The Redemption of David Corson eBook

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THIS OTHER EDEN

> "This other Eden, demi-paradise, this fortress built by nature."
> —Richard II.

Hidden away in this worn and care-encumbered world, scarred with its frequent traces of a primeval curse, are spots so quiet and beautiful as to make the fall of man seem incredible, and awaken in the breast of the weary traveler who comes suddenly upon them, a vague and dear delusion that he has stumbled into Paradise.

Such an Eden existed in the extreme western part of Ohio in the spring of eighteen hundred and forty-nine. It was a valley surrounded by wooded hills and threaded by a noisy brook which hastily made its way, as if upon some errand of immense importance, down to the big Miami not many miles distant. A road cut through a vast and solemn forest led into the valley, and entering as if by a corridor and through the open portal of a temple, the traveler saw a white farm-house nestling beneath a mighty hackberry tree whose wide-reaching arms sheltered it from summer sun and winter wind. A deep, wide lawn of bluegrass lay in front, and a garden of flowers, fragrant and brilliant, on its southern side. Stretching away into the background was the farm newly carved out of the wilderness, but already in a high state of cultivation. All those influences which stir the deepest emotion of the heart were silently operating here—quiet, order, beauty, power, life. It affected one to enter it unprepared in much the same way, only with a greater variety and richness of emotion, as to push through dense brush and suddenly behold a mountain lake upon whose bosom there is not so much as a ripple, and in whose silver mirror surrounding forests, flying water-fowl and the bright disk of the sun are perfectly reflected.

In this lovely valley, at the close of a long, odorous, sun-drenched day in early May, the sacred silence was broken by a raucous blast from that most unmusical of instruments, a tin dinner horn. It was blown by a bare-legged country boy who seemed to take delight in this profanation. By his side, in the vine-clad porch of the white farm-house stood a woman who shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked toward a vague object in a distant meadow. She was no longer young, but had exchanged the exquisite beauty of youth for the finer and more impressive beauty of maturity. As the light of the setting sun fell full upon her face it seemed almost transparent, and even the unobserving must have perceived that some deep experience of the sadness of life had added to her character an indescribable charm.

"Thee will have to go and call him, Stephen, for I think he has fallen into another trance," the woman said, in a low voice in which there was not a trace of impatience, although the evening meal was waiting and the pressing work of the household had been long delayed.

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The child threw down his dinner horn, whistled to his dog and started. Springing up from where he had been watching every expression of his master's face, the shaggy collie bounded around him as he moved across the lawn, while the woman watched them with a proud and happy smile. They had scarcely entered the long lane leading to the pasture, when a woodchuck shambled out of the corner of the fence and ran lumbering into his burrow. Rushing excitedly after him the child clapped his hands and shouted: "Dig him out! Dig him out, Shep!" Tearing up the ground with his paws and thrusting his head down into the subterranean chamber, the obedient collie yelped and whined. Then backing out and plunging in once more, he yelped and whined again. The hole was too deep or the time too short and the boy became discouraged. Moving reluctantly away he chidingly summoned his companion to follow him. The dog, humiliated by his failure, obeyed, and sheepishly licked his mouth with his long, red tongue.

By this time the sun's disk had sunk behind the hills, its trailing glory lingering above their summits while slowly in the sky faded continents, mountains and spires. The day had died regretfully upon a couch o'erhung with gorgeous canopies, and the ensanguined bier still seemed to tremble with his last sigh. Birds in the tops of trees and crickets beneath the sod were giving expression to the emotions of the sad heart of the great earth in melancholy evening songs. The odors of peach and apple blossoms, wafted by gentle breezes from distant orchards, made the valley fragrant as an oriental garden. The soothing influence of the approaching night subdued the effervescent spirits of the lad, and he began to walk softly, as do nuns in the aisles of dim cathedrals or deer in the pathways of the moonlit forest. These few moments between twilight and dark are pregnant with a mysterious holiness and it is doubtful if the worst of men could find the courage to commit a crime while they endure.

Unutterable and incomprehensible emotions were awakened in the soul of the boy by the stillness and beauty of the evening world. His senses were not yet dulled nor his feelings jaded. Through every avenue of his intelligence the mystery of the universe stole into his sensitive spirit. If a breeze blew across the meadow he turned his cheek to its kiss; if the odor of spearmint from the brookside was wafted around him he breathed it into his nostrils with delight. He saw the shadow of a crow flying across the field and stopped to look up and listen for the swish of her wings and her loud, hoarse caw as she made her way to the nesting grounds; then he gazed beyond her, into the fathomless depths of the blue sky, and his soul was stirred with an indescribable awe. Everything filled him with surprise, with wonder and with ecstasy,—the glowing sky above the western hills, the new pale crescent of the silver moon, the heavy-laden honey bees eagerly hastening home, the long shadows lying across his path, the trees with branches swaying in the evening breeze, the cows with bursting udders lowing at the bars.

