket, and give it to them to blow."

"So it will, Mercy, I declare. That 'ud be real nice. You're a master-piece for thinkin' o' things." And, easily diverted as a child, the old woman dropped the whistle into her deep pocket, and, forgetting all her tears, returned to her packing.

Not so Mercy. Having attained her end of cheering her mother, her own thoughts reverted again and again all day long, and many times in after years, whenever she saw the ivory whistle, to the strange picture of the lonely old woman in the garret coming upon her first-born child's first toy, lost for forty years; the picture, too, of the history of

the quaint piece of carving itself; the day it was slowly cut and chiselled by a patient and ill-paid toiler in some city of China; its voyage in the keeping of the ardent young husband hastening home to welcome his first child; its forty years of silence and darkness in the old garret; and then its return to life and light and sound, in the hands and lips of new generations of children.

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The journey which Mercy had so much dreaded was unexpectedly pleasant. Mrs. Carr proved an admirable traveller with the exception of her incessant and garrulous anxiety about the boxes which had been left behind on the deck of the schooner “Maria Jane,” and could not by any possibility overtake them for three weeks to come. She was, in fact, so much of a child that she was in a state of eager delight at every new scene and person. Her childishness proved the best of claims upon every one’s courtesy. Everybody was ready to help “that poor sweet old woman;” and she was so simply and touchingly grateful for the smallest kindness that everybody who had helped her once wanted to help her again. More than one of their fellow-travellers remembered for a long time the bright-faced young woman with her childish mother, and wondered where they could have been going, and what was to be their life.

On the fourth day, just as the sun was sinking behind the hills, they entered the beautiful river interval, through which the road to their new home lay. Mercy sat with her face almost pressed against the panes of the car-windows, eagerly scanning every feature of the landscape, to her so new and wonderful. To the dweller by the sea, the first sight of mountains is like the sight of a new heavens and a new earth. It is a revelation of a new life. Mercy felt strangely stirred and overawed. She looked around in astonishment at her fellow-passengers, not one of whom apparently observed that on either hand were stretching away to the east and the west fields that were, even in this late autumn, like carpets of gold and green. Through these fertile meadows ran a majestic river, curving and doubling as if loath to leave such fair shores. The wooded mountains changed fast from green to purple, from purple to dark gray; and almost before Mercy had comprehended the beauty of the region, it was lost from her sight, veiled in the twilight’s pale, indistinguishable tints. Her mother was fast asleep in her seat. The train stopped every few moments at some insignificant station, of which Mercy could see nothing but a narrow platform, a dim lantern, and a sleepy-looking station-master. Slowly, one or two at a time, the passengers disappeared, until she and her mother were left alone in the car. The conductor and the brakeman, as they passed through, looked at them with renewed interest: it was evident now that they were going through to the terminus of the road.

“Goin’ through, be ye?” said the conductor. “It’ll be dark when we get in; an’ it’s beginnin’ to rain. ‘S anybody comin’ to meet ye?”

“No,” said Mercy, uneasily. “Will there not be carriages at the depot? We are going to the hotel. I believe there is but one.”

“Well, there may be a kerridge down to-night, an’ there may not: there’s no knowin’. Ef it don’t rain too hard, I reckon Seth’ll be down.”

Mercy’s sense of humor never failed her. She laughed heartily, as she said,—

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“Then Seth stays away, does he, on the nights when he would be sure of passengers?”

The conductor laughed too, as he replied,——

“Well, ’tisn’t quite so bad’s that. Ye see this here road’s only a piece of a road. It’s goin’ up through to connect with the northern roads; but they ‘ve come to a stand-still for want o’ funds, an’ more ’n half the time I don’t carry nobody over this last ten miles. Most o’ the people from our town go the other way, on the river road. It’s shorter, an’ some cheaper. There isn’t much travellin’ done by our folks, anyhow. We’re a mighty dead an’ alive set up here. Goin’ to stay a spell?” he continued, with increasing interest, as he looked longer into Mercy’s face.

“Probably,” said Mercy, in a grave tone, suddenly recollecting that she ought not to talk with this man as if he were one of her own village people. The conductor, sensitive as are most New England people, spite of their apparent familiarity of address, to the least rebuff, felt the change in Mercy’s tone, and walked away, thinking half surlily, “She needn’t put on airs. A schoolma’am, I reckon. Wonder if it can be her that’s going to teach the Academy?”

When they reached the station, it was, as the conductor had said, very dark; and it was raining hard. For the first time, a sense of her unprotected loneliness fell upon Mercy’s heart. Her mother, but half-awake, clung nervously to her, asking purposeless and incoherent questions. The conductor, still surly from his fancied rebuff at Mercy’s hands, walked away, and took no notice of them. The station-master was nowhere to be seen. The two women stood huddling together under one umbrella, gazing blankly about them.

“Is this Mrs. Philbrick?” came in clear, firm tones, out of the darkness behind them; and, in a second more, Mercy had turned and looked up into Stephen White’s face.

“Oh, how good you were to come and meet us!” exclaimed Mercy. “You are Mr. Allen’s friend, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Stephen, curtly. “But I did not come to meet you. You must not thank me. I had business here. However, I made the one carriage which the town boasts, wait, in case you should be here. Here it is!” And, before Mercy had time to analyze or even to realize the vague sense of disappointment she felt at his words, she found herself and her mother placed in the carriage, and the door shut.

“Your trunks cannot go up until morning,” he said, speaking through the carriage window; “but, if you will give me your checks, I will see that they are sent.”

“We have only one small valise,” said Mercy: “that was under our seat. The brakeman said he would take it out for us; but he forgot it, and so did I.”

The train was already backing out of the station. Stephen smothered some very unchivalrous words on his lips, as he ran out into the rain, overtook the train, and swung himself on the last car, in search of the “one small valise” belonging to his tenants. It was a very shabby valise: it had made many a voyage with its first owner, Captain Carr. It was a very little valise: it could not have held one gown of any of the modern fashions.

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“Dear me,” thought Stephen, as he put it into the carriage at Mercy’s feet, “what sort of women are these I’ve taken under my roof! I expect they’ll be very unpleasing sights to my eyes. I did hope she’d be good-looking.” How many times in after years did Stephen recall with laughter his first impressions of Mercy Philbrick, and wonder how he could have argued so unhesitatingly that a woman who travelled with only one small valise could not be good-looking.

“Will you come to the house to-morrow?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” replied Mercy, “not for three or four weeks yet. Our furniture will not be here under that time.”

“Ah!” said Stephen, “I had not thought of that. I will call on you at the hotel, then, in a day or two.”

His adieus were civil, but only civil: that most depressing of all things to a sensitive nature, a kindly indifference, was manifest in every word he said, and in every tone of his voice.

Mercy felt it to the quick; but she was ashamed of herself for the feeling. “What business had I to expect that he was going to be our friend?” she said in her heart. “We are only tenants to him.”

“What a kind-spoken young man he is, to be sure, Mercy!” said Mrs. Carr.

So all-sufficient is bare kindliness of tone and speech to the unsensitive nature.

“Yes, mother, he was very kind,” said Mercy; “but I don’t think we shall ever know him very well.”

“Why, Mercy, why not?” exclaimed her mother. “I should say he was most uncommon friendly for a stranger, running back after our valise in the rain, and a goin’ to call on you to oncet.”

Mercy made no reply. The carriage rolled along over the rough and muddy road. It was too dark to see any thing except the shadowy black shapes of houses, outlined on a still deeper blackness by the light streaming from their windows. There is no sight in the world so hard for lonely, homeless people to see, as the sight of the lighted windows of houses after nightfall. Why houses should look so much more homelike, so much more suggestive of shelter and cheer and companionship and love, when the curtains are snug-drawn and the doors shut, and nobody can look in, though the lights of fires and lamps shine out, than they do in broad daylight, with open windows and people coming and going through open doors, and a general air of comradeship and busy living, it is hard to see. But there is not a lonely vagabond in the world who does not know that they do. One may see on a dark night many a wistful face of lonely man or lonely

woman, hurrying resolutely past, and looking away from, the illumined houses which mean nothing to them except the keen reminder of what they are without. Oh, the homeless people there are in this world! Did anybody ever think to count up the thousands there are in every great city, who live in lodgings and not in homes; from the luxurious lodger who lodges in the costliest rooms of the costliest hotel, down to the most poverty-stricken lodger who lodges in a corner of the poorest tenement-house? Homeless all of them; their common vagabondage is only a matter of degrees of decency. All honor to the bravery of those who are homeless because they must be, and who make the best of it. But only scorn and pity for those who are homeless because they choose to be, and are foolish enough to like it.

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Mercy had never before felt the sensation of being a homeless wanderer. She was utterly unprepared for it. All through the breaking up of their home and the preparations for their journey, she had been buoyed up by excitement and anticipation. Much as she had grieved to part from some of the friends of her early life, and to leave the old home in which she was born, there was still a certain sense of elation in the prospect of new scenes and new people. She had felt, without realizing it, a most unreasonable confidence that it was to be at once a change from one home to another home. In her native town, she had had a position of importance. Their house was the best house in the town; judged by the simple standards of a Cape Cod village, they were well-to-do. Everybody knew, and everybody spoke with respect and consideration, of "Old Mis' Carr," or, as she was perhaps more often called, "Widder Carr." Mercy had not thought —in her utter inexperience of change, it could not have occurred to her—what a very different thing it was to be simply unknown and poor people in a strange place. The sense of all this smote upon her suddenly and keenly, as they jolted along in the noisy old carriage on this dark, rainy night. Stephen White's indifferent though kindly manner first brought to her the thought, or rather the feeling, of this. Each new glimmer of the home-lights deepened her sense of desolation. Every gust of rain that beat on the carriage roof and windows made her feel more and more like an outcast. She never forgot these moments. She used to say that in them she had lived the whole life of the loneliest outcast that was ever born. Long years afterward, she wrote a poem, called "The Outcast," which was so intense in its feeling one could have easily believed that it was written by Ishmael. When she was asked once how and when she wrote this poem, she replied, "I did not write it: I lived it one night in entering a strange town." In vain she struggled against the strange and unexpected emotion. A nervous terror of arriving at the hotel oppressed her more and more; although, thanks to Harley Allen's thoughtfulness, she knew that their rooms were already engaged for them. She felt as if she would rather drive on and on, in all the darkness and rain, no matter where, all night long, rather than enter the door of the strange and public house, in which she must give her name and her mother's name on the threshold.

When the carriage stopped, she moved so slowly to alight that her mother exclaimed petulantly,—

"Dear me, child, what's the matter with you? Ain't you goin' to git out? Ain't this the tavern?"

"Yes, mother, this is our place," said Mercy, in a low voice, unlike her usual cheery, ringing tones, as she assisted her mother down the clumsy steps from the old-fashioned, high vehicle. "They're expecting us: it is all right." But her voice and face belied her words. She moved all through the rest of the evening like one in a dream. She said little, but busied herself in making her mother as comfortable as it was possible to be in the dingy and unattractive little rooms; and, as soon as the tired old woman had fallen asleep, Mercy sat down on the floor by the window, and leaning her head on the sill cried hard.

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Chapter III.

The next morning the sun shone, and Mercy was herself again. Her depression of the evening before seemed to her so causeless, so inexplicable, that she recalled it almost with terror, as one might a temporary insanity. She blushed to think of her unreasonable sensitiveness to the words and tones of Stephen White. “As if it made any sort of difference to mother and to me whether he were our friend or not. He can do as he likes. I hope I’ll be out when he calls,” thought Mercy, as she stood on the hotel piazza, after breakfast, scanning with a keen and eager glance every feature of the scene. To her eyes, accustomed to the broad, open, leisurely streets of the Cape Cod hamlet, its isolated little houses with their trim flower-beds in front and their punctiliously kept fences and gates, this somewhat untidy and huddled town looked unattractive. The hotel stood on the top of one of the plateaus of which I spoke in the last chapter. The ground fell away slowly to the east and to the south. A poorly kept, oblong-shaped “common,” some few acres in extent, lay just in front of the hotel: it had once been fenced in; but the fences were sadly out of repair, and two cows were grazing there this morning, as composedly as if there were no town ordinance forbidding all running of cattle in the streets. A few shabby old farm-wagons stood here and there by these fences; the sleepy horses which had drawn them thither having been taken out of the shafts, and tethered in some mysterious way to the hinder part of the wagons. A court was in session; and these were the wagons of lawyers and clients, alike humble in their style of equipage. On the left-hand side of the hotel, down the eastern slope of the hill ran an irregular block of brick buildings, no two of a height or size, The block had burned down in spots several times, and each owner had rebuilt as much or as little as he chose, which had resulted in as incoherent a bit of architecture as is often seen. The general effect, however, was of a tendency to a certain parallelism with the ground line: so that the block itself seemed to be sliding down hill; the roof of the building farthest east being not much above the level of the first story windows in the building farthest west. To add to the queerness of this “Brick Row,” as it was called, the ingenuity of all the sign-painters of the region had been called into requisition. Signs alphabetical, allegorical, and symbolic; signs in black on white, in red on black, in rainbow colors on tin; signs high up, and signs low down; signs swung, and signs posted,—made the whole front of the Row look at a little distance like a wall of advertisements of some travelling menagerie. There was a painted yellow horse with a fiery red mane, which was the pride of the heart of Seth Nims, the livery-stable keeper; and a big black dog’s head with a gay collar of scarlet and white morocco, which

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was supposed to draw the custom of all owners of dogs to “John Locker, harness-maker.” There was a barber’s pole, and an apothecary’s shop with the conventional globes of mysterious crimson and blue liquids in the window; and, to complete the list of the decorations of this fantastic front, there had been painted many years ago, high up on the wall, in large and irregular letters, the sign stretching out over two-thirds of the row, “Miss Orra White’s Seminary for Young Ladies.” Miss Orra White had been dead for several years; and the hall in which she had taught her school, having passed through many successive stages of degradation in its uses, had come at last to be a lumber-room, from which had arisen many a waggish saying as to the similarity between its first estate and its last.

On the other side of the common, opposite the hotel, was a row of dwelling-houses, which owing to the steep descent had a sunken look, as if they were slipping into their own cellars. The grass was too green in their yards, and the thick, matted plantain-leaves grew on both edges of the sodden sidewalk.

“Oh, dear,” thought Mercy to herself, “I am sure I hope our house is not there.” Then she stepped down from the high piazza, and stood for a moment on the open space, looking up toward the north. She could only see for a short distance up the winding road. A high, wood-crowned summit rose beyond the houses, which seemed to be built higher and higher on the slope, and to be much surrounded by trees. A street led off to the west also: this was more thickly built up. To the south, there was again a slight depression; and the houses, although of a better order than those on the eastern side of the common, had somewhat of the same sunken air. Mercy’s heart turned to the north with a sudden and instinctive recognition. “I am sure that is the right part of the town for mother,” she said. “If Mr. White’s house is down in that hollow, we’ll not live in it long.” She was so absorbed in her study of the place, and in her conjectures as to their home, that she did not realize that she herself was no ordinary sight in that street: a slight, almost girlish figure, in a plain, straight, black gown like a nun’s, with one narrow fold of transparent white at her throat, tied carelessly by long floating ends of black ribbon; her wavy brown hair blown about her eyes by the wind, her cheeks flushed with the keen air, and her eyes bright with excitement. Mercy could not be called even a pretty woman; but she had times and seasons of looking beautiful, and this was one of them. The hostler, who was rubbing down his horses in the door of the barn, came out wide-mouthed, and exclaimed under his breath,—

“Gosh! who’s she?” with an emphasis on that feminine, personal pronoun which was all the bitterer slur on the rest of womankind in that neighborhood, that he was so unconscious of the reflection it conveyed. The cook and the stable-boy also came running to the kitchen door, on hearing the hostler’s exclamation; and they, too, stood gazing at the unconscious Mercy, and each, in their own way, paying tribute to her appearance.

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“That’s the gal thet comed last night with her mother. Darned sight better-lookin’ by daylight than she wuz then!” said the stable-boy.

“Hm! boys an’ men, ye ’re all alike,—all for looks,” said the cook, who was a lean and ill-favored spinster, at least fifty years old. “The gal isn’t any thin’ so amazin’ for good looks, ’s I can see; but she’s got mighty sarchin’ eyes in her head. I wonder if she’s a lookin’ for somebody they’re expectin’.”

“Steve White he was with ’em down to the depot,” replied the stable-boy. “Seth sed he handed on ’em into the kerridge, ’s if they were regular topknots, sure enough.”

“Hm! Seth Quin ’s a fool, ‘n’ always wuz,” replied the cook, with a seemingly uncalled-for acerbity of tone. “I’ve allus observed that them that hez the most to say about topknots hez the least idea of what topknots really is. There ain’t a touch o’ topknot about that ere girl: she’s come o’ real humbly people. Anybody with half an eye can see that. Good gracious! I believe she’s goin’ to stand still, and let old man Wheeler run over her. Look out there, look out, gal!” screamed the cook, and pounded vigorously with her rolling-pin on the side of the door to rouse Mercy’s attention. Mercy turned just in time to confront a stout, red-faced, old gentleman with a big cane, who was literally on the point of walking over her. He was so near that, as she turned, he started back as if she had hit him in the breast.

“God bless my soul, God bless my soul, miss!” he exclaimed, in his excitement, striking his cane rapidly against the ground. “I beg your pardon, beg pardon, miss. Bad habit of mine, very bad habit,—walk along without looking. Walked on a dog the other day; hurt dog; tumbled down myself, nearly broke my leg. Bad habit, miss,—bad habit; too old to change, too old to change. Beg pardon, miss.”

The old gentleman mumbled these curt phrases in a series of inarticulate jerks, as if his vocal apparatus were wound up and worked with a crank, but had grown so rusty that every now and then a wheel would catch on a cog. He did not stand still for a moment, but kept continually stepping, stepping, without advancing or retreating, striking his heavy cane on the ground at each step, as if beating time to his jerky syllables. He had twinkling blue eyes, which were half hid under heavy, projecting eyebrows, and shut up tight whenever he laughed. His hair was long and thin, and white as spun glass. Altogether, except that he spoke with an unmistakable Yankee twang, and wore unmistakable Yankee clothes, you might have fancied that he was an ancient elf from the Hartz Mountains.

Mercy could not refrain from laughing in his face, as she retreated a few steps towards the piazza, and said,—

“It is I who ought to beg your pardon. I had no business to be standing stock-still in the middle of the highway like a post.”

“Sensible young woman! sensible young woman! God bless my soul! don’t know your face, don’t know your face,” said the old gentleman, peering out from under the eaves of his eyebrows, and scrutinizing Mercy as a child might scrutinize a new-comer into his father’s house. One could not resent it, any more than one could resent the gaze of a child. Mercy laughed again.

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“No, sir, you don’t know my face. I only came last night,” she said.

“God bless my soul! God bless my soul! Fine young woman! fine young woman! glad to see you,—glad, glad. Girls good for nothing, nothing, nothing at all, nowadays,” jerked on the queer old gentleman, still shifting rapidly from one foot to the other, and beating time continuously with his cane, but looking into Mercy’s face with so kindly a smile that she felt her heart warm with affection towards him.

“Your father come with you? Come to stay? I’d like to know ye, child. Like your face, —good face, good face, very good face,” continued the inexplicable old man. “Don’t like many people. People are wolves, wolves, wolves. ’D like to know you, child. Good face, good face.”

“Can he be crazy?” thought Mercy. But the smile and the honest twinkle of the clear blue eye were enough to counterbalance the incoherent talk: the old man was not crazy, only eccentric to a rare degree. Mercy felt instinctively that she had found a friend, and one whom she could trust and lean on.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “I’m very glad you like my face. I like yours, too,—you look so merry. I think I and my mother will be very glad to know you. We have come to live here in half of Mr. Stephen White’s house.”

“Merry, merry? Nobody calls me merry. That’s a mistake, child,—mistake, mistake. Mistake about the house, too,—mistake. Stephen White hasn’t any house,—no, no, hasn’t any house. My name’s Wheeler, Wheeler. Good enough name. ‘Old Man Wheeler’ some think’s better. I hear ’em: my cane don’t make so much noise but I hear ’em. Ha! ha! wolves, wolves, wolves! People are all wolves, all alike, all alike. Got any money, child?” With this last question, the whole expression of his face changed; the very features seemed to shrink; his eyes grew dark and gleaming as they fastened on Mercy’s face.

Even this did not rouse Mercy’s distrust. There was something inexplicable in the affectionate confidence she felt in this strange, old man.

“Only a little, sir,” she said. “We are not rich; we have only a little.”

“A little’s a good deal, good deal, good deal. Take care of it, child. People’ll git it away from you. They’re nothing but wolves, wolves, wolves;” and, saying these words, the old man set off at a rapid pace down the street, without bidding Mercy good-morning.

As she stood watching him with an expression of ever-increasing astonishment, he turned suddenly, planted his stick in the ground, and called,—

“God bless my soul! God bless my soul! Bad habit, bad habit. Never do say good-morning,—bad habit. Too old to change, too old to change. Bad habit, bad habit.” And with a nod to Mercy, but still not saying good-morning, he walked away.

Mercy ran into the house, breathless with amusement and wonder, and gave her mother a most graphic account of this strange interview.

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“But, for all his queerness, I like him, and I believe he’ll be a great friend of ours,” she said, as she finished her story.

Mrs. Carr was knitting a woollen stocking. She had been knitting woollen stockings ever since Mercy could remember. She always kept several on hand in different stages of incompletion: some that she could knit on in the dark, without any counting of stitches; others that were in the process of heeling or toeing, and required the closest attention. She had been setting a heel while Mercy was speaking, and did not reply for a moment. Then, pushing the stitches all into a compact bunch in the middle of one needle, she let her work fall into her lap, and, rolling the disengaged knitting-needle back and forth on her knee to brighten it, looked at Mercy reflectively.

“Mercy,” said she, “queer people allers do take to each other. I don’t believe he’s a bit queerer ’n you are, child.” And Mrs. Carr laughed a little laugh, half pride and half dissatisfaction. “You’re jest like your father: he’d make friends with a stranger, any day, on the street, in two jiffeys, if he took a likin’ to him; and there might be neighbors a livin’ right long ‘side on us, for years an’ years, thet he’d never any more ’n jest pass the time o’ day with, ‘n’ he wa’n’t a bit stuck up, either. I used ter ask him, often ‘n’ often, what made him so offish to sum folks, when I knew he hadn’t the least thing agin ’em; and he allers said, sez he, ‘Well, I can’t tell ye nothin’ about it, only jest this is the way ’t is: I can’t talk to ’em; they sort o’ shet me up, like. I don’t feel nateral, somehow, when they’re round!’”

“O mother!” exclaimed Mercy, “I think I must be just like father. That is exactly the way I feel so often. When I get with some people, I feel just as if I had been changed into somebody else. I can’t bear to open my mouth. It is like a bad dream, when you dream you can’t move hand nor foot, all the time they’re in the room with me.”

“Well, I thank the Lord, I don’t never take such notions about people,” said Mrs. Carr, settling herself back in her chair, and beginning to make her needles fly. “Nobody don’t never trouble me much, one way or the other. For my part, I think folks is alike as peas. We shouldn’t hardly know ’em apart, if ’t wa’n’t for their faces.”

Mercy was about to reply, “Why, mother, you just said that I was queer; and this old man was queer; and my father must have been queer, too.” But she glanced at the placid old face, and forbore. There was a truth as well as an untruth in the inconsistent sayings, and both lay too deep for the childish intellect to grasp.

Mercy was impatient to go at once to see their new home; but she could not induce her mother to leave the house.

“O Mercy!” she exclaimed pathetically, “ef yer knew what a comfort ’t was to me jest to set still in a chair once more. It seems like heaven, arter them pesky joltin’ cars. I ain’t

in no hurry to see the house. It can't run away, I reckon; and we're sure of it, ain't we? There ain't any thing that's got to be done, is there?" she asked nervously.

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“Oh, no, mother. It is all sure. We have leased the house for one year; and we can’t move in until our furniture comes, of course. But I do long to see what the place is like, don’t you?” replied Mercy, pleadingly.

“No, no, child. Time enough when we move in. ’T ain’t going to make any odds what it’s like. We’re goin’ to live in it, anyhow. You jest go by yourself, ef you want to so much, an’ let me set right here. It don’t seem to me ‘s I’ll ever want to git out o’ this chair.” At last, very unwillingly, late in the afternoon, Mercy went, leaving her mother alone in the hotel.

Without asking a question of anybody, she turned resolutely to the north.

“Even if our house is not on this street,” she said to herself, “I am going to see those lovely woods;” and she walked swiftly up the hill, with her eyes fixed on the glowing dome of scarlet and yellow leaves which crowned it. The trees were in their full autumnal splendor: maples, crimson, scarlet, and yellow; chestnuts, pale green and yellow; beeches, shining golden brown; and sumacs in fiery spikes, brighter than all the rest. There were also tall pines here and there in the grove, and their green furnished a fine dark background for the gay colors. Mercy had often read of the glories of autumn in New England’s thickly wooded regions; but she had never dreamed that it could be so beautiful as this. Rows of young maples lined the street which led up to this wooded hill. Each tree seemed a full sheaf of glittering color; and yet the path below was strewn thick with fallen leaves no less bright. Mercy walked lingeringly, each moment stopping to pick up some new leaf which seemed brighter than all the rest. In a very short time, her hands were too full; and in despair, like an over-laden child, she began to scatter them along the way. She was so absorbed in her delight in the leaves that she hardly looked at the houses on either hand, except to note with an unconscious satisfaction that they were growing fewer and farther apart, and that every thing looked more like country and less like town than it had done in the neighborhood of the hotel.

Presently she came to a stretch of stone wall, partly broken down, in front of an old orchard whose trees were gnarled and moss-grown. Blackberry-vines had flung themselves over this wall, in and out among the stones. The leaves of these vines were almost as brilliant as the leaves of the maple-trees. They were of all shades of red, up to the deepest claret; they were of light green, shading into yellow, and curiously mottled with tiny points of red; all these shades and colors sometimes being seen upon one long runner. The effect of these wreaths and tangles of color upon the old, gray stones was so fine that Mercy stood still and involuntarily exclaimed aloud. Then she picked a few of the most beautiful vines, and, climbing up on the wall, sat down to arrange them with the maple-leaves she had already gathered.

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She made a most picturesque picture as she sat there, in her severe black gown and quaint little black bonnet, on the stone wall, surrounded by the bright vines and leaves; her lap full of them, the ground at her feet strewed with them, her little black-gloved hands deftly arranging and rearranging them. She looked as if she might be a nun, who had run away from her cloister, and coming for the first time in her life upon gay gauds of color, in strange fabrics, had sat herself down instantly to weave and work with them, unaware that she was on a highway.

This was the picture that Stephen White saw, as he came slowly up the road on his way home after an unusually wearying day. He slackened his pace, and, perceiving how entirely unconscious Mercy was of his approach, deliberately studied her, feature, dress, attitude,—all, as scrutinizingly as if she had been painted on canvas and hanging on a wall.

“Upon my word,” he said to himself, “she isn’t bad-looking, after all. I’m not sure that she isn’t pretty. If she hadn’t that inconceivable bonnet on her head,—yes, she is very pretty. Her mouth is bewitching. I declare, I believe she is beautiful,” were Stephen’s successive verdicts, as he drew nearer and nearer to Mercy. Mercy was thinking of him at that very moment,—was thinking of him with a return of the annoyance and mortification which had stung her at intervals all day, whenever she recalled their interview of the previous evening. Mercy combined, in a very singular manner, some of the traits of an impulsive nature with those of an unimpulsive one. She did things, said things, and felt things with the instantaneous intensity of the poetic temperament; but she was quite capable of looking at them afterward, and weighing them with the cool and unbiassed judgment of the most phlegmatic realist. Hence she often had most uncomfortable seasons, in which one side of her nature took the other side to task, scorned it and berated it severely; holding up its actions to its remorseful view, as an elder sister might chide a younger one, who was incorrigibly perverse and wayward.

“It was about as silly a thing as you ever did in your life. He must have thought you a perfect fool to have supposed he had come down to meet you,” she was saying to herself at the very moment when the sound of Stephen’s footsteps first reached her ear, and caused her to look up. The sight of his face at that particular moment was so startling and so unpleasant to her that it deprived her of all self-possession. She gave a low cry, her face was flooded with crimson, and she sprang from the wall so hastily that her leaves and vines flew in every direction.

“I am very sorry I frightened you so, Mrs. Philbrick,” said Stephen, quite unconscious of the true source of her confusion. “I was just on the point of speaking, when you heard me. I ought to have spoken before, but you made so charming a picture sitting there among the leaves and vines that I could not resist looking at you a little longer.”

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Mercy Philbrick hated a compliment. This was partly the result of the secluded life she had led; partly an instinctive antagonism in her straightforward nature to any thing which could be even suspected of not being true. The few direct compliments she had received had been from men whom she neither respected nor trusted. These words, coming from Stephen White, just at this moment, were most offensive to her.

Her face flushed still deeper red, and saying curtly,—"You frightened me very much, Mr. White; but it is not of the least consequence," she turned to walk back to the village. Stephen unconsciously stretched out his hand to detain her.

"But, Mrs. Philbrick," he said eagerly, "pray tell me what you think of the house. Do you think you can be contented in it?"

"I have not seen it," replied Mercy, in the same curt tone, still moving on.

"Not seen it!" exclaimed Stephen, in a tone which was of such intense astonishment that it effectually roused Mercy's attention. "Not seen it! Why, did you not know you were on your own stone wall? There is the house;" and Mercy, following the gesture of his hand, saw, not more than twenty rods beyond the spot where she had been sitting, a shabby, faded, yellow wooden house, standing in a yard which looked almost as neglected as the orchard, from which it was only in part separated by a tumbling stone wall.

Mercy did not speak. Stephen watched her face in silence for a moment; then he laughed constrainedly, and said,—

"Don't be afraid, Mrs. Philbrick, to say outright that it is the dismallest old barn you ever saw. That's just what I had said about it hundreds of times, and wondered how anybody could possibly live in it. But necessity drove us into it, and I suppose necessity has brought you to it, too," added Stephen, sadly.

Mercy did not speak. Very deliberately her eyes scanned the building. An expression of scorn slowly gathered on her face.

"It is not so forlorn inside as it is out," said Stephen. "Some of the rooms are quite pleasant. The south rooms in your part of the house are very cheerful."

Mercy did not speak. Stephen went on, beginning to be half-angry with this little, unknown woman from Cape Cod, who looked with the contemptuous glance of a princess upon the house in which he and his mother dwelt,—

"You are quite at liberty to throw up your lease, Mrs. Philbrick, if you choose. It was, perhaps, hardly fair to have let you hire the house without seeing it."

Mercy started. "I beg your pardon, Mr. White. I should not think of such a thing as giving up the lease. I am very sorry you saw how ugly I think the house. I do think it is

the very ugliest house I ever saw," she continued, speaking with emphatic deliberation; "but, then, I have not seen many houses. In our village at home, all the houses are low and broad and comfortable-looking. They look as if they had sat down and leaned back to take their ease; and they are all neat and clean-looking, and have rows of flower-beds from the gate to the front door. I never saw a house built with such a steep angle to its roof as this has," said Mercy, looking up with the instinctive dislike of a natural artist's eye at the ridgepole of the old house.

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“We have to have our roofs at a sharp pitch, to let the snow slide off in winter,” said Stephen, apologetically, “we have such heavy snows here; but that doesn’t make the angle any less ugly to look at.”

“No,” said Mercy; and her eyes still roved up and down and over the house, with not a shadow of relenting in their expression. It was Stephen’s turn to be silent now. He watched her, but did not speak.

Mercy’s face was not merely a record of her thoughts: it was a photograph of them. As plainly as on a written page held in his hand, Stephen White read the successive phases of thought and struggle which passed through Mercy’s mind for the next five minutes; and he was not in the least surprised when, turning suddenly towards him with a very sweet smile, she said in a resolute tone,—

“There! that’s done with. I hope you will forgive my rudeness, Mr. White; but the truth is I was awfully shocked at the first sight of the house. It isn’t your house, you know, so it isn’t quite so bad for me to say so; and I’m so glad you hate it as much as I do. Now I am never going to think about it again,—never.”

“Why, can you help it, Mrs. Philbrick?” asked Stephen, in a wondering tone. “I can’t. I hate it more and more, I verily believe, each time I come home; and I think that, if my mother weren’t in it, I should burn it down some night.”

Mercy looked at him with a certain shade of the same contempt with which she had looked at the house; and Stephen winced, as she said coolly,—

“Why, of course I can help it. I should be very much ashamed of myself if I couldn’t. I never allow myself to be distressed by things which I can’t help,—at least, that sort of thing,” added Mercy, her face clouding with the sudden recollection of a grief that she had not been able to rise above. “Of course, I don’t mean real troubles, like grief about any one you love. One can’t wholly conquer such troubles as that; but one can do a great deal more even with these than people usually suppose. I am not sure that it is right to let ourselves be unhappy about any thing, even the worst of troubles. But I must hurry home now. It is growing late.”

“Mrs. Philbrick,” exclaimed Stephen, earnestly: “please come into the house, and speak to my mother a moment. You don’t know how she has been looking forward to your coming.”

“Oh, no, I cannot possibly do that,” replied Mercy. “There is no reason why I should call on your mother, merely because we are going to live in the same house.”

“But I assure you,” persisted Stephen, “that it will give her the greatest pleasure. She is a helpless cripple, and never leaves her bed. She has probably been watching us from

the window. She always watches for me. She will wonder if I do not bring you in to see her. Please come," he said with a tone which it was impossible to resist; and Mercy went.

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Mrs. White had indeed been watching them from the window; but Stephen had reckoned without his host, or rather without his hostess, when he assured Mercy that his mother would be so glad to see her. The wisest and the tenderest of men are continually making blunders in their relations with women; especially if they are so unfortunate as to occupy in any sense a position involving a relation to two women at once. The relation may be ever so rightful and honest to each woman; the women may be good women, and in their right places; but the man will find himself perpetually getting into most unexpected hot water, as many a man could testify pathetically, if he were called upon.

Mrs. White had been watching her son through the whole of his conversation with Mercy. She could see only dimly at such a distance; but she had discerned that it was a woman with whom he stood talking so long. It was nearly half an hour past supper-time, and supper was Mrs. White's one festivity in the course of the day. Their breakfast and their mid-day dinner were too hurried meals for enjoyment, because Stephen was obliged to make haste to the office; but with supper there was nothing to interfere. Stephen's work for the day was done: he took great pains to tell her at this time every thing which he had seen or heard which could give her the least amusement. She looked forward all through her long lonely days to the evenings, as a child looks forward to Saturday afternoons. Like all invalids whose life has been forced into grooves, she was impatient and unreasonable when anybody or any thing interfered with her routine. A five minutes' delay was to her a serious annoyance, and demanded an accurate explanation. Stephen so thoroughly understood this exactingness on her part that he adjusted his life to it, as a conscientious school-boy adjusts his to bells and signals, and never trespassed knowingly. If he had dreamed that it was past tea-time, on this unlucky night, he would never have thought of asking Mercy to go in and see his mother. But he did not; and it was with a bright and eager face that he threw open the door, and said in the most cordial tone,—

"Mother, I have brought Mrs. Philbrick to see you."

"How do you do, Mrs. Philbrick?" was the rejoinder, in a tone and with a look so chilling that poor Mercy's heart sank within her. She had all along had an ideal in her own mind of the invalid old lady, Mr. White's mother, to whom she was to be very good, and who was to be her mother's companion. She pictured her as her own mother would be, a good deal older and feebler, in a gentle, receptive, patient old age. Of so repellent, aggressive, unlovely an old woman as this she had had no conception. It would be hard to do justice in words to Mrs. White's capacity to be disagreeable when she chose. She had gray eyes, which, though they had a very deceptive trick of suffusing with tears as of great sensibility on occasion, were capable

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of resting upon a person with a positively unhuman coldness; her voice also had at these times a distinctly unhuman quality in its tones. She had apparently no conception of any necessity of controlling her feelings, or the expression of them. If she were pleased, if all things went precisely as she liked, if all persons ministered to her pleasure, well and good,—she would be graciously pleased to smile, and be good-humored. If she were displeased, if her preferences were not consulted, if her plans were interfered with, woe betide the first person who entered her presence; and still more woe betide the person who was responsible for her annoyance.

As soon as Stephen's eyes fell on her face, on this occasion, he felt with a sense of almost terror that he had made a fatal mistake, and he knew instantly that it must be much later than he had supposed; but he plunged bravely in, like a man taking a header into a pool he fears he may drown in, and began to give a voluble account of how he had found Mrs. Philbrick sitting on their stone wall, so absorbed in looking at the bright leaves that she had not even seen the house. He ran on in this strain for some minutes, hoping that his mother's mood might soften, but in vain. She listened with the same stony, unresponsive look on her face, never taking the stony, unresponsive eyes from his face; and, as soon as he stopped speaking, she said in an equally stony voice,—

"Mrs. Philbrick, will you be so good as to take off your bonnet and take tea with us? It is already long past our tea-hour!"

Mercy sprang to her feet, and said impulsively, "Oh, no, I thank you. I did not dream that it was so late. My mother will be anxious about me. I must go. I am very sorry I came in. Good-evening."

"Good-evening, Mrs. Philbrick," in the same slow and stony syllables, came from Mrs. White's lips, and she turned her head away immediately.

Stephen, with his face crimson with mortification, followed Mercy to the door. In a low voice, he said, "I hope you will be able to make allowances for my mother's manner. It is all my fault. I know that she can never bear to have me late at meals, and I ought never to allow myself to forget the hour. It is all my fault"

Mercy's indignation at her reception was too great for her sense of courtesy.

"I don't think it was your fault at all, Mr. White," she exclaimed. "Good-night," and she was out of sight before Stephen could think of a word to say.