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But it was not so much the objects themselves as the spirit pervading them, which stirred the depths of the child's mind. The little pantheist saw God everywhere. We bestow the gift of language upon a child, but the feelings which that language serves only to interpret and express exist and glow within him even if he be dumb. And this gift of language is often of questionable value, and had been so with him. Things he had heard said about God often made the boy hate Him. All that he felt, filled him with love. To him the valley was heaven, and through it invisibly but unmistakably God walked, morning, noon and evening.

To the child sauntering dreamily and wistfully along, the object dimly seen from the farm-house door began gradually to dissolve itself into a group of living beings. Two horses were attached to a plow; one standing in the lush grass of the meadow, and the other in a deep furrow traced across its surface. The first, an old gray mare, was breathing heavily, her sides expanding and contracting like a bellows. Her wide nostrils opened and closed with spasmodic motions. Her eyes were shut and she seemed to be asleep. The other, a young and slender filly doing this season the first real service of her life, pawed the ground restlessly, snorted, shook her mane, rattled the harness chains and looked angrily over her shoulder at the driver. The plowshare was buried deep in the rich, alluvial soil, and a ribbon of earth rolled from its blade like a petrified sea billow, crested with a cluster of daisies white as the foam of a wave.

Between the handles of the plow and leaning on the crossbar, his back to the horses, stood a young Quaker. His broad-brimmed hat, set carelessly on the back of his head, disclosed a wide, high forehead; his flannel shirt, open at the throat, exposed a strong, columnar neck, and a deep, broad chest; his sunburned and muscular arms were folded across his breast; figure and posture revealed the perfect concord of body and soul with the beauty of the world; his great blue eyes were fixed upon the notch in the hills where the sun had just disappeared; he gazed without seeing and felt without thinking.

The boy approached this statuesque figure with a stealthy tread, and plucking a long spear of grass tickled the bronzed neck. The hand of the plowman moved automatically upward as if to brush away a fly, and at this unconscious action the child, seized by a convulsion of laughter and fearing lest it explode, stuffed his fists into his mouth. In the opinion of this irreverent young skeptic his Uncle Dave was in a "tantrum" instead of a "trance," and he thought such a disease demanded heroic treatment.

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For several years this Quaker youth had been the subject of remarkable emotional experiences, in explanation of which the rude wits of the village declared that he had been moon-struck; the young girls who adored his beauty thought he was in love, and the venerable fathers and mothers of this religious community believed that in him the scriptural prophecy, “Your young men shall see visions,” had been literally fulfilled. David Corson himself accepted the last explanation with unquestioning faith. He no more doubted the existence of a spiritual than of a material universe. He did not even conceive of their having well-defined boundaries, but seemed to himself to pass from one to the other as easily as across the lines of adjoining farms. In this respect he resembled many a normal youth, except that this impression had lingered with him a little longer than was usual; for faith is always instinctive, while skepticism is the result of experience and reflection. Having as yet only wandered around the edges of the sacred groves of wisdom where these pitiless teachers break the sweet shackles of their pupils, he still thought the thoughts of childhood and instinctively obeyed the injunction of Emerson, to “reverence the dreams of our youth,” and the admonition of Richter, that “when we cease to do so, then dies the man in us.” Whatever might have been the real nature of these emotional experiences, no one doubted that they possessed a genuine reality of some kind or other, for it was a matter of history in this little community that David Corson had often exercised prophetic, mesmeric and therapeutic powers.

The life of this young man had been pure and uneventful. Existence in this frontier region, once full of the tragedy of Indian warfare, had been gradually softened by peace and religion. The passions slowly kindling in the struggle over slavery had not yet burst into flame, and this particular valley was even more quiet than others because it had been settled by a colony of Quakers. Into it the rude noises of the great outside world floated only in softened echoes, and what knowledge young Corson had acquired of that vague and shadowy realm had come mainly through traveling preachers, and this, because of their simplicity and unworldliness, was not unlike hearing the crash of arms through silken portieres or seeing the flash of lightning through the stained-glass windows of a cathedral. In such a sequestered region books and papers were scarce, and he had access only to a few volumes written by quietists and mystics, and to that great mine of sacred literature, the Holy Bible. The seeds of knowledge sown by these books in the rich soil of this young heart were fertilized by the society of noble men, virtuous women, and natural surroundings of exquisite beauty.

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But however limited his knowledge of men and affairs, the young mystic had acquired an extraordinary familiarity with the operations of the divine life which animates the universe. He seemed to have found the pass-key to nature's mysteries, and to have acquired a language by which he could communicate with all her creatures. He knew where the rabbits burrowed, where the partridges nested, and where the wild bees stored their honey. He could foretell storms by a thousand signs, possessed the homing instinct of the pigeons, knew where the first violets were to be found, and where the last golden-rod would bloom. The squirrels crept down the trunks of trees to nibble the crumbs which he scattered for them. He could fold up his hands like a cup and at his whistle birds would drop into them as into a nest. His was a beautiful soul, and what Novalis said of Spinoza might have been said of him, "he was a God-intoxicated man." He was in that blissful period of existence when the interpretations of life imparted to him by his elders solved the few simple problems of thought and action pressed upon him by his environment. He had never seriously questioned any of the ideas received from his instructors. He was often conscious of the infinite mystery lying beyond his ken, but never of those frightful inconsistencies and contradictions in nature and life by which the soul is sooner or later paralyzed or at least bewildered.