Very slowly he walked back into the sitting-room. He had seldom been so angry with his mother; but his countenance betrayed no sign of it, and he took his seat opposite her in silence. Silence, absolute, unconquerable silence, was the armor which Stephen

White wore. It was like those invisible networks of fine chains worn next the skin, in which many men in the olden time passed unscathed through years of battles, and won the reputation of having charmed

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lives. No one suspected the secret. To the ordinary beholder, the man seemed accoutred in the ordinary fashion of soldiers; but, whenever a bullet struck him, it glanced off harmlessly as if turned back by a spell. It was so with Stephen White's silence: in ordinary intercourse, he was social genial; he talked more than average men talk; he took or seemed to take, more interest than men usually take in the common small talk of average people; but the instant there was a manifestation of anger, of discord of any thing unpleasant, he entrenched himself in silence. This was especially the case when he was reproached or aroused by his mother. It was often more provoking to her than any amount of retort or recrimination could have been. She had in her nature a certain sort of slow ugliness which delighted in dwelling upon a small offence, in asking irritating questions about it, in reiterating its details; all the while making it out a matter of personal unkindness or indifference to her that it should have happened. When she was in these moods, Stephen's silence sometimes provoked her past endurance.

"Can't you speak, Stephen?" she would exclaim.

"What would be the use, mother?" he would say sadly. "If you do not know that the great aim of my life is to make you happy, it is of no use for me to keep on saying it. If it would make you any happier to keep on discussing and discussing this question indefinitely, I would endure even that; but it would not."

To do Mrs. White justice, she was generally ashamed of these ebullitions of unreasonable ill-temper, and endeavored to atone for them afterward by being more than ordinarily affectionate and loving in her manner towards Stephen. But her shame was short-lived, and never made her any the less unreasonable or exacting when the next occasion occurred; so that, although Stephen received her affectionate epithets and caresses with filial responsiveness, he was never in the slightest degree deluded by them. He took them for what they were worth, and held himself no whit freer from constraint, no whit less ready for the next storm. By the very fact of the greater fineness of his organization, this tyrannical woman held him chained. His submission to her would have seemed abject, if it had not been based on a sentiment and grounded in a loyalty which compelled respect. He had accepted this burden as the one great duty of his life; and, whatever became of him, whatever became of his life, the burden should be carried. This helpless woman, who stood to him in the relation of mother, should be made happy. From the moment of his father's death, he had assumed this obligation as a sacrament; and, if it lasted his life out, he would never dream of evading or lessening it. In this fine fibre of loyalty, Stephen White and Mercy Philbrick were alike: though it was in him more an exalted sentiment; in her, simply an organic necessity. In him, it would always have been in danger of taking morbid

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shapes and phases; of being over-ridden and distorted at any time by selfishness or wickedness in its object, as it had been by his selfish mother. In Mercy, it was on a higher and healthier plane. Without being a shade less loyal, she would be far clearer-sighted; would render, but not surrender; would give a lifetime of service, but not a moment of subjection. There was a shade of something feminine in Stephen's loyalty, of something perhaps masculine in Mercy's; but Mercy's was the best, the truest.

"I wouldn't allow my mother to treat a stranger like that," she thought indignantly, as she walked away after Mrs. White's inhospitable invitation to tea. "I wouldn't allow her. I would make her see the shamefulness of it. What a weak man Mr. White must be!"

Yet if Mercy could have looked into the room she had just left, and have seen Stephen listening with a face unmoved, save for a certain compression of the mouth, and a look of patient endurance in the eyes, to a torrent of ill-nature from his mother, she would have recognized that he had strength, however much she might have undervalued its type.

"I should really think that you might have more consideration, Stephen, than to be so late to tea, when you know it is all I have to look forward to, all day long. You stood a good half hour talking with that woman, Did you not know how late it was?"

"No, mother. If I had, I should have come in."

"I suppose you had your watch on, hadn't you?"

"Yes, mother."

"Well, I'd like to know what excuse there is for a man's not knowing what time it is, when he has a watch in his pocket? And then you must needs bring her in here, of all things, —when you know I hate to see people near my meal-times, and you must have known it was near supper-time. At any rate, watch or no watch, I suppose you didn't think you'd started to come home in the middle of the afternoon, did you? And what did you want her to come in for, anyhow? I'd like to know that. Answer me, will you?"

"Simply because I thought that it would give you pleasure to see some one, mother. You often complain of being so lonely, of no one's coming in," replied Stephen, in a tone which was pathetic, almost shrill, from its effort to be patient and calm.

"I wish, if you can't speak in your own voice, you wouldn't speak at all," said the angry woman. "What makes you change your voice so?"

Stephen made no reply. He knew very well this strange tone which sometimes came into his voice, when his patience was tried almost beyond endurance. He would have

liked to avoid it; he was instinctively conscious that it often betrayed to other people what he suffered. But it was beyond his control: it seemed as if all the organs of speech involuntarily clenched themselves, as the hand unconsciously clenches itself when a man is enraged.

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Mrs. White persisted. “Your voice, when you’re angry, ’s enough to drive anybody wild. I never heard any thing like it. And I’m sure I don’t see what you have to be angry at now. I should think I was the one to be angry. You’re all I’ve got in the world, Stephen; and you know what a life I lead. It isn’t as if I could go about, like other women; then I shouldn’t care where you spent your time, if you didn’t want to spend it with me.” And tears, partly of ill-temper, partly of real grief, rolled down the hard, unlovely, old face.

This was only one evening. There are three hundred and sixty-five in a year. Was not the burden too heavy for mortal man to carry?

Chapter IV.

Mercy said nothing to her mother of Mrs. White’s rudeness. She merely mentioned the fact of her having met Mr. White near the house, and having gone with him, at his request, to speak to his mother.

“What’s she like, Mercy?” asked Mrs. Carr, eagerly. “Is she goin’ to be company for me?”

“I could not tell, mother,” replied Mercy, indifferently; “for it was just their tea-hour, and I did not stay a minute,—only just to say, How d’ye do, and Good-evening. But Mr. White says she is very lonely; people don’t go to see her much: so I should think she would be very glad of somebody her own age in the house, to come and sit with her. She looks very ill, poor soul. She hasn’t been out of her bed, except when she was lifted, for eight years.”

“Dear me! dear me!” exclaimed Mrs. Carr. “Oh, I hope I’ll never be that way. What’u’d you ever do child, if I’d get to be like that?”

“No danger, mother dear, of your ever being like Mrs. White,” said Mercy, with an incautious emphasis, which, however, escaped Mrs. Carr’s recognition.

“Why, how can you be so sure I mightn’t ever get into jest so bad a way, child? There’s none of us can say what diseases we’re likely to hev or not to hev. Now there’s never been a case o’ lung trouble in our family afore mine, not ’s fur back ’s anybody kin trace it out; ‘n’ there’s been two cancers to my own knowledge; ‘n’ I allus hed a most awful dread o’ gettin’ a cancer. There ain’t no death like thet. There wuz my mother’s half-sister, Keziah,—she that married Elder Swift for her second husband. She died o’ cancer; an’ her oldest boy by her first husband he hed it in his face awful. But he held on ter life ’s ef he couldn’t say die, nohow; and I tell yer, Mercy, it wuz a sight nobody’d ever forget, to see him goin’ round the street with one side o’ his face all bound up, and his well eye a rolling round, a-doin’ the work o’ two. He got so he couldn’t see at all out

o' either eye afore he died, 'n' you could hear his screeches way to our house. There wouldn't no laudalum stop the pain a mite."

"Oh, mother! don't! don't!" exclaimed Mercy. "It is too dreadful to talk about. I can't bear to think that any human being has ever suffered so. Please don't ever speak of cancers again."

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Mrs. Carr looked puzzled and a little vexed, as she answered, “Well, I reckon they’ve got to be talked about a good deal, fust and last, ’s long ’s there’s so many dies on ’em. But I don’t know ’s you ‘n’ I’ve got any call to dwell on ’em much. You’ve got dreadful quick feelin’s, Mercy, ain’t you? You allus was orful feelin’ for everybody when you wuz little, ‘n’ I don’t see ’s you’ve outgrowed it a bit. But I expect it’s thet makes you sech friends with folks, an’ makes you such a good gal to your poor old mother. Kiss me, child,” and Mrs. Carr lifted up her face to be kissed, as a child lifts up its face to its mother. She did this many times a day; and, whenever Mercy bent down to kiss her, she put her hands on the old woman’s shoulders, and said, “Dear little mother!” in a tone which made her mother’s heart warm with happiness.

It is a very beautiful thing to see just this sort of relation between an aged parent and a child, the exact reversal of the bond, and the bond so absolutely fulfilled. It seems to give a new and deeper sense to the word “filial,” and a new and deeper significance to the joy of motherhood or fatherhood. Alas, that so few sons and daughters are capable of it! so few helpless old people know the blessedness of it! No little child six years old ever rested more entirely and confidingly in the love and kindness and shelter and direction of its mother than did Mrs. Carr in the love and kindness and shelter and direction of her daughter Mercy. It had begun to be so, while Mercy was yet a little girl. Before she was fifteen years old, she felt a responsibility for her mother’s happiness, a watchfulness over her mother’s health, and even a care of her mother’s clothes. With each year, the sense of these responsibilities grew deeper; and after her marriage, as she was denied the blessing of children, all the deep maternal instincts of her strong nature flowed back and centred anew around this comparatively helpless, aged child whom she called mother, and treated with never-failing respect.

When Mrs. Carr first saw the house they were to live in, she exclaimed,—

“O Lor’, Mercy! Is thet the house?” Then, stepping back a few steps, shoving her spectacles high on her nose, and with her head well thrown back, she took a survey of the building in silence. Then she turned slowly around, and, facing Mercy, said in a droll, dry way, not uncommon with her,—

“’Bijah Jenkins’s barn!”

Mercy laughed outright.

“So it is, mother. I hadn’t thought of it. It looks just like that old barn of Deacon Jenkins’s.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Carr. “That’s it, exzackly. Well, I never thought o’ offerin’ to hire a barn to live in afore, but I s’pose ’t’ll do till we can look about. Mebbe we can do better.”

“But we’ve taken it for a year, mother,” said Mercy, a little dismayed.

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“Oh, hev we? Well, well, I daresay it’s comfortable enough; so the sun shines in mornin’s, thet’s the most I care for. You’ll make any kind o’ house pooty to look at inside, an’ I reckon we needn’t roost on the fences outside, a-lookin’ at it, any more’n we choose to. It does look, for all the world though, like ’Bijah Jenkins’s old yaller barn; ‘n’ thet there jog’s jest the way he jined on his cow-shed. I declare it’s too redicklus.” And the old lady laughed till she had to wipe her spectacles.

“It could be made very pretty, I think,” said Mercy, “for all it is so hideous now. I know just what I’d do to it, if it were mine. I’d throw out a big bay window in that corner where the jog is, and another on the middle of the north side, and then run a piazza across the west side, and carry the platform round both the bay windows. I saw a picture of a house in a book Mr. Allen had, which looked very much as this would look then. Oh, but I’d like to do it!” Mercy’s imagination was so fired with the picture she had made to herself of the house thus altered and improved, that she could not easily relinquish it.

“But, Mercy, you don’t know the lay o’ the rooms, child. You don’ ‘no’ where that ere jog comes. Your bay window mightn’t come so’s’t would be of any use. Yer wouldn’t build one jest to look at, would you?” said her mother.

“I’m not so sure I wouldn’t, if I had plenty of money,” replied Mercy, laughing. “But I have no idea of building bay windows on other people’s houses. I was only amusing myself by planning it. I’d rather have that house, old and horrid as it is, than any house in the town. I like the situation so much, and the woods are so beautiful. Perhaps I’ll earn a lot of money some day, and buy the place, and make it just as we like it.”

“You earn money, child!” said Mrs. Carr, in a tone of unqualified wonder. “How could you earn money, I’d like to know?”

“Oh, make bonnets or gowns, dear little mother, or teach school,” said Mercy, coloring. “Mr. Allen said I was quite well enough fitted to teach our school at home, if I liked.”

“But, Mercy, child, you’d never go to do any such thing’s thet, would yer now?” said her mother, piteously. “Don’t ye hev all ye want, Mercy? Ain’t there money enough for our clothes? I’m sure I don’t need much; an’ I could do with a good deal less, if there was any thing you wanted, dear. Your father he ’d never rest in his grave, ef he thought his little Mercy was a havin’ to arn money for her livin’. You didn’t mean it, child, did yer? Say yer didn’t mean it, Mercy,” and tears stood in the poor old woman’s eyes.

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It is strange what a tenacious pride there was in the hearts of our old sea-faring men of a half century ago. They had the same feeling that kings and emperors might have in regard to their wives and daughters, that it was a disgrace for them to be obliged to earn money. It would be an interesting thing to analyze this sentiment, to trace it to its roots: it was so universal among successful sea-faring men that it must have had its origin in some trait distinctively peculiar to their profession. All the other women in the town or the village might eke out the family incomes by whatever devices they pleased; but the captains' wives were to be ladies. They were to wear silk gowns brought from many a land; they were to have ornaments of quaint fashion, picked up here and there; they were to have money enough in the bank to live on in quiet comfort during the intervals when the husbands sailed away to make more. So strong was this feeling that it crystallized into a traditionary custom of life, which even poverty finds it hard to overcome. You shall find to-day, in any one of the seaport cities or towns of New England, widows and daughters of sea-captains, living, or rather seeming to live, upon the most beggarly incomes, but still keeping up a certain pathetic sham of appearance of being at ease. If they are really face to face with probable starvation, they may go to some charitable institution where fine needlework is given out, and earn a few dollars in that way. But they will fetch and carry their work by night, and no neighbor will ever by any chance surprise them with it in their hands. Most beautifully is this surreptitious sewing done; there is no work in this country like it. The tiny stitches bear the very aroma of sad and lonely leisure in them; a certain fine pride, too, as if the poverty-constrained lady would in no wise condescend to depart from her own standard in the matter of a single loop or stitch, no matter to what plebeian uses the garment might come after it should leave her hands.

Mercy's deep blush when she replied to her mother's astonished inquiry, how she could possibly earn any money, sprung from her consciousness of a secret,—a secret so harmless in itself, that she was ashamed of having any feeling of guilt in keeping it a secret; and yet, her fine and fastidious honesty so hated even the semblance of concealment, that the mere withholding of a fact, simply because she disliked to mention it, seemed to her akin to a denial of it. If there is such a thing in a human being as organic honesty,—an honesty which makes a lie not difficult, but impossible, just as it is impossible for men to walk on ceilings like flies, or to breathe in water like fishes,—-Mercy Philbrick had it. The least approach to an equivocation was abhorrent to her: not that she reasoned about it, and submitting it to her conscience found it wicked, and therefore hateful; but that she disliked it instinctively,—as instinctively as she disliked pain. Her moral

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nerves shrank from it, just as nerves of the body shrink from suffering; and she recoiled from the suggestion of such a thing with the same involuntary quickness with which we put up the hand to ward off a falling blow, or drop the eyelid to protect an endangered eye. Physicians tell us that there are in men and women such enormous differences in this matter of sensitiveness to physical pain that one person may die of a pain which would be comparatively slight to another; and this is a fact which has to be taken very carefully into account, in all dealing with disease in people of the greatest capacity for suffering. May there not be equally great differences in souls, in the matter of sensitiveness to moral hurt?—differences for which the soul is not responsible, any more than the body is responsible for its skin's having been made thin or thick. Will-power has nothing whatever to do with determining the latter conditions. Let us be careful how far we take it to task for failing to control the others. Perhaps we shall learn, in some other stage of existence, that there is in this world a great deal of moral color blindness, congenital, incurable; and that God has much more pity than we suppose for poor things who have stumbled a good many times while they were groping in darkness.

People who see clearly themselves are almost always intolerant of those who do not. We often see this ludicrously exemplified, even in the trivial matter of near-sightedness. We are almost always a little vexed, when we point out a distant object to a friend, and hear him reply,—

"No, I do not see it at all. I am near-sighted."

"What! can't you see that far?" is the frequent retort, and in the pity is a dash of impatience.

There is a great deal of intolerance in the world, which is closely akin to this; and not a whit more reasonable or righteous, though it makes great pretensions to being both. Mercy Philbrick was full of such intolerance, on this one point of honesty. She was intolerant not only to others, she was intolerant to herself. She had seasons of fierce and hopeless debating with herself, on the most trivial matters, or what would seem so to nine hundred and ninety-nine persons out of a thousand. During such seasons as these, her treatment of her friends and acquaintances had odd alternations of frank friendliness and reticent coolness. A sudden misgiving whether she might not be appearing to like her friend more than she really did would seize her at most inopportune moments, and make her absent-minded and irresponsive. She would leave sentences abruptly unfinished,—invitations, perhaps, or the acceptances of invitations, the mere words of which spring readily to one's lips, and are thoughtlessly spoken. But, in Mercy's times of conflict with herself, even these were exaggerated in her view to monstrous deceits. She had again and again held long conversations with Mr. Allen on this subject, but he failed to help her. He was a good man, of average

conscientiousness and average perception: he literally could not see many of the points which Mercy's keener analysis ferreted out, and sharpened into weapons for her own pain. He thought her simply morbid.

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“Now, child,” he would say,—for, although he was only a few years Mercy’s senior, he had taught her like a child for three years,—“now, child, leave off worrying yourself by these fancies. There is not the least danger of your ever being any thing but truthful. Nature and grace are both too strong in you. There is no lie in saying to a person who has come to see you in your own house, ‘I am glad to see you,’ for you are glad; and, if not, you can make yourself glad, when you think how much pleasure you can give the person by talking with him. You are glad, always, to give pleasure to any human being, are you not?”

“Yes,” Mercy would reply unhesitatingly.

“Very well. To the person who comes to see you, you give pleasure: therefore, you are glad to see him.”

“But, Mr. Allen,” would persist poor Mercy, “that is not what the person thinks I mean. Very often some one comes to see me, who bores me so that I can hardly keep awake. He would not be pleased if he knew that all my cordial welcome really meant was,—’I’m glad to see you, because I’m a benevolent person, and am willing to make my fellow-creatures happy at any sacrifice, even at the frightful one of entertaining such a bore as you are!’ He would never come near me again, if he knew I thought that; and yet, if I do think so, and make him think I do not, is not that the biggest sort of a lie? Why, Mr. Allen, many a time when I have seen tiresome or disagreeable people coming to our house, I have run away and hid myself, so as not to be found; not in the least because I could not bear the being bored by them, but because I could not bear the thought of the lies I should speak, or at least act, if I saw them.”

“The interpretation a visitor chooses to put upon our kind cordiality of manner to him is his own affair, not ours, Mercy. It is a Christian duty to be cordial and kindly of manner to every human being: any thing less gives pain, repels people from us, and hinders our being able to do them good. There is no more doubt of this than of any other first principle of Christian conduct; and I am very sorry that these morbid notions have taken such hold of you. If you yield to them, you will make yourself soon disliked and feared, and give a great deal of needless pain to your neighbors.”

It was hard for Mr. Allen to be severe with Mercy, for he loved her as if she were his younger sister; but he honestly thought her to be in great danger of falling into a chronic morbidness on this subject, and he believed that stern words were most likely to convince her of her mistake. It was a sort of battle, however,—this battle which Mercy was forced to fight,—in which no human being can help another, unless he has first been through the same battle himself. All that Mr. Allen said seemed to Mercy specious and, to a certain extent, trivial: it failed to influence her, simply because it did not so much as recognize the point where her difficulty lay.

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“If Mr. Allen tries till he dies, he will never convinc me that it is not deceiving people to make them think you’re glad to see them when you’re not,” Mercy said to herself often, as, with flushed cheeks and tears in her eyes, she walked home after these conversations. “He may make me think that it is right to deceive them rather than to make them unhappy. It almost seems as if it must be; yet, if we once admitted that, where should we ever stop? It seems to me that would be a very dangerous doctrine. A lie’s a lie, let whoever will call it fine names, and pass it off as a Christian duty The Bible does not say, ’Thou shalt not lie, except when it is necessary to lie, to avoid hurting thy neighbor’s feelings,’ It says, ‘Thou shalt not lie.’ Oh, what a horrible word ‘lie’ is! It stings like a short, sharp stroke with a lash.” And Mercy would turn away from the thought with a shudder, and resolutely force hersef to think of something else. Sometimes she would escape from the perplexity for weeks: chance would so favor her, that no opportunity for what she felt to be deceit would occur; but, in these intervals of relief, her tortured conscience seemed only to renew its voices, and spring upon her all the more fiercely on the next occasion. The effect, of all these indecisive conflicts upon Mercy’s character had not been good. They had left her morally bruised, and therefore abnormally sensitive to the least touch. She was in danger of becoming either a fanatic for truth, or indifferent to it. Paradoxcal as it may seem, she was in almost as much danger of the one as of the other. But always, when our hurts are fast healing without help, the help comes. It is probable that there is to-day on the earth a cure, either in herb or stone or spring, for every ill which men’s bodies can know. Ignorance and accident may hinder us long from them, but sooner or later the race shall come to possess them all. So with souls. There is the ready truth, the living voice, the warm hand, or the final experience, waiting for each soul’s need. We do not die till we have found them. There were yet to enter into Mercy Philbrick’s life a new light and a new force, by the help of which she would see clearly and stand firm.

The secret which she had now for nearly a year kept from her mother was a very harmless one. To people of the world, it would appear so trivial a thing, that the conscience which could feel itself wounded by reticence on such a point would seem hardly worth a sneer. Mr. Allen, who had been Mercy’s teacher for three years, had early seen in her a strong poetic impulse, and had fostered and stimulated it by every means in his power. He believed that in the exercise of this talent she would find the best possible help for her loneliness and comfort for her sorrow. He recognized clearly that, to so exceptional a nature as Mercy’s, a certain amount of isolation was inevitable, all through her life, however fortunate she might be in entering into new and wider relations.

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The loneliness of intense individuality is the loneliest loneliness in the world,—a loneliness which crowds only aggravate, and which even the closest and happiest companionship can only in part cure. The creative faculty is the most inalienable and uncontrollable of individualities. It is at once its own reward and its own penalty: until it has conquered the freedom of its own city, in which it must for ever dwell, more or less apart, it is only a prisoner in the cities of others. All this Mr. Allen felt for Mercy, recognized in Mercy. He felt and recognized it by the instinct of love, rather than by any intellectual perception. Intellectually, he was, in spite of his superior culture, far Mercy's inferior. He had been brave enough and manly enough to recognize this, and also to recognize what it took still more manliness to recognize,—that she could never love a man of his temperament. It would have been very easy for him to love Mercy. He was not a man of a passionate nature; but he felt himself strangely stirred whenever he looked into her sensitive, orchid-like face. He felt in every fibre of him that to have the whole love of such a woman would be bewildering joy; yet never for one moment did he allow himself to think of seeking it. "I might make her think she loved me, perhaps," he said to himself. "She is so lonely and sad, and has seen so few men; but it would be base. She needs a nature totally different from mine, a life unlike the life I shall lead. I will never try to make her love me. And he never did. He taught her and trained her, and developed her, patiently, exactingly, and yet tenderly as if she had been his sister; but he never betrayed to her, even by a look or tone, that he could have loved her as his wife. No doubt his influence was greater over her for this subtle, unacknowledged bond. It gave to their intercourse a certain strange mixture of reticence and familiarity, which grew more and more perilous and significant month by month. Probably a change must have come, had they lived thus closely together a year or two longer. The change could have been in but one direction. They loved each other too much to ever love less: they might have loved more; and Mercy's life had been more peaceful, her heart had known a truer content, if she had never felt any stronger emotion than that which Harley Allen's love would have roused in her bosom. But his resolution was inexorable. His instinct was too keen, his will too strong: he compelled all his home-seeking, wife-loving thoughts to turn away from Mercy; and, six months after her departure, he had loyally and lovingly promised to be the husband of another. In Mercy's future he felt an intense interest; he would never cease to watch over her, if she would let him; he would guide, mould, and direct her, until the time came—he knew it would come—when she had outgrown his help, and ascended to a plane where he could no longer guide her. His greatest fear was lest, from her overflowing

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vitality and keen sensuous delight in all the surface activities and pleasures of life, the intellectual side of her nature should be kept in the background and not properly nourished. He had compelled her to study, to think, to write. Who would do this for her in the new home? He knew enough of Stephen White's nature to fear that he, while he might be an appreciative friend, would not be a stimulating one. He was too dreamy and pleasure-loving himself to be a spur to others. A vague wonder, almost like a presentiment, haunted his thoughts continually as to the nature of the relation which would exist between Stephen and Mercy. One day he wrote a long letter to Stephen, telling him all about Mercy,—her history; her peculiarities, mental and moral; her great need of mental training; her wonderful natural gifts. He closed his letter in these words: —

"There is the making of a glorious woman and, I think, a true poet in this girl; but whether she ever makes either will depend entirely upon the hands she falls into. She has a capacity for involuntary adaptation of herself to any surroundings, and for an unconscious and indomitable loyalty to the every-day needs of every-day life, which rarely go with the poetic temperament. She would contentedly make bread and do nothing else, till the day of her death, if that seemed to be the nearest and most demanded duty. She would be heartily faithful and joyous every day, in intercourse with only common and uncultivated people, if fate sets her among them. She seems to me sometimes to be more literally a child of God, in the true and complete sense of the word 'child,' than any one I ever knew. She takes every thing which comes to her just as a happy and good little child takes every thing that is given to him, and is pleased with all; yet she is not at all a religious person. I am often distressed by her lack of impulse to worship. I think she has no strong sense of a personal God; yet her conscience is in many ways morbidly sensitive. She is a most interesting and absorbing person,—one entirely unique in my experience. Living with her, as you will, it will be impossible for you not to influence her strongly, one way or the other; and I want to enlist your help to carry on the work I have begun. She owes it to herself and to the world not to let her mind be inactive. I am very much mistaken if she has not within her the power to write poems, which shall take place among the work that lasts."

Mr. Allen read this letter over several times, and then, with a gesture of impatience, tore the sheets down the middle, and threw them into the fire, exclaiming,—

"Pshaw! as if there were any use in sending a man a portrait of a woman he is to see every day. If Stephen is the person to amount to any thing in her life, he will recognize her. If he is not, all my descriptions of her will be thrown away. It is best to let things take their own course."

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After some deliberation, he decided to take a step, which he would never have taken, had Mercy not been going away from his influence,—a step which he had again and again said to himself he would hot risk, lest the effect might be to hinder her intellectual growth. He sent two of her poems to a friend of his, who was the editor of one of the leading magazines in the country. The welcome they met exceeded even his anticipations. By the very next mail, he received a note from his friend, enclosing a check, which to Harley Allen's inexperience of such matters seemed disproportionately large. "Your little Cape Cod girl is a wonder, indeed," wrote the editor. "If she can keep on writing such verse as this, she will make a name for herself. Send us some more: we'll pay her well for it."

Mr. Allen was perplexed. He had not once thought of the verses being paid for. He had thought that to see her poems in print might give Mercy a new incentive to work, might rouse in her an ambition, which would in part take the place of the stimulus which his teachings had given her. He very much disliked to tell her what he had done, and to give to her the money she had unwittingly earned. He feared that she would resent it; he feared that she would be too elated by it; he feared a dozen different things in as many minutes, as he sat turning the check over and over in his hands. But his fears were all unfounded. Mercy had too genuine an artistic nature to be elated, too much simplicity to be offended. Her first emotion was one of incredulity; her second, of unaffected and humble wonder that any verses of hers should have been so well spoken of; and her next, of childlike glee at the possibility of her earning any money. She had not a trace of the false pride which had crystallized in her mother's nature into such a barrier against the idea of a paid industry.

"O Mr. Allen!" she exclaimed, "is it really possible? Do you think the verses were really worth it? Are you quite sure the editor did not send the money because the verses were written by a friend of yours?"

Harley Allen laughed.

"Editors are not at all likely, Mercy," he said, "to pay any more for things than the things are worth. I think you will some day laugh heartily, as you look back upon the misgivings with which you received the first money earned by your pen. If you will only work faithfully and painstakingly, you can do work which will be much better paid than this."

Mercy's eyes flashed.

"Oh! oh! Then I can have books and pictures, and take journeys," she said in a tone of such ecstasy that Mr. Allen was surprised.

"Why, Mercy," he replied, "I did not know you were such a discontented girl. Have you always longed for all these things?"

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“I’m not discontented, Mr. Allen,” answered Mercy, a little proudly. “I never had a discontented moment in my life. I’m not so silly. I have never yet seen the day which did not seem to me brimful and running over with joys and delights; that is, except when I was for a little while bowed down by a grief nobody could bear up under,” she added, with a sudden drooping of every feature in her expressive face, as she recalled the one sharp grief of her life. “I don’t see why a distinct longing for all sorts of beautiful things need be in the least inconsistent with absolute content. In fact, I know it isn’t; for I have both.”

Mr. Allen was not enough of an idealist to understand this. He looked puzzled, and Mercy went on,—

“Why, Mr. Allen, I should like to have our home perfectly beautiful, just like the most beautiful houses I have read about in books. I should like to have the walls hung full of pictures, and the rooms filled full of books; and I should like to have great greenhouses full of all the rare and exquisite flowers of the whole world. I’d like one house like the house you told me of, full of all the orchids, and another full of only palms and ferns. I should like to wear always the costliest of silks, very plain and never of bright colors, but heavy and soft and shining; and laces that were like fleecy clouds when they are just scattering. I should like to be perfectly beautiful, and to have perfectly beautiful people around me. But all this doesn’t make me one bit less contented. I care just as much for my few little, old books, and my two or three pictures, and our beds of sweet-williams and pinks. They all give me such pleasure that I’m just glad I’m alive every minute.—-What are you thinking of, Mr. Allen!” exclaimed Mercy, breaking off and coloring scarlet, as she became suddenly aware that her pastor was gazing at her with a scrutinizing look she had never seen on his face before.

“Of your future life, Mercy,—of your future life. I am wondering what it will be, and if the dear Lord will carry you safe through all the temptations which the world must offer to one so sensitive as you are to all its beauties,” replied Mr. Allen, sadly. Mercy was displeased. She was always intolerant of this class of references to the Lord. Her sense of honesty took alarm at them. In a curt and half-petulant tone, she answered,—

“I suppose ministers have to say such things, Mr. Allen; but I wish you wouldn’t say them to me. I do not think that the Lord made the beautiful things in this world for temptations; and I believe he expects us to keep ourselves out of mischief, and not throw the responsibility on to him!”

“Oh, Mercy, Mercy! don’t say such things! They sound irreverent: they shock me!” exclaimed Mr. Allen, deeply pained by Mercy’s tone and words.

“I am very sorry to shock you, Mr. Allen,” replied Mercy, in a gentler tone. “Pray forgive me. I do not think, however, there is half as much real irreverence in saying that the Lord expects us to look out for ourselves and keep out of mischief as there is in

teaching that he made a whole world full of people so weak and miserable that they couldn’t look after themselves, and had to be lifted along all the time.”

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Mr. Allen shook his head, and sighed. When Mercy was in this frame of mind, it was of no use to argue with her. He returned to the subject of her poetry.

“If you will keep on reading and studying, Mercy, and will compel yourself to write and rewrite carefully, there is no reason why you should not have a genuine success as a writer, and put yourself in a position to earn money enough to buy a great many comforts and pleasures for yourself, and your mother also,” he said.

At the mention of her mother, Mercy started, and exclaimed irrelevantly,—

“Dear me! I never once thought of mother.”

Mr. Allen looked, as well he might, mystified. “Never once thought of her! What do you mean, Mercy?”

“Why, I mean I never once thought about telling her about the money. She wouldn’t like it.”

“Why not? I should think she would not only like the money, but be very proud of your being able to earn it in such a way.”

“Perhaps that might make a difference,” said Mercy, reflectively: “it would seem quite different to her from taking in sewing, I suppose.”

“Well, I should think so,” laughed Mr. Allen. “Very different, indeed.”

“But it’s earning money, working for money, all the same,” continued Mercy; “and you haven’t the least idea how mother feels about that. Father must have been full of queer notions. She got it all from him. But I can’t see that there is any difference between a woman’s taking money for what she can do, and a man’s taking money for what he can do. I can do sewing, and you can preach; and of the two, if people must go without one or the other, they could do without sermons better than without clothes,—eh, Mr. Allen?” and Mercy laughed mischievously. “But once when I told mother I believed I would turn dressmaker for the town, I knew I could earn ever so much money, besides doing a philanthropy in getting some decent gowns into the community, she was so horrified and unhappy at the bare idea that I never have forgotten it. It is just so with ever so many women here. They would rather half-starve than do any thing to earn money. For my part, I think it is nonsense.”

“Certainly, Mercy,—certainly it is,” replied Mr. Allen, anxious lest this new barrier should come between Mercy and her work. “It is only a prejudice. And you need never let your mother know any thing about it. She is so old and feeble it would not be worth while to worry her.”

Mercy's eyes grew dark and stern as she fixed them on Mr. Allen. "I wonder I believe any thing you say, Mr. Allen. How many things do you keep back from me, or state differently from what they are, to save my feelings? or to adapt the truth to my feebleness, which is not like the feebleness of old age, to be sure, but is feebleness in comparison with your knowledge and strength? I hate, hate, hate, your theories about deceiving people. I shall certainly tell my mother, if I keep on writing, and am paid for it," she said impetuously.

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“Very well. Of course, if you think it wrong to leave her in ignorance about it, you must tell her. I myself see no reason for your mentioning the fact, unless you choose to. You are a mature and independent woman: she is old and childish. The relation between you is really reversed. You are the mother, and she the child. Suppose she had become a writer when you were a little girl: would it have been her duty to tell you of it?” replied Mr. Allen.

“I don’t care! I shall tell her! I never have kept the least thing from her yet, and I don’t believe I ever will,” said Mercy. “You’ll never make me think it’s right, Mr. Allen. What a good Jesuit you’d have made, wouldn’t you?”

Mr. Allen colored. “Oh, child, how unjust you are!” he exclaimed. “But it must be all my stupid way of putting things. One of these days, you’ll see it all differently.”

And she did. Firm as were her resolutions to tell her mother every thing, she could not find courage to tell her about the verses and the price paid for them. Again and again she had approached the subject, and had been frightened back,—sometimes by her own unconquerable dislike to speaking of her poetry; sometimes, as in the instance above, by an outbreak on her mother’s part of indignation at the bare suggestion of her earning money. After that conversation, Mercy resolved within herself to postpone the day of the revelation, until there should be more to tell and more to show.

“If ever I have a hundred dollars, I’ll tell her then,” she thought. “So much money as that would make it seem better to her. And I will have a good many verses by that time to read to her.” And so the secret grew bigger and heavier, and yet Mercy grew more used to carrying it, until she herself began to doubt whether Mr. Allen were not right, after all; and if it would not be a pity to trouble the feeble old heart with a needless perplexity and pain.

Chapter V.

When Stephen White saw his new tenants’ first preparations for moving into his house, he was conscious of a strangely mingled feeling, half irritation, and half delight. Four weeks had passed since the unlucky evening on which he had taken Mercy to his mother’s room, and he had not seen her face again. He had called at the hotel twice, but had found only Mrs. Carr at home. Mercy had sent a messenger with only a verbal message, when she wished the key of the house.

She had an undefined feeling that she would not come into any relation with Stephen White, if it could be avoided. She was heartily glad that she had not been in the house when he called. And yet, had she been in the habit of watching her own mental states, she would have discovered that Stephen White was very much in her thoughts; that she

had come to wondering why she never met him in her walks; and, what was still more significant, to mistaking other men for him, at a distance. This is one of the

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oddest tricks of a brain preoccupied with the image of one human being. One would think that it would make the eye clearer-sighted, well-nigh infallible, in the recognition of the loved form. Not at all. Waiting for her lover to appear, a woman will stand wearily watching at a window, and think fifty times in sixty minutes that she sees him coming. Tall men, short men, dark men, light men; men with Spanish cloaks, and men in surtouts,—all wear, at a little distance, a tantalizing likeness to the one whom they in no wise resemble.

After such a watching as this, the very eye becomes disordered, as after looking at a bright color it sees a spectrum of a totally different tint; and, when the long looked-for person appears, he himself looks unnatural at first, and strange. How well many women know this curious fact in love's optics! I doubt if men ever watch long enough, and longingly enough, for a woman's coming, to be so familiar with the phenomenon. Stephen White, however, had more than once during these four weeks quickened his pace to overtake some slender figure clad in black, never doubting that it was Mercy Philbrick, until he came so near that his eyes were forced to tell him the truth. It was truly a strange thing that he and Mercy did not once meet during all these weeks. It was no doubt an important element in the growth of their relation, this interval of unacknowledged and combated curiosity about each other. Nature has a myriad of ways of bringing about her results. Seed-time and harvest are constant, and the seasons all keep their routine; but no two fields have the same method or measure in the summer's or the winter's dealings. Hearts lie fallow sometimes; and seeds of love swell very big in the ground, all undisturbed and unsuspected.

When Mercy and her mother drove up to the house, Stephen was standing at his mother's window. It was just at dusk.

"Here they are, mother," he said. "I think I will go out and meet them."

Mrs. White lifted her eyes very slowly towards her son, and spoke in the measured syllables and unvibrating tone which always marked her utterance when she was displeased.

"Do you think you are under any obligation to do that? Suppose they had hired a house of you in some other part of the town: would you have felt called upon to pay them that attention? I do not know what the usual duties of a landlord are. You know best."

Stephen colored. This was the worst of his mother's many bad traits,—an instinctive, unreasoning, and unreasonable jealousy of any mark of attention or consideration shown to any other person than herself, even if it did not in the smallest way interfere with her comfort; and this cold, sarcastic manner of speaking was, of all the forms of her ill-nature, the one he found most unbearable. He made no reply, but stood still at the

window, watching Mercy's light and literally joyful movements, as she helped her mother out of, and down from, the antiquated old carriage, and carried parcel after parcel and laid them on the doorstep.

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Mrs. White continued in the same sarcastic tone,—

“Pray go and help move all their baggage in, Stephen, if it would give you any pleasure. It is nothing to me, I am sure, if you choose to be all the time doing all sorts of things for everybody. I don’t see the least occasion for it, that’s all.”

“It seems to me only common neighborliness and friendly courtesy, mother,” replied Stephen, gently. “But you know you and I never agree upon such points. Our views are radically different, and it is best not to discuss them.”

“Views!” ejaculated Mrs. White, in a voice more like the low growl of some animal than like any sound possible to human organs. “I don’t want to hear any thing about ‘views’ about such a trifle. Why don’t you go, if you want to, and be done with it?”

“It is too late now,” answered Stephen, in the same unruffled tone. “They have gone in, and the carriage is driving off.”

“Well, perhaps they would like to have you put down their carpets for them, or open their boxes,” sneered Mrs. White, still with the same intolerable sarcastic manner. “I don’t doubt they could find some use for your services.”

“O mother, don’t!” pleaded Stephen, “please don’t. I do not wish to go near them or ever see them, if it will make you any less happy. Do let us talk of something else.”

“Who ever said a word about your not going near them, I’d like to know? Have I ever tried to shut you up, or keep you from going anywhere you wanted to? Answer me that, will you?”

“No, mother,” answered Stephen, “you never have. But I wish I could make you happier.”

“You do make me very happy, Steve,” said Mrs. White, mollified by the gentle answer. “You’re a good boy, and always was; but it does vex me to see you always so ready to be at everybody’s beck and call; and, where it’s a woman, it naturally vexes me more. You wouldn’t want to run any risk of being misunderstood, or making a woman care about you more than she ought.”

Stephen stared. This was a new field. Had his mother gone already thus far in her thoughts about Mercy Philbrick? And was her only thought of the possibility of the young woman’s caring for him, and not in the least of his caring for her?

And what would ever become of the peace of their daily life, if this kind of jealousy—the most exacting, most insatiable jealousy in the world—were to grow up in her heart? Stephen was dumb with despair. The apparent confidential friendliness and assumption of a tacit understanding and agreement between him and her on the matter, with which

his mother had said, “You wouldn’t want to be misunderstood, or make a woman care more for you than she ought,” struck terror to his very soul. The apparent amicableness of her remark at the present moment did not in the least blind him to the enormous possibilities of future misery involved in such a train of feeling and thought on her part. He foresaw himself involved in a perfect network of espionage and cross-questioning and suspicion, in comparison with which all he had hitherto borne at his mother’s hands would seem trivial. All this flashed through his mind in the brief instant that he hesitated before he replied in an off-hand tone, which for once really blinded his mother,—

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“Goodness, mother! whatever put such ideas into your head? Of course I should never run any such risk as that.”

“A man can’t possibly be too careful,” remarked Mrs. White, sententiously. “The world’s full of gossiping people, and women are very impressionable, especially such high-strung women as that young widow. A man can’t possibly be too careful. Read me the paper now, Stephen.”

Stephen was only too thankful to take refuge in and behind the newspaper. A newspaper had so often been to him a shelter from his mother’s eyes, a protection from his mother’s tongue, that, whenever he saw a storm or a siege of embarrassing questioning about to begin, he looked around for a newspaper as involuntarily as a soldier feels in his belt for his pistol. He had more than once smiled bitterly to himself at the consciousness of the flimsy bulwark; but he found it invaluable. Sometimes, it is true, her impatient instinct made a keen thrust at the truth, and she would say angrily,—

“Put down that paper! I want to see your face when I speak to you;” but his reply, “Why, mother, I am reading. I was just going to read something aloud to you,” would usually disarm and divert her. It was one of her great pleasures to have him read aloud to her. It mattered little what he read: she was equally interested in the paragraphs of small local news, and in the telegraphic summaries of foreign affairs. A revolt in a distant European province, of which she had never heard even the name, was neither more nor less exciting to her than the running away of a heifer from the premises of an unknown townsman.

All through the evening, the sounds of moving of furniture, and brisk going up and down stairs, came through the partition, and interrupted Stephen’s thoughts as much as they did his mother’s. They had lived so long alone in the house in absolute quiet, save for the semi-occasional stir of Marty’s desultory house-cleaning, that these sounds were disturbing, and not pleasant to hear. Stephen did not like them much better than his mother did; and he gave her great pleasure by remarking, as he bade her good-night, —

“I suppose those people next door will get settled in a day or two, and then we can have a quiet evening again.”

“I should hope so,” replied his mother. “I should think that a caravan of camels needn’t have made so much noise. It’s astonishing to me that folks can’t do things without making a racket; but I think some people feel themselves of more consequence when they’re making a great noise.”

The next morning, as Stephen was bidding his mother good-morning, he accidentally glanced out of the window, and saw Mercy walking slowly away from the house with a little basket on her arm.

“She’ll go to market every morning,” he thought to himself. “I shall see her then.”

Not the slightest glance of Stephen’s eye ever escaped his mother’s notice.

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“Ah! there goes the lady,” she said. “I wonder if she is always going down town at this hour? You will have to manage to go either earlier or later, or else people will begin to talk about you.”

Stephen White had one rule of conduct: when he was uncertain what to do, not to do any thing. He broke it in this instance, and had reason to regret it long. He spoke impulsively on the instant, and revealed to mother his dawning interest in Mercy, and planted then and there an ineffaceable germ of distrust in her mind.

“Now, mother,” he said, “what’s the use of you beginning to set up this new worry? Mrs. Philbrick is a widow, and very sad and lonely. She is the friend of my friend, Harley Allen; and I am in duty bound to show her some attention, and help her if I can. She is also a bright, interesting person; and I do not know so many such that I should turn my back on one under my own roof. I have not so many social pleasures that I should give up this one, just on account of a possible gossip about it.”

Silence would have been wiser. Mrs. White did not speak for a moment or two; then she said, in a slow and deliberate manner, as if reflecting on a problem,—“You enjoy Mrs. Philbrick’s society, then, do you, Stephen? How much have you seen of her?”

Still injudicious and unlike himself, Stephen answered, “Yes, I think I shall enjoy it very much, and I think you will enjoy it more than I shall; for you may see great deal of her. I have only seen her once, you know.”

“I don’t suppose she will care any thing about me,” replied Mrs. White, with an emphasis on the last personal pronoun which spoke volumes. “Very few people do.”

Stephen made no reply. It had just dawned on his consciousness that he had been blundering frightfully, and his mind stood still for a moment, as a man halts suddenly, when he finds himself in a totally wrong road. To turn short about is not always the best way of getting off a wrong road, though it may be the quickest way. Stephen turned short about, and exclaimed with a forced laugh, “Well, mother, I don’t suppose it will make any great difference to you, if she doesn’t. It is not a matter of any moment, anyhow, whether we see any thing of either of them or not. I thought she seemed a bright, cheery sort of body, that’s all. Good-by,” and he ran out of the house.

Mrs. White lay for a long time with her eyes fixed on the wall. The expression of her face was of mingled perplexity and displeasure. After a time, these gave place to a more composed and defiant look. She had taken her resolve, had marked out her line of conduct.

“I won’t say another word to Stephen about her,” she thought. “I’ll just watch and see how things go. Nothing can happen in this house without my knowing it.”

The mischief was done; but Mrs. White was very much mistaken in the last clause of her soliloquy.

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Meantime, Mercy was slowly walking towards the village, revolving her own little perplexities, and with a mind much freer from the thought of Stephen White than it had been for four weeks. Mercy was in a dilemma. Their clock was broken, hopelessly broken. It had been packed in too frail a box; and heavier boxes placed above it had crashed through, making a complete wreck of the whole thing,—frame, works, all. It was a high, old-fashioned Dutch clock, and had stood in the corner of their sitting-room ever since Mercy could recollect. It had belonged to her father's father, and had been her mother's wedding gift from him.

"It's easy enough to get a clock that will keep good time," thought Mercy, as she walked along; "but, oh, how I shall miss the dear old thing! It looked like a sort of belfry in the corner. I wonder if there are any such clocks to be bought anywhere nowadays?" She stopped presently before a jeweller's and watchmaker's shop in the Brick Row, and eagerly scrutinized the long line of clocks standing in the window. Very ugly they all were,—cheap, painted wood, of a shining red, and tawdry pictures on the doors, which ran up to a sharp point in a travesty of the Gothic arch outline.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mercy, involuntarily aloud.

"Bless my soul! Bless my soul!" fell suddenly upon her ear, in sharp, jerking syllables, accompanied by clicking taps of a cane on the sidewalk. She turned and looked into the face of her friend, "Old Man Wheeler," who was standing so near her that with each of his rapid shiftings from foot to foot he threatened to tread on the hem of her gown.

"Bless my soul! Bless my soul! Glad to see ye. Missed your face. How're ye gettin' on? Gone into your house? How's your mother? I'll come see you, if you're settled. Don't go to see anybody,—never go! never go! People are all wolves, wolves, wolves; but I'll come an' see you. Like your face,—good face, good face. What're you lookin' at? What're you lookin' at? Ain't goin' to buy any thin' out o' that winder, be ye? Trash, trash, trash! People are all cheats, cheats," said the old man, breathlessly.

"I'm afraid I'll have to, sir," replied Mercy, vainly trying to keep the muscles of her face quiet. "I must buy a clock. Our clock got broken on the way."

"Broken? Clock broken? Mend it, mend it, child. I'll show you a good man, not this feller in here,—he's only good for outsides. Holler sham, holler sham! What kind o' clock was it?"

"Oh, that's the worst of it. It was an old clock my grandfather brought from Holland. It reached up to the ceiling, and had beautiful carved work on it. But it's in five hundred pieces, I do believe. A heavy box crushed it. Even the brass work inside is all jammed and twisted. Our things came by sea," replied Mercy.

“Bless my soul! Bless my soul! Come on, come on! I’ll show you,” exclaimed the eccentric old man, starting off at a quick pace. Mercy did not stir. Presently, he looked back, wheeled, and came again so near that he nearly trod on her gown.

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“Bless my soul! Didn’t tell her,—bad habit, bad habit. Never do make people understand. Come on, child,—come on! I’ve got a clock like yours. Don’t want it. Never use it. Run down twenty years ago. Guess we can find it. Come on, come on!” he exclaimed.

“But, Mr. Wheeler,” said Mercy, half-frightened at his manner, yet trusting him in spite of herself, “do you really want to sell the clock? If you have no use for it, I’d be very glad to buy it of you, if it looks even a little like our old one. I will bring my mother to look at it.”

“Fine young woman! fine young woman! Good face. Never mistaken in a face yet. Don’t sell clocks: never sold a clock yet. I’ll give yer the clock, if yer like it. Come on, child,—come on!” and he laid his hand on Mercy’s arm and drew her along.

Mercy held back. “Thank you, Mr. Wheeler,” she said. “You’re very kind. But I think my mother would not like to have you give us a clock. I will buy it of you; but I really cannot go with you now. Tell me where the clock is, and I will come with my mother to see it.”

The old man stamped his foot and his cane both with impatience. “Pshaw! pshaw!” he said: “women all alike, all alike.” Then with an evident effort to control his vexation, and speak more slowly, he said, “Can’t you see I’m an old man, child? Don’t pester me now. Come, on, come on! I tell you I want to show yer that clock. Give it to you ’s well ’s not. Stood in the lumber-room twenty years. Come on, come on! It’s right up here, ten steps.” And again he took Mercy by the arm. Reluctantly she followed him, thinking to herself, “Oh, what a rash thing this is to do! How do I know but he really is crazy?”

He led the way up an outside staircase at the end of the Brick Row, and, after fumbling a long time in several deep pockets, produced a huge rusty iron key, and unlocked the door at the head of the stairs. A very strange life that key had led in pockets. For many years it had slept under Miss Orra White’s maidenly black alpacas, and had been the token of confinement and of release to scores of Miss Orra’s unruly pupils; then it had had an interval of dignified leisure, lifted to the level of the Odd Fellows regalia, and only used by them on rare occasions. For the last ten years, however, it had done miscellaneous duty as warder of Old Man Wheeler’s lumber-room. If a key could be supposed to peep through a keyhole, and speculate on the nature of the service it was rendering to humanity, in keeping safe the contents of the room into which it gazed, this key might have indulged in fine conjectures, and have passed its lifetime in a state of chronic bewilderment. Each time that the door of this old storehouse opened, it opened to admit some new, strange, nondescript article, bearing no relation to any thing that had preceded it. “Old Man Wheeler” added to all his other eccentricities a most eccentric way of collecting his debts. He had dealings of one sort or another with everybody. He drove hard bargains, and was inexorable as to dates. When a debtor came, pleading for a short delay on a payment, the old man had but one reply,—

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“No, no, no! What yer got? what yer got? Gie me somethin’, gie me somethin’. Settle, settle, settle! Gie me any thin’ yer got. Settle, settle, settle!” The consequences of twenty years’ such traffic as this can more easily be imagined than described. The room was piled from floor to roof with its miscellaneous collections: junk-shops, pawnbrokers’ cellars, and old women’s garrets seemed all to have disgorged themselves here. A huge stack of calico comforters, their tufts gray with dust and cobwebs, lay on top of two old ploughs, in one corner: kegs of nails, boxes of soap, rolls of leather, harnesses stiff and cracking with age, piles of books, chairs, bedsteads, andirons, tubs, stone ware, crockery ware, carpets, files of old newspapers, casks, feather-beds, jars of druggists’ medicines, old signboards, rakes, spades, school-desks, —in short, all things that mortal man ever bought or sold,—were here, packed in piles and layers, and covered with dust as with a gray coverlid. At each foot-fall on the loose boards of the floor, clouds of stifling dust arose, and strange sounds were heard in and behind the piles of rubbish, as if all sorts of small animals might be skurrying about, and giving alarms to each other.

Mercy stood still on the threshold, her face full of astonishment. The dust made her cough; and at first she could hardly see which way to step. The old man threw down his cane, and ran swiftly from corner to corner, and pile to pile, peering around, pulling out first one thing and then another. He darted from spot to spot, bending lower and lower, as he grew more impatient in his search, till he looked like a sort of human weasel gliding about in quest of prey.

“Trash, trash, nothin’ but trash!” he muttered to himself as he ran. “Burn it up some day. Trash, trash!”

“How did you get all these queer things together, Mr. Wheeler?” Mercy ventured to say at last “Did you keep a store?”

The old man did not reply. He was tugging away at a high stack of rolls of undressed leather, which reached to the ceiling in one corner. He pulled them too hastily, and the whole stack tumbled forward, and rolled heavily in all directions, raising a suffocating dust, through which the old man’s figure seemed to loom up as through a fog, as he skipped to the right and left to escape the rolling bales.

“O Mr. Wheeler!” cried Mercy, “are you hurt?”

He laughed a choked laugh, more like a chuckle than like a laugh.

“He! he! child. Dust don’t hurt me. Goin’ to return to ’t presently. Made on ’t! made on ’t! Don’t see why folks need be so ’fraid on ’t! He! he! ’T is pretty choky, though.” And he sat down on one of the leather rolls, and held his sides through a hard coughing fit. As the dust slowly subsided, Mercy saw standing far back in the corner, where the bales

of leather had hidden it, an old-fashioned clock, so like her own that she gave a low cry of surprise.

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“Oh, is that the clock you meant, Mr. Wheeler?” she exclaimed.

“Yes, yes, that’s it. Nice old clock. Took it for debt. Cost me more’n ’t’s wuth. As fur that matter, ‘tain’t wuth nothin’ to me. Wouldn’t hev it in the house ‘n’ more than I’d git the town ’us tower in for a clock. D’ye like it, child? Ye can hev it’s well’s not. I’d like to give it to ye.”

“I should like it very much, very much indeed,” replied Mercy. “But I really cannot think of taking it, unless you let us pay for it.”

The old man sprung to his feet with such impatience that the leather bale rolled away from him, and he nearly lost his balance. Mercy sprang forward and caught him.

“Bless my soul! Bless my soul! Don’t pester me, child! Don’t you see I’m an old man? I tell ye I’ll give ye the clock, an’ I won’t sell it ter ye,—won’t, won’t, won’t,” and he picked up his cane, and stood leaning upon it with both his hands clasped on it, and his head bent forward, eagerly scanning Mercy’s face. She hesitated still, and began to speak again.

“But, Mr. Wheeler,”—

“Don’t ‘but’ me. There ain’t any buts about it. There’s the clock. Take it, child,—take it, take it, take it, or else leave it, just’s you like. I ain’t a-goin’ to saddle ye with it; but I think ye’d be very silly not to take it,—silly, silly.”

Mercy began to think so too. The clock was its own advocate, almost as strong as the old man’s pleading.

“Very well, Mr. Wheeler,” she said. “I will take the clock, though I don’t know what my mother will say. It is a most valuable present. I hope we can do something for you some day.”

“Tut, tut, tut!” growled the old man. “Just like all the rest o’ the world. Got no faith,—-can’t believe in gettin’ somethin’ for nothin’. You’re right, child,—right, right. ’S a general thing, people are cheats, cheats, cheats. Get all your money away,—wolves, wolves, wolves! Stay here, child, a minute. I’ll get two men to carry it.” And, before Mercy realized his intention, he had shut the door, locked it, and left her alone in the warehouse. Her first sensation was of sharp terror; but she ran to the one window which was accessible, and, seeing that it looked out on the busiest thoroughfare of the town, she sat down by it to await the old man’s return. In a very few moments, she heard the sounds of steps on the stairs, the door was thrown open, and the old man, still talking to himself in muttered tones, pushed into the room two ragged vagabonds whom he had picked up on the street.

They looked as astonished at the nature of the place as Mercy had. With gaping mouths and roving eyes, they halted on the threshold.

“Come in, come in! What ’re ye ’bout? Earn yer money, earn yer money!” exclaimed the old man, pointing to the clock, and bidding them take it up and carry it out.

“Now mind! Quarter a piece, quarter a piece,—not a cent more. Do ye understand? Hark ’e! do ye understand? Not a cent more,” he said, following them out of the door. Then turning to Mercy, he exclaimed,—

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“Bless my soul! Bless my soul! Forgot you, child. Come on, come on! I’ll go with you, else those rascals will cheat you. Men are wolves, wolves, wolves. They’re to carry the clock up to your house for a quarter apiece. But I’ll come on with you. Got half a dollar?”

“Oh, yes,” laughed Mercy, much pleased that the old man was willing she should pay the porters. “Oh, yes, I have my portemonnaie here,” holding it up. “This is the cheapest clock ever sold, I think; and you are very good to let me pay the men.”

The old man looked at her with a keen, suspicious glance.

“Good? eh! good? Why, ye didn’t think I was goin’ to give ye money, did ye? Oh, no, no, no! Not money. Never give money.”

This was very true. It would probably have cost him a severer pang to give away fifty cents than to have parted with the entire contents of the storehouse. Mercy laughed aloud.

“Why, Mr. Wheeler,” she said, “you have given me just the same as money. Such a clock as this must have cost a good deal, I am sure.”

“No, no, child! It’s very different, different. Clock wasn’t any use to me, wasn’t wuth any thin’. Money’s of use, use, use. Can’t have enough on’t. People get it all away from you. They’re wolves, wolves, wolves,” replied the old man, running along in advance of Mercy, and rapping one of the men who were carrying the clock, sharply on his shoulder.

“Keep your end up there! keep it up! I won’t pay you, if you don’t carry your half,” he exclaimed.

It was a droll procession, and everybody turned to look at it: the two ragged men carrying the quaint-fashioned old clock, from which the dust shook off at every jolt, revealing the carved scrolls and figures upon it: following them, Mercy, with her expressive face full of mirth and excitement; and the old man, now ahead, now lagging behind, now talking in an eager and animated manner with Mercy, now breaking off to admonish or chastise the bearers of the clock. The eccentric old fellow used his cane as freely as if it had been a hand. There were few boys in town who had not felt its weight; and his more familiar acquaintances knew the touch of it far better than they knew the grip of his fingers. It “saved steps,” he used to say; though of steps the old man seemed any thing but chary, as he was in the habit of taking them perpetually, without advancing or retreating, changing from one foot to the other, as uneasily as a goose does.

Stephen White happened to be looking out of the window, when this unique procession of the clock passed his office. He could not believe what he saw. He threw up the window and leaned out, to assure himself that he was not mistaken. Mercy heard the sound, looked up, and met Stephen's eye. She colored violently, bowed, and involuntarily quickened her pace. Her companion halted, and looked up to see what had arrested her attention. When he saw Stephen's face, he said,—

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“Pshaw!” and turned again to look at Mercy. The bright color had not yet left her cheek. The old man gazed at her angrily for a moment, then stopped short, planted his cane on the ground, and said in a loud tone, all the while peering into her face as if he would read her very thoughts,—

“Don’t you know that Steve White isn’t good for any thin’? Poor stock, poor stock! Father before him poor stock, too. Don’t you go to lettin’ him handle your money, child. Mind now! I’ll be a good friend to you, if you’ll do ’s I say; but, if Steve White gets hold on you, I’ll have nothin’ to do with you. Mind that, eh? eh?”

Mercy had a swift sense of angry resentment at these words; but she repelled it, as she would have resisted the impulse to be angry with a little child.

“Mr. Wheeler,” she said with a gentle dignity of tone, which was not thrown away on the old man, “I do not know why you should speak so to me about Mr. White. He is almost an entire stranger to me as yet. We live in his house; but we do not know him or his mother yet, except in the most formal way. He seems to be a very agreeable man,” she added with a little tinge of perversity.

“Hm! hm!” was all the old man’s reply; and he did not speak again till they reached Mercy’s gate. Here the clock-carriers were about to set their burden down. Mr. Wheeler ran towards them with his cane outstretched.

“Here! here! you lazy rascals! Into the house! into the house, else you don’t get any quarter!

“Well I came along, child,—well I came along. They’d ha’ left it right out doors here. Cheats! People are all cheats, cheats, cheats,” he exclaimed.

Into the house, without a pause, without a knock, into poor bewildered Mrs. Carr’s presence he strode, the men following fast on his steps, and Mercy unable to pass them.

“Where’ll you have it? Where’ll you have it, child? Bless my soul! where’s that girl!” he exclaimed, looking back at Mercy, who stood on the front doorstep, vainly trying to hurry in to explain the strange scene to her mother. Mrs. Carr was, as usual, knitting. She rose up suddenly, confused at the strange apparitions before her, and let her knitting fall on the floor. The ball rolled swiftly towards Mr. Wheeler, and tangled the yarn around his feet. He jumped up and down, all the while brandishing his cane, and muttering, “Pshaw! pshaw! Damn knitting! Always did hate the sight on’t.” But, kicking out to the right and the left vigorously, he soon snapped the yarn, and stood free.

“Mother! mother!” called Mercy from behind, “this is the gentleman I told you of,—Mr. Wheeler. He has very kindly given us this beautiful clock, almost exactly like ours.”

The sound of Mercy's voice reassured the poor bewildered old woman, and, dropping her old-fashioned courtesy, she said timidly,—

"Pleased to see you, sir. Pray take a chair."

"Chair? chair? No, no! Never do sit down in houses,—never, never. Where'll you have it, mum? Where'll you have it?

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“Don’t you dare put that down! Wait till you are told to, you lazy rascals!” he exclaimed, lifting his cane, and threatening the men who were on the point of setting the clock down, very naturally thinking they might be permitted at last to rest a moment.

“Oh, Mr. Wheeler!” said Mercy, “let them put it down anywhere, please, for the present. I never can tell at first where I want a thing to stand. I shall have to try it in different corners before I am sure,” and Mercy took out her portemonnaie, and came forward to pay the bearers. As she opened it, the old man stepped nearer to her, and peered curiously into her hand. The money in the portemonnaie was neatly folded and assorted, each kind by itself, in a separate compartment. The old man nodded, and muttered to himself, “Fine young woman! fine young woman! Business, business!—-Who taught you, child, to sort your money that way?” he suddenly asked.

“Why, no one taught me,” replied Mercy. “I found that it saved time not to have to fumble all through a portemonnaie for a ten-cent piece. It looks neater, too, than to have it all in a crumpled mass,” she added, smiling and looking up in the old man’s face. “I don’t like disorder. Such a place as your store-room would drive me crazy.”

The old man was not listening. He was looking about the room with a dissatisfied expression of countenance. In a few moments, he said abruptly,—

“’S this all the furniture you’ve got?”

Mrs. Carr colored, and looked appealingly at Mercy; but Mercy laughed, and replied as she would have answered her own grandfather,—

“Oh, no, not all we have! We have five more rooms furnished. It is all we have for this room, however. These rooms are all larger than our rooms were at home, and so the things look scanty. But I shall get more by degrees.”

“Hm! hm! Want any thing out o’ my lumber-room? Have it’s well’s not. Things no good to anybody.”

“Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Wheeler. We have all we need. I could not think of taking any thing more from you. We are under great obligation to you now for the clock,” said Mercy; and Mrs. Carr bewilderedly ejaculated, “Oh, no, sir,—no, sir! There isn’t any call for you to give us any thin’.”

While they were speaking, the old man was rapidly going out of the house; with quick, short steps like a child, and tapping his cane on the floor at every step. In the doorway he halted a moment, and, without looking back, said, “Well, well, let me know, if you do want any thing. Have it’s well’s not,” and he was gone.

“Oh, Mercy! he’s crazy, sure’s you’re alive. You’ll get took up for hevin’ this clock. Whatever made you take it, child?” exclaimed Mrs. Carr, walking round and round the clock, and dusting it here and there with a corner of her apron.

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“Well, mother, I am sure I don’t know. I couldn’t seem to help it: he was so determined, and the clock was such a beauty. I don’t think he is crazy. I think he is simply very queer; and he is ever, ever so rich. The clock isn’t really of any value to him; that is, he’d never do any thing with it. He has a huge room half as big as this house, just crammed with things, all sorts of things, that he took for debts; and this clock was among them. I think it gave the old man a real pleasure to have me take it; so that is one more reason for doing it.”

“Well, you know best, Mercy,” said Mrs. Carr, a little sadly; “but I can’t quite see it’s you do. It seems to me amazin’ like a charity. I wish he hadn’t never found you out.”

“I don’t, mother. I believe he is going to be my best crony here,” said Mercy, laughing; “and I’m sure nobody can say any thing ill-natured about such a crony as he would be. He must be seventy years old, at least.”

When Stephen came home that night, he received from his mother a most graphic account of the arrival of the clock. She had watched the procession from her window, and had heard the confused sounds of talking and moving of furniture in the house afterward. Marty also had supplied some details, she having been surreptitiously overlooking the whole affair.

“I must say,” remarked Mrs. White, “that it looks very queer. Where did she pick up Old Man Wheeler? Who ever heard of his being seen walking with a woman before? Even as a young man, he never would have any thing to do with them; and it was always a marvel how he got married. I used to know him very well.”

“But, mother,” urged Stephen, “for all we know, they may be relations or old friends of his. You forget that we know literally nothing about these people. So far from being queer, it may be the most natural thing in the world that he should be helping her fit up her house.”

But in his heart Stephen thought, as his mother did, that it was very queer.

Chapter VI.

The beautiful white New England winter had set in. As far as the eye could reach, nothing but white could be seen. The boundary, lines of stone walls and fences were gone, or were indicated only by raised and rounded lines of the same soft white. On one side of these were faintly pencilled dark shadows in the morning and in the afternoon; but at high noon the fields were as unbroken a white as ever Arctic explorer saw, and the roads shone in the sun like white satin ribbons flung out in all directions. The groves of maple and hickory and beech were bare. Their delicate gray tints spread in masses over the hillsides like a transparent, gray veil, through which every outline of

the hills was clear, but softened. The massive pines and spruces looked almost black against the white of the snow, and the whole landscape was at once shining and sombre; an effect which is

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peculiar to the New England winter in the hill country, and is always either very depressing or very stimulating to the soul. Dreamy and inert and phlegmatic people shiver and huddle, see only the sombreness, and find the winter one long imprisonment in the dark. But to a joyous, brisk, sanguine soul, the clear, crisp, cold air is like wine; and the whiteness and sparkle and shine of the snow are like martial music, a constant excitement and spell.

Mercy's soul thrilled within her with new delight and impulse each day. The winter had always oppressed her before. On the seashore, winter means raw cold, a pale, gray, angry ocean, fierce winds, and scanty wet snows. This brilliant, frosty air, so still and dry that it never seemed cold, this luxuriance of snow piled soft and high as if it meant shelter and warmth,—as indeed it does,—were very wonderful to Mercy. She would have liked to be out of doors all day long: it seemed to her a fairer than summer-time. She followed the partially broken trails of the wood-cutters far into the depths of the forests, and found there on sunny days, in sheltered spots, where the feet of the men and horses and the runners of the heavy sledges had worn away the snow, green mosses and glossy ferns and shining clumps of the hepatica. It was a startling sight on a December day, when the snow was lying many inches deep, to come suddenly on Mercy walking in the middle of the road, her hands filled with green ferns and mosses and vines. There were three different species of ground-pine in these woods, and hepatica and pyrola and wintergreen, and thickets of laurel. What wealth for a lover of wild, out-door things! Each day Mercy bore home new treasures, until the house was almost as green and fragrant as a summer wood. Day after day, Mrs. White, from her point of observation at her window, watched the lithe young figure coming down the road, bearing her sheaves of boughs and vines, sometimes on her shoulder, as lightly and gracefully as a peasant girl of Italy might bear her poised basket of grapes. Gradually a deep wonder took possession of the lonely old woman's soul.

"Whatever can she do with all that green stuff?" she thought. "She's carried in enough to trim the 'Piscopal church twice over."

At last she shared her perplexity with Marty.

"Marty," said she one day, "have you ever seen Mrs. Philbrick come into the house without somethin' green in her hands? What do you suppose she's goin' to do with it all?"

"Lord knows," answered Marty. "I've been a speckkerlatin' about that very thing myself. They can't be a brewin' beer this time o' year; but I see her yesterday with her hands full o' pyroly."

“I wish you would make an errand in there, Marty,” said Mrs. White, “and see if you can any way find out what it’s all for. She’s carried in pretty near a grove of pine-trees, I should say.”

The willing Marty went, and returned with a most surprising tale. Every room was wreathed with green vines. There were evergreen trees in boxes; the window-seats were filled with pots of green things growing; waving masses of ferns hung down from brackets on the walls.

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“I jest stood like a dumb critter the minnit I got in,” said Marty. “I didn’t know whether I wuz in the house or out in the woods, the whole place smelled o’ hemlock so, an’ looked so kind o’ sunny and shady all ter oncet.—I jest wished Steve could see it. He’d go wild,” added the unconsciously injudicious Marty.

Mrs. White’s face darkened instantly.

“It must be very unwholesome to have rooms made so dark and damp,” she said. “I should think people might have more sense.”

“Oh, it wa’n’t dark a mite!” interrupted Marty, eagerly. “There wuz a blazin’ fire on the hearth in the settin’-room, an’ the sun a-streamin’ into both the south winders. It made shadders on the floor, jest as it does in the woods. I’d jest ha’ liked to set down there a spell, and not do nothin’ but watch ’em.”

At this moment, a low knock at the door interrupted the conversation. Marty opened the door, and there stood Mercy herself, holding in her hands some wreaths of laurel and pine, and a large earthen dish with ferns growing in it. It was the day before Christmas; and Mercy had been busy all day, putting up the Christmas decorations in her rooms. As she hung cross after cross, and wreath after wreath, she thought of the poor, lonely, and peevish old woman she had seen there weeks before, and wondered if she would have any Christmas evergreens to brighten her room.

“I don’t suppose a man would ever think of such things,” thought Mercy. “I’ve a great mind to carry her in some. I’ll never muster courage to go in there, unless I go to carry her something; and I may as well do it first as last. Perhaps she doesn’t care any thing about things from the woods; but I think they may do her good without her knowing it. Besides, I promised to go.” It was now ten days since Stephen, meeting Mercy in the town one day, had stopped, and said to her, in a half-sad tone which had touched her, —

“Do you really never mean to come again to see my mother? I do assure you it would be a great kindness.”

His tone conveyed a great deal,—his tone and his eyes. They said as plainly as words could have said,—

“I know that my mother treated you abominably, I know she is very disagreeable; but, after all, she is helpless and alone, and if you could only once get her to like you, and would come and see her now and then, it would be a kindness to her, and a great help to me; and I do yearn to know you better; and I never can, unless you will begin the acquaintance by being on good terms with my mother.”

All this Stephen's voice and eyes had said to Mercy's eyes and heart, while his lips, pronounced the few commonplace words which were addressed to her ear. All this Mercy was revolving in her thoughts, as she deftly and with almost a magic touch laid the soft mosses in the earthen dish, and planted them thick with ferns and hepatica and partridge-berry vines and wintergreen. But all she was conscious of saying to herself was, "Mr. White asked me to go; and it really is not civil not to do it, and I may as well have it over with."

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When Mrs. White's eyes first fell on Mercy in the doorway, they rested on her with the same cold gaze which had so repelled her on their first interview. But no sooner did she see the dish of mosses than her face lighted up, and exclaiming, "Oh, where did you get those partridge-berry vines?" she involuntarily stretched out her hands. The ice was broken. Mercy felt at home at once, and at once conceived a true sentiment of pity for Mrs. White, which never wholly died out of her heart. Kneeling on the floor by her bed, she said eagerly,—

"I am so glad you like them, Mrs. White. Let me hold them down low, where you can look at them."

Some subtle spell must have linked itself in Mrs. White's brain with the dainty red partridge berries. Her eyes filled with tears, as she lifted the vines gently in her fingers, and looked at them. Mercy watched her with great surprise; but with the quick instinct of a poet's temperament she thought, "She hasn't seen them very likely since she was a little girl."

"Did you use to like them when you were a child, Mrs. White?" she asked.

"I used to pick them when I was young," replied Mrs. White, dreamily,—"when I was young: not when I was a child, though. May I have one of them to keep?" she asked presently, still holding an end of one of the vines in her fingers.

"Oh, I brought them in for you, for Christmas," exclaimed Mercy. "They are all for you."

Mrs. White was genuinely astonished. No one had ever done this kind of thing for her before. Stephen always gave her on her birthday and on Christmas a dutiful and somewhat appropriate gift, though very sorely he was often puzzled to select a thing which should not jar either on his own taste or his mother's sense of utility. But a gift of this kind, a simple little tribute to her supposed womanly love of the beautiful, a thoughtful arrangement to give her something pleasant to look upon for a time, no one had ever before made. It gave her an emotion of real gratitude, such as she had seldom felt.

"You are very kind, indeed,—very," she said with emphasis, and in a gentler tone than Mercy had before heard from her lips. "I shall have a great deal of comfort out of it."

Then Mercy set the dish on a small table, and hung up the wreaths in the windows. As she moved about the room lightly, now and then speaking in her gay, light-hearted voice, Mrs. White thought to herself,—

"Steve was right. She is a wonderful cheery body." And, long after Mercy had gone, she continued to think happily of the pleasant incident of the fresh bright face and the

sweet voice. For the time being, her jealous distrust of the possible effect of these upon her son slumbered.

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When Stephen entered his mother's room that night, his heart gave a sudden bound at the sight of the green wreaths and the dish of ferns. He saw them on fhe first instant after opening the door; he knew in the same instant that the hands of Mercy Philbrick must have placed them there; but, also, in that same brief instant came to him an involuntary impulse to pretend that he did not observe them; to wait till his mother should have spoken of them first, that he might know whether she were pleased or not by the gift. So infinitely small are the first beginnings of the course of deceit into which tyranny always drives its victim. It could not be called a deceit, the simple forbearing to speak of a new object which one observed in a room. No; but the motive made it a sure seed of a deceit: for when Mrs. White said, "Why, Stephen, you haven't noticed the greens! Look in the windows!" his exclamation of apparent surprise, "Why, how lovely! Where did they come from?" was a lie. It did not seem so, however, to Stephen. It seemed to him simply a politic suppression of a truth, to save his mother's feelings, to avoid a possibility of a war of words. Mercy Philbrick, under the same circumstances, would have replied,—

"Oh, yes, I saw them as soon as I came in. I was waiting for you to tell me about them," and even then would have been tortured by her conscience, because she did not say why she was waiting.

While his mother was telling him of Mercy's call, and of the report Marty had brought back of the decorations of the rooms, Stephen stood with his face bent over the ferns, apparently absorbed in studying each leaf minutely; then he walked to the windows and examined the wreaths. He felt himself so suddenly gladdened by these tokens of Mercy's presence, and by his mother's evident change of feeling towards her, that he feared his face would betray too much pleasure; he feared to speak, lest his voice should do the same thing. He was forced to make a great effort to speak in a judiciously indifferent tone, as he said,—

"Indeed, they are very pretty. I never saw mosses so beautifully arranged; and it was so thoughtful of her to bring them in for you for Christmas Eve. I wish we had something to send in to them, don't you?"

"Well, I've been thinking," said his mother, "that we might ask them to come in and take dinner with us to-morrow. Marty's made some capital mince-pies, and is going to roast a turkey. I don't believe they'll be goin' to have any thing better, do you, Stephen?"

Stephen walked very suddenly to the fire, and made a feint of rearranging it, that he might turn his face entirely away from his mother's sight. He was almost dumb with astonishment. A certain fear mingled with it. What meant this sudden change? Did it portend good or evil? It seemed too sudden, too inexplicable, to be genuine. Stephen had yet to learn the magic power which Mercy Philbrick had to compel the liking even of people who did not choose to like her.

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“Why, yes, mother,” he said, “that would be very nice. It is a long time since we had anybody to Christmas dinner.”

“Well, suppose you run in after tea and ask them,” replied Mrs. White, in the friendliest of tones.

“Yes, I’ll go,” answered Stephen, feeling as if he were a man talking in a dream. “I have been meaning to go in ever since they came.”