And so his outlook upon the universe was serene and untroubled. As he stood there in the deepening twilight he differed from the child who had approached him in this, that while the boy reveled in the beauty around him because he did not try to comprehend it, the youth was intoxicated by the belief that he possessed the clue to all these mysteries, and had a working theory of all the phenomena in the natural and spiritual world in which he moved. To such mystical natures this confidence is unavoidable anywhere through the period of the pride of adolescence; but it was heightened in this case by the simplicity of life's problems in this narrow valley, and in the provincial little village which was the metropolis of this sparsely settled region. To him "the cackle of that bourg was the murmur of the world," and his theories of a life lacking the complexities of larger aggregations of men seemed adequate, because he had never seen them thoroughly tested, to meet every emergency arising for reflection or endeavor. In this mental attitude of serene and undisturbed confidence that he knew the real meaning of existence, and was in constant contact with the divine mind through knowledge or through vision, every avenue of his spirit was open to the influences of nature. Through all that gorgeous day of May he had been drawing these influences into his being as the vegetation drew in light and moisture, until his soul was drenched through and through, and at that perfect hour of dusk, when the flowers and grasses exhaled the gifts they had received

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from heaven and earth in a richer, finer perfume like an evening oblation, the young dreamer was also rendering back those gifts bestowed by heaven in an incense of purest thought and aspiration. It was one of those hours that come occasionally in that sublime period of unshattered ideals and unsullied faith, for which Pharaoh and Caesar would have exchanged their thrones, Croesus and Lucullus bartered their wealth, Solomon and Aristotle forgotten their learning.

Every imaginative youth who has been reared in pure surroundings experiences over again in these rare and radiant hours all the bliss that Adam knew in Eden. To his joyous, eager spirit, the world appears a new creation fresh from the hand of God. He hears its author walking in the garden at eventide, and murmuring: "Behold it is very good." A single element of disquietude, a solitary, vague unrest disturbs him. He awaits his Eve with longing, but has no dread of the serpent.

At sight of this young man the most superficial observer would have paused to take a second look; an artist would have instinctively seized his pencil or his brush; a scientist would have paused to inquire what mysterious influences could have produced so finely proportioned a nature; a philosopher to wonder what would become of him in some sudden and powerful temptation.

None of these reflections disturbed the mind of the barefooted boy. Having suppressed his laughter, he tickled the sunburnt neck again. Once more the hand rose automatically, and once more the boy was almost strangled with delight. The dreamer was hard to awaken, but his tormentor had not yet exhausted his resources. No genuine boy is ever without that fundamental necessity of childhood, a pin, and finding one somewhere about his clothing, he thrust it into the leg of the plowman. The sudden sting brought the soaring saint from heaven to earth. In an instant the mystic was a man, and a strong one, too. He seized the unsanctified young reprobate with one hand and hoisted him at arm's length above his head.

"Oh, Uncle Dave, I'll never do it again! Never! Never! Let me down."

Still holding him aloft as a hunter would hold a falcon, the reincarnated "spirit" laughed long, loud and merrily, the echoes of his laughter ringing up the valley like a peal from a chime of bells. The child's fear was needless, for the heart and hands that dealt with him were as gentle as a woman's. The youth, resembling some old Norse god as he stood there in the gathering gloom, lowered the child slowly, and printing a kiss on his cheek, said:

"Thee little pest, thee has no reverence! Thee should never disturb a child at his play, a bird on his nest nor a man at his prayers."

“But thee was not praying, Uncle Dave,” the boy replied. “Thee was only in another of thy tantrums. The supper has grown cold, the horses are tired and Shep and I have walked a mile to call thee. Grandmother said thee had a trance. Tell me what thee has seen in thy visions, Uncle Dave?”

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“God and His angels,” said the young mystic softly, falling again into the mood from which he had been so rudely awakened.

“Angels!” scoffed the young materialist. “If thee was thinking of any angel at all, I will bet thee it was Dorothy Fraser.”

“Tush, child, do not be silly,” replied the convicted culprit. For it was easier than he would care to admit to mingle visions of beauty with those of holiness.

“I am not silly. Thee would not dare say thee was not thinking of her. She thinks of thee.”

“How does thee know?”

“Because she gives me bread and jam if I so much as mention thy name.”

This did not offend the young plowman, to judge by the expression of his face; but he said nothing, and, stooping down, loosened the chains of the whiffletree and turned the faces of the tired horses homeward. The cavalcade moved on in silence for a few moments, but nothing can repress the chatter of a boy, and presently he began again.

“Uncle Dave, was it really up this very valley that Mad Anthony Wayne marched with his brave soldiers?”

“This very valley.”

“I wish I could have been with him.”

“It is an evil wish. Thee is a child of peace. Thy father and thy father’s fathers have denied the right of men to war. Thee ought to be like them, and love the things that make for peace.”

“Well, if I can not wish for war, I will wish that a runaway slave would dash up this valley with a pack of bloodhounds at his heels. Oh, Uncle Dave, tell me that story about thy hiding a negro in the haystack, and