After tea, Stephen sat counting the minutes till he should go. To all appearances, he was buried in his newspaper, occasionally reading a paragraph aloud to his mother. He thought it better that she should remind him of his intention to go; that the call should be purely at her suggestion. The patience and silence with which he sat waiting for her to remember and speak of it were the very essence of deceit again,—twice in this one hour an acted lie, of which his dulled conscience took no note or heed. Fine and impalpable as the meshes of the spider’s-web are the bands and bonds of a habit of concealment; swift-growing, too, and in ever-widening circles, like the same glittering net woven for death.

At last Mrs. White said, “Steve, I think it’s getting near nine o’clock. You’d better go in next door before it’s any later.”

Stephen pulled out his watch. By his own sensations, he would have said that it must be midnight.

“Yes, it is half-past eight. I suppose I had better go now,” he said, and bade his mother good-night.

He went out into the night with a sense of ecstasy of relief and joy. He was bewildered at himself. How this strong sentiment towards Mercy Philbrick had taken possession of him he could not tell. He walked up and down in the snowy path in front of the house for some minutes, questioning himself, sounding with a delicious dread the depths of this strange sea in which he suddenly found himself drifting. He went back to the day when Harley Allen’s letter first told him of the two women who might become his tenants. He felt then a presentiment that a new element was to be introduced into his life; a vague, prophetic sense of some change at hand. Then came the first interview, and his sudden disappointment, which he now blushed to recollect. It seemed to him as if some magician must have laid a spell upon his eyes, that he did not see even in that darkness how lovely a face Mercy had, did not feel even through all the embarrassment and strangeness the fascination of her personal presence. Then he dwelt lingeringly on the picture, which had never faded from his brain, of his next sight of her, as she sat on the old stone wall, with the gay maple-leaves and blackberry-vines in her lap. From that day to the present, he had seen her only a half dozen times, and only for a chance greeting as they had passed each other in the street; but it seemed to him that she had

never been really absent from him, so conscious was he of her all the time. So absorbed was he in these thoughts that a half-hour was gone before he realized it, and the village bells were ringing for nine o' clock when he knocked on the door of the wing.

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Mrs. Carr had rolled up her knitting, and was just on the point of going upstairs. Their little maid of all work had already gone to bed, when Stephen's loud knock startled them all.

"Gracious alive! Mercy, what's that?" exclaimed Mrs. Carr, all sorts of formless terrors springing upon her at once. Mercy herself was astonished, and ran hastily to open the door. When she saw Stephen standing there, her astonishment was increased, and she looked it so undisguisedly that he said,—

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Philbrick. I know it is late, but my mother sent me in with a message." ...

"Pray come in, Mr. White," interrupted Mercy. "It is not really late, only we keep such absurdly early hours, and are so quiet, as we know nobody here, that a knock at the door in the evening makes us all jump. Pray come in," and she threw open the door into the sitting-room, where the lamps had already been put out, and the light of a blazing hickory log made long flickering shadows on the crimson carpet. In this dancing light, the room looked still more like a grove than it had to Marty at high noon. Stephen's eyes fastened hungrily on the sight.

"Your room is almost too much to resist," he said; "but I will not come in now. I did not know it was so late. My mother wishes to know if you and your mother will not come in and eat a Christmas dinner with us to-morrow. We live in the plainest way, and cannot entertain in the ordinary acceptation of the term. We only ask you to our ordinary home-dinner," he added, with a sudden sense of the incongruity between the atmosphere of refined elegance which pervaded Mercy's simple, little room, and the expression which all his efforts had never been able to banish from his mother's parlor.

"Oh thank you, Mr. White. You are very good. I think we should like to come very much. Mother and I were just saying that it would be the first Christmas dinner we ever ate alone. But you must come in, Mr. White,—I insist upon it," replied Mercy, stretching out one hand towards him, as if to draw him in.

Stephen went. On the threshold of the sitting-room he paused and stood silent for some minutes. Mercy was relighting the lamps.

"Oh, Mrs. Philbrick!" he exclaimed, "won't you please not light the lamps. This firelight on these evergreens is the loveliest thing I ever saw."

Too unconventional to think of any reasons why she should not sit with Stephen White alone by firelight in her own house, Mercy blew out the lamp she had lighted, and drawing a chair close up to the hearth sat down, and clasping her hands in her lap looked eagerly into Stephen's face, and said as simply as a child,—

“I like firelight, too, a great deal better than any other light. Some evenings we do not light the lamps at all. Mother can knit just as well without much light, and I can think better.”

Mercy was sitting in a chair so low that, to look at Stephen, she had to lift her face. It was the position in which her face was sweetest. Some lines, which were a shade too strong and positive when her face fully confronted you, disappeared entirely when it was thrown back and her eyes were lifted. It was then as ingenuous and tender and trustful a face as if she had been but eight instead of eighteen.

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Stephen forgot himself, forgot the fact that Mercy was comparatively a stranger, forgot every thing, except the one intense consciousness of this sweet woman-face looking up into his. Bending towards her, he said suddenly,—

“Mrs. Philbrick, your face is the very loveliest face I have ever seen in my life. Do not be angry with me. Oh, do not!” he continued, seeing the color deepen in Mercy’s cheeks, and a stern expression gathering in her eyes, as she looked steadily at him with unutterable surprise. “Do not be angry with me. I could not help saying it; but I do not say it as men generally say such things. I am not like other men: I have lived alone all my life with my mother. You need not mind my saying your face is lovely, any more than my saying that the ferns on the walls are lovely.”

If Stephen had known Mercy from her childhood, he could not have framed his words more wisely. Every fibre of her artistic nature recognized the possibility of a subtle truth in what he said, and his calm, dreamy tone and look heightened this impression. Moreover, as Stephen’s soul had been during all the past four weeks slowly growing into the feeling which made it inevitable that he should say these words on first looking closely and intimately into Mercy’s face, so had her soul been slowly growing into the feeling which made it seem not really foreign or unnatural to her that he should say them.

She answered him with hesitating syllables, quite unlike her usual fluent speech.

“I think you must mean what you say, Mr. White; and you do not say it as other men have said it. But will you please to remember not to say it again? We cannot be friends, if you do.”

“Never again, Mrs. Philbrick?” he said,—he could almost have said “Mercy,”—and looked at her with a gaze of whose intentness he was hardly aware.

Mercy felt a strange terror of this man; a few minutes ago a stranger, now already asking at her hands she hardly knew what, and compelling her in spite of herself. But she replied very quietly, with a slight smile,—

“Never, Mr. White. Now talk of something else, please. Your mother seemed very much pleased with the ferns I carried her to-day. Did she love the woods, when she was well?”

“I do not know. I never heard her say,” answered Stephen, absently, still gazing into Mercy’s face.

“But you would have known, surely, if she had cared for them,” said Mercy, laughing; for she perceived that Stephen had spoken at random.

“Oh, yes, certainly,—certainly. I should have known,” said Stephen, still with a preoccupied air, and rising to go. “I thank you for letting me come into this beautiful room with you. I shall always think of your face framed in evergreens, and with flickering firelight on it.”

“You are not going away, are you, Mr. White?” asked Mercy, mischievously.

“Oh, no, certainly not. I never go away. How could I go away? Why did you ask?”

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“Oh,” laughed Mercy, “because you spoke as if you never expected to see my face after to-night. That’s all.”

Stephen smiled. “I am afraid I seem a very absent-minded person,” he said. “I did not mean that at all. I hope to see you very often, if I may. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Mr. White. We shall be very glad to see you as often as you like to come. You may be sure of that; but you must come earlier, or you will find us all asleep. Good-night.”

Stephen spent another half-hour pacing up and down in the snowy path in front of the house. He did not wish to go in until his mother was asleep. Very well he knew that it would be better that she did not see his face that night. When he went in, the house was dark and still. As he passed his mother’s door, she called, “Steve!”

“All right, mother. They’ll come,” he replied, and ran swiftly up to his own room.

During this half-hour, Mercy had been sitting in her low chair by the fire, looking steadily into the leaping blaze, and communing very sternly with her own heart on the subject of Stephen White. Her pitiless honesty of nature was just as inexorable in its dealing with her own soul as with others; she never paltered with, nor evaded an accusation of, her consciousness. At this moment, she was indignantly admitting to herself that her conduct and her feeling towards Stephen were both deserving of condemnation. But, when she asked herself for their reason, no answer came framed in words, no explanation suggested itself, only Stephen’s face rose up before her, vivid, pleading, as he had looked when he said, “Never again, Mrs. Philbrick?” and as she looked again into the dark blue eyes, and heard the low tones over again, she sank into a deeper and deeper reverie, from which gradually all self-accusation, all perplexity, faded away, leaving behind them only a vague happiness, a dreamy sense of joy. If lovers could look back on the first quickening of love in their souls, how precious would be the memories; but the unawakened heart never knows the precise instant of the quickening. It is wrapped in a half-conscious wonder and anticipation; and, by the time the full revelation comes, the impress of the first moments has been wiped out by intenser experiences. How many lovers have longed to trace the sweet stream back to its very source, to the hidden spring which no man saw, but have lost themselves presently in the broad greenness, undisturbed and fertile, through which, like a hidden stream through an emerald meadow, the love had been flowing undiscovered.

Months after, when Mercy’s thoughts reverted to this evening, all she could recollect was that on the night of Stephen’s first call she had been much puzzled by his manner and his words, had thought it very strange that he should seem to care-so much for her, and perhaps still more strange that she herself found it not unpleasing that he did so. Stephen’s reminiscences were at once more distinct and more indistinct,—more distinct of his emotions, more indistinct of the incidents. He could not recollect one word which

had been said: only his own vivid consciousness of Mercy's beauty; her face "framed in evergreens, with the firelight flickering on it," as he had told her he should always think of it.

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Christmas morning came, clear, cold, shining bright. A slight thaw the day before had left every bough and twig and pine-needle covered with a moisture that had frozen in the night into glittering crystal sheaths, which flashed like millions of prisms in the sun. The beauty of the scene was almost solemn. The air was so frosty cold that even the noon sun did not melt these ice-sheaths; and, under the flood of the full mid-day light, the whole landscape seemed one blaze of jewels. When Mercy and her mother entered Mrs. White's room, half an hour before the dinner-hour, they found her sitting with the curtains drawn, because the light had hurt her eyes.

"Oh, Mrs. White!" exclaimed Mercy. "It is cruel you should not see this glorious spectacle! If you had the window open, the light would not hurt your eyes. It is the glare of it coming through the glass. Let us wrap you up, and draw you close to the window, and open it wide, so that you can see the colors for a few minutes. It is just like fairy-land."

Mrs. White looked bewildered. Such a plan as this of getting out-door air she had never thought of.

"Won't it make the room too cold?" she said.

"Oh, no, no!" cried Mercy; "and no matter if it does. We can soon warm it up again. Please let me ask Marty to come?" And, hardly waiting for permission, she ran to call Marty. Wrapped up in blankets, Mrs. White was then drawn in her bed close to the open window, and lay there with a look of almost perplexed delight on her face. When Stephen came in, Mercy stood behind her, a fleecy white cloud thrown over her head, pointing out eagerly every point of beauty in the view. A high bush of sweet-brier, with long, slender, curving branches, grew just in front of the window. Many of the cup-like seed-vessels still hung on the boughs: they were all finely encrusted with frost. As the wind faintly stirred the branches, every frost-globule flashed its full rainbow of color; the long sprays looked like wands strung with tiny fairy beakers, inlaid with pearls and diamonds. Mercy sprang to the window, took one of these sprays in her fingers, and slowly waved it up and down in the sunlight.

"Oh, look at it against the blue sky!" she cried. "Isn't it enough to make one cry just to see it?"

"Oh, how can mother help loving her?" thought Stephen. "She is the sweetest woman that ever drew breath."

Mrs. White seemed indeed to have lost all her former distrust and antagonism. She followed Mercy's movements with eyes not much less eager and pleased than Stephen's. It was like a great burst of sunlight into a dark place, the coming of this earnest, joyous, outspoken nature into the old woman's narrow and monotonous and comparatively uncheered life. She had never seen a person of Mercy's temperament.

The clear, decided, incisive manner commanded her respect, while the sunny gayety won her liking. Stephen had gentle, placid sweetness and much love

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of the beautiful; but his love of the beautiful was an indolent, and one might almost say a-haughty, demand in his nature. Mercy's was a bounding and delighted acceptance. She was cheery: he was only placid. She was full of delight; he, only of satisfaction. In her, joy was of the spirit, spiritual. Keen as were her senses, it was her soul which marshalled them all. In him, though the soul's forces were not feeble, the senses foreran them,—compelled them, sometimes conquered them. It would have been impossible to put Mercy in any circumstances, in any situation, out of which, or in spite of which, she would not find joy. But in Stephen circumstance and place might as easily destroy as create happiness. His enjoyment was as far inferior to Mercy's in genuineness and enduringness as is the shallow lake to the quenchless spring. The waters of each may leap and sparkle alike, to the eye, in the sunshine; but when drought has fallen on the lake, and the place that knew it knows it no more, the spring is full, free, and glad as ever.

Mrs. White's pleasure in Mercy's presence was short-lived. Long before the simple dinner was over, she had relapsed into her old forbidding manner, and into a silence which was more chilly than any words could have been. The reason was manifest. She read in every glance of Stephen's eyes, in every tone of his voice, the depth and the warmth of his feeling towards Mercy. The jealous distrust which she had felt at first, and which had slept for a brief time under the spell of Mercy's kindliness towards herself, sprang into fiercer life than ever. Stephen and Mercy, in utter unconsciousness of the change which was gradually taking place, talked and laughed together in an evident gay delight, which made matters worse every moment. A short and surly reply from Mrs. White to an innocent question of Mrs. Carr's fell suddenly on Mercy's ear. Keenly alive to the smallest slight to her mother, she turned quickly towards Mrs. White, and, to her consternation, met the same steady, pitiless, aggressive look which she had seen on her face in their first interview. Mercy's first emotion was one of great indignation: her second was a quick flash of comprehension of the whole thing. A great wave of rosy color swept over her face; and, without knowing what she was doing, she looked appealingly at Stephen. Already there was between them so subtle a bond that each understood the other without words. Stephen knew all that Mercy thought in that instant, and an answering flush mounted to his forehead. Mrs. White saw both these flushes, and compressed her lips still more closely in a grimmer silence than before. Poor, unsuspecting Mrs. Carr kept on and on with her meaningless and childish remarks and inquiries; and Mercy and Stephen were both very grateful for them. The dinner came to an untimely end; and almost immediately Mercy, with a nervous and embarrassed air, totally foreign to her, said to her mother,—

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“We must go home now. I have letters to write.”

Mrs. Carr was disappointed. She had anticipated a long afternoon of chatty gossip with her neighbor; but she saw that Mercy had some strong reason for hurrying home, and she acquiesced unhesitatingly.

Mrs. White did not urge them to remain. To all Mrs. White’s faults it must be confessed that she added the virtue of absolute sincerity.

“Good-afternoon, Mrs. Carr,” and “Good-afternoon, Mrs. Philbrick,” fell from her lips in the same measured syllables and the same cold, unhuman voice which had so startled Mercy once before.

“What a perfectly horrid old woman!” exclaimed Mercy, as soon as they had crossed the threshold of their own door. “I’ll never go near her again as long as I live!”

“Why, Mercy Carr!” exclaimed her mother, “what do you mean? I don’t think so. She got very tired before dinner was over. I could see that, poor thing! She’s dreffful weak, an’ it stan’s to reason she’d be kind o’ snappish sometimes.”

Mercy opened her lips to reply, but changed her mind and said nothing.

“It’s just as well for mother to keep on good terms with her, if she can,” she thought. “Maybe it’ll help divert a little of Mrs. White’s temper from him, poor fellow!”

Stephen had followed them to the door, saying little; but at the last moment, when Mercy said “good-by,” he had suddenly held out his hand, and, clasping hers tightly, had looked at her sadly, with a world of regret and appeal and affection and almost despair in the look.

“What a life he must lead of it!” thought Mercy. “Dear me! I should go wild or else get very wicked. I believe I’d get very wicked. I wonder he shuts himself up so with her. It is all nonsense: it only makes her more and more selfish. How mean, how base of her, to be so jealous of his talking with me! If she were his wife, it would be another thing. But he doesn’t belong to her body and soul, if she *is* his mother. If ever I know him well enough, I’ll tell him so. It isn’t manly in him to let her tyrannize over him and everybody else that comes into the house. I never saw any human being that made one so afraid, somehow. Her tone and look are enough to freeze your blood.”

While Mercy was buried in these indignant thoughts, Stephen and his mother, only a few feet away, separated from her only by a wall, were having a fierce and angry talk. No sooner had the door closed upon Mercy than Mrs. White had said to Stephen,—

“Have you the slightest idea how much excitement you showed in conversing with Mrs. Philbrick? I have never seen you look or speak in this way.”

The flush had not yet died away on Stephen's face. At this attack, it grew deeper still. He made no reply. Mrs. White continued,—

"I wish you could see your face. It is almost purple now."

"It is enough to make the blood mount to any man's face, mother, to be accused so," replied Stephen, with a spirit unusual for him.

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“I don’t accuse you of any thing,” she retorted. “I am only speaking of what I observe. You needn’t think you can deceive me about the least thing, ever. Your face is a perfect tell-tale of your thoughts, always.”

Poor Stephen groaned inwardly. Too well he knew his inability to control his unfortunate face.

“Mother!” he exclaimed with almost vehemence of tone, “mother! do not carry this thing too far. I do not in the least understand what you are driving at about Mrs. Philbrick, nor why you show these capricious changes of feeling towards her. I think you have treated her so to-day that she will never darken your doors again. I never should, if I were in her place.”

“Very well, I hope she never will, if her presence is to produce such an effect on you. It is enough to turn her head to see that she has such power over a man like you. She is a very vain woman, anyway,—vain of her power over people, I think.”

Stephen could bear no more. With a half-smothered ejaculation of “O mother!” he left the room.

And thus the old year went out and the new year came in for Mercy Philbrick and Stephen White,—the old year in which they had been nothing, and the new year in which they were to be every thing to each other.

Chapter VII.

The next morning, while Stephen was dressing, he slowly reviewed the events of the previous day, and took several resolutions. If Mrs. White could have had the faintest conception of what was passing in her son’s mind, while he sat opposite to her at breakfast, so unusually cheerful and talkative, she would have been very unhappy. But she, too, had had a season of reflection this morning, and was much absorbed in her own plans. She heartily regretted having shown so much ill-feeling in regard to Mercy; and she had resolved to atone for it in some way, if she could. Above all, she had resolved, if possible, to banish from Stephen’s mind the idea that she was jealous of Mercy or hostile towards her. She had common sense enough to see that to allow him to recognize this feeling on her part was to drive him at once into a course of manoeuvring and concealment. She flattered herself that it was with a wholly natural and easy air that she began her plan of operations by remarking,—

“Mrs. Philbrick seems to be very fond of her mother, does she not, Stephen?”

“Yes, very,” answered Stephen, indifferently.

“Mrs. Carr is quite an old woman. She must have been old when Mrs. Philbrick was born. I don’t think Mrs. Philbrick can be more than twenty, do you?”

“I am sure I don’t know. I never thought anything about her age,” replied Stephen, still more indifferently. “I’m no judge of women’s ages.”

“Well, I’m sure she isn’t more than twenty, if she is that,” said Mrs. White; “and she really is a very pretty woman, Steve. I’ll grant you that.”

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“Grant me that, mother?” laughed Stephen, lightly. “I never said she was pretty, did I? The first time I saw her, I thought she was uncommonly plain; but afterwards I saw that I had done her injustice. I don’t think, however, she would usually be thought pretty.”

Mrs. White was much gratified by his careless tone and manner; so much so that she went farther than she had intended, and said in an off-hand way, “I’m real sorry, Steve, you thought I didn’t treat her well yesterday. I didn’t mean to be rude, but you know it always does vex me to see a woman’s head turned by a man’s taking a little notice of her; and I know very well, Stephy, that women like you. It wouldn’t take much to make Mrs. Philbrick fancy you were in love with her.”

Stephen also was gratified by his mother’s apparent softening of mood, and instinctively met her more than half way, replying,—

“I didn’t mean to say that you were rude to her, mother; only you showed so plainly that you didn’t want them to stay. Perhaps she didn’t notice it, only thought you were tired. It isn’t any great matter, any way. We’d better keep on good terms with them, if they’re to live under the same roof with us, that’s all.”

“Oh, yes,” replied Mrs. White. “Much better to be on neighborly terms. The old mother is a childish old thing, though. She’d bore me to death, if she came in often.”

“Yes, indeed, she is a bore, sure enough,” said Stephen; “but she’s so simple, and so much like a child you can’t help pitying her.”

They fenced very well, these two, with their respective secrets to keep; but the man fenced best, his secret being the most momentous to shield from discovery. When he shut the door, having bade his mother good by, he fairly breathed hard with the sense of having come out of a conflict. One of the resolutions he had taken was that he would wait for Mercy this morning on a street he knew she must pass on her way to market. He did not define to himself any motive for this act, except the simple longing to see her face. He had not said to himself what he would do, or what words he would speak, or even that he would speak at all; but one look at her face he must have, and he had though to himself distinctly in making this plan, “Here is one way in which I can see her every day, and my mother never know any thing about it.”

When Mrs. White saw Mercy set off for her usual morning walk, a half hour or more after Stephen had left the house, she thought, as she had often though before on similar occasions, “Well, she won’t overtake Stephen this time. I dare say she planned to.” Light-hearted Mercy, meantime, was walking on with her own swift, elastic tread, and thinking warmly and shyly of the look with which Stephen had bade her good-by the day before. She was walking, as was her habit, with her eyes cast down, and did not observe that any one approached her, until she suddenly heard Stephen’s voice saying, “Good-morning, Mrs. Philbrick.” It was the second time that he had surprised her in a

reverie of which he himself was the subject. This time the surprise was a joyful one; and the quick flush of rosy color which spread over her cheeks was a flush of gladness, —undisguised and honest gladness.

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“Why, Mr. White,” she exclaimed, “I never thought of seeing you. I thought you were always in your office at this time.”

“I waited to see you this morning,” replied Stephen, in a tone as simply honest as her own. “I wanted to speak to you.”

Mercy looked up inquiringly, but did not speak. Stephen smiled.

“Oh, not for any particular thing,” he said: “only for the pleasure of it.”

Then Mercy smiled, and the two looked into each other’s faces with a joy which neither attempted to disguise. Stephen took Mercy’s basket from her arm; and they walked along in silence, not knowing that it was silence, so full was it of sweet meanings to them in the simple fact that they were walking by each other’s side. The few words they did speak were of the purposeless and irrelevant sort in which unacknowledged lovers do so universally express themselves in their earlier moments alone together,—a sort of speech more like birds chirping than like ordinary language. When they parted at the door of Stephen’s office, he said,—

“I think you always come to the village about this time in the morning, do you not?”

“Yes, always,” replied Mercy.

“Then, if you are willing, I would like sometimes to walk with you,” said Stephen.

“I like it very much, Mr. White,” answered Mercy, eagerly. “I used to walk a great deal with Mr. Allen, and I miss it sadly.”

A jealous pang shot through Stephen’s heart. He had been blind. This was the reason Harley Allen had taken such interest in finding a home for Mrs. Philbrick and her mother. He remembered now that he had thought at the time some of the expressions in his friend’s letter argued an unusual interest in the young widow. Of course no man could know Mercy without loving her. Stephen was wretched; but no trace of it showed on the serene and smiling face with which he bade Mercy “Good-by,” and ran up his office-stairs three steps at a time.

All day Mercy went about her affairs with a new sense of impulse and cheer. It was not a conscious anticipation of the morrow: she did not say to herself “To-morrow morning I shall see him for half an hour.” Love knows the secret of true joy better than that. Love throws open wider doors,—lifts a great veil from a measureless vista: all the rest of life is transformed into one shining distance; every present moment is but a round in a ladder whose top disappears in the skies, from which angels are perpetually descending to the dreamer below.

The next morning Mercy saw Stephen leave the house even earlier than usual. Her first thought was one of blank disappointment. “Why, I thought he meant to walk down with me,” she said to herself. Her second thought was a perplexed instinct of the truth: “I wonder if he can be afraid to have his mother see him with me?” At this thought, Mercy’s face burned, and she tried to banish it; but it would not be banished, and by the time her morning duties were done, and she had set out on her walk, the matter had become quite clear in her mind.

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“I shall see him at the corner where he was yesterday,” she said.

But no Stephen was there. Spite of herself, Mercy lingered and looked back. She was grieved and she was vexed.

“Why did he say he wanted to walk with me, and then the very first morning not come?” she said, as she walked slowly into the village.

It was a cloudy day, and the clouds seemed to harmonize with Mercy’s mood. She did her errands in a half-listless way; and more than one of the tradespeople, who had come to know her voice and smile, wondered what had gone wrong with the cheery young lady. All the way home she looked vainly for Stephen at every cross-street. She fancied she heard his step behind her; she fancied she saw his tall figure in the distance. After she reached home and the expectation was over for that day, she took herself angrily to task for her folly. She reminded herself that Stephen had said “sometimes,” not “always;” and that nothing could have been more unlikely than that he should have joined her the very next day. Nevertheless, she was full of uneasy wonder how soon he would come again; and, when the next morning dawned clear and bright, her first thought as she sprang up was,—

“This is such a lovely day for a walk! He will surely come to-day.”

Again she was disappointed. Stephen left the house at a very early hour, and walked briskly away without looking back. Mercy forced herself to go through her usual routine of morning work. She was systematic almost to a fault in the arrangement of her time, and any interference with her hours was usually a severe trial of her patience. But to-day it was only by a great effort of her will that she refrained from setting out earlier than usual for the village. She walked rapidly until she approached the street where Stephen had joined her before. Then she slackened her pace, and fixed her eyes on the street. No person was to be seen in it. She walked slower and slower: she could not believe that he was not there. Then she began to fear that she had come a little too early. She turned to retrace her steps; but a sudden sense of shame withheld her, and she turned back again almost immediately, and continued her course towards the village, walking very slowly, and now and then halting and looking back. Still no Stephen. Street after street she passed: no Stephen. A sort of indignant grief swelled up in Mercy’s bosom; she was indignant with herself, with him, with circumstances, with everybody; she was unreasoning and unreasonable; she longed so to see Stephen’s face that she could not think clearly of any thing else. And yet she was ashamed of this longing. All these struggling emotions together were too much for her; tears came into her eyes; then vexation at the tears made them come all the faster; and, for the first time in her life, Mercy Philbrick pulled her veil over her face to hide that she was crying. Almost in the very moment that she had done this, she heard a quick step behind her, and Stephen’s voice calling,—

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“Oh, Mrs. Philbrick! Mrs. Philbrick! do not walk so fast. I am trying to overtake you.”

Feeling as guilty as a child detected in some forbidden spot, Mercy stood still, vainly hoping her black veil was thick enough to hide her red eyes; vainly trying to regain her composure enough to speak in her natural voice, and smile her usual smile. Vainly, indeed! What crape could blind a lover’s eyes, or what forced tone deceive a lover’s ears?

At his first sight of her face, Stephen started; at the first sound of her voice, he stood still, and exclaimed,—

“Mrs. Philbrick, you have been crying!” There was no gainsaying it, even if Mercy had not been too honest to make the attempt. She looked up mischievously at him, and tried to say lightly,—

“What then, Mr. White? Didn’t you know all women cried?”

The voice was too tremulous. Stephen could not bear it. Forgetting that they were on a public street, forgetting every thing but that Mercy was crying, he exclaimed,—

“Mercy, what is it? Do let me help you! Can’t I?”

She did not even observe that he called her “Mercy.” It seemed only natural. Without realizing the full meaning of her words, she said,—

“Oh, you have helped me now,” and threw up her veil, showing a face where smiles were already triumphant. Instinct told Stephen in the same second what she had meant, and yet had not meant to say. He dropped her hand, and said in a low voice,—

“Mercy, did you really have tears in your eyes because I did not come? Bless you, darling! I don’t dare to speak to you here. Oh, pray come down this little by-street with me.”

It was a narrow little lane behind the Brick Row into which Stephen and Mercy turned. Although it was so near the centre of the town, it had never been properly graded, but had been left like a wild bit of uneven field. One side of it was walled by the Brick Row; on the other side were only a few poverty-stricken houses, in which colored people lived. The snow lay piled in drifts here all winter, and in spring it was an almost impassable slough of mud. There was now no trodden path, only the track made by sleighs in the middle of the lane. Into this strode Stephen, in his excitement walking so fast that Mercy could hardly keep up with him. They were too much absorbed in their own sensations and in each other to realize the oddity of their appearance, floundering in the deep snow, looking eagerly in each other’s faces, and talking in a breathless and disjointed way.

“Mercy,” said Stephen, “I have been walking up and down waiting for you ever since I came out; but a man whom I could not get away from stopped me, and I had to stand still helpless and see you walk by the street, and I was afraid I could not overtake you.”

“Oh, was that it?” said Mercy, looking up timidly in his face. “I felt sure you would be there this morning, because”—

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“Because what?” said Stephen, gently.

“Because you said you would come sometimes, and I knew very well that that need not have meant this particular morning nor any particular morning; and that was what vexed me so, that I should have been silly and set my heart on it. That was what made me cry, Mr. White, I was so vexed with myself,” stoutly asserted Mercy, beginning to feel braver and more like herself.

Stephen looked her full in the face without speaking for a moment. Then,—

“May I call you Mercy?” he said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“May I say to you exactly what I am thinking?”

“Yes,” she replied again, a little more hesitatingly.

“Then, Mercy, this is what I want to say to you,” said Stephen, earnestly. “There is no reason why you and I should try to deceive each other or ourselves. I care very, very much for you, and you care very much for me. We have come very close to each other, and neither of our lives can ever be the same again. What is in store for us in all this we cannot now see; but it is certain we are very much to each other.”

He spoke more and more slowly and earnestly; his eyes fixed on the distant horizon instead of on Mercy’s face. A deep sadness gradually gathered on his countenance, and his last words were spoken more in the tone of one who felt a new exaltation of suffering than of one who felt the new ecstasy of a lover. Looking down into Mercy’s face, with a tenderness which made her very heart thrill, he said,—

“Tell me, Mercy, is it not so? Are we not very much to each other?”

The strange reticence of his tone, even more reticent than his words, had affected Mercy inexplicably: it was as if a chill wind had suddenly blown at noonday, and made her shiver in spite of full sunlight. Her tone was almost as reticent and sad as his, as she said, without raising her eyes,—

“I think it is true.”

“Please look up at me, Mercy,” said Stephen. “I want to feel sure that you are not sorry I care so much for you.”

“How could I be sorry?” exclaimed Mercy, lifting her eyes suddenly, and looking into Stephen’s face with all the fulness of affection of her glowing nature. “I shall never be sorry.”

“Bless you for saying that, dear!” said Stephen, solemnly,—“bless you. You should never be sorry a moment in your life, if I could help it; and now, dear, I must leave you,” he said, looking uneasily about. “I ought not to have brought you into this lane. If people were to see us walking here, they would think it strange.” And, as they reached the entrance of the lane, his manner suddenly became most ceremonious; and, extending his hand to assist her over a drift of snow, he said in tones unnecessarily loud and formal, “Good-morning, Mrs. Philbrick. I am glad to have helped you through these drifts. Good-morning,” and was gone.

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Mercy stood still, and looked after him for a moment with a blank sense of bewilderment. His sudden change of tone and manner smote her like a blow. She comprehended in a flash the subterfuge in it, and her soul recoiled from it with incredulous pain. “Why should he be afraid to have people see us together? What does it mean? What reason can he possibly have?” Scores of questions like these crowded on her mind, and hurt her sorely. Her conjecture even ran so wide as to suggest the possibility of his being engaged to another woman,—some old and mistaken promise by which he was hampered. Her direct and honest nature could conceive of nothing less than this which could explain his conduct. Restlessly her imagination fastened on this solution of the problem, and tortured her in vain efforts to decide what would be right under such circumstances.

The day was a long, hard one for Mercy. The more she thought, conjectured, remembered, and anticipated, the deeper grew her perplexity. All the joy which she had at first felt in the consciousness that Stephen loved her died away in the strain of these conflicting uncertainties: and it was a grave and almost stern look with which she met him that night, when, with an eager bearing, almost radiant, he entered her door.

He felt the change at once, and, stretching both his hands towards her, exclaimed,—

“Mercy, my dear, new, sweet friend! are you not well to-night?”

“Oh, yes, thank you. I am very well,” replied Mercy, in a tone very gentle, but with a shade of reserve in it.

Stephen’s face fell. The expression of patient endurance which was habitual to it, and which Mercy knew so well, and found always so irresistibly appealing, settled again on all his features. Without speaking, he drew his chair close to the hearth, and looked steadfastly into the fire. Some minutes passed in silence. Mercy felt the tears coming again into her eyes. What was this intangible but inexorable thing which stood between this man’s soul and hers? She could not doubt that he loved her; she knew that her whole soul went out towards him with a love of which she had never before had even a conception. It seemed to her that the words he had spoken and she had received had already wrought a bond between them which nothing could hinder or harm. Why should they sit thus silent by each other’s side to-night, when so few hours ago they were full of joy and gladness? Was it the future or the past which laid this seal on Stephen’s lips? Mercy was not wont to be helpless or inert. She saw clearly, acted quickly always; but here she was powerless, because she was in the dark. She could not even grope her way in this mystery. At last Stephen spoke.

“Mercy,” he said, “perhaps you are already sorry that I care so much for you. You said yesterday you never would be.”

“Oh, no, indeed! I am not,” said Mercy. “I am very glad you care so much for me.”

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“Perhaps you have discovered that you do not care so much for me as you yesterday thought you did.”

“Oh, no, no!” replied poor Mercy, in a low tone.

Again Stephen was silent for a long time. Then he said,—

“Ever since I can remember, I have longed for a perfect and absorbing friendship. The peculiar relations of my life have prevented my even hoping for it. My father’s and my mother’s friends never could be my friends. I have lived the loneliest life a mortal man ever lived. Until I saw you, Mercy, I had never even looked on the face of a woman whom it seemed possible to me that any man could love. Perhaps, when I tell you that, you can imagine what it was to me to look on the face of a woman whom it seems to me no man could help loving. I suppose many men have loved you, Mercy, and many more men will. I do not think any man has ever felt for you, or ever will feel for you, as I feel. My love for you includes every love the heart can know,—the love of father, brother, friend, lover. Young as I am, you seem to me like my child, to be taken care of; and you seem like my sister, to be trusted and loved; and like my friend, to be leaned upon. You see what my life is. You see the burden which I must carry, and which none can share. Do you think that the friendship I can give you can be worth what it would ask? I feel withheld and ashamed as I speak to you. I know how little I can do, how little I can offer. To fetter you by a word would be base and selfish; but, oh, Mercy, till life brings you something better than my love, let me love you, if it is only till to-morrow!”

Mercy listened to each syllable Stephen spoke, as one in a wilderness, flying for his life from pursuers, would listen to every sound which could give the faintest indications which way safety might lie. If she had listened dispassionately to such words, spoken to any other woman, her native honesty of soul would have repelled them as unfair. But every instinct of her nature except the one tender instinct of loving was disarmed and blinded,—disarmed by her affection for Stephen, and blinded by her profound sympathy for his suffering.

She fixed her eyes on him as intently as if she would read the very thoughts of his heart.

“Do you understand me, Mercy?” he said.

“I think I do,” she replied in a whisper.

“If you do not now, you will as time goes on,” he continued. “I have not a thought I am unwilling for you to know; but there are thoughts which it would be wrong for me to put into words. I stand where I stand; and no mortal can help me, except you. You can help me infinitely. Already the joy of seeing you, hearing you, knowing that you are near, makes all my life seem changed. It is not very much for you to give me, Mercy, after all, out of the illimitable riches of your beauty, your brightness, your spirit, your

strength,—just a few words, just a few smiles, just a little love,—for the few days, or it may be years, that fate sets us by each other's side? And you, too, need a friend, Mercy. Your duty to another has brought you where you are singularly alone, for the time being, just as my duty to another has placed me where I must be singularly alone. Is it not a strange chance which has thus brought us together?"

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“I do not believe any thing is chance,” murmured Mercy. “I must have been sent here for something.”

“I believe you were, dear,” said Stephen, “sent here for my salvation. I was thinking last night that, no matter if my life should end without my ever knowing what other men call happiness, if I must live lonely and alone to the end, I should still have the memory of you,—of your face, of your hand, and the voice in which you said you cared for me. O Mercy, Mercy! you have not the least conception of what you are to me!” And Stephen stretched out both his arms to her, with unspeakable love in the gesture.

So swiftly that he had not the least warning of her intention, Mercy threw herself into them, and laid her head on his shoulder, sobbing. Shame filled her soul, and burned in her cheeks, when Stephen, lifting her as he would a child, and kissing her forehead gently, placed her again in her chair, and said,—

“My darling, I cannot let you do that. I will never ask from you any thing that you can by any possibility come to regret at some future time. I ought perhaps to be unselfish enough not to ask from you any thing at all. I did not mean to; but I could not help it, and it is too late now.”

“Yes, it is too late now,” said Mercy,—“too late now.” And she buried her face in her hands.

“Mercy,” exclaimed Stephen, in a voice of anguish, “you will break my heart: you will make me wish myself dead, if you show such suffering as this. I thought that you, too, could find joy, and perhaps help, in my love, as I could in yours. If it is to give you pain and not happiness, it were better for you never to see me again. I will never voluntarily look on your face after to-night, if you wish it,—if you would be happier so.”

“Oh, no, no!” cried Mercy. Then, overwhelmed with the sudden realization of the pain she was giving to a man whom she so loved that at that moment she would have died to shield him from pain, she lifted her face, shook back the hair from her forehead, and, looking bravely into his eyes, repeated,—

“No, no! I am very selfish to feel like this. I do understand you. I understand it all; and I will help you, and comfort you all I can. And I do love you very dearly,” she added in a lower voice, with a tone of such incomparable sweetness that it took almost superhuman control on Stephen’s part to refrain from clasping her to his heart. But he did not betray the impulse, even by a gesture. Looking at her with an expression of great thankfulness, he said,—

“I believe that peace will come to us, Mercy. I believe I can do something to make you happy. To know that I love you as I do will be a great deal to you, I think.” He paused.

“Yes,” answered Mercy, “a great deal.” He went on,—

“And to know that you are perpetually helping and cheering me will be still more to you, I think. We shall know some joys, Mercy, which joyous lovers never know. Happy people do not need each other as sad people do. O Mercy, do try and remember all the time that you are the one bright thing in my life,—in my whole life.”

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“I will, Stephen, I will,” said Mercy, resolutely, her whole face glowing with the new purposes forming in her heart. It was marvellous how clear the relation between herself and Stephen began to seem to her. It was rather by her magnetic consciousness of all that he was thinking and feeling than by the literal acceptance of any thing or all things which he said. She seemed to herself to be already one with him in all his trials, burdens, perplexities; in his renunciation; in his self-sacrifice; in his loyalty of reticence; in his humility of uncomplainingness.

When she bade him “good-night,” her face was not only serene: it was serene with a certain exaltation added, as the face of one who had entered into a great steadfastness of joy. Stephen wondered greatly at this transition from the excitement and grief she had at first shown. He had yet to learn what wellsprings of strength lie in the poetic temperament.

As he stood lingering on the threshold, finding it almost impossible to turn away while the sweet face held him by the honest gaze of the loving eyes, he said,

“There will be many times, dear, when things will have to be very hard, when I shall not be able to do as you would like to have me, when you may even be pained by my conduct. Shall you trust me through it all?”

“I shall trust you till the day of my death,” said Mercy, impetuously. “One can’t take trust back. It isn’t a gift: it is a necessity.”

Stephen smiled,—a smile of sorrow rather than gladness.

“But if you thought me other than you had believed?” he said.

“I could never think you other than you are,” replied Mercy, proudly. “It is not that I ‘believe’ you. I know you. I shall trust you to the day of my death.”

Perhaps nothing could illustrate better the difference between Mercy Philbrick’s nature and Stephen White’s, between her love for him and his for her, than the fact that, after this conversation, she lay awake far into the early hours of the morning, living over every word that he had spoken, looking resolutely and even joyously into the strange future which was opening before her, and scanning with loving intentness every chance that it could possibly hold for her ministrations to him. He, on the other hand, laid his head on his pillow with a sense of dreamy happiness, and sank at once into sleep, murmuring,—

“The darling! how she does love me! She shall never regret it,—never. We can have a great deal of happiness together as it is; and if the time ever should come,” ...

Here his thoughts halted, and refused to be clothed in explicit phrase. Never once had Stephen White permitted himself to think in words, even in his most secret meditations,

“When my mother dies, I shall be free.” His fine fastidiousness would shrink from it, as from the particular kind of brutality and bad taste involved in a murder. If the whole truth could have been known of Stephen’s feeling about all crimes and sins, it would have been found to be far more a matter of taste than of principle, of instinct than of conviction.

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Surely never in this world did love link together two souls more diametrically opposite than Mercy Philbrick's and Stephen White's. It needed no long study or especial insight into character to know which of the two would receive the more and suffer the less, in the abnormal and unfortunate relation on which they had entered. But no presentiment warned Mercy of what lay before her. She was like a traveller going into a country whose language he has never heard, and whose currency he does not understand. However eloquent he may be in his own land, he is dumb and helpless here; and of the fortune with which he was rich at home he is robbed at every turn by false exchanges which impose on his ignorance. Poor Mercy! Vaguely she felt that life was cruel to Stephen and to her; but she accepted its cruelty to her as an inevitable part of her oneness with him. Whatever he had to bear she must bear too, especially if he were helped by her sharing the burden. And her heart glowed with happiness, recalling the expression with which he had said,—

"Remember, Mercy, you are the one bright thing in my life."

She understood, or thought she understood, precisely the position in which he was placed.

"Very possibly he has even promised his mother," she said to herself, "even promised her he would never be married. It would be just like her to exact such a promise from him, and never think any thing of it. And, even if he has not, it is all the same. He knows very well no human being could live in the house with her, to say nothing of his being so terribly poor. Poor, dear Stephen! to think of our little rent being more than half his income! Oh, if there were only some way in which I could contrive to give him money without his knowing it."

If any one had said to Mercy at this time: "It was not honorable in this man, knowing or feeling that he could not marry you, to tell you of his love, and to allow you to show him yours for him. He is putting you in a false position, and may be blighting your whole life," Mercy would have repelled the accusation most indignantly. She would have said: "He has never asked me for any such love as that. He told me most honestly in the very beginning just how it was. He always said he would never fetter me by a word; and, once when I forgot myself for a moment, and threw myself into his very arms, he only kissed my forehead as if I were his sister, and put me away from him almost with a reproof. No, indeed! he is the very soul of honor. It is I who choose to love him with all my soul and all my strength. Why should not a woman devote her life to a man without being his wife, if she chooses, and if he so needs her? It is just as sacred and just as holy a bond as the other, and holier, too; for it is more unselfish. If he can give up the happiness of being a husband and father, for the sake of his duty to his mother, cannot I give up the happiness of being a wife and mother, for the sake of my affection and duty towards him?"

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It looked very plain to Mercy in these first days. It looked right, and it seemed very full of joy. Her life seemed now rounded and complete. It had a ruling motive, without which no life is satisfying; and that motive was the highest motive known to the heart,—-the desire to make another human being perfectly happy. All hindrances and difficulties, all drawbacks and sacrifices, seemed less than nothing to her. When she saw Stephen, she was happy because she saw him; and when she did not see him, she was happy because she had seen him, and would soon see him again. Past, present, and future all melt into one great harmonious whole under the spell of love in a nature like Mercy's. They are like so many rooms in one great house; and in one or the other the loved being is always to be found, always at home, can never depart! Could one be lonely for a moment in such a house?

Mercy's perpetual and abiding joy at times terrified Stephen. It was a thing so foreign to his own nature that it seemed to him hardly natural. Calm acquiescence he could understand,—serene endurance: he himself never chafed at the barriers, little or great, which kept him from Mercy. But there were many days when his sense of deprivation made him sad, subdued, and quiet. When, in these moods, he came into Mercy's presence, and found her radiant, buoyant, mirthful even, he wondered; and sometimes he questioned. He strove to find out the secret of her joy. There seemed to him no legitimate reason for it.

"Why, to see that I make you glad, Stephen," she would say. "Is not that enough? Or even, when I cannot make you glad, just to love you is enough."

"Mercy, how did you ever come to love me?" he said once, stung by a sense of his own unworthiness. "How do you know you love me, after all?"

"How do I know I love you!" she exclaimed. "Can any one ever tell that, I wonder? I know it by this: that every thing in the whole world, even down to the smallest grass-blade, seems to me different because you are alive." She said these words with a passionate vehemence, and tears in her eyes. Then, changing in a second to a mischievous, laughing mood, she said,—

"Yes: you make all that odds to me. But let us not talk about loving each other, Stephen. That's the way children do with their flower-seeds,—keep pulling them up, to see how they grow."

That night, Mercy gave Stephen this sonnet,—the first words she had written out of the great wellspring of her love:—

"*How was it?*"

Why ask, dear one? I think I cannot tell,
More than I know how clouds so sudden lift

From mountains, or how snowflakes float and drift,
Or springs leave hills. One secret and one spell
All true things have. No sunlight ever fell
With sound to bid flowers open. Still and swift
Come sweetest things on earth.
So comes true gift
Of Love, and so we know that it is well.
Sure tokens also, like the cloud, the snow,
And silent flowing of the mountain-springs,
The new gift of true loving always brings.
In clearer light, in purer paths, we go:
New currents of deep joy in common things
We find. These are the tokens, dear, we know!

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Chapter VIII.

As the months went on, Mercy began to make friends. One person after another observed her bright face, asked who she was, and came to seek her out. “Who is that girl with fair hair and blue eyes, who, whenever you meet her in the street, always looks as if she had just heard some good news?” was asked one day. It was a noteworthy thing that this description was so instantly recognized by the person inquired of, that he had no hesitancy in replying,—

“Oh, that is a young widow from Cape Cod, a Mrs. Philbrick. She came last winter with her mother, who is an invalid. They live in the old Jacobs house with the Whites.”

Among the friends whom Mercy thus met was a man who was destined to exercise almost as powerful an influence as Stephen White over her life. This was Parson Dorrance.

Parson Dorrance had in his youth been settled as a Congregationalist minister. But his love of literature and of science was even stronger than his love of preaching the gospel; and, after a very few years, he accepted a position as professor in a small college, in a town only four miles distant from the village in which Mercy had come to live. This was twenty-five years ago. Parson Dorrance was now fifty-five years old. For a quarter of a century, his name had been the pride, and his hand had been the stay, of the college. It had had presidents of renown and professors of brilliant attainments; but Parson Dorrance held a position more enviable than all. Few lives of such simple and steadfast heroism have ever been lived. Few lives have ever so stamped the mark of their influence on a community. In the second year of his ministry, Mr. Dorrance had married a very beautiful and brilliant woman. Probably no two young people ever began married life with a fairer future before them than these. Mrs. Dorrance was as exceptionally clever and cultured a person as her husband; and she added to these rare endowments a personal beauty which is said by all who knew her in her girlhood to have been marvellous. But, as is so often the case among New England women of culture, the body had paid the cost of the mind’s estate; and, after the birth of her first child, she sank at once into a hopeless invalidism,—an invalidism all the more difficult to bear, and to be borne with, that it took the shape of distressing nervous maladies which no medical skill could alleviate. The brilliant mind became almost a wreck, and yet retained a preternatural restlessness and activity. Many regarded her condition as insanity, and believed that Mr. Dorrance erred in not giving her up to the care of those making mental disorders a specialty. But his love and patience were untiring. When her mental depression and suffering reached such a stage that she could not safely see a human face but his, he shut himself up with her in her darkened room till the crisis had passed. There were times

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when she could not close her eyes in sleep unless he sat by her side, holding her hand in his, and gently stroking it. He spent weeks of nights by her bedside in this way. At any hour of the day, a summons might come from her; and, whatever might be his engagement, it was instantly laid aside,—laid aside, too, with cheerfulness and alacrity. At times, all his college duties would be suspended on her account; and his own specialties of scientific research, in which he was beginning to win recognition even from the great masters of science in Europe, were very early laid aside for ever. It must have been a great pang to him,—this relinquishment of fame, and of what is dearer to the true scientific man than all fame, the joys of discovery; but no man ever heard from his lips an allusion to the sacrifice. The great telescope, with which he had so many nights swept the heavens, still stood in his garden observatory; but it was little used except for recreation, and for the pleasure and instruction of his boy. Yet no one would have dreamed, from the hearty joy with which he used it for these purposes, that it had ever been to him the token and the instrument of the great hope of his heart. The resolute cheer of this man's life pervaded the whole atmosphere of his house. Spite of the perpetual shadow of the invalid's darkened room, spite of the inevitable circumscribing of narrow means, Parson Dorrance's cottage was the pleasantest house in the place, was the house to which all the townspeople took strangers with pride, and was the house which strangers never forgot. There was always a new book, or a new print, or a new flower, or a new thought which the untiring mind had just been shaping; and there were always and ever the welcome and the sympathy of a man who loved men because he loved God, and who loved God with an affection as personal in its nature as the affection with which he loved a man.

Year after year, classes of young men went away from this college, having for four years looked on the light of this goodness. Said I not well that few lives have ever been lived which have left such a stamp on a community? No man could be so gross that he would utterly fail to feel its purity, no man so stupid that he could not see its grandeur of self-sacrifice; and to souls of a fibre fine enough to be touched to the quick by its exaltation, it was-a kindling fire for ever.

In the twenty-seventh year of her married life, and near the end of the twenty-fifth year of her confinement to her room, Mrs. Dorrance died. For a few months after her death, her husband seemed like a man suddenly struck blind in the midst of familiar objects. He seemed to be groping his way, to have lost all plan of daily life, so tremendous was the change involved in the withdrawal of this perpetual burden. Just as he was beginning to recover the natural tone of his mind, and to resume his old habits of work, his son sickened and died. The young man had never

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been strong: he had inherited his mother's delicacy of constitution, and her nervous excitability as well; but he had rare qualities of mind, and gave great promise as a scholar. The news of his death was a blow to every heart that loved his father. "This will kill the Parson," was said by sorrowing voices far and near. On the contrary, it seemed to be the very thing which cleared the atmosphere of his whole life, and renewed his vigor and energy. He rose up from the terrible grief more majestic than ever, as some grand old tree, whose young shoots and branches have been torn away by fierce storms, seems to lift its head higher than before, and to tower in its stripped loneliness above all its fellows. All the loving fatherhood of his nature was spent now on the young people of his town; and, by young people, I mean all between the ages of four and twenty. There was hardly a baby that did not know Parson Dorrance, and stretch out its arms to him; there was hardly a young man or a young woman who did not go to him with troubles or perplexities. You met him, one day, drawing a huge sledful of children on the snow; another day, walking in the centre of a group of young men and maidens, teaching them as he walked. They all loved him as a comrade, and reverenced him as a teacher. They wanted him at their picnics; and, whenever he preached, they flocked to hear him. It was a significant thing that his title of Professor was never heard. From first to last, he was always called "Parson Dorrance;" and there were few Sundays on which he did not preach at home or abroad. It was one of the forms of his active benevolence. If a poor minister broke down and needed rest, Parson Dorrance preached for him, for one month or for three, as the case required. If a little church were without a pastor and could not find one, or were in debt and could not afford to hire one, it sent to ask Parson Dorrance to supply the pulpit; and he always went. Finally, not content with these ordinary and established channels for preaching the gospel, he sought out for himself a new one. About eight miles from the village there was a negro settlement known as "The Cedars." It was a wild place. Great outcropping ledges of granite, with big boulders toppling over, and piled upon each other, and all knotted together by the gnarled roots of ancient cedar-trees, made the place seem like ruins of old fortresses. There were caves of great depth, some of them with two entrances, in which, in the time of the fugitive slave law, many a poor hunted creature had had safe refuge. Besides the cedar-trees, there were sugar-maples and white birches; and the beautiful rock ferns grew all over the ledges in high waving tufts, almost as luxuriantly as if they were in the tropics; so that the spot, wild and fierce as it was, had great beauty. Many of the fugitive slaves had built themselves huts here: some lived in the caves. A few poor and vicious whites had joined them, intermarried with them, and from these

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had gradually grown up a band of as mongrel, miserable vagabonds as is often seen. They were the terror of the neighborhood. Except for their supreme laziness, they would have been as dangerous as brigands; for they were utter outlaws. No man cared for them; and they cared for no man. Parson Dorrance's heart yearned over these poor Ishmaelites; and he determined to see if they were irreclaimable. The first thing that his townsmen knew of his plan was his purchase of several acres of land near "The Cedars." He bought it very cheap, because land in that vicinity was held to be worthless for purposes of cultivation. Unless the crops were guarded night and day, they were surreptitiously harvested by foragers from "The Cedars." Then it was found out that Parson Dorrance was in the habit of driving over often to look at his new property. Gradually, the children became used to his presence, and would steal out and talk to him. Then he carried over a small microscope, and let them look through it at insects; and before long there might have been seen, on a Sunday afternoon, a group of twenty or thirty of the outcasts gathered round the Parson, while he talked to them as he had talked to the children. Then he told them that, if they would help, he would build a little house on his ground, and put some pictures and maps in it for them, and come over every Sunday and talk to them; and they set to work with a will. Very many were the shrugs and smiles over "Parson Dorrance's Chapel at 'The Cedars.'" But the chapel was built; and the Parson preached in it to sometimes seventy-five of the outlaws. The next astonishment of the Parson's friends was on finding him laying out part of his new land in a nursery of valuable young fruit-trees and flowering shrubs. Then they said,—

"Really, the Parson is mad! Does he think he has converted all those negroes, so that they won't steal fruit?" And, when they met the Parson, they laughed at him. "Come, come, Parson," they said, "this is carrying the thing a little too far, to trust a fruit orchard over there by 'The Cedars.'"

Parson Dorrance's eyes twinkled.

"I know the boys better than you do," he replied. "They will not steal a single pear."

"I'd like to wager you something on that," said the friend.

"Well, I couldn't exactly take such a wager," answered the Parson, "because you see I know the boys won't steal the fruit."

Somewhat vexed at the obstinacy of the Parson's faith, his friend exclaimed, "I'd like to know how you can know that beforehand?"

Parson Dorrance loved a joke.

“Neighbor,” said he, “I wish I could in honor have let you wager me on that. I’ve given the orchard to the boys. The fruit’s all their own.”

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This was the man whom Mercy Philbrick met early in her first summer at Penfield. She had heard him preach twice, and had been so greatly impressed by his words and by his face that she longed very much to know him. She had talked with Stephen about him, but had found that Stephen did not sympathize at all in her enthusiasm. "The people over at Danby are all crazy about him, I think," said Stephen. "He is a very good man no doubt, and does no end of things for the college boys, that none of the other professors do. But I think he is quixotic and sentimental; and all this stuff about those niggers at the Cedars is moonshine. They'd pick his very pocket, I daresay, any day; and he'd never suspect them. I know that lot too well. The Lord himself couldn't convert them."

"Oh, Stephen! I think you are wrong," replied Mercy. "Parson Dorrance is not sentimental, I am sure. His sermons were clear and logical and terse,—not a waste word in them; and his mouth and chin are as strong as an old Roman's."

Stephen looked earnestly at Mercy. "Mercy," said he, "I wonder if you would love me better if I were a preacher, and could preach clear, logical, and terse sermons?"

Mercy was impatient. Already the self-centring of Stephen's mind, his instant reverting from most trains of thought to their possible bearing on her love for him, had begun to irritate her. It was so foreign to her own unconscious, free-souled acceptance and trust.

"Stephen," she exclaimed, "I wish you wouldn't say such things. Besides seeming to imply a sort of distrust of my love for you, they are illogical; and you know there is nothing I hate like bad logic."

Stephen made no reply. The slightest approach to a disagreement between Mercy and himself gave him great pain and a sense of terror; and he took refuge instantly behind his usual shield of silence. This also was foreign to Mercy's habit and impulse. When any thing went wrong, it was Mercy's way to speak out honestly; to have the matter set in all its lights, until it could reach its true one. She hated mystery; she hated reticence; she hated every thing which fell short of full and frank understanding of each other.

"Oh, Stephen!" she used to say often, "it is bad enough for us to be forced into keeping things back from the world. Don't let us keep any thing back from each other."

Poor Mercy! the days were beginning to be hard for her. Her face often wore a look of perplexed thought which was very new to it. Still she never wavered for a moment in her devotion to Stephen. If she had stood acknowledged before all the world as his wife, she could not have been any more single-hearted and unquestioning in her loyalty.

It was at a picnic in which the young people of both Danby and Penfield had joined that Mercy met Parson Dorrance. No such gathering was ever thought complete without the Parson's presence. Again and again one might hear it said in the preliminary

discussion: “But we must find out first what day Parson Dorrance can go. It won’t be any fun without him!”

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Until Mercy came, Stephen White had rarely been asked to the pleasurings of the young people in Penfield. There was a general impression that he did not care for things of that sort. His manner was wrongly interpreted, however: it was really only the constraint born of the feeling that he was out of his place, or that nobody wanted him. He watched in silent wonder the cordial way in which, it seemed to him, that Mercy talked with everybody, and made everybody feel happy.

“Oh, Mercy, how can you!” he would exclaim: “I feel so dumb, even while I am talking the fastest!”

“Why, so do I, Stephen,” said Mercy. “I am often racking my brains to think what I shall say next. Half the people I meet are profoundly uninteresting to me; and half of the other half paralyze me at first sight, and I feel like such a hypocrite all the time; but, oh, what a pleasure it is to talk with the other quarter!”

“Yes,” sighed Stephen, “you look so happy and absorbed sometimes that it makes me feel as if you had forgotten me altogether.”

“Silly boy!” laughed Mercy. “Do you want me to prove to you by a long face that I am remembering you?—Darling,” she added, “at those very times when you see me seem so absorbed and happy in company, I am most likely thinking about the last time you looked into my face, or the next time you will.”

And for once Stephen was satisfied.

The picnic at which Mercy met Parson Dorrance had taken place on a mountain some six miles south-west of Penfield. This mountain was the western extremity of the range of which I have before spoken; and at its base ran the river which made the meadow-lands of Penfield and Danby so beautiful. Nowhere in America is there a lovelier picture than these meadow-lands, seen from the top of this mountain which overhangs them. The mountain is only about twenty-five hundred feet high: therefore, one loses no smallest shade of color in the view; even the difference between the green of broom-corn and clover records itself to the eye looking down from the mountain-top. As far as one can see to northward the valley stretches in bands and belts and spaces of varied tints of green. The river winds through it in doubling curves, and looks from the height like a line of silver laid in loops on an enamelled surface. To the east and the west rise the river terraces, higher and higher, becoming, at last, lofty and abrupt hills at the horizon.

When Parson Dorrance was introduced to Mercy, she was alone on a spur of rock which jutted out from the mountain-side and overhung the valley. She had wandered away from the gay and laughing company, and was sitting alone, absorbed and almost saddened by the unutterable beauty of the landscape below. Stephen had missed her, but had not yet dared to go in search of her. He imposed on himself a very rigid law in

public, and never permitted himself to do or say or even look any thing which could suggest to others the intimacy of their relations. Mercy sometimes felt this so keenly that she reproached him. “I can’t see why you should think it necessary to avoid me so,” she would say. “You treat me exactly as if I were only a common acquaintance.”

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“That is exactly what I wish to have every one believe you to be, Mercy,” Stephen would reply with emphasis. “That is the only safe course. Once let people begin to associate our names together, and there is no limit to the things they would say. We cannot be too careful. That is one thing you must let me be the judge of, dear. You cannot understand it as I do. So long as I am without the right or the power to protect you, my first duty is to shield you from any or all gossip linking our names together.”

Mercy felt the justice of this; and yet to her there seemed also a sort of injustice involved in it. She felt stung often, and wounded, in spite of all reasoning with herself that she had no cause to do so, that Stephen was but doing right. So inevitable and inextricable are pains and dilemmas when once we enter on the paths of concealment.

Parson Dorrance was introduced to Mercy by Mrs. Hunter, a young married woman, who was fast becoming her most intimate friend. Mrs. Hunter’s father had been settled as the minister of a church in Penfield, in the same year that Parson Dorrance had taken his professorship in Danby, and the two men had been close friends from that day till the day of Mr. Adams’s death. Little Lizzy Adams had been Parson Dorrance’s pet when she lay in her cradle. He had baptized her; and, when she came to woman’s estate, he had performed the ceremony which gave her in marriage to Luke Hunter, the most promising young lawyer in the county.

She had always called Parson Dorrance her uncle, and her house in Penfield was his second home. It had been Mrs. Hunter’s wish for a long time that he should see and know her new friend, Mercy. But Mercy was very shy of seeing the man for whom she felt such reverence, and had steadily refused to meet him. It was therefore with a certain air of triumphant satisfaction that Mrs. Hunter led Parson Dorrance to the rock where Mercy was sitting, and exclaimed,—

“There, Uncle Dorrance! here she is!”

Parson Dorrance did not wait for any farther introduction; but; holding out both his hands to Mercy, he said in a deep, mellow voice, and with a tone which had a benediction in it,—

“I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Philbrick. My child Lizzy here has been telling me about you for a long time. You know I’m the same as a father to her; so you can’t escape me, if you are going to be her friend.”

Mercy looked up half-shamefacedly and half-archly, and replied,—

“It was not that I wanted to escape you; but I wanted you to escape me.” She perceived that the Parson had been told of her refusals to meet him. Then they all sat down again on the jutting rock; and Mercy, leaning forward with her hands clasped on her knees, fixed her eyes on Parson Dorrance’s face, and drank in every word that he said. He

had a rare faculty of speaking with the greatest simplicity, both of language and manner. It was impossible

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not to feel at ease in his presence. It was impossible not to tell him all that he asked. Before you knew it, you were speaking to him of your own feelings, tastes, the incidents of your life, your plans and purposes, as if he were a species of father confessor. He questioned you so gently, yet with such an air of right; he listened so observantly and sympathetically. He did not treat Mercy Philbrick as a stranger; for Mrs. Hunter had told him already all she knew of her friend's life, and had showed him several of Mercy's poems, which had surprised him much by their beauty, and still more by their condensation of thought. They seemed to him almost more masculine than feminine; and he had unconsciously anticipated that in seeing Mercy he would see a woman of masculine type. He was greatly astonished. He could not associate this slight, fair girl, with a child's honesty and appeal in her eyes, with the forceful words he had read from her pen. He pursued his conversation with her eagerly, seeking to discover the secret of her style, to trace back the poetry from its flower to its root. It was an astonishment to Mercy to find herself talking about her own verses with this stranger whom she so reverenced. But she felt at once as if she had sat at his feet all her life, and had no right to withhold any thing from her master.

"I suppose, Mrs. Philbrick, you have read the earlier English poets a great deal, have you not?" he said. "I infer so from the style of some of your poems."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Mercy, in honest vehemence. "I have read hardly any thing, Mr. Dorrance. I know Herbert a little; but most of the old English poets I have never even seen. I have never lived where there were any books till now."

"You love Wordsworth, I hope," he said inquiringly.

Mercy turned very red, and answered in a tone of desperation, "I've tried to. Mr. Allen said I must. But I can't. I don't care any thing about him." And she looked at the Parson with the air of a culprit who has confessed a terrible misdemeanor.

"Ah," he replied, "you have not then reached the point in the journey at which one sees him. It is only a question of time: one comes of a sudden into the presence of Wordsworth, as a traveller finds some day, upon a well-known road, a grand cathedral, into which he turns aside and worships, and wonders how it happens that he never before saw it. You will tell me some day that this has happened to you. It is only a question of time."

Just as Parson Dorrance pronounced the last words, they were echoed by a laughing party who had come in search of him. "Yes, yes, only a question of time," they said; "and it is our time now, Parson. You must come with us. No monopoly of the Parson allowed, Mrs. Hunter," and they carried him off, joining hands around him and singing the old college song, "Gaudeamus igitur."

Stephen, who had joined eagerly in the proposal to go in search of the Parson, remained behind, and made a sign to Mercy to stay with him. Sitting down by her side, he said gloomily,—

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“What were you talking about when we came up? Your face looked as if you were listening to music.”

“About Wordsworth,” said Mercy. “Parson Dorrance said such a beautiful thing about him. It was like music, like far off music,” and she repeated it to Stephen. “I wonder if I shall ever reach that cathedral,” she added.

“Well, I’ve never reached it,” said Stephen, “and I’m a good deal older than you. I think two thirds of Wordsworth’s poetry is imbecile, absolutely imbecile.”

Mercy was too much under the spell of Parson Dorrance’s recent words to sympathize in this; but she had already learned to avoid dissent from Stephen’s opinions, and she made no reply. They were sitting on the edge of a great fissure in the mountain. Some terrible convulsion must have shaken the huge mass to its centre, to have made such a rift. At the bottom ran a stream, looking from this height like little more than a silver thread. Shrubs and low flowering things were waving all the way down the sides of the abyss, as if nature had done her best to fill up the ugly wound. Many feet below them, on a projecting rock, waved one little white blossom, so fragile it seemed as if each swaying motion in the breeze must sever it from the stem.

“Oh, see the dainty, brave little thing!” exclaimed Mercy. “It looks as if it were almost alone in space.”

“I will get it for you,” said Stephen; and, before Mercy could speak to restrain him, he was far down the precipice. With a low ejaculation of terror, Mercy closed her eyes. She would not look on Stephen in such peril. She did not move nor open her eyes, until he stood by her side, exclaiming, “Why, Mercy! my darling, do not look so! There was no danger,” and he laid the little plant in her hand. She looked at it in silence for a moment, and then said,—

“Oh, Stephen! to risk your life for such a thing as that! The sight of it will always make me shudder.”

“Then I will throw it away,” said Stephen, endeavoring to take it from her hand; but she held it only the tighter, and whispered,—

“No! oh, what a moment! what a moment! I shall keep this flower as long as I live!” And she did,—kept it wrapped in a paper, on which were written the following lines:—

A *moment*.

Lightly as an insect floating
  In the sunny summer air,
Waved one tiny snow-white blossom,
From a hidden crevice growing,

Dainty, fragile-leaved, and fair,
Where great rocks piled up like mountains,
Well-nigh to the shining heavens,
Rose precipitous and bare,
With a pent-up river rushing,
Foaming as at boiling heat
Wildly, madly, at their feet.

Hardly with a ripple stirring
The sweet silence by its tone,
Fell a woman's whisper lightly,—
"Oh, the dainty, dauntless blossom!
What deep secret of its own
Keeps it joyous and light-hearted,
O'er this dreadful chasm swinging,
Unsupported and alone,
With no help or cheer from kindred?
Oh, the dainty, dauntless thing,
Bravest creature of the spring!"

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Then the woman saw her lover,
  For one instant saw his face,
Down the precipice slow sinking,
Looking up at her, and sending
  Through the shimmering, sunny space
Look of love and subtle triumph,
As he plucked the tiny blossom
  In its airy, dizzy place,—
Plucked it, smiling, as if danger
  Were not danger to the hand
  Of true lover in love's land.

In her hands her face she buried,
  At her heart the blood grew chill;
In that one brief moment crowded
The whole anguish of a lifetime,
  Made her every pulse stand still.
Like one dead she sat and waited,
Listening to the stirless silence,
  Ages in a second, till,
Lightly leaping, came her lover,
  And, still smiling, laid the sweet
  Snow-white blossom at her feet.

"O my love! my love!" she shuddered,
  "Bloomed that flower by Death's own spell?
Was thy life so little moment,
Life and love for that one blossom
  Wert thou ready thus to sell?
O my precious love! for ever
I shall keep this faded token
  Of the hour which came to tell,
In such voice I scarce dared listen,
  How thy life to me had grown
  So much dearer than my own!"

On their way home from the picnic late in the afternoon, they came at the base of the mountain to a beautiful spot where two little streams met. The two streams were in sight for a long distance: one shining in a green meadow; the other leaping and foaming down a gorge in the mountain-side. A little inn, which was famous for its beer, stood on the meadow space, bounded by these two streams; and the picnic party halted before its door. While the white foamy glasses were clinked and tossed, Mercy ran down the narrow strip of land at the end of which the streams met. A little thicket of willows grew there. Standing on the very edge of the shore, Mercy broke off a willow

wand, and dipped it to right in the meadow stream, to the left in the stream from the gorge. Then she brought it back wet and dripping.

“It has drank of two waters,” she cried, holding it up. “Oh, you ought to see how wonderful it is to watch their coming together at that point! For a little while you can trace the mountain water by itself in the other: then it is all lost, and they pour on together.” This picture, also, she set in a frame of verse one day, and gave it to Stephen.

On a green point of sunny land,
  Hemmed in by mountains stern and high,
I stood alone as dreamers stand,
  And watched two streams that hurried by.

One ran to east, and one to south;
  They leaped and sparkled in the sun;
They foamed like racers at the mouth,
  And laughed as if the race were won.

Just on the point of sunny land
  A low bush stood, like umpire fair,
Waving green banners in its hand,
  As if the victory to declare.

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Ah, victory won, but not by race!
  Ah, victory by a sweeter name!
To blend for ever in embrace,
  Unconscious, swift, the two streams came.

One instant, separate, side by side
  The shining currents seemed to pour;
Then swept in one tumultuous tide,
  Swifter and stronger than before.

O stream to south! O stream to east!
  Which bears the other, who shall see?
Which one is most, which one is least,
  In this surrendering victory?

To that green point of sunny land,
  Hemmed in by mountains stern and high,
I called my love, and, hand in hand,
  We watched the streams that hurried by.

Chapter IX.

It was a turning-point in Mercy's life when she met Parson Dorrance. Here at last was a man who had strength enough to influence her, culture enough to teach her, and the firm moral rectitude which her nature so inexorably demanded. During the first few weeks of their acquaintance, Mercy was conscious of an insatiable desire to be in his presence: it was an intellectual and a moral thirst. Nothing could be farther removed from the absorbing consciousness which passionate love feels of its object, than was this sentiment she felt toward Parson Dorrance. If he had been a being from another planet, it could not have been more so. In fact, it was very much as if another planet had been added to her world,—a planet which threw brilliant light into every dark corner of this one. She questioned him eagerly. Her old doubts and perplexities, which Mr. Allen's narrower mind had been unable to comprehend or to help, were now set at rest and cleared up by a spiritual vision far keener than her own. Her mind was fed and trained by an intellect so much stronger than her own that it compelled her assent and her allegiance. She came to him almost as a maiden, in the ancient days of Greece, would have gone to the oracle of the holiest shrine. Parson Dorrance in his turn was as much impressed by Mercy; but he was never able to see in her simply the pupil, the questioner. To him she was also a warm and glowing personality, a young and beautiful woman. Parson Dorrance's hair was white as snow; but his eyes were as keen and dark as in his youth, his step as firm, and his pulse as quick. Long before he dreamed of such a thing, he might have known, if he had taken counsel of his heart, that Mercy was becoming to him the one woman in the world. There was always this peculiarity in

Mercy's influence upon all who came to love her. She was so unique and incalculable a person that she made all other women seem by comparison with her monotonous and wearying. Intimacy with her had a subtle flavor to it, by which other flavors were dulled. The very impersonality of her enthusiasms and interests, her capacity for looking on a person for the time being merely as a representative or mouth-piece,

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so to speak, of thoughts, of ideas, of narrations, was one of her strongest charms. By reason of this, the world was often unjust to her in its comments on her manner, on her relations with men. The world more than once accused her uncharitably of flirting. But the men with whom she had friendships knew better; and now and then a woman had the insight to be just to her, to see that she was quite capable of regarding a human being as objectively as she would a flower or a mountain or a star. The blending of this trait in her with the strong capacity she had for loving individuals was singular; not more so, perhaps, than the blending of the poetic temperament with the active, energetic, and practical side of her nature.

It was not long before her name began to be mentioned in connection with Parson Dorrance's, by the busy tongues which are always in motion in small villages. It was not long, moreover, before a thought and a hope, in which both these names were allied, crept into the heart of Lizzy Hunter.

"Oh," she thought, "if only Uncle Dorrance would marry Mercy, how happy I should be, she would be, every one would be."

No suspicion of the relation in which Mercy stood to Stephen White had ever crossed Mrs. Hunter's mind. She had never known Stephen until recently; and his manner towards her had been from the outset so chilled and constrained by his unconscious jealousy of every new friend Mercy made, that she had set him down in her own mind as a dull and surly man, and rarely thought of him. And, as one of poor Mercy's many devices for keeping up with her conscience a semblance of honesty in the matter of Stephen was the entire omission of all reference to him in her conversation, nothing occurred to remind her friends of him. Parson Dorrance, indeed, had said to her one day,—

"You never speak of Mr. White, Mercy. Is he an agreeable and kind landlord?"

Mercy started, looked bewilderedly in the Parson's face, and repeated his words mechanically,—

"Landlord?" Then recollecting herself, she exclaimed, "Oh, yes! we do pay rent to him; but it was paid for the whole year in advance, and I had forgotten all about it."

Parson Dorrance had had occasion to distrust Stephen's father, and he distrusted the son. "Advance? advance?" he exclaimed. "Why did you do that, child? That was all wrong."

"Oh, no!" said Mercy, eagerly. "I had the money, and it made no difference to me; and Mr. Allen told me that Mr. White was in a great strait for money, so I was very glad to

give it to him. Such a mother is a terrible burden on a young man," and Mercy continued talking about Mrs. White, until she had effectually led the conversation away from Stephen.

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When Lizzy Hunter first began to recognize the possibility of her Uncle Dorrance's loving her dear friend Mercy, she found it very hard to refrain, in her talks with Mercy, from all allusions to such a possibility. But she knew instinctively that any such suggestion would terrify Mercy, and make her withdraw herself altogether. So she contented herself with talking to her in what she thought were safe generalizations on the subject of marriage. Lizzy Hunter was one of the clinging, caressing, caressable women, who nestle into men's affections as kittens nestle into warm corners, and from very much the same motives,—love of warmth and shelter, and of being fondled. To all these instincts in Lizzy, however, were added a really beautiful motherliness and great loyalty of affection. If the world held more such women, there would be more happy children and contented husbands.

"Mercy," said she one afternoon, earnestly, "Mercy, it makes me perfectly wretched to have you say so confidently that you will never be married. You don't know what you are talking about: you don't realize in the least what it is for a woman to live alone and homeless to the end of her days."

"I never need be homeless, dear," said Mercy. "I shall always have a home, even after mother is no longer with me; and I am afraid that is very near, she has failed so much this past summer. But, even if I were all alone, I should still keep my home."

"A house isn't a home, Mercy!" exclaimed Lizzy. Of course you can always be comfortable, so far as a roof and food go towards comfort."

"And that's a great way, my Lizzy," interrupted Mercy, laughing,—"a great way. No husband could possibly take the place of them, could he?"

"Now, Mercy, don't talk so. You know very well what I mean," replied Lizzy. "It is so forlorn for a woman not to have anybody need her, not to have anybody to love her more than he loves all the rest of the world, and not to have anybody to love herself. Oh, Mercy, I don't see how any woman lives without it!"

The tears came into Mercy's eyes. There were depths of lovingness in her soul of which a woman like Lizzy could not even dream. But she spoke in a resolute tone, and she spoke very honestly, too, when she said,—

"Well, I don't see how any woman can help living very well without it, if it doesn't come to her. I don't see how any human being—man or woman, single or married—can help being glad to be alive under any conditions. It is such a glorious thing to have a soul and a body, and to get the most out of them. Just from the purely selfish point of view, it seems to me a delight to live; and when you look at it from a higher point, and think how much each human being can do for those around him, why, then it is sublime. Look at Parson Dorrance, Lizzy! Just think of the sum of the happiness that man has created in this world! He isn't lonely. He couldn't think of such a thing."

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“Yes, he is, too,—I know he is,” said Lizzy, impetuously. “The very way he takes up my children and hugs them and kisses them shows that he longs for a home and children of his own.”

“I think not,” replied Mercy. “It is all part of the perpetual overflow of his benevolence. He can’t pass by a living creature, if it is only a dog, without a desire to give it a moment’s happiness. Of happiness for himself he never thinks, because he is on a plane above happiness,—a plane of perpetual joy.” Mercy hesitated, paused, and then went on, “I don’t mean to be irreverent, but I could never think of his needing personal ministrations to his own happiness, any more than I could think of God’s needing them. I think he is on a plane as absolutely above such needs as God is. Not so high above, but as absolutely.”

“How are you so sure God is above it?” said Lizzy, timidly. “I can’t conceive of God’s being happy if nobody loved him.”

Mercy was startled by these words from Lizzy, who rarely questioned and never philosophized. She opened her lips to reply with a hasty reiteration of her first sentiment, but the words died even before they were spoken, arrested by her sudden consciousness of the possibility of a grand truth underlying Lizzy’s instinct. If that were so, did it not lie out far beyond every fact in life, include and control them all, as the great truth of gravitation outlies and embraces the physical universe? Did God so need as well as so love the world, that he gave his only begotten Son for it? Is this what it meant to be “one with God”? Then, if the great, illimitable heart of God thus yearns for the love of his creatures, the greater the heart of a human being, the more must he yearn for a fulness of love, a completion of the cycle of bonds and joys for which he was made. From these simple words of a loving woman’s heart had flashed a great light into Mercy’s comprehension of God. She was silent for some moments; then she said solemnly,—

“That was a great thought you had then, Lizzy. I never saw it in that light before. I shall never forget it. Perhaps you are right about the Parson, too. I wonder if there is any thing he does long for? If there is, I would die to give it to him,—I know that.”

It was very near Lizzy’s lips to say, “If you would live to give it to him, it would be more to the purpose, perhaps;” but she wisely forbore and they parted in silence, Mercy absorbed in thinking of this new view of God’s relation to man, and Lizzy hoping that Mercy was thinking of Parson Dorrance’s need of a greater happiness than he possessed.

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As Mercy's circle of friends widened, and her interests enlarged and deepened, her relation to Stephen became at once easier and harder: easier, because she no longer spent so many hours alone in perplexed meditation as to the possible wrong in it; harder, because he was frequently unreasonable, jealous of the pleasure that he saw she found in others, jealous of the pleasure she gave to others,—jealous, in short, of every thing in which he was not her centre. Mercy was very patient with him. She loved him unutterably. She never forgot for an instant the quiet heroism with which he bore his hard life. As the months had gone on, she had gradually established a certain kindly familiarity with his mother; going in often to see her, taking her little gifts of flowers or fruit, and telling her of all little incidents which might amuse her. She seemed to herself in this way to be doing a little towards sharing Stephen's burden; and she also felt a certain bond to the woman who, being Stephen's mother, ought to have been hers by adoption. The more she saw of Mrs. White's tyrannical, exacting nature, the more she yearned over Stephen. Her first feeling of impatience with him, of resentment at the seeming want of manliness in such subjection, had long ago worn away. She saw that there were but two courses for him,—either to leave the house, or to buy a semblance of peace at any cost.

"Flesh and blood can't stand up agin Mis' White," said Marty one day, in an irrepressible confidence to Mercy. "An' the queerest thing is, that she'll never let go on you. There ain't nothin' to hender my goin' away any day, an' there hain't been for twenty year; but she sez I'm to stay till she dies, an' I don't make no doubt I shall. It's Mister Stephen I stay for, though, after all, more 'n 't is her. I don't believe the Lord ever made such a man."

Mercy's cheeks would burn after such a talk as this; and she would lavish upon Stephen every device of love and cheer which she could invent, to atone to him by hours, if possible, for the misery of days.

But the hours were few and far between. Stephen's days were filled with work, and his evenings were his mother's. Only after she slept did he have freedom. Just as soon as it was safe for him to leave the house, he flew to Mercy; but, oh, how meagre and pitiful did the few moments seem!

"Hardly long enough to realize that I am with you, my darling," he often said.

"But then it is every day, Stephen,—think of that," Mercy would reply, bent always on making all things easier instead of harder for him. Even the concealment, which was at times well-nigh insupportable to her, she never complained of now. She had accepted it. "And, after accepting it, I have no right to reproach him with it: it would be base," she thought.

Nevertheless, it was slowly wearing away the very foundations of her peace. The morning walks had long been given up. Mercy had been resolute about this. When she

found Stephen insisting upon going in by-ways and lanes, lest some one should see them who might mention it to his mother, when he told her that she must not speak of it to her own mother, she said firmly,—

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“This must end, Stephen. How hard it is to me to give it up you know very well. It is like the sunrise to my day, always, these moments with you. But I will not multiply concealments. It makes me guilty and ashamed all the time. Don’t urge me to any such thing; for I am not sure that too much of it would not kill my love for you. Let us be patient. Chance will do a good deal for us; but I will not plan to meet clandestinely. Whenever you can come to our house, that is different. It distresses me to have you do that and never tell of it; but that is yours and not mine, if any thing can be yours and not mine,” she added sadly. Stephen had not heard the last words.

“Kill your love for me, Mercy!” he exclaimed. “Are you really afraid of that?”

“No, not kill my love for you,” replied Mercy, “I think nothing could do that, but kill all my joy in my love for you; and that would be as terrible to you as if the love were killed. You would not know the difference, and I should not be able to make you see it.”

It was a strange thing that with all Stephen’s jealousy of Mercy’s enlarged and enlarging life, of her ever-widening circle of friends, he had no especial jealousy of Parson Dorrance. The Parson was Mercy’s only frequent visitor; and Stephen knew very well that he had become her teacher and her guide, that she referred every question to his decision, and was guided implicitly by his taste and wish in her writing and in her studies. But, when Stephen was a boy in college, Parson Dorranee had seemed to him an old man; and he now seemed venerable. Stephen could not have been freer from a lover’s jealousy of him, if he had been Mercy’s own father. Perhaps, if his instinct had been truer, it might have quickened Mercy’s. She was equally unaware of the real nature of the Parson’s regard for her. He did for her the same things he did for Lizzy, whom he called his child. He came to see her no oftener, spoke to her no more affectionately: she believed that she and Lizzy were sisters together in his fatherly heart.

When she was undeceived, the shock was very great: it was twofold,—a shock to her sense of loyalty to Stephen, a shock to her tender love for Parson Dorrance. It was true, as she had said to Lizzy, that she would have died to give him a pleasure; and yet she was forced to inflict on him the hardest of all pains. Every circumstance attending it made it harder; made it seem to Mercy always in after life, as she looked back upon it, needlessly hard,—cruelly, malignantly hard.

It was in the early autumn. The bright colors which had thrilled Mercy with such surprise and pleasure on her first arrival in Penfield were glowing again on the trees, it seemed to her brighter than before. Purple asters and golden-rod waved on the roadsides and in the fields; and blue gentians, for which Penfield was famous, were blooming everywhere. Parson Dorrance came one day to take Lizzy and Mercy over

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to his “Parish,” as he called “The Cedars.” They had often been with him there; and Mercy had been for a long time secretly hoping that he would ask her to help him in teaching the negroes. The day was one of those radiant and crystalline days peculiar to the New England autumn. On such days, joy becomes inevitable even to inert and lifeless natures: to enthusiastic and spontaneous ones, the exhilaration of the air and the sun is as intoxicating as wine. Mercy was in one of her most mirthful moods. She frolicked with the negro children, and decked their little woolly heads with wreaths of golden-rod, till they looked as fantastic as dancing monkeys. She gathered great sheaves of ferns and blue gentians and asters, until the Parson implored her to “leave a few just for the poor sun to shine on.” The paths winding among “The Cedars” were in some places thick-set with white eupatoriums, which were now in full, feathery flower, some of them so old that, as you brushed past them, a cloud of the fine thread-like petals flew in all directions. Mercy gathered branch after branch of these, but threw them away impatiently, as the flowers fell off, leaving the stems bare.

“Oh, dear!” she exclaimed. “Nature wants some seeds, I suppose; but I want flowers. What becomes of the poor flower, any way? it lives such a short while; all its beauty and grace sacrificed to the making of a seed for next year.”

“That’s the way with every thing in life, dear child,” said Parson Dorrance. “The thing that shall be is the thing for which all the powers of nature are at work. We, you and Lizzy and I, will drop off our stems presently,—I, a good deal the first, for you and Lizzy have the blessing of youth, but I am old.”

“You are not old! You are the youngest person I know,” exclaimed Mercy, impetuously. “You will never be old, Mr. Dorrance, not if you should live to be as old as—as old as the Wandering Jew!”

Mercy’s eyes were fixed intently on the Parson’s face; but she did not note the deep flush which rose to his very hair, as she said these words. She was thinking only of the glorious soul, and seeing only its shining through the outer tabernacle. Lizzy Hunter, however, saw the flush, and knew what it meant, and her heart gave a leap of joy. “Now he can see that Mercy never thinks of him as an old man, and never would,” she thought to herself; and while her hands were idly playing with her flowers and mosses, and her face looked as innocent and care-free as a baby’s, her brain was weaving plots of the most complicated devices for hastening on the future which began to look to her so assured for these two.

They were sitting on a mossy mound in the shadow of great cedar-trees. The fields around “The Cedars” were filled with low mounds, like velvet cushions: some of them were merely a mat of moss over great rocks; some of them were soft yielding masses of moss, low cornel, blueberry-bushes, wintergreen, blackberry-vines, and sweet ferns;

dainty, fragrant, crowded ovals, lovelier than any florist could ever make; white and green in the spring, when the cornels were in flower; scarlet and green and blue in the autumn, when the cornels and the blueberries were in fruit.

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Mercy was sitting on a mound which was thick-grown with the shining wintergreen. She picked a stem which had a cluster of red berries on it, and below the berries one tiny pink blossom. As she held it up, the blossom fell, leaving a tiny satin disk behind it on its stem. She took the bell and tried to fit it again on its place; then she turned it over and over, held it up to the light and looked through it. "It makes me sad," she said: "I wish I knew if the flower knows any thing about the fruit. If it were working to that end all the while, and so were content to pass on and make room, it would seem all right. But I don't want to pass on and make room! I do so like to be here!"

Parson Dorrance looked from one woman's face to the other, both young, both lovely: Lizzy's so full of placid content, unquestioning affection, and acceptance; Mercy's so full of mysterious earnestness, far-seeing vision, and interpretation.

"What a lot lies before that gifted creature," he said to himself, "if life should go wrong with her! If only I might dare to take her fate into my hands! I do not believe any one else can do for her what I could, if I were only younger." And the Parson sighed.

That night he stayed in Penfield at Lizzy's house. The next morning, on his way to Danby, he stopped to see Mercy for a moment. When he entered her door, he had no knowledge of what lay before him; he had not yet said to himself, had not yet dared to say to himself, that he would ask Mercy to be his wife. He knew that the thought of it was more and more present with him, grew sweeter and sweeter; yet he had never ceased resisting it, saying that it was impossible. That is, he had never ceased saying so in words; but his heart had ceased resisting long ago. Only that traitor which we call judgment had been keeping up a false show of resolute opinion, just to lure the beguiled heart farther and farther on in a mistaken security.

But love is like the plants. It has its appointed days for flowers and for the falling of the flowers. The vague, sweetness of the early hours and days together, the bright happiness of the first close intimacy and interchange,—these reach their destined moment, to pass on and make room for the harvest. Blessed are the lives in which all these sweet early petals float off gently and in season for the perfect setting of the holy fruit!

On this morning, when Parson Dorrance entered Mercy's room, it was already decorated as if for a festival. Every blooming thing she had brought from "The Cedars" the day before had taken its own place in the room, and looked as at home as it had looked in the fields. One of Mercy's great gifts was the gift of creating in rooms a certain look which it is hard to define. The phrase "vitalized individuality," perhaps, would come as near describing it as is possible; for it was not merely that the rooms looked unlike other rooms. Every article in them seemed to stand in the place where

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it must needs stand by virtue of its use and its quality. Every thing had a certain sort of dramatic fitness, without in the least trenching on the theatrical. Her effects were always produced with simple things, in simple ways; but they resulted in an impression of abundance and luxury. As Parson Dorrance glanced around at all the wild-wood beauty, and the wild-wood fragrance stole upon his senses, a great mastering wave of love for the woman whose hand had planned it all swept over him. He recalled Mercy's face the day before, when she had said,—

"You are the youngest person I know;" and, as she crossed the threshold of the door at that instant, he went swiftly towards her with outstretched hands, and a look on his face which, if she had seen, she could not have failed to interpret aright.

But she was used to the outstretched hands; she always put both her own in them, as simply as a child; and she was bringing to her teacher now a little poem, of which her thoughts were full. She did not look fully in his face, therefore; for it was still a hard thing for her to show him her verses.

Holding out the paper, she said shyly,—

"It had to get itself said or sung, you know,—that thought that haunted me so yesterday at 'The Cedars.' I daresay it is very bad poetry, though."

Parson Dorrance unfolded the paper, and read the following poem:—

Where?

My snowy eupatorium has dropped
Its silver threads of petals in the night;
No sound told me its blossoming had stopped;
Its seed-films flutter, silent, ghostly white:
  No answer stirs the shining air,
    As I ask, "Where?"

Beneath the glossy leaves of wintergreen
Dead lily-bells lie low, and in their place
A rounded disk of pearly pink is seen,
Which tells not of the lily's fragrant grace:
  No answer stirs the shining air,
    As I ask "Where?"

This morning's sunrise does not show to me
Seed-film or fruit of my sweet yesterday;
Like falling flowers, to realms I cannot see

Its moments floated silently away:
No answer stirs the shining air,
As I ask, “Where?”

As he read the last verse, his face altered. Mercy was watching him.

“I thought you wouldn’t like the last verse,” she said eagerly. “But, indeed, it doesn’t mean doubt. I know very well no day dies; but we can’t see the especial good of each single day by itself. That is all I meant.”

Parson Dorrance came closer to Mercy: they were both standing. He laid one hand on her’ head, and said,—

“Child, it was a ‘sweet yesterday’ wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mercy, still absorbed in the thought of the poem. “The day was as sweet as the flowers. But all days are heavenly sweet out of doors with you and Lizzy,” she continued, lifting one hand, and laying it caressingly on the hand which was stroking her hair.

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“O Mercy! Mercy! couldn’t I make all days sweet for you? Come to me, darling, and let me try!” came from Parson Dorrance’s lips in hurried and husky tones.

Mercy looked at him for one second in undisguised terror and bewilderment. Then she uttered a sharp cry, as of one who had suddenly got a wound, and, burying her face in her hands, sank into a chair and began to cry convulsively.

Parson Dorrance walked up and down the room. He dared not speak. He was not quite sure what Mercy’s weeping meant; so hard is it, for a single moment, to wrench a great hope out of a man’s heart. But, as she continued sobbing, he understood. Unselfish to the core, his first thought was, even now, “Alas! now she will never let me do any thing more for her. Oh, how shall I win her back to trust me as a father again?”

“Mercy!” he said. Mercy did not answer nor look up.

“Mercy!” he repeated in a firmer tone. “Mercy, my child, look up at me!”

Docile from her long habit and from her great love, Mercy looked up, with the tears streaming. As soon as she saw Parson Dorrance’s face, she burst again into more violent crying, and sobbed out incoherently,—

“Oh! I never knew it. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Hush, dear! Hush!” said the Parson, in a voice of tender authority. “I have done wrong; and you must forgive me, and forget it. You are not in the least to blame. It is I who ought to have known that you could never think of me as any thing but a father.”

“Oh! it is not that,” sobbed Mercy, vehemently,—“it is not that at all! But it wouldn’t be right.”

Parson Dorrance would not have been human if Mercy’s vehement “It is not that,—it is not that!” had not fallen on his ear gratefully, and made hope stir in his heart again. But her evident grief was too great for the hope to last a moment.

“You may not know why it seems so wrong to you, dear child,” he continued; “but that is the real reason. There could be no other.” He paused. Mercy shuddered, and opened her lips to speak again; but the words refused to be uttered. This was the supreme moment of pain. If she could but have said,—

“I loved some one else long before I saw you. I was not my own. If it had not been for that, I should have loved you, I know I should!” Even in her tumult of suffering, she was distinctly conscious of all this. The words “I could have loved him, I know I could! I can’t bear to have him think it is because he is so old,” went clamoring in her heart, pleading to be said; but she dared not say them.

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Tenderly and patiently Parson Dorrance endeavored to soothe her, to convince her that his words sprung from a hasty impulse which he would be able wholly to put aside and forget. The one thing that he longed now to do, the only reparation that he felt was left for him to make to her, was to enable her, if possible, to look on him as she had done before. But Mercy herself made this more difficult. Suddenly wiping her tears, she looked very steadily into his face, and said slowly,—"It is not of the least use, Mr. Dorrance, for you to say this sort of thing to me. You can't deceive me. I know exactly how you love me, and how you always will love me. And, oh, I wish I were dead! It can never be any thing but pain to you to see me,—never," and she wept more bitterly than before.

"You do not know me, Mercy," replied the Parson, speaking as slowly as she had done. "All my life has been one long sacrifice of my own chief preferences. It is not hard for me to do it."

Mercy clasped her hands tighter, and groaned,—

"Oh, I know it! I know it! and I said you were on a plane above all thought of personal happiness."

The Parson looked bewildered, but went on,—

"You do love me, my child, very dearly, do you not?"

"Oh, you know I do!" cried Mercy. "You know I do!"

"Yes, I know you do, or I should not have said that. You know I am all alone in the world, do you not?"

"Yes," moaned Mercy.

"Very well. Now remember that you and Lizzy are my two children, and that the greatest happiness I can have, the greatest help in my loneliness, is the love of my two daughters. You will not refuse me this help, will you? You will let me be just as I was before, will you not?"

Mercy did not answer.

"Will you try, Mercy?" he said in a tone almost of the old affectionate authority; and Mercy again moaned rather than said,—

"Yes."

Then Parson Dorrance kissed her hair where his hand had lain a few moments before, and said,—

“Now I must go. Good-by, my child.”

But Mercy did not look up; and he closed the door gently, leaving her sitting there bowed and heart-stricken, in the little room so gay with the bright flowers she had gathered on her “sweet yesterday.”

Chapter X.

The winter set in before its time, and with almost unprecedented severity. Early in the last week in November, the whole country was white with snow, the streams were frozen solid, and the cold was intense. Week after week the mercury ranged from zero to ten, fifteen, and even twenty below, and fierce winds howled night and day. It was a terrible winter for old people. They dropped on all sides, like leaves swept off of trees in autumn gales. It was startling to read the death records in the newspapers, so large a proportion of them were of men and women past sixty.

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Mrs. Carr had been steadily growing feebler all summer; but the change had seemed to Mercy to be more mental than physical, and she had been in a measure blinded to her mother's real condition. With the increase of childishness and loss of memory had come an increased gentleness and love of quiet, which partially disguised the loss of strength. She would sit in her chair from morning till night, looking out of the window or watching the movements of those around her, with an expression of perfect placidity on her face. When she was spoken to, she smiled, but did not often speak. The smile was meaningless and yet infinitely pathetic: it was an infant's smile on an aged face; the infant's heart and infant's brain had come back. All the weariness, all the perplexity, all the sorrow, had gone from life, had slipped away from memory. This state had come on so gradually that even Mercy hardly realized the extent of it. The silent smile or the gentle, simple ejaculations with which her mother habitually replied meant more to her than they did to others. She did not comprehend how little they really proved a full consciousness on her mother's part; and she was unutterably shocked, when, on going to her bedside one morning, she found her unable to move, and evidently without clear recognition of any one's face. The end had begun; the paralysis which had so slowly been putting the mind to rest had prostrated the body also. It was now only a question of length of siege, of how much vital force the system had hoarded up. Lying helpless in bed, the poor old woman was as placid and gentle as before. She never murmured nor even stirred impatiently. She seemed unconscious of any weariness. The only emotion she showed was when Mercy left the room; then she would cry silently till Mercy returned. Her eyes followed Mercy constantly, as a little babe's follow its mother; and she would not take a mouthful of food from any other hand.

It was the very hardest form of illness for Mercy to bear. A violent and distressing disease, taxing her strength, her ingenuity to their utmost every moment, would have been comparatively nothing to her. To sit day after day, night after night, gazing into the senseless yet appealing eyes of this motionless being, who had literally no needs except a helpless animal's needs of food and drink; who clung to her with the irrational clinging of an infant, yet would never know even her name again,—it was worse than the chaining of life to death. As the days wore on, a species of terror took possession of Mercy. It seemed to her that this silent watchful, motionless creature never had been her mother,—never had been a human being like other human beings. As the old face grew more and more haggard, and the old hands more and more skinny and claw-like, and the traces of intellect and thought more and more faded away from the features, the horror deepened, until Mercy feared that her own brain must be giving way.

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She revolted from the very thought of herself for having such a feeling towards her mother. Every instinct of loyalty in her deeply loyal nature rose up indignantly against her. She would reiterate to herself the word, “Mother! mother! mother!” as she sat gazing with a species of horror-stricken fascination into the meaningless face. But she could not shake off the feeling. Her nerves were fast giving way under the strain, and no one could help her. If she left the room or the house, the consciousness that the helpless creature was lying silently weeping for lack of the sight of her pursued her like a presence. She saw the piteous old face on the pillow, and the slow tears trickling down the cheeks, just as distinctly as if she were sitting by the bed. On the whole, the torture of staying was less than the torture of being away; and for weeks together she did not leave the house. Sometimes a dull sense of relief came to her in the thought that by this strange confinement she was escaping many things which would have been hard. She rarely saw Stephen except for a few moments late in the evening. He had ventured into Mrs. Carr’s room once or twice; but his presence seemed to disturb her, the only presence that had done so. She looked distressed, made agonizing efforts to speak, and with the hand she could lift made a gesture to repel him when he drew near the bed. In Mercy’s overwrought state, this seemed to her like an omen. She shuddered, and drew Stephen away.

“O Stephen,” she said, “she knows now that I have deceived her about you. Don’t come near her again.”

“You never deceived her, darling. Do not distress yourself so,” whispered Stephen. They were standing on the threshold of the room. A slight rustling in the bed made them turn: Mrs. Carr had half-lifted her head from the pillow, her lower jaw had fallen to its utmost extent in her effort to articulate, and she was pointing the forefinger of her left hand at the door. It was a frightful sight. Even Stephen turned pale, and sprang hastily away.

“You see,” said Mercy, in a ghastly whisper, “sometimes she certainly does know things; but she never looks like that except at you. You must never come in again.”

“No,” said Stephen, almost as horror-stricken as Mercy. “It is very strange though, for she always used to seem so fond of me.”

“She was very childish and patient,” said Mercy. “And I think she thought that you were slowly getting to care about me; but now, wherever her soul is,—I think it has left her body,—she knows that we deceived her.”

Stephen made no answer, but turned to go. The expression of resolved endurance on his face pierced Mercy to the quick, as it always did. She sprang after him, and clasped both her hands on his arm. “O Stephen, darling,—precious, brave, strong darling! do

forgive me. I ought to be killed for even saying one word to give you pain. How I can, I don’t see, when I long so to make you happy always.”

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“You do give me great, unutterable happiness, Mercy,” he replied. “I never think of the pain: I only think of the joy,” and he laid her hand on his lips. “All the pain that you could possibly give me in a lifetime could not outweigh the joy of one such moment as this, when you say that you love me.”

These days were unspeakably hard for Stephen. He had grown during the past year to so live on the sight and in the blessedness of Mercy that to be shut away from them was simply a sort of dying. There was no going back for him to the calm routine of the old life before she came. He was restless and wretched: he walked up and down in front of the house every night, watching the shadow of her figure on the curtains of her mother’s room. He made all manner of excuses, true and false, reasonable and unreasonable, to speak to her for a moment at the door in the morning. He carried the few verses in his pocket-book she had given him; and, although he knew them nearly by heart, he spent long hours in his office turning the little papers over and over. Some of them were so joyous that they stirred in him almost a bitter incredulity as he read them in these days of loss and pain. One was a sonnet which she had written during a two days’ absence of his,—his only absence from his mother’s house for six years. Mercy had been astonished at her sense of loneliness in these two days. “O Stephen,” she had said, when he came back, “I am honestly ashamed of having missed you so much. Just the knowing that you wouldn’t be here to come in, in the evenings, made the days seem a thousand years long, and this is what came of it.”

And she gave him this sonnet:—

To an absent lover.

That so much change should come when them dost go,
Is mystery that I cannot ravel quite.
The very house seems dark as when the light
Of lamps goes out. Each wonted thing doth grow
So altered, that I wander to and fro,
Bewildered by the most familiar sight,
And feel like one who rouses in the night
From dream of ecstasy, and cannot know
At first if he be sleeping or awake,
My foolish heart so foolish for thy sake
Hath grown, dear one!
    Teach me to be more wise.
I blush for all my foolishness doth lack;
I fear to seem a coward in thine eyes.
Teach me, dear one,—but first thou must come back!

Another was a little poem, which she laughingly called his and not hers. One morning, when they had bade each other “good-by,” and she had kissed him,—a rare thing for

Mercy to do, he had exclaimed, “That kiss will go floating before me all day in the air, Mercy. I shall see every thing in a light as rosy as your lips.”

At night she gave him this little poem, saying,—

“This is your poem, not mine, darling. I should never have thought of any thing so absurd myself.”

“*Couleur de rose*.”

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All things to-day “Couleur de rose,”
  I see,—oh, why?
I know, and my dear love she knows,
  Why, oh, why!
On both my eyes her lips she set,
All red and warm and dewy wet,
  As she passed by.
The kiss did not my eyelids close,
But like a rosy vapor goes,
  Where’er I sit, where’er I lie,
Before my every glance, and shows
  All things to-day “Couleur de rose.”

Would it last thus? Alas, who knows?
  Men ask and sigh:
They say it fades, “Couleur de rose.”
  Why, oh, why?
Without swift joy and sweet surprise,
Surely those lips upon my eyes
  Could never lie,
Though both our heads were white as snows,
And though the bitterest storm that blows,
  Of trouble and adversity,
Had bent us low: all life still shows
  To eyes that love “Couleur de rose.”

This sonnet, also, she persisted in calling Stephen’s, and not her own, because he had asked her the question which had suggested it:—

Lovers’ *thoughts*.

“How feels the earth when, breaking from the night,
The sweet and sudden Dawn impatient spills
Her rosy colors all along the hills?
How feels the sea, as it turns sudden white,
And shines like molten silver in the light
Which pours from eastward when the full moon fills
Her time to rise?”

“I know not, love, what thrills
The earth, the sea, may feel. How should I know?
Except I guess by this,—the joy I feel
When sudden on my silence or my gloom
Thy presence bursts and lights the very room?

Then on my face doth not glad color steal
Like shining waves, or hill-tops' sunrise glow?"

One of the others was the poem of which I spoke once before, the poem which had been suggested to her by her desolate sense of homelessness on the first night of her arrival in Penfield. This poem had been widely copied after its first appearance in one of the magazines; and it had been more than once said of it, "Surely no one but a genuine outcast could have written such a poem as this." It was hard for Mercy's friends to associate the words with her. When she was asked how it happened that she wrote them, she exclaimed, "I did not write that poem, I lived it one night,—the night when I came to Penfield, and drove through these streets in the rain with mother. No vagabond in the world ever felt more forlorn than I did then."

The outcast.

O sharp, cold wind, thou art my friend!
And thou, fierce rain, I need not dread
Thy wonted touch upon my head!
On, loving brothers! Wreak and spend
Your force on all these dwellings. Rend
These doors so pitilessly locked,
To keep the friendless out! Strike dead
The fires whose glow hath only mocked
By muffled rays the night where I,
The lonely outcast, freezing lie!

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Ha! If upon those doors to-night
I knocked, how well I know the stare,
The questioning, the mingled air
Of scorn and pity at the sight,
The wonder if it would be right
To give me alms of meat and bread!
And if I, reckless, standing there,
For once the truth imploring said,
That not for bread or meat I longed,
That such an alms my real need wronged,

That I would fain come in, and sit
Beside their fire, and hear the voice
Of children; yea, and if my choice
Were free, and I dared mention it,
And some sweet child should think me fit
To hold a child upon my knee
One moment, would my soul rejoice,
More than to banquet royally,
And I the pulses of its wrist
Would kiss, as men the cross have kissed.

Ha! Well the haughty stare I know
With which they'd say, "The man is mad!"
"What an impostor's face he had!"
"How insolent these beggars grow!"
Go to, ye happy people! Go!
My yearning is as fierce as hate.
Must my heart break, that yours be glad?
Will your turn come at last, though late?
I will not knock, I will pass by;
My comrades wait,—the wind, the rain.
Comrades, we'll run a race to-night!
The stakes may not seem much to gain:
The goal is not marked plain in sight;
But, comrades, understand,—if I
Drop dead, 't will be a victory!

These poems and many others Stephen carried with him wherever he went. To read them over was next to seeing Mercy. The poet was hardly less dear to him than the woman. He felt at times so removed from her by the great gulf which her genius all unconsciously seemed to create between herself and him that he doubted his own memories of her love, and needed to be reassured by gazing into her eyes, touching her hand, and listening to her voice. It seemed to him that, if this separation lasted

much longer, he should lose all faith in the fact of their relation. Very impatient thoughts of poor old Mrs. Carr filled Stephen's thoughts in these days. Heretofore she had been no barrier to his happiness; her still and childlike presence was no restraint upon him; he had come to disregard it as he would the presence of an infant in a cradle. Therefore, he had, or thought he had, the kindest of feelings towards her; but now that her helpless paralyzed hands had the power to shut him away from Mercy, he hated her, as he had always hated every thing which stood between him and delight. Yet, had it been his duty to minister to her, he would have done it as gently, as faithfully, as Mercy herself. He would have spoken to her in the mildest and tenderest of tones, while in his heart he wished her dead. So far can a fine fastidiousness, allied to a sentiment of compassion, go towards making a man a consummate hypocrite.

Parson Dorrance came often to see Mercy, but always with Lizzy Hunter. By the subtle instinct of love, he knew that to see him thus, and see him often, would soonest win back for him his old place in Mercy's life. The one great desire he had left now was to regain that,—to see her again look up in his face with the frank, free, loving look which she always had had until that sad morning.

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A strange incident happened to Mercy in these first weeks of her mother's illness. She was called to the door one morning by the message that a stranger wished to speak to her. She found standing there an elderly woman, with a sweet but care-worn face, who said eagerly, as soon as she appeared,—

"Are you Mrs. Philbrick?"

"Yes," said Mercy. "Did you wish to see me?"

The woman hesitated a moment, as if trying to phrase her sentence, and then burst out impetuously, with a flood of tears,—

"Won't you come and help me make my husband come home. He is so sick, and I believe he will die in that wretched old garret."

Mercy looked at her in blank astonishment, and her first thought was that she must be insane; but the woman continued,—

"I'm Mrs. Wheeler. You never saw me before, but my husband's talked about you ever since he first saw you on the street, that day. You're the only human being I've ever known him take a fancy to; and I do believe, if anybody could do any thing with him, you could."

It seemed that, in addition to all his other eccentricities, "Old Man Wheeler" had the habit of disappearing from his home at intervals, leaving no clew behind him. He had attacks of a morbid unwillingness to see a human face: during tkese attacks, he would hide himself, sometimes in one place, sometimes in another. He had old warehouses, old deserted mills and factories, and uninhabited rooms and houses in all the towns in the vicinity. There was hardly any article of merchandise which he had not at one time or another had a depot for, or a manufactory of. He had especially a hobby for attempting to make articles which were not made in this country. It was only necessary for some one to go to him, and say, "Mr. Wheeler, do you know how much this country pays every year for importing such or such an article?" to throw him into a rage.

"Damned nonsense! Damned nonsense, sir. Just as well make it here. I'll make it myself." And up would start a new manufacture, just as soon as he could get men to work at it.

At one time it was ink, at another time brushes, then chintz, and then pocket-books; in fact, nobody pretended to remember all the schemes which the old man had failed in. He would stop them as instantaneously as he began them, dismiss the workmen, shut up the shops or the mills, turn the key on them just as they stood, very possibly filled full of material in the rough. He did not care. The hobby was over: he had proved that the thing could be made in America, and he was content. It was usually in some one of

these disused buildings that he set up his hermitage in these absences from home. He would sally out once a day and buy bread, just a pittance, hardly enough to keep him alive, and then bury himself again in darkness and solitude. If the absence did not last more than three or four days, his wife and sons gave themselves no concern about him. He

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usually returned a saner and healthier man than he went away. When the absences were longer, they went in search of him, and could usually prevail on him to return home with them. But this last absence had been much longer than usual before they found him. He was as cunning and artful as a fugitive from justice in concealing his haunt. At last he was discovered in the old garret store-room over the Brick Row. The marvel was that he had not died of cold there. He was not far from it, however; for he was so ill that at times he was delirious. He lay curled up in the old stack of comforters in the corner, with only a jug of water and some crumbs of bread by his side, when they found him. He had been so ill when he last crawled up the stairs that he had forgotten to take the key out of the keyhole, but left it on the outside, and by that they found him. At the bare suggestion of his going home, he became so furious that it seemed unsafe to urge it. His wife and eldest son had stayed there with him now for two days; but he had grown steadily worse, and it was plain that he must die unless he could be properly cared for.

"At last I thought of you," said the poor woman. "He's always said so much about you; and once, when I was riding with him, he pointed you out to me on the street, and said he, 'That's the very nicest girl in America.' And he told me about his giving you the clock; and I never knew him give any thing away before in his whole life. Not but what he has always been very good to me, in his way. He'd never give me a cent o' money; but he'd always pay bills,—that is, that was any way reasonable. But I said to 'Siah this morning, 'If there's anybody on earth can coax your father to let us take him home, it's that Mrs. Philbrick; and I'm going to find her.' 'Siah didn't want me to. The boys are so ashamed about it; but I don't see any shame in it. It's just a kind of queer way Mr. Wheeler's always had; and everybody's got something queer about 'em, first or last; and this way of Mr. Wheeler's of going off don't hurt anybody but himself. I got used to 't long ago. Now, won't you come, and try and see if you can't persuade him? It won't do any harm to try."

"Why, yes, indeed, Mrs. Wheeler, I'll come; but I don't believe I can do any thing," said Mercy, much touched by the appeal to her. "I have wondered very much what had become of Mr. Wheeler. I had not seen him for a long time."

When they went into the garret, the old man was half-lying, half-sitting, propped on his left elbow. In his right hand he held his cane, with which he continually tapped the floor, as he poured out a volley of angry reproaches to his son "'Siah," a young man of eighteen or twenty years old, who sat on a roll of leather at a safe distance from his father's lair. As the door opened, and he saw Mercy entering with his wife, the old man's face underwent the most extraordinary change. Surprise, shame, perplexity, bravado,—all struggled together there.

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“God bless my soul! God bless my soul!” he exclaimed, trying to draw the comforters more closely about him.

Mercy went up to him, and, sitting down by his side, began to talk to him in a perfectly natural tone, as if she were making an ordinary call on an invalid in his own home. She said nothing to suggest that he had done any thing unnatural in hiding himself, and spoke of his severe cold as being merely what every one else had been suffering from for some time. Then she told him how ill her mother was, and succeeded in really arousing his interest in that. Finally, she said,—

“But I must go now. I can’t be away from my mother long. I will come and see you again to-morrow. Shall I find you here or at your home?”

“Well, I was thinking I ’d better move home to-day,” said he.

His wife and son involuntarily exchanged glances. This was more than they had dared to hope.

“Yes, I would, if I were you,” replied Mercy, still in a perfectly natural tone. “It would be so much better for you to be in a room with a fire in it for a few days. There isn’t any way of warming this room, is there?” said she, looking all about, as if to see if it might not be possible still to put up a stove there. “’Siah” turned his head away to hide a smile, so amused was he by the tact of the remark. “No, I see there is no stovepipe-hole here,” she went on, “so you’d much better move home. I’m going by the stable. Let me send Seth right up with the carriage, won’t you?”

“No, no! Bless my soul! Thinks I’m made of money, don’t she! No, no! I can walk.” And the old half-crazy glare came into his eyes.

Mercy went nearer to him, and laid her hand gently on his.

“Mr. Wheeler,” said she, “you did something very kind for me once: now won’t you do something once more,—just once? I want you to go home in the carriage. It is a terribly cold day, and the streets are very icy. I nearly fell several times myself coming over here. You will certainly take a terrible cold, if you walk this morning. Please say I may get the carriage.”

“Bless my soul! Bless my soul, child! Go get it then, if you care so much; but tell him I’ll only pay a quarter,—only a quarter, remember. They’d take every cent I’ve got. They are all wolves, wolves, wolves!”

“Yes, I’ll tell him only a quarter. I’ll have him here in a few minutes!” exclaimed Mercy, and ran out of the room hastily before the old man could change his mind.

As good luck would have it, Seth and his “kerridge” were in sight when Mercy reached the foot of the staircase. So in less than five minutes she returned to the garret, exclaiming,—

“Here is Seth now, Mr. Wheeler. It is so fortunate I met him. Now I can see you off.” The old man was so weak that his son had to carry him down the stairs; and his face, seen in the broad daylight, was ghastly. As they placed him in the carriage, he called out to his wife and son, sharply,—

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“Don’t you get in! You can walk, you can walk. Mind, he’s to have but a quarter, tell him.” And, as Seth whipped up his horses and drove off, the words, “wolves, wolves, wolves,” were heard coming in muffled tones through the door.

“He’d never have gone, if you hadn’t come back,—never,” said Mrs. Wheeler, as she turned to Mercy. “I never can thank you enough. It’ll save his life, getting him out of that garret.”

Mercy did not say, but she thought that it was too late. A mortal sickness had fastened upon the old man; and so it proved. When she went to his home the next day, he was in a high fever and delirious; and he lived only a few days. He had intervals of partial consciousness, and in those he seemed to be much touched by the patient care which his two sons were giving to him. He had always been a hard father; had compelled his sons very early to earn their own living, and had refused to give them money, which he could so easily have spared, to establish themselves in business. Now, that it was too late, he repented.

“Good boys, good boys, good boys after all,” he would mutter to himself, as they bent over him, and nursed him tenderly in his helplessness. “Might have left them more money, might have left them more. Mistake, mistake!” Once he roused, and with great vehemence asked to have his lawyer sent for immediately. But, when the lawyer came, the delirium had returned again: it was too late; and the old man died without repairing the injustice he had done. The last intelligible words he spoke were, “Mistake! mistake!”

And he had indeed made a mistake. When his will was opened, it was found that the whole bulk of his large estate had been left to trustees, to be held as a fund for assisting poor young men to a certain amount of capital to go into business with,—the very thing which he had never done for his own children. The trust was burdened with such preposterous conditions, however, that it never could have amounted to any thing, even if the courts had not come to the rescue, and mercifully broken the will, dividing the property where it rightfully belonged, between the wife and children.

Early in February Mrs. Carr died. It was more like a going to sleep than like a death. She lay for two days in a dozing state, smiling whenever Mercy spoke to her, and making great efforts to swallow food whenever Mercy offered it to her. At last she closed her eyes, turned her head on one side, as if for a sounder sleep, and never moved again.

However we may think we are longing for the release from suffering to come to one we love, when it does come, it is a blow, is a shock. Hundreds of times Mercy had said to herself in the course of the winter, “Oh, if God would only take my mother to heaven! Her death would be easier to bear than this.” But now she would have called her back, if she could. The silent house, the empty room, still more terrible the long empty hours in which nobody needed her help,

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all wrung Mercy's heart. It was her first experience of being alone. She had often pictured to herself, or rather she thought she had, what it would be; but no human imagination can ever sound the depths of that word: only the heart can feel it. It is a marvel that hearts do not break under it oftener than they do. The silence which is like that darkness which could be felt; the sudden awakening in the night with a wonder what it means that the loved one is not there; the pitiless morning light which fills the empty house, room after room; and harder than all else to forget, to rise above—the perpetual sense of no future: even the little near futures of the next hour, the next day, all cut off, all closed, to the human being left utterly alone. The mockery of the instincts of hunger and need of rest seems cruel. What a useless routine, for one left alone, to be fed, to sleep, and to rise up to eat and sleep again!

Mercy bore all this in a sort of dumb bewilderment for a few days. All Stephen's love and sympathy did not help her. He was unutterably tender and sympathizing now that poor old Mrs. Carr was fairly out of his way. It surprised even himself to see what a sort of respectful affection he felt for her in her grave. Any misgiving that this new quiet and undisturbed possession of Mercy might not continue did not cross his mind; and when Mercy said to him suddenly, one evening about ten days after her mother's death, "Stephen, I must go away, I can't live in this house another week," it was almost as sudden a shock to him as if he had gone in and found her dead.

"Go away! Leave me!" he gasped, rather than said. "Mercy, you can't mean it!" and the distress in his face smote Mercy bitterly. But she persisted. "Yes, I do mean it," she said. "You must not ask me to stay. I should lose my senses or fall ill. You can't think how terrible it is to me to be all alone in these rooms. Perhaps in new rooms I should not feel it so much. I have always looked forward to being left alone at some time, and have thought I would still have my home; but I did not think it could feel like this. I simply cannot bear it,—at any rate, not till I am stronger. And besides, Stephen," and Mercy's face flushed red, "there is another thing you have not thought of: it would never do for me to live here alone in this house with you, as we have been living. You couldn't come to see me so much now mother is not here."

Poor Mrs. Carr! avenged at last, by Stephen's own heart. How gladly would he have called her to life now! Mercy's words carried instantaneous conviction to his mind. It was strange he had never thought of this before; but he had not. He groaned aloud.

"O Mercy! O Mercy!" he exclaimed, "I never once thought of that, we have been living so so long. You are right: you cannot stay here. Oh, what shall I do without you, my darling, my darling?"

“I do not think you can ever be so lonely as I,” said Mercy; “for you have still your work left you to do. If I had any human being to need me, I could bear being separated from you.”

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“Where will you go, Mercy?” asked Stephen, in a tone of dull, hopeless misery.

“I do not know. I have not thought yet. Back to my old home for a visit, I think, and then to some city to study and work. That is the best life for me.”

“O Mercy, Mercy, I am going to lose you,—lose you utterly!” exclaimed Stephen.

Mercy looked at him with a pained and perplexed expression. “Stephen,” she said earnestly, “I can’t understand you. You bear your hard life so uncomplainingly, so bravely, that it seems as if you could not have a vestige of selfishness in you; and yet”—Mercy halted; she could not put her thought in words. Stephen finished it for her.

“And yet,” he said, “I am selfish about you, you think. Selfish! Good God! do you call it selfishness in a man who is drowning, to try to swim, in a man who is starving, to clutch a morsel of bread? What else have I that one could call life except you? Tell me, Mercy! You are my life: that is the whole of it. All that a man has he will give for his life. Is it selfishness?” Stephen locked his hands tight together, and looked at Mercy almost angrily. She was writhing under his words. She had always an unspeakable dread of being unjust to him. Love made her infinitely tender, and pity made her yearn over him. But neither her own love and pity nor his passionate words could wholly blind her now; and there was a sadness in the tones in which she replied,—

“No, Stephen, I did not mean to call you selfish; but I can’t understand why you are not as brave and patient about all hard things as you are about the one hardest thing of all.”

“Mercy, would you marry me now, if I asked you?” said Stephen. He did not realize the equivocal form of his question. An indignant look swept over Mercy’s face for a moment, but only for a moment. She knew Stephen’s love too well.

“No, Stephen,” she said, “I would not. If you had asked me at first, I should have done it. I thought then that it would be best,” she said, with hot blushes mounting high on her cheeks; “but I have seen since that it would not.”

Stephen sighed. “I am glad you see that,” he said. Then in a lower tone, “You know you are free, Mercy,—utterly free. I would never be so base as to hold you by a word.”

Mercy smiled half-bitterly, as she replied,—

“Words never hold people, and you know very well it is only an empty form of words to say that I am free. I do not want to be free, darling,” she added, in a burst of tenderness toward him. “You could not set me free, if you tried.”

When Mercy told Parson Dorrance her intention of going away, his face changed as if some fierce spasm wrung him; but it was over in a second, and he said,—

“You are quite right, my child,—quite right. It will be a great deal better for you in every way. This is no place for you now. You must have at least a year or two of travel and entire change.”

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In her heart, Mercy contrasted the replies of her two lovers. She could not banish the feeling that one was the voice of a truer love than the other. She fought against the feeling as against a treason; but the truth was strongest. In her heart, she knew that the man she did not love was manlier than the man she loved.

Chapter XI

For the first few months after Mercy went away, Stephen seemed to himself to be like an automaton, which had been wound up to go through certain movements for a certain length of time, and could by no possibility stop. He did not suffer as he had expected. Sometimes it seemed to him that he did not suffer at all; and he was terrified at this very absence of suffering. Then again he had hours and days of a dull despair, which was worse than any more active form of suffering. Now he understood, he thought, how in the olden time men had often withdrawn themselves from the world after some great grief, and had lived long, stagnant lives in deserts and caves. He had thought it would kill him to lose Mercy out of his life. Now he felt sure that he should live to be a hundred years old; should live by very help of the apathy into which he had sunk. Externally, he seemed very little changed,—a trifle quieter, perhaps, and gentler. His mother sometimes said to herself,—

“Steve is really getting old very fast for so young a man;” but she was content with the change. It seemed to bring them nearer together, and made her feel more at ease as to the possibility of his falling in love. Her old suspicions and jealousies of Mercy had died out root and branch, within three months after her departure. Stephen’s unhesitating assurance to her that he did not expect to write to Mercy had settled the question in her mind once for all. If she had known that at the very moment when he uttered these words he had one long letter from Mercy and another to her lying in his pocket, the shock might well-nigh have killed her; for never once in Mrs. White’s most jealous and ill-natured hours had the thought crossed her mind that her son would tell her a deliberate lie. He told it, however, unflinchingly, in as gentle and even a tone and with as unruffled a brow as he would have bade her good-morning. He had thought the whole matter over, and deliberately resolved to do it. He did it to save her from pain; and he had no more compunction about it than he would have had about closing a blind, to shut out a sunlight too strong for her eyes. What a terrible thing is the power which human beings have of deceiving each other! Woe to any soul which trusts itself to any thing less than an organic integrity of nature, to which a lie is impossible!

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Mercy's letters disappointed Stephen. They were loving; but they were concise, sensible, sometimes merry, and always cheerful. Her life was constantly broadening; friends crowded around her; and her art was becoming more and more to her every day. Her name was beginning to be known, and her influence felt. Her verses were simple, and went to people's hearts. They were also of a fine and subtle flavor, and gave pleasure to the intellect. Strangers began to write words of encouragement to her, —sometimes a word of gratitude for help, sometimes a word of hearty praise. She began to feel that she had her own circle of listeners, unknown friends, who were always ready to hear her when she spoke. This consciousness is a most exquisite happiness to a true artist: it is a better stimulus than all the flattering criticism in the world can give.

She was often touched to tears by the tributes she received from these unknown friends. They had a wide range, coming sometimes from her fellow-artists in literature, sometimes from lowly and uncultured people. Once there came to her by mail, on a sheet of coarse paper, two faded roses, fragrant,—for they were cinnamon roses, whose fragrance never dies,—but yellow and crumpled, for they had journeyed many days to reach her. They were tied together by a bit of blue yarn; and on the paper was written, in ill-spelt words, "I wanted to send you something; and these were all I had. I am an old woman, and very poor. You've helped me ever so much."

Another gift was a moss basket filled with arbutus blossoms. Hid away in the leaves was a tiny paper, on which were written some graceful verses, evidently by a not unpractised hand. The signature was in initials unknown to Mercy; but she hazarded a guess as to the authorship, and sent the following verses in reply:—

To E.B.

At night, the stream came to the sea.
"Long leagues," it cried, "this drop I bring,
O beauteous, boundless sea!
What is the meagre, paltry thing
In thine abundance unto thee?
No ripple, in thy smallest wave, of me
Will know! No thirst its suffering
Shall better slake for my surrendering
My life! O sea, in vain
My leagues of toil and pain!"

At night, wayfarers reached the sea.
"Long weary leagues we came," they cried,
"O beauteous, boundless sea!
The swelling waves of thy swift tide
Break on the shores where souls are free:

Through lonely wildernesses, unto thee
One tiny stream has been our guide,
And in the desert we had died,
If its oases sweet
Had not refreshed our feet.”

O tiny stream, lost in the sea,
Close symbol of a lifetime’s speech!
O beauteous, boundless sea,
Close fitting symbol of the reach,
Of measureless Eternity!
Be glad, O stream, O sea, blest equally!
And thou whose words have helped to teach
Me this,—my unknown friend,—for each
Kind thought, warm thanks.
Only the stream can know
How at such words the long leagues lighter grow.

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All these new interests and occupations, while they did not in the least weaken her loyalty to Stephen, filled her thoughts healthfully and absorbingly, and left her no room for any such passionate longing and brooding as Stephen poured out to her in his letters. He looked in vain for any response to these expressions. Sometimes, unable to bear the omission any longer, he would ask her pathetically why she did not say that she longed to see him. Her reply was characteristic:—

"You ask me, dear, why I do not say that I long to see you. I am not sure that I ever do long, in the sense in which you use the word. I know that I cannot see you till next winter, just as I used to know every morning that I could not see you until night; and the months between now and then seem to me one solid interval of time to be filled up and made the most of, just as the interval of the daytime between your going away in the morning and coming home at night used to seem to me. I do not think, dear Stephen, there is a moment of any day when I have not an under current of consciousness of you; but it is not a longing for the sight of you. Are you sure, darling, that the love which takes perpetual shape in such longings is the strongest love?"

Little by little, phrases like this sank into Stephen's mind, and gradually crystallized into a firm conviction that Mercy was being weaned from him. It was not so. It was only that separation and its surer tests were adjusting to a truer level the relation between them. She did not love him one whit less; but she was taking the position which belonged to her stronger and finer organization. If she had ever lived by his side as his wife, the same change would have come; but her never-failing tenderness would have effectually covered it from his recognition, and hid it from her own, so long as he looked into her eyes with pleading love, and she answered with woman's fondness. No realization of inequality could ever have come. It is, after all, the flesh and blood of the loved one which we idealize. There is in love's sacraments a "real presence," which handling cannot make us doubt. It is when we go apart and reflect that our reason asks questions. Mercy did not in the least know that she was outgrowing Stephen White. She did not in the least suspect that her affection and her loyalty were centring around an ideal personality, to which she gave his name, but which had in reality never existed. She believed honestly that she was living for and in Stephen all this time; that she was his, as he was hers, inalienably and for ever. If it had been suggested to her that it was unnatural that she should be so content in a daily life which he did not share, so busy and glad in occupations and plans and aspirations into which he did not enter, she would have been astonished. She would have said, "How foolish of me to do otherwise! We have our lives to lead, our work to do. It would be a sin to waste one's

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life, to leave one's work undone, because of the mere lack of seeing any one human being, however dear." Stephen knew love better than this: he knew that life without the daily sight of Mercy was a blank drudgery; that, day by day, month by month, he was growing duller and duller, and more and more lifeless, as if his very blood were being impoverished by lack of nourishment. Surely it was a hard fate which inflicted on this man, already so overburdened, the perpetual pain of a love denied, thwarted, unhappy. Surely it was a brave thing in him to bear the double load uncomplainingly, to make no effort to throw it off, and never by a word or a look to visit his own sufferings on the head of the helpless creature, who seemed to be the cause of them all. If there were any change in his manner toward his mother during these months, it was that he grew tenderer and more demonstrative to her. There were even times when he kissed her, solely from the yearning need he felt to kiss something human, he so longed for one touch of Mercy's hand. He would sometimes ask her wistfully, "Do I make you happy, mother?" And she would be won upon and softened by the words; when in reality they were only the outcry of the famished heart which needed some reassurance that its sacrifices had not been all in vain.

Month after month went on, and no tenants came for the "wing." Stephen even humiliated himself so far as to offer it to Jane Barker's husband at a lowered rent; but his offer was surlily rejected, and he repented having made it. Very bitterly he meditated on the strange isolation into which he and his mother were forced. His sympathies were not broad and general enough to comprehend it. He did not know how quickly all people feel an atmosphere of withdrawal, an air of indifference. If Stephen had been rich and powerful, the world would have forgiven him these traits, or have smothered its dislike of them; but in a poor man, and an obscure one, such "airs" were not to be tolerated. Nobody would live in the "wing." And so it came to pass that one day Stephen wrote to Mercy the following letter:—

"You will be sorry to hear that I have had to foreclose the mortgage on this house. It was impossible to get a tenant for the other half of it, and there was nothing else to be done. The house must be sold, but I doubt if it brings the full amount of the loan. I should have done this three months ago, except for your strong feeling against it. I am very sorry for old Mrs. Jacobs; but it is her misfortune, not my fault. I have my mother to provide for, and my first duty is to her. Of course, Mrs. Jacobs will now have to go to the alms-house but I am not at all sure that she will not be more comfortable there than she has made herself in the cottage. She has starved herself all these years. Some people say she must have a hoard of money there somewhere, that she cannot have spent even the little she has received.

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“I shall move out of the house at once, into the little cottage you liked so much, farther up on the hill. That is for rent, only fifty dollars a year. I shall put this house into good repair, run a piazza around it as you suggested, and paint it; and then I think I shall be sure of finding a purchaser. It can be made a very pretty house by expending a little money on it; and I can sell it for enough more to repay me. I am sure nobody would buy it as it is.”

Mercy replied very briefly to this part of Stephen’s letter. She had discussed the question with him often before, and she knew the strict justice of his claim; but her heart ached for the poor friendless old woman, who was thus to lose her last dollar. If it had been possible for Mercy to have continued to pay the rent of the wing herself, she would gladly have done so; but, at her suggestion of such a thing, Stephen had been so angry that she had been almost frightened.

“I am not so poor yet, Mercy,” he had exclaimed, “as to take charity from you! I think I should go to the alms-house myself first. I don’t see why old Granny Jacobs is so much to you, any way.”

“Only because she is so absolutely friendless, Stephen,” Mercy had replied gently. “I never before knew of anybody who had not a relative or a friend in the world; and I am afraid they are cruel to the poor people at the alms-house. They all look so starved and wretched!”

“Well, it will be no more than she deserves,” said Stephen; “for she was cruel to her husband’s brother’s wife. I used to hear horrid stories, when I was a boy, about how she drove them out of the house; and she was cruel to her son too, and drove him away from home. Of course, I am sorry to be the instrument of punishing her, and I do have a certain pity for the old woman; but it is really her own fault. She might be living now in comfort with her son, perhaps, if she had treated him well.”

“We can’t go by such ‘ifs’ in this world, Steve,” said Mercy, earnestly. “We have to take things as they are. I don’t want to be judged way back in my life. Only God knows all the ‘ifs.’” Such conversations as these had prepared Mercy for the news which Stephen now wrote her; but they had in no wise changed her feeling in regard to it. She believed in the bottom of her heart that Stephen might have secured a tenant, if he had tried. He had once, in speaking of the matter, dropped a sentence which had shocked her so that she could never forget it.

“It would be a great deal better for me,” he had said, “to have the money invested in some other way. If the house does fall into my hands, I shall sell it; and, even if I don’t get the full amount of what father loaned, I shall make it bring us in a good deal more than it does this way.”

This sentence rang in Mercy's ears, as she read in Stephen's letter all his plans for improving the house; but the thing was done, and it was not Mercy's habit to waste effort or speech over things which could not be altered.

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“I am very sorry,” she wrote, “that you have been obliged to take the house. You know how I always felt for poor old Granny Jacobs. Perhaps we can do something to make her more comfortable in the alms-house. I think Lizzy could manage that for us.”

And in her own mind Mercy resolved that the old woman should never lack for food and fire, however unwilling the overseers might be to permit her to have unusual comforts.

Stephen’s next letter opened with these words: “O Mercy, I have such a strange thing to tell you. I am so excited I can hardly find words. I have found a lot of money in your old fireplace. Just think of our having sat there so quietly night after night, within hands’ reach of it, all last winter! And how lucky that I found it, instead of any of the workmen! They’d have pocketed it, and never said a word.”

“To be sure they would,” thought Mercy, “and poor old Granny Jacobs would have been”—she was about to think, “cheated out of her rights again,” but with a pang she changed the phrase into “none the better off for it. Oh, how glad I am for the poor old thing! People always said her husband must have hid money away somewhere.”

Mercy read on. “I was in such a hurry to get the house done before the snow came that I took hold myself, and worked every night and morning before the workmen came; and, after they had gone, I found this last night, and I declare, Mercy, I haven’t shut my eyes all night long. It seems to me too good to be true. I think there must be as much as three thousand dollars, all in solid gold. Some of the coins I don’t know the value of; but the greater proportion of them are English sovereigns. Of course rich people wouldn’t think this such a very big sum, but you and I know how far a little can go for poor people.”

“Yes, indeed,” thought Mercy. “Why, it will make the poor old woman perfectly comfortable all her life: it will give her more than she had from the house.” And Mercy laid the letter in her lap and fell into a reverie, thinking how strange it was that this good fortune should have come about by means of an act which had seemed to her cruel on Stephen’s part.

She took the letter up again. It continued: “O Mercy, my darling, do you suppose you can realize what this sudden lift is to me? All my life I have found our poverty so hard to bear, and these latter years I have bitterly felt the hardship of being unable to go out into the world and make my fortune as other men do, as I think I might, if I were free. But this sum, small as it is, will be a nucleus, I feel sure it will, of a competency at least. I know of several openings where I can place it most advantageously. O Mercy! dear, dear Mercy! what hopes spring up in my heart! The time may yet come when we shall build up a lovely home together. Bless old Jacobs’s miserliness! How little he knew what he was hoarding up his gold for!”

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At this point, Mercy dropped the letter,—dropped it as if it had been a viper that stung her. She was conscious of but two things: a strange, creeping cold which seemed to be chilling her to the very marrow of her bones; and a vague but terrible sense of horror, mentally. The letter fell to the floor. She did not observe it. A half-hour passed, and she did not know that it had been a moment. Gradually, her brain began to rouse into activity again, and strove confusedly with the thoughts which crowded on it.

“That would be stealing. He can’t mean it. Stephen can’t be a thief.” Half-formed, incoherent sentences like these floated in her mind, seemed to be floating in the air, pronounced by hissing voices.

She pressed her hands to her temples, and sprang to her feet. The letter rustled on the floor, as her gown swept over it. She turned and looked at it, as if it were a living thing she would kill. She stooped to pick it up, and then recoiled from it. She shrank from the very paper. All the vehemence of her nature was roused. As in the moment of drowning people are said to review in one swift flash of consciousness their whole lives, so now in this moment did Mercy look back over the months of her life with Stephen. Her sense of the baseness of his action now was like a lightning illuming every corner of the past: every equivocation, every concealment, every subterfuge he had practised, stood out before her, bare, stripped of every shred of apology or excuse. “He lies; he has always lied. Why should he not steal?” she exclaimed. “It is only another form of the same thing. He stole me, too; and he made me steal him. He is dishonest to the very core. How did I ever love such a man? What blinded me to his real nature?”

Then a great revulsion of feeling, of tenderness toward Stephen, would sweep over her, and drown all these thoughts. “O my poor, brave, patient darling! He never meant to do any thing wrong in his life. He does not see things as I do: no human soul could see clearly, standing where he stands. There is a moral warp in his nature, for which he is no more responsible than a tree is responsible for having grown into a crooked shape when it was broken down by heavy stones while it was a sapling. Oh, how unjust I am to him! I will never think such thoughts of him again. My darling, my darling! He did not stop to think in his excitement that the money was not his. I daresay he has already seen it differently.”

Like waves breaking on a beach, and rolling back again to meet higher waves and be swallowed up in them, these opposing thoughts and emotions struggled with each other in Mercy’s bosom. Her heart and her judgment were at variance, and the antagonism was irreconcilable. She could not believe that her lover was dishonest. She could not but call his act a theft. The night came and went, and no lull had come to the storm by which her soul was tossed. She could not sleep. As the morning

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dawned, she rose with haggard and weary eyes, and prepared to write to Stephen. In some of her calmer intervals, she had read the remainder of his letter. It was chiefly filled with the details of the manner in which the gold had been hidden. A second fireplace had been built inside the first, leaving a space of several inches between the two brick walls. On each side two bricks had been so left that they could be easily taken out and replaced; and the bags of gold hung upon iron stanchions in the outer wall. What a strange picture it must have been in the silent night hours,—the old miser bending above the embers of the dying fire on the hearth, and reaching down the crevice to his treasures! The bags were of leather, curiously embossed; they were almost charred by the heat, and the gold was dull and brown.

"I wonder which old fellow put it there?" said Stephen, at the end of his letter. "Captain John would have been more likely to have foreign gold; but why should he hide it in his brother's fireplace? At any rate, to whichever of them I am indebted for it, I am most profoundly grateful. If ever I meet him in any world, I'll thank him."

Suddenly the thought occurred to Mercy, "Perhaps old Mrs. Jacobs is dead. Then there would be nobody who had any right to the money. But no: Stephen would have told me if she had been."

Still she clung to this straw of a hope; and, when she sat down to write to Stephen, these words came first to her pen:—

"Is Mrs. Jacobs dead, Stephen? You do not say any thing about her; but I cannot imagine your thinking for a moment of keeping that money for yourself, unless she is dead. If she is alive, the money is hers. Nobody but her husband or his brother could have put it there. Nobody else has lived in the house, except very poor people. Forgive me, dear, but perhaps you had not thought of this when you first wrote: it has very likely occurred to you since then, and I may be making a very superfluous suggestion." So hard did she cling to the semblance of a trust that all would yet prove to be well with her love and her lover.

Stephen's reply came by the very next mail. It was short: it ran thus:—

"*Dear darling*,—I do not know what to make of your letter. Your sentence, 'I cannot imagine your thinking for a moment of keeping that money for yourself,' is a most extraordinary one. What do you mean by 'keeping it for myself'? It is mine: the house was mine and all that was in it. Old Mrs. Jacobs is alive still, at least she was last week; but she has no more claim on that money than any other old woman in town. I can't suppose you would think me a thief, Mercy; but your letter strikes me as a very strange one. Suppose I were to discover that there is a gold mine in the orchard,—stranger things than that have happened,—would you say that that also belonged to Mrs. Jacobs

and not to me? The cases are precisely parallel. You have allowed your impulsive feeling to run away with your judgment; and, as I so often tell you, whenever you do that, you are wrong. I never thought, however, it would carry you so far as to make you suspect me of a dishonorable act."

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Stephen was deeply wounded. Mercy's attempted reticence in her letter had not blinded him. He felt what had underlain the words, and it was a hard blow to him. His conscience was as free from any shadow of guilt in the matter of that money as if it had been his by direct inheritance from his own father. Feeling this, he had naturally the keenest sense of outrage at Mercy's implied accusation.

Before Stephen's second letter came, Mercy had grown calm. The more she thought the thing over, the more she felt sure that Mrs. Jacobs must be dead, and that Stephen in his great excitement had forgotten to mention the fact. Therefore the second letter was even a greater blow to her than the first: it was a second and a deeper thrust into a wound which had hardly begun to heal. There was also a tone of confident, almost arrogant, assumption in the letter, it seemed to Mercy, which irritated her. She did not perceive that it was the inevitable confidence of a person so sure he is right that he cannot comprehend any doubt in another's mind on the subject. There was in Mercy's nature a vein of intolerance, which was capable of the most terrible severity. She was as blinded, to Stephen's true position in the matter as he was to hers. The final moment of divergence had come: its seeds were planted in her nature and in Stephen's when they were born. Nothing could have hindered their growth, nothing could have forestalled their ultimate result. It was only a question of time and of occasion, when the two forces would be arrayed against each other, and would be found equally strong.

Mercy took counsel with herself now, and delayed answering this second letter. She was resolved to be just to Stephen.

"I will think this thing over and over," she said to herself, "till I am sure past all doubt that I am right, before I say another word."

But her long thinking did not help Stephen. Each day her conviction grew deeper, her perception clearer, her sense of alienation from Stephen profounder. If a moral antagonism had grown up between them in any other shape, it would have been less fatal to her love. There were many species of wrong-doing which would have been less hateful in her sight. It seemed to her sometimes that there could be no crime in the world which would appear to her so odious as this. Her imagination dwelt on the picture of the lonely old woman in the alms-house. She had been several times to see Mrs. Jacobs, and had been much moved by a certain grim stoicism which gave almost dignity to her squalor and wretchedness.

"She always had the bearing of a person who knew she was suffering wrongly, but was too proud to complain," thought Mercy. "I wonder if she did not all along believe there was something wrong about the mortgage?" and Mercy's suspicious thoughts and conjectures ran far back into the past, fastening on the beginnings of all this trouble. She recollected old Mr. Wheeler's warnings about Stephen, in the first weeks of her stay in Penfield. She recollected Parson Dorrance's expression, when he found out that she

had paid her rent in advance. She tortured herself by reviewing minutely every little manoeuvre she had known of Stephen's practising to conceal his relation with her.

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Let Mercy once distrust a person in one particular, and she distrusted him in all. Let one act of his life be wrong, and she believed that his every act was wrong in motive, or in relation to others, however specious and fair it might be made to appear. All the old excuses and apologies she had been in the habit of making for Stephen's insincerities to his mother and to the world seemed to her now less than nothing; and she wondered how she ever could have held them as sufficient. In vain her heart pleaded. In vain tender memories thrilled her, by their vivid recalling of hours, of moments, of looks and words. It was with a certain sense of remorse that she dwelt on them, of shame that she was conscious of clinging to them still. "I shall always love him, I am afraid," she said to herself; "but I shall never trust him again,—never!"

And hour by hour Stephen was waiting and looking for his letter.

Chapter XII.

Stephen took Mercy's letter from the post-office at night. It was one week past the time at which it would have reached him, if it had been written immediately on the receipt of his. Only too well he knew what the delay meant. He turned the letter over and over in his hand, and noted without surprise it was very light. The superscription was written with unusual care. Mercy's handwriting was free and bold, but illegible, unless she made a special effort to write with care; and she never made that effort in writing to Stephen. How many times he had said to her: "Never mind how you write to me, dear. I read your sentences by another sense than the sense of sight." This formally and neatly written, superscription smote him, as a formal bow and a chilling glance from Mercy would, if he had passed her on the street.

He carried the letter home unopened. All through the evening it lay like a leaden weight in his bosom, as he sat by his mother's side. He dared not read it until he was sure of being able to be alone for hours. At last he was free. As he went upstairs to his room, he thought to himself, "This is the hour at which I used to fly to her, and find such welcome. A year ago to-night how happy we were!" With a strange disposition to put off the opening of the letter, he moved about his room, rearranged the books, lighted an extra lamp, and finally sat down in an arm-chair, and leaning both his arms on the table looked at the letter lying there so white, so still. He felt a preternatural consciousness of what was in it; and he shrank from looking at the words, as a condemned prisoner might shrink from reading his own death-warrant. The room was bitterly cold. Fires in bed-rooms were a luxury Stephen had never known. As he sat there, his body and heart seemed to be growing numb together. At last he said, "I may as well read it," and took the letter up. As he opened it and read the first words, "My darling Stephen," his heart gave a great bound. She loved him still.

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What a reprieve in that! He had yet to learn that love can be crueller than any friendship, than any indifference, than any hate: nothing is so exacting, so inexorable, as love. The letter was full of love; but it was, nevertheless, hard and pitiless in its tone. Stephen read it again and again: then he held it in the flame of the lamp, and let it slowly burn, until only a few scorched fragments remained. These he folded in a small paper, and put into his pocket-book. Why he did this, he could not tell, and wondered at himself for doing it. Then he walked the room for an hour or two, revolving in his mind what he should say to Mercy. His ideas arranged themselves concisely and clearly. He had been stung by Mercy's letter into a frame of feeling hardly less inexorable than her own. He said to himself, "She never truly loved me, or nothing under heaven could make her believe me capable of a dishonesty;" and, in midst of all his pain at this thought, he had an indignant resentment, as if Mercy herself had been in some way actively responsible for all this misery.

His letter was shorter than Mercy's. They were sad, strange letters to have passed between lovers. Mercy's ran as follows:—

"*My darling Stephen*,—Your letters have shocked me so deeply that I find myself at a loss for words in which to reply. I cannot understand your present position at all. I have waited all these days, hoping that some new light would come to me, that I could see the whole thing differently; but I cannot. On the contrary, each hour that I think of it (and I have thought of nothing else since your second letter came) only makes my conviction stronger. Darling, that money is Mrs. Jacobs's money, by every moral right. You may be correct in your statement as to the legal rights of the case. I take it for granted that you are. At any rate, I know nothing about that; and I rest no argument upon it at all. But it is clear as daylight to me that morally you are bound to give her the money. Suppose you had had permission from her to make those changes in the house, while you were still her tenant, and had found the money, then you would have handed it to her unhesitatingly. Why? Because you would have said, 'This woman's husband built this house. No one except his brother who could possibly have deposited this money here has lived in the house. One of those two men was the owner of that gold. In either case, she is the only heir, and it is hers. I am sure you would have felt this, had we chanced to discover the money on one of those winter nights you refer to. Now in what has the moral obligation been changed by the fact that the house has come into your hands? Not by ordinary sale, either; but simply by foreclosure of a mortgage, under conditions which were certainly very hard for Mrs. Jacobs, inasmuch as one-half the interest has always been paid. This money which you have found would have paid nearly the whole of the original loan. It was hers,

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only she did not know where it lay. O Stephen, my darling, I do implore you not to do this great wrong. You will certainly come to see, sooner or later, that it was a dishonest act; and then it will be too late to undo it. If I thought that by talking with you I could make you see it as I do, I would come to you at once. But I keep clinging to the hope that you will see it of yourself, that a sudden realization of it will burst upon you like a great light. Don't speak so angrily to me of calling you a thief. I never used the word. I never could. I know the act looks to you right, or you would not commit it. But it is terrible to me that it should look so to you. I feel, darling, as if you were color-blind, and I saw you about to pick a most deadly fruit, whose color ought to warn every one from touching it; but you, not seeing the color, did not know the danger; and I must save you at all hazards, at all costs. Oh, what shall I say, what shall I say! How can I make you see the truth? God help us if I do not; for such an act as this on your part would put an impassable gulf between our souls for ever. Your loving,

"*Mercy*."

Stephen's letter was in curter phrase. Writing was not to him a natural form of expression. Even of joyous or loving words he was chary, and much more so of their opposites. His life-long habit of repression of all signs of annoyance, all complaints, all traces of suffering, told still more on his written words than on his daily speech and life. His letter sounded harder than it need for this reason; seemed to have been written in antagonism rather than in grief, and so did injustice to his feeling.

"*My dear mercy*,—It is always a mistake for people to try to impose their own standards of right and wrong on others. It gives me very great pain to wound you in any way, you know that; and to wound you in such a way as this gives me the greatest possible pain. But I cannot make your conscience mine. If this money had not seemed to me to be justly my own, I should never have thought of taking it. As it does seem to me to be justly my own, your believing it to be another's ought not to change my action. If I had only my own future to consider, I might give it up, for the sake of your peace of mind. But it is not so. I have a helpless invalid dependent on me; and one of the hardest things in my life to bear has always been the fear that I might lose my health, and be unable to earn even the poor living we now have. This sum, small as it is, will remove that fear, will enable me to insure for my mother a reasonable amount of comfort as long as she lives; and I cannot give it up. I do not suppose, either, that it would make any difference in your feeling if I gave it up solely to please you, and not because I thought it wrong to keep it. How any act which I honestly believe to be right, and which you know I honestly believe to be right, can put 'an impassable gulf between our souls for ever,' I do not understand. But, if' it seems so to you, I can only submit; and I will try to forget that you ever said to me, 'I shall trust you till I die!' O Mercy, Mercy, ask yourself if you are just!

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"*Stephen*."

Mercy grasped eagerly at the intimation in this letter that Stephen might possibly give the money up because she desired it.

"Oh, if he will only not keep it, I don't care on what grounds he gives it up!" she exclaimed. "I can bear his thinking it was his, if only the money goes where it belongs. He will see afterwards that I was right." And she sat down instantly, and wrote Stephen a long letter, imploring him to do as he had suggested.

"Darling," she said, "this last letter of yours has given me great comfort." As Stephen read this sentence, he uttered an ejaculation of surprise. What possible comfort there could have been in the words he remembered to have written he failed to see; but it was soon made clear to him.

"You say," she continued, "that you might possibly give the money up for sake of my peace of mind, if it were not for the fear that your mother might suffer. O Stephen, then give it up! give it up! Trust to the future's being at least as kind as the past. I will not say another word about the right or wrong of the thing. Think that my feeling is all morbid and overstrained about it, if you will. I do not care what you think of me, so that I do not have to think of you as using money which is not your own. And, darling, do not be anxious about the future: if any thing happens to you, I will take care of your mother. It is surely my right next to yours. I only wish you would let me help you in it even now. I am earning more and more money. I have more than I need. Oh, if you would only take some of it, darling! Why should you not? I would take it from you, if you had it and I had not. I could give you in a very few years as much as this you have found and never miss it. Do let me atone to you in this way for your giving up what you think is your right in the matter of this ill-fated money. O Stephen, I could be almost happy again, if you would do this! You say it would make no difference in my feeling about it, if you gave the money up only to please me, and not because you thought it wrong to keep it. No, indeed! that is not so. I would be happier, if you saw it as I do, of course; but, if you cannot, then the next best thing, the only thing left for my happiness, is to have you yield to my wish. Why, Stephen, I have even felt so strongly about it as this: that sometimes, in thinking it over, I have had a wild impulse to tell you that if you did not give the money to Mrs. Jacobs I would inform the authorities that you had it, and so test the question whether you had the right to keep it or not. Any thing, even your humiliation, has at times seemed to me better than that you should go on living in the possession of stolen money. You can see from this how deeply I felt about the thing. I suppose I really never could have done this. At the last moment, I should have found it impossible to array myself against you in any such public way;

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but, oh, my darling, I should always have felt as if I helped steal the money, if I kept quiet about it. You see I use a past tense already, I feel so certain that you will give it up now. Dear, dear Stephen, you will never be sorry: as soon as it is done, you will be glad. I wish that gold had been all sunk in the sea, and never seen light again, the sight of it has cost us so dear. Darling, I can't tell you what a load has rolled off my heart. Oh, if you could know what it has been to me to have this cloud over my thoughts of you! I have always been so proud of you, Stephen,—your patience, your bravery. In my thought, you have stood always for my ideal of the beautiful alliance of gentleness and strength. Darling, we owe something to those who love us: we owe it to them not to disappoint them. If I were to be tempted to do some dishonorable thing, I should say to myself: 'No, for I must be what Stephen believes me. It is not only that I will not grieve him: still more, I will not disappoint him.'"

Mercy wrote on and on. The reaction from the pent-up grief, the prolonged strain, was great. In her first joy at any, even the least, alleviation of the horror she had felt at the thought of Stephen's dishonesty, she over-estimated the extent of the relief she would feel from his surrendering the money at her request. She wrote as buoyantly, as confidently, as if his doing that would do away with the whole wrong from the beginning. In her overflowing, impetuosity, also, she did not consider what severe and cutting things were implied as well as said in some of her sentences. She closed the letter without rereading it, hastened to send it by the first mail, and then began to count the days which must pass before Stephen's answer could reach her.

Alas for Mercy! this was a sad preparation for the result which was to follow her hastily written words. It seems sometimes as if fate delighted in lifting us up only to cast us down, in taking us up into a high mountain to show us bright and goodly lands, only to make our speedy imprisonment in the dark valley the harder to bear.

Stephen read this last letter of Mercy's with an ever-increasing sense of resentment to the very end. For the time being it seemed to actually obliterate every trace of his love for her. He read the words as wrathfully as if they had been written by a mere acquaintance.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "'Stolen money! Inform the authorities!' Let her do it if she likes and see how she would come out at the end of that.' And Stephen wrote Mercy very much such a letter as he would have written to a man under the same circumstances. Luckily, he kept it a day, and, rereading it in a cooler moment was shocked at its tone, destroyed it, and wrote another. But the second one was no less hard, only more courteous, than the first. It ran thus:—

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"*Mercy*,—I am sorry that any thing in my last letter should have led you to suppose that under the existing circumstances you could control my actions. All I said was that I might, for the sake of your peace of mind, give up this money, if it were not for my obligations to my mother. It was a foolish thing to say, since those obligations could not be done away with. I ought to have known that in your overwrought frame of mind you would snatch at the suggestion, and make it the basis of a fresh appeal.

"Now let me say, once for all, that my mind is firmly made up on this subject, and that it must be dropped between us. The money is mine, and I shall keep it. If you think it your duty to 'inform the authorities,' as you say, you must do so; and I would not say one word to hinder you. I would never, as you do in this case, attempt to make my own conscience the regulator of another's conduct. If you do regard me as the possessor of 'stolen money,' it is undoubtedly your duty to inform against me. I can only warn you that all you would gain by it would be a most disagreeable exposure of your own and my private affairs, and much mortification to both of us. The money is mine beyond all question. I shall not reply to any more letters from you on this subject. There is nothing more to be said; and all prolonging of the discussion is a needless pain, and is endangering the very foundations of our affection for each other. I want to say one thing more, however; and I hope it will impress you as it ought. Never forget that the strongest proof that my conscience was perfectly clear in regard to that money is that I at once told you of its discovery. It would have been perfectly easy for me to have accounted to you in a dozen different ways for my having come into possession of a little money, or even to have concealed from you the fact that I had done so; and, if I had felt myself a thief, I should certainly have taken good care that you did not know it.

"I must also thank you for your expressions of willingness to take care of my mother, in case of any thing's happening to me. Until these last letters of yours, I had often thought, with a sense of relief, that, if I died, you would never see my mother suffer; but now any such thought is inseparably associated with bitter memories. And my mother will not, in any event, need your help; for the money I shall have from the sale of the house, together with this which I have found, will give her all she will require.

"You must forgive me if this letter sounds hard, Mercy. I have not your faculty of mingling endearing epithets with sharp accusations and reproaches. I cannot be lover and culprit at once, as you are able to be lover and accuser, or judge. I love you, I think, as deeply and tenderly as ever; but you yourself have made all expression of it impossible. *Stephen*."

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This letter roused in Mercy most conflicting emotions. Wounded feeling at its coldness, a certain admiration for its tone of immovable resolution, anger at what seemed to her Stephen's unjustifiable resentment of her effort to influence his action,—all these blended in one great pain which was well-nigh unbearable. For the time being, her distress in regard to the money seemed cast into shadow and removed by all this suffering in her personal relation with Stephen; but the personal suffering had not so deep a foundation as the other. Gradually, all sense of her own individual hurts in Stephen's words, in his acts, in the weakening of the bond which held them together, died out, and left behind it only a sense of bereavement and loss; while the first horror of Stephen's wrong-doing, of the hopeless lack in his moral nature, came back with twofold intensity. This had its basis in convictions,—in convictions which were as strong as the foundations of the earth: the other had its basis in emotions, in sensibilities which might pass away or be dulled.

Spite of Stephen's having forbidden all reference to the subject, Mercy wrote letter after letter upon it, pleading sometimes humbly, sometimes vehemently. It seemed to her that she was fighting for Stephen's very life, and she could not give way. To all these out-pourings Stephen made no reply. He answered the letters punctually, but made no reference to the question of the money, save by a few short words at the end of his letter, or in a postscript: such as, "It grieves me to see that you still dwell on that matter of which I said we must speak no more;" or, "Pray, dear Mercy, do not prolong that painful discussion. I have nothing more to say to you about it."

For the rest, his letters were faithful transcripts of the little events of his uneventful life, warm comments on any of Mercy's writings which he read, and gentle assurances of his continued affection. The old longings, broodings, and passionate yearnings, which he used to pour out, ceased. Stephen was wounded to the very quick; and the wound did not heal. Yet he felt no withdrawal from Mercy: probably nothing she could do would ever drive him from her. He would die, if worst came to worst, lying by her side and looking up in her eyes, like a dog at the feet of its master who had shot him.

Mercy was much moved by this tone of patience in his letters: it touched her, as the look of patient endurance on his face used to touch her. It also irritated her, it was so foreign to her own nature.

"How can he help answering these things I say?" she would exclaim. "He has no right to refuse to talk with me about such a vital matter." If any one had said to Mercy, "He has as much right to refuse to discuss the question as you have to force it upon him," she could not have seen the point fairly.

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But all Stephen's patience, gentleness, and firmness did not abate one jot or tittle of Mercy's conviction that he was doing a dishonest thing. Oh the contrary, his quiet appeared to her more and more like a callous satisfaction; and his occasional cheerfulness, like an exultation over his ill-gotten gains. Slowly there crept into her feeling towards him a certain something which was akin to scorn,—the most fatal of deaths to love. The hateful word "thief" seemed to be perpetually ringing in her ears. When she read accounts of robberies, of defalcations, of breaches of trust, she found herself always drawing parallels between the conduct of these criminals and Stephen's. The secrecy, the unassailable safety of his crime, seemed to her to make it inexpressibly more odious.

"I do believe," she thought to herself again and again, "that if he had been driven by his poverty to knocking men down on the highway, and robbing them of their pocket-books, I should not have so loathed it!"

As the weeks went on, Mercy's unhappiness increased rather than diminished. There seemed an irreconcilible conflict between her love and every other emotion in her soul. She seemed to herself to be, as it were, playing the hypocrite to her own heart in thinking thus of a man and loving him still; for that she still loved Stephen, she did not once doubt. At this time, she printed a little poem, which set many of her friends to vondering from what experience of hers it could possibly have been drawn. Mercy's poems were so largely subjective in tone that it was hard for her readers to believe that they were not all drawn from her own individual experience.

A *woman's battle*.

Dear foe, I know thou'lt win the fight;
I know thou hast the stronger bark,
And thou art sailing in the light,
While I am creeping in the dark.
Thou dost not dream that I am crying,
As I come up with colors flying.

I clear away my wounded, slain,
With strength like frenzy strong and swift;
I do not feel the tug and strain,
Though dead are heavy, hard to lift.
If I looked on their faces dying,
I could not keep my colors flying.

Dear foe, it will be short,—our fight,—
Though lazily thou train'st thy guns:
Fate steers us,—me to deeper night,
And thee to brighter seas and suns;

But thou'lt not dream that I am dying,
As I sail by with colors flying!

There was great injustice to Stephen in this poem. When he read it, he groaned, and exclaimed aloud, "O Mercy! O Mercy!" Then, as he read it over again, he said, "Surely she could not have meant herself in this: it is only dramatic. She could never call me her foe." Mercy had often said to him of some of her most intense poems, "Oh, it was purely dramatic. I just fancied how anybody would feel under such circumstances;" and he clung to the hope that it was true in this

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case. But it was not. Already Mercy had a sense of antagonism, of warfare, with Stephen, or rather with her love for him. Already her pride was beginning to array itself in reticence, in withdrawal, in suppression. More than once she had said to herself “I can live without him! I could bear that pain better than this.” More than once she had asked herself with a kind of terror, “Do I really wish ever to see Stephen again?” and had been forced to own in her secret thought that she shrank from meeting him. She began even to consider the possibility of deferring the visit to Lizzy Hunter, which she had promised to make in the spring. As the time drew nearer, her unwillingness to go increased, and she would no doubt have discovered some way of escape; but one day early in March a telegram came to her, which left her no longer any room for choice.

It ran:—

“Uncle Dorrance is not expected to live. He wishes to see you. He is at my house. Come immediately.

“*Lizzy Hunter*.”

Chapter XIII.

Within six hours after the receipt of this telegram, Mercy was on her way to Penfield. Her journey would take a night and part of a day. As the morning dawned, and she drew near the old familiar scenes, her heart was wrung with conflicting memories and hopes and fears. The whole landscape was dreary: the fields were dark and sodden, with narrow banks of discolored snow lying under the fences, and thin rims of ice along the edges of the streams and pools. The sky was gray; the bare trees were gray: all life looked gray and hopeless to Mercy. She had had an over-mastering presentiment from the moment when she read the telegram that she should reach Penfield too late to see Parson Dorrance alive. A strange certainty that he had died in the night settled upon her mind as soon as she waked from her troubled sleep; and when she reached Lizzy’s door, and saw standing before it the undertaker’s wagon, which she so well remembered, there was no shock of surprise to her in the sight. At the first sound of Mercy’s voice, Lizzy came swiftly forward, and fell upon her neck in a passion of crying.

“O Mercy, Mercy, he”—

“Yes, dear, I know it,” interrupted Mercy, in a calm tone. “I know he is dead.”

“Why, who told you, Mercy?” exclaimed Lizzy. “He only died a few hours ago,—about daybreak,”

“Oh, I thought he died in the night!” said Mercy, in a strange tone, as if trying to recollect something accurately about which her memory was not clear. Her look and her tone filled Lizzy with terror, and banished her grief for the time being.

“Mercy, Mercy, don’t look so!” she exclaimed. “Speak to me! Oh, do cry, can’t you?” And Lizzy’s tears flowed afresh.

“No, Lizzy, I don’t think I can cry,” said Mercy, in the same strange, low voice. “I wish I could have spoken to him once, though. Did he leave any word for me? Perhaps there is something he wanted me to do.”

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Mercy's face was white, and her lips trembled; but her look was hardly the look of one in sorrow: it was a rapt look, as of one walking on dizzy heights, breathless with some solemn purpose. Lizzy was convulsed with grief, sobbing like a child, and pouring out one incoherent sentence after another. Mercy soothed her and comforted her as a mother might have done, and finally compelled her to be more calm. Mercy's magnetic power over those whom she loved was almost unlimited. She forestalled their very wills, and made them desire what she desired.

"O Mercy, don't make me glad he is dead! You frighten me, darling. I don't want to stop crying; but you have sealed up all my tears," cried Lizzy, later in the day, when Mercy had been talking like a seer, who could look into the streets of heaven, and catch the sound of the songs of angels.

Mercy smiled sadly. "I don't want to prevent your crying, dear," she said, "if it does you any good. But I am very sure that Mr. Dorrance sees us at this moment, and longs to tell us how glad he is, and that we must be glad for him." And Mercy's eyes shone as they looked steadfastly across the room, as if the empty space were, to her vision, peopled with spirits. This mood of exalted communion did not leave her. Her face seemed transfigured by it. When she stood by the body of her loved teacher and friend, she clasped her hands, and, bending over the face, exclaimed,—

"Oh, how good God was!" Then, turning suddenly to Lizzy, she exclaimed,—

"Lizzy, did you know that he loved me, and asked me to be his wife? This is why I am thanking God for taking him to heaven."

Lizzy's face paled. Astonishment, incredulity, anger, grief, all blended in the sudden look she turned upon Mercy. "I thought so! I thought so! But I never believed you knew it. And you did not love him! Mercy, I will never forgive you!"

"He forgave me," said Mercy, gently; "and so you might. But I shall never forgive myself!"

"Mercy Philbrick!" exclaimed Lizzy, "how could you help loving that man?" And, in her excitement, Lizzy stretched out her right hand towards the rigid, motionless figure under the white pall. "He was the most glorious man God ever made."

The two women stood side by side, looking into the face of the dead. It was a strange place for these words to be spoken. It was as solemn as eternity.

"I did not help loving him," said Mercy, in a lower tone, her white face growing whiter as she spoke. "But"—she paused. No words came to her lips, for the bitter consciousness which filled her heart.

Lizzy's voice sank to a husky whisper.

“But what?” she said. “O Mercy, Mercy! is it Stephen White you love?” And Lizzy’s face, even in that solemn hour, took a look of scorn. “Are you going to marry Stephen White?” she continued.

“Never, Lizzy,—never!” said Mercy, in a tone as concentrated as if a lifetime ended there; and, stooping low, she kissed the rigid hands which lay folded on the heart of the man she ought to have loved, but had not. Then, turning away, she took Lizzy’s hands in hers, and kissing, her forehead said earnestly,—

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“We will never speak again of this, Lizzy, remember.” Lizzy was overawed by her tone, and made no reply.

Parson Dorrance’s funeral was a scene which will never be forgotten by those who saw it. It was on one of the fiercest days which the fierce New England March can show. A storm of rain and sleet, with occasional softened intervals of snow, raged all day. The roads were gullies of swift-running water and icy sloughs; the cold was severe; and the cutting wind at times drove the sleet and rain in slanting scourges, before which scarce man or beast could stand. The funeral was held in the village church, which was larger than the college chapel. Long before the hour at which the services were to begin, every pew was filled, and the aisles were crowded with those who could not find seats. From every parish within twenty miles the mourners had come. There was not one there who had not heard words of help or comfort from Parson Dorrance’s lips. The students of the college filled the body of the church; the Faculty and distinguished strangers sat in the front pews. The pews under one of the galleries had been reserved for the negroes from “The Cedars.” Early in the morning the poor creatures had begun to flock in. Not a seat was empty: old women, women with babies, old men, boys and girls, wet, dripping, ragged, friendless, more than one hundred of them,—there they were. They had walked all that distance in that terrible storm. Each one had brought in his hand a green bough or a bunch of rock-ferns, something of green beauty from the woods their teacher had taught them to love. They sat huddled together, with an expression of piteous grief on every face, which was enough to touch the stoniest heart. Now and then sobs would burst from the women, and some old figure would be seen rocking to and fro in uncontrollable sorrow.

The coffin stood on a table in front of the pulpit. It seemed to be resting on an altar of cedar and ferns. Mercy had brought from her old haunts in the woods masses of the glossy evergreen fern, and interwoven them with the boughs of cedar. At the end of the services, it was announced that all who wished could pass by the coffin and take one last look at their friend.

Slowly and silently the congregation passed up the right aisle, looked on the face, and passed out at the left door. It was a pathetic sight to see the poor, outcast band wait patiently, humbly, till every one else had gone: then, like a flock of stricken sheep, they rushed confusedly towards the pulpit, and gathered round the coffin. Now burst out the grief which had been pent up: with cries and ejaculations, they went tottering and stumbling down the aisles. One old man, with hair as white as snow,—one of the original fugitive slaves who had founded the settlement,—bent over the coffin at its head, and clung with both hands to its edge, swaying back and forth above it, crying aloud, till the sexton was obliged to loosen his grasp and lead him away by force.

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The college faculty still sat in the front pews. There were some of their number, younger men, scholars and men of the world, who had not been free from a disposition to make good-natured fun of Parson Dorrance's philanthropies. They shrugged their shoulders sometimes at the mention of his parish at "The Cedars;" they regarded him as old-fashioned and unpractical. They sat conscience-stricken and abashed now; the tears of these bereaved black people smote their philosophy and their worldliness, and showed them how shallow they were. Tears answered to tears, and the college professors and the negro slaves wept together.

"They have nobody left to love them now," exclaimed one of the youngest and hitherto most cynical of Parson Dorrance's colleagues, as he stood watching the grief-stricken creatures.

While the procession formed to bear the body to the grave, the blacks stood in a group on the church-steps, watching it. After the last carriage had fallen into line, they hurried down and followed on in the storm. In vain some kindly persons tried to dissuade them. It was two miles to the cemetery, two miles farther away from their homes; but they repelled all suggestions of the exposure with indignant looks, and pressed on. When the coffin was lowered into the grave, they pushed timidly forward, and began to throw in their green boughs and bunches of ferns. Every one else stepped back respectfully as soon as their intention was discovered, and in a moment they had formed in solid ranks close about the grave, each one casting in his green palm of crown and remembrance,—a body-guard such as no emperor ever had to stand around him in his grave.

On the day after Mercy's arrival in town, Stephen had called to see her. She had sent down to him a note with these words:—

"I cannot see you, dear Stephen, until after all is over. The funeral will be to-morrow. Come the next morning, as early as you like."

The hours had seemed bitterly long to Stephen. He had watched Mercy at the funeral; and, when he saw her face bowed in her hands, and felt rather than saw that she was sobbing, he was stung by a new sense of loss and wrong that he had no right to be by her side and comfort her. He forgot for the time, in the sight of her grief, all the unhappiness of their relation for the past few months. He had unconsciously felt all along that, if he could but once look in her eyes, all would be well. How could he help feeling so, when he recalled the expression of childlike trust and devotion which her sweet face always wore when she lifted it to his? And now, as his eyes dwelt lingeringly and fondly on every line of her bowed form, he had but one thought, but one consciousness,—his desire to throw his arms about her, and exclaim, "O Mercy, are you not my own, my very own?"

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With his heart full of this new fondness and warmth, Stephen went at an early hour to seek Mercy. As he entered the house, he was sensibly affected by the expression still lingering of the yesterday's grief. The decorations of evergreens and flowers were still untouched. Mercy and Lizzy had made the whole house gay as for a festival; but the very blossoms seemed to-day to say that it had been a festival of sorrow. A large sheaf of callas had stood on a small table at the head of the coffin. The table had not yet been moved from the place where it stood near the centre of the room; but it stood there now alone, with a strange expression of being left by accident. Stephen bent over it, looking into the deep creamy cups, and thinking dreamily that Mercy's nature was as fair, as white, as royal as these most royal of graceful flowers, when the door opened and Mercy came towards him. He sprang to meet her with outstretched arms. Something in her look made the outstretched arms fall nerveless; made his springing step pause suddenly; made the very words die away on his lips. "O Mercy!" was all he could say, and he breathed it rather than said it.

Mercy smiled a very piteous smile, and said, "Yes, Stephen, I am here."

"O Mercy, it is not you! You are not here. What has done this to you? Did you so love that man?" exclaimed Stephen, a sudden pang seizing him of fiercest jealousy of the dead, whom he had never feared while he was living.

Mercy's face contracted, as if a sharp pain had wrenched every nerve.

"No, I did not love him; that is, not as you mean. You know how very dearly I did love him, though."

"Dear darling, you are all worn out. This shock has been too much for you. You are not well," said Stephen, tenderly, coming nearer to her and taking her hand. "You must have rest and sleep at once."

The hand was not Mercy's hand any more than the voice had been Mercy's voice. Stephen dropped it, and, looking fixedly at Mercy's eyes, whispered, "Mercy, you do not love me as you used to."

Mercy's eyes drooped; she locked her hands tightly together, and said, "I can't, Stephen." No possible form of words could have been so absolute. "I can't!" "I do not," would have been merciful, would have held a hope, by the side of this helpless, despairing, "I can't."

Stephen sank into a chair, and covered his eyes with his hands. Mercy stood still, near the white callas; her hands clasped, and her eyes fixed on Stephen. At last she spoke, in a voice of unutterable yearning and tenderness, "I do love you, Stephen."

At these words, he pressed his hands tighter upon his eyes for one second, then shook them hastily free, and looking up at Mercy said gently,—

“Yes, dear, I know you do; and I know you would have loved me always, if you could. Do not be unhappy. I told you a long time ago that to have had you once love me was enough for a lifetime.” And Stephen smiled,—a smile more pathetic than Mercy’s had been. He went on, still in the same gentle voice,—a voice out of which the very life seemed to have died,—“I hoped, when we met, all would be right. It used to be so much to you, Mercy, to look into my eyes, I thought you would trust me when you saw me.”

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No reproach, no antagonism, no entreaty. With the long-trained patience of a lifetime, Stephen accepted this great grief, and made no effort to gainsay it. Mercy tried again and again to speak, but no words came. At last, with a flood of tears, she exclaimed,—

“I cannot help it, Stephen,—I cannot help it.”

“No, darling, you cannot help it; and it is not your fault,” replied Stephen. Touched to the heart by his sweetness and forbearance, Mercy went nearer him, and took his hand, and in her old way was about to lay it to her cheek.

Stephen drew it hastily away, and a shudder ran over his body. “No, Mercy, do not try to do that. That is not right, when you do not trust me. You cannot help loving the touch of my hand, Mercy,”—and a certain sad pride lighted Stephen’s face at the thought of the clinging affection which even now stirred this woman’s veins for him,—“any more than you can help having ceased to trust me. If the trust ever comes back, then”—Stephen turned his head away, and did not finish the sentence. A great silence fell upon them both. How inexplicable it seemed to them that there was nothing to say! At last Stephen rose, and said gravely,—

“Good-by, Mercy. Unless there is something I can do to help you, I would rather not see you again.”

“No,” whispered Mercy. “That is best.”

“And if the time ever comes, darling, when you need me, ... or trust me ... again, will you write to me and say so?”

“Yes,” sobbed Mercy, and Stephen left her. On the threshold of the door, he turned and fixed his eyes upon her with one long look of sorrow, compassion, and infinite love. Her heart thrilled under it. She made an eager step forward. If he had returned, she would have thrown herself into his arms, and cried out, “O Stephen, I do love you, I do trust you.” But Stephen made an inexorable gesture of his hand, which said more than any words, “No! no! do not deceive yourself,” and was gone.

And thus they parted for ever, this man and this woman who had been for two years all in all to each other, who had written on each other’s hearts and lives characters which eternity itself could never efface.

Hope lived long in Stephen’s heart. He built too much on the memories of his magnetic power over Mercy, and he judged her nature too much by his own. He would have loved and followed her to the end, in spite of her having become a very outcast of crime, if she had continued to love him; and it was simply impossible for him to conceive of her love’s being either less or different. But, when in a volume of poems which Mercy

published one year after their parting, he read the following sonnet, he knew that all was indeed over:—

Died.

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Not by the death that kills the body. Nay,
By that which even Christ bade us to fear
Hath died my dead.
Ah, me! if on a bier
I could but see him lifeless stretched to-day,
I 'd bathe his face with tears of joy, and lay
My cheek to his in anguish which were near
To ecstasy, if I could hold him dear
In death as life. Mere separations weigh
As dust in balances of love. The death
That kills comes only by dishonor. Vain
To chide me! vain! And weaker to implore,
O thou once loved so well, loved now no more!
There is no resurrection for such slain,
No miracle of God could give thee breath!

* * * * *

Mercy Philbrick lived thirty years after the events described in these pages. It was a life rich to overflowing, yet uneventful, as the world reckons: a life lonely, yet full of companionship; sady yet full of cheer; hard, and yet perpetually uplifted by an inward joy which made her very presence like sunshine, and made men often say of her, "Oh, she has never known sorrow." This was largely the result of her unquenchable gift of song, of the true poet's temperament, to which life is for ever new, beautiful, and glad. It was also the result of her ever-increasing spirituality of nature. This took no shape of creed, worship, or what the world's common consent calls religion. Most of the words spoken by the teachers of churches repelled Mercy by their monotonous iteration of the letter which killeth. But her realization of the solemn significance of the great fact of being alive deepened every hour; her tenderness, her sense of brotherhood to every human being, and her sense of the actual presence and near love of God. Her old intolerance was softened, or rather it had changed from antagonisms on the surface to living principles at the core. Truth, truth, truth, was still the war-cry of her soul; and there was an intensity in every word of her written or spoken pleadings on this subject which might well have revealed to a careful analyzer of them that they had sprung out of the depths of the profoundest experiences. Her influence as a writer was very great. As she grew older, she wrote less and less for the delight of the ear, more and more for the stirring of the heart. To do a little towards making people glad, towards making them kind to one another, towards opening their eyes to the omnipresent beauty,—these were her ambitions. "Oh, the tender, unutterable beauty of all created things!" were the opening lines of one of her sweetest songs; and it might have been said to be one of the watchwords of her life.

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It took many years for her to reach this plane, to attain to the fulness of this close spiritual communion with things seen and unseen. The double bereavement and strain of her two years of life in Penfield left her for a long time bruised and sore. Her relation with Stephen, as she looked back upon it, hurt her in every fibre of her nature. Sometimes she was filled with remorse for the grief she had caused him, and sometimes with poignant distress, of doubt whether she had not after all been unjust to him. Underlying all this remorse, all this doubt was a steadily growing consciousness that her love for him was in the very outset a mistake, an abnormal emotion, born of temporary and insufficient occasion, and therefore sure to have sooner or later proved too weak for the tests of life. On the other hand, her thoughts of Parson Dorrance grew constantly warmer, tenderer, more assured. His character, his love for her, his beautiful life, rose steadily higher and higher, and brighter and brighter on her horizon, as the lofty snow-clad peaks of a mountain land reveal themselves in all their grandeur to our vision only when we have journeyed away from their base. Slowly the whole allegiance of her heart transferred itself to the dead man's memory; slowly her grief for his loss deepened, and yet with the deepened grief came a certain new and holy joy. It surely could not be impossible for him to know in heaven that she was his on earth? As confidently as if she had been wedded to him here, she looked forward to the reunion with him there, and found in her secret consciousness of this eternal bond a hidden rapture, such as has been the stay of many a widowed heart through long lifetimes of loneliness. This secret bond was like an impalpable yet impenetrable veil between her soul and the souls of all men who came into relation with her. Men loved her and sought her,—loved her warmly and sought her with long years of devotion. The world often judged her uncharitably by reason of these friendships, which were only friendships, and yet pointed to a warmer regard than the world consents that friends may feel. But there was never a man, of all the men who loved Mercy, who did not feel himself, spite of all her frank and loving intimacy, withheld, debarred, separated from her at a certain point, as if there stood drawn up there a cordon of viewless spirits.

The one grief above which she could not wholly rise, which at times smote her and bowed her down, was her sense of her loss in being childless. The heart of mother was larger in her even than the heart of wife. Her longing for children of her own was so great that it was often more than she could bear to watch little children at their play. She stood sometimes at her window at dusk, and watched the poor laboring men and women going home, leading or carrying their children; and it seemed as if her heart would break. Everywhere, her eye noted the swarming groups of children, poor, uncared for, so often unwelcome; and she said sadly to herself, "So many! so many! and not one for me." Yet she never felt any desire to adopt children. She distrusted her own patience and justice too much; and she feared too deeply the development of hereditary traits which she could not conquer; "I might find that I had taken a liar," she thought; "and I should hate him."

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As she reached middle age, this unsatisfied desire ceased to be so great a grief. She became more and more like a motherly friend to the young people surrounding her. Her house was a home to them all, and she reproduced in her own life very nearly the relation which Parson Dorrance had held to the young people of Danby. Her friend Lizzy Hunter was now the mother of four girls, all in their first young womanhood. They all strove eagerly for the privilege of living with "Aunt Mercy," and went in turn to spend whole seasons with her.

On Stephen White's thirty-sixth birthday, his mother died. The ten years which had passed since Mercy left him had grown harder and harder, day by day; but he bore the last as silently and patiently as he bore the first, and Mrs. White's last words to the gray-haired man who bent over her bed were,—

"You have been a good boy, Steve,—a good boy. You'll have some rest now."

Since the day he bade good-by to Mercy in the room from which Parson Dorrance had just been buried, Stephen had never written to her, never heard from her, except as all the world heard from her, in her published writings. These he read eagerly, and kept them carefully in scrap-books. He took great delight in collecting all the copies of her verses. Sometimes a little verse of hers would go the rounds of the newspapers for months, and each reappearance of it was a new pleasure to Stephen. He knew most of them by heart; and he felt that he knew Mercy still, as well as he knew her when she looked up in his face. On the night of his mother's death he wrote to her these words:—

"*Mercy*,—It is ten years since we parted. I love you as I loved you then. I shall never love any other woman. I am free now. My mother has died this night. May I come and see you? I ask nothing of you, except to be your friend. Can I not be that?

"*Stephen*."

If a ghost of one dead for ten years had entered her presence, Mercy had hardly been more startled. Stephen had ceased to be a personality to her. Striving very earnestly with herself to be kind, and to do for this stranger whom she knew not what would be the very best and most healing thing for his soul, Mercy wrote to him as follows:—

"*Dear Stephen*,—Your note was a very great surprise to me. I am most heartily thankful that you are at last free to live your life like other men. I think that the future ought to hold some very great and good gifts in store for you, to reward you for your patience. I have never known any human being so patient as you.

"You must forgive me for saying that I do not believe it is possible for us to be friends. I could be yours, and would be glad to be so. But you could not be mine while you continue so to set me apart from all other women, as you say you do, in your affection.

I am truly grieved that you do this, and I hope that in your new free life you will very soon find other relations which will make you forget your old one with me. I did you a great harm, but we were both ignorant of our mistake. I pray that it may yet be repaired, and that you may soon be at rest in a happy home with a wife and children. Then I should be glad to see you: until then, it is not best.

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“Yours most honestly,

“*Mercy*.”

Until he read this letter, Stephen had not known that secretly in the bottom of his heart he riad all these years cherished a hope that there might yet be a future in store for him and Mercy. Now, by the new sense of desolation which he felt, he knew that there must have been a little more life than he thought left; in him to die.

As soon as his mother was buried, he closed the house and went abroad. There he roamed about listlessly from country to country, for many years, acquiring a certain desultory culture, and buying, so far as his income would permit, every thing he saw which he thought Mercy would like. Then he went home, bought the old Jacobs house back again, and fitted it up in every respect as Mercy had once suggested. This done, he sat down to wait—for he knew not what. He had a vague feeling that he would die soon, and leave the house and his small fortune to Mercy; and she would come and spend her summers there, and so he would recall to her their old life together. He led the life of a hermit,—rarely went out, and still more rarely saw any one at home. He looked like a man of sixty rather than like one of fifty. He was fast becoming an invalid, more, however, from the lack of purpose and joy than from any disease. Life had been very hard to Stephen.

Nothing seemed more probable, contrasting his listless figure, gray hair, and jaded face with Mercy’s full, fresh countenance and bounding elasticity, than that his dream of going first, and leaving to her the gift of all he had, would be realized; but he was destined to outlive her by many a long year.

Mercy’s death was a strange one. She had gone with two of Lizzy Hunter’s daughters to spend a few weeks in one of the small White Mountain villages, which was a favorite haunt of hers. The day after their arrival, a two days’ excursion to some of the mountains was proposed; and Mercy, though not feeling well enough to join it herself, insisted that the girls should go. They were reluctant to leave her; but, with her usual vehemence, she resisted all their protestations, and compelled them to join the party. She was thus left alone in a house crowded with people, all of whom were strangers to her. Some of them recollected afterward to have noticed her sitting on the piazza at sunset, looking at the mountains with an expression of great delight; but no one spoke with her, and no one missed her the next morning, when she did not come to breakfast. Late in the forenoon, the landlady came running in great terror and excitement to one of the guests, exclaiming: “That lady that came yesterday is dying. The chambermaids could not get into her room, nor get any answer, so we broke open the door. The doctor says she’ll never come to again!”

Helpless, the village doctor, and the servants, and the landlady, and as many of the guests as could crowd into the little room, stood around Mercy’s bed. It seemed a sad

way to die, surrounded by strangers, who did not even know her name; but Mercy was unconscious. It made no difference to her. Her heavy breathing told only too well the nature of the trouble.

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“This cannot be the first attack she has had,” said the doctor; and it was found afterward that Mercy had told Lizzy Hunter of her having twice had threatenings of a paralytic seizure. “If only I die at once,” she had said to Lizzy, “I would rather go that way than in most others. I dread the dying part of death. I don’t want to know when I am going.”

And she did not. All day her breathing grew slower and more labored, and at night it stopped. In a few hours, there settled upon her features an expression of such perfect peace that each one who came to look at her stole away reverent and subdued.

The two old crones who had come to “lay out” the body crept about on tiptoe, their usual garrulity quenched by the sad and beautiful spectacle. It was a singular thing that no one knew the name of the stranger who had died thus suddenly and alone. In the confusion of their arrival, Mercy had omitted to register their names. In the smaller White Mountain houses, this formality is not rigidly enforced. And so it came to pass that this woman, so well known, so widely beloved, lay a night and a day dead, within a few hours’ journey of her home as unknown as if she had been cast up from a shipwrecked vessel on a strange shore.

The two old crones sat with the body all night and all the next day. They sewed on the quaint garments in which it is still the custom of rural New England to robe the dead. They put a cap of stiff white muslin over Mercy’s brown hair, which even now, in her fiftieth year, showed only here and there a silver thread. They laid fine plaits of the same stiff white muslin over her breast, and crossed her hands above them.

“She must ha’ been a handsome woman in her time, Mis’ Bunker. I ’spect she was married, don’t you?” said Ann Sweetser, Mrs. Bunker’s spinster cousin, who always helped her on these occasions.

“Well, this ere ring looks like it,” replied Mrs. Bunker, taking up a bit of the muslin and rubbing the broad gold band on the third finger of Mercy’s left hand. “But yer can’t allers tell by that nowadays. There’s folks wears ’em that ain’t married. This is a real harndsome ring, ’s heavy ’s ever I see.”

How Mercy’s heart must have been touched, and also her fine and pathetic sense of humor, if her freed spirit hovered still in that little low-roofed room! This cast-off garment of hers, so carefully honored, so curiously considered and speculated upon by these simple-minded people! There was something rarely dramatic in all the surroundings of these last hours. Among the guests in the house was one, a woman, herself a poet, who toward the end of the second day came into the chamber, bringing long trailing vines of the sweet Linnea, which was then in full bloom. Her poet’s heart was moved to the depths by the thought of this unknown, dead woman lying there, tended by strangers’ hands. She gazed with an inexplicable feeling of affection upon Mercy’s placid brow. She lifted the lifeless hands and laid them down again in a less constrained position. She, too, noted the broad gold ring, and said,—

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“She has been loved then. I wonder if he is alive!” The door was closed, and no one was in the room. With a strange impulse she could not account for to herself, she said, “I will kiss her for him,” and bent and kissed the cold forehead. Then she laid the fragrant vines around the face and across the bosom, and went away, feeling an inexplicable sense of nearness to the woman she had kissed. When the next morning she knew that it was Mercy Philbrick, the poet, in whose lifeless presence she had stood, she exclaimed with a burst of tears, “Oh, I might have known that there was some subtile bond which made me kiss her! I have always loved her verses so.”

On the day after Lizzy Hunter returned from Mercy’s funeral, Stephen White called at her house and asked to speak to her. She had almost forgotten his existence, though she knew that he was living in the Jacobs house. Their paths never crossed, and Lizzy had long ago forgotten her passing suspicion of Mercy’s regard for him. The haggard and bowed man who met her now was so unlike the Stephen White she recollected, that Lizzy involuntarily exclaimed. Stephen took no notice of her exclamation.

“No, thank you, I will not sit down,” he said, as with almost solicitude in her face she offered him a chair. “I merely wish to give you something of”—he hesitated—“Mrs. Philbrick’s.”

He drew from his breast a small package of papers, yellow, creased, old. He unfolded one of these and handed it to Lizzy, saying,—

“This is a sonnet of hers which has never been printed. She gave it to me when,”—he hesitated again,—“when she was living in my house. She said at that time that she would like to have it put on her tombstone. I did not know any other friend of hers to go to but you. Will you see that it is done?”

Lizzy took the paper and began to read the sonnet. Stephen stood leaning heavily on the back of a chair; his breath was short, and his face much flushed.

“Oh, pray sit down, Mr. White! You are ill,” exclaimed Lizzy.

“No, I am not ill. I would rather stand,” replied Stephen. His eyes were fixed on the spot where thirty years before Mercy had stood when she said, “I can’t, Stephen.”

Lizzy read the sonnet with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Oh, it is beautiful,—beautiful!” she exclaimed. “Why did she never have it printed?”

Stephen colored and hesitated. One single thrill of pride followed by a bitter wave of pain, and he replied,—

“Because I asked her not to print it.”

Lizzy's heart was too full of tender grief now to have any room for wonder or resentment at this, or even to realize in that first moment that there was any thing strange in the reply.

"Indeed, it shall be put on the stone," she said. "I am so thankful you brought it. I have been thinking that there were no words fit to put above her grave. No one but she herself could have written any that would be," and she was folding up the paper.

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Stephen stretched out his hand. “Pardon me,” he said, “I cannot part with that. I have brought a copy to leave with you,” and he gave Lizzy another paper.

Mechanically she restored to him the first one, and gazed earnestly into his face. Its worn and harrowed features, its look of graven patience, smote her like a cry. She was about to speak to him eagerly and with sympathy, but he was gone. His errand was finished,—the last thing he could do for Mercy. She watched his feeble steps as he walked away, and her pity revealed to her the history of his past.

“How he loved her! how he loved her!” she said, and watched his figure lingeringly, till it was out of sight.

This is the sonnet which was cut on the stone above Mercy’s grave:—

EMIGRAVIT.

With sails full set, the ship her anchor weighs;
Strange names shine out beneath her figure-head:
What glad farewells with eager eyes are said!
What cheer for him who goes, and him who stays!
Fair skies, rich lands, new homes, and untried days
Some go to seek: the rest but wait instead
Until the next stanch ship her flag shall raise.
Who knows what myriad colonies there are
Of fairest fields, and rich, undreamed-of gains,
Thick-planted in the distant shining plains
Which we call sky because they lie so far?
Oh, write of me, not,—“Died in bitter pains,”
But, “Emigrated to another star!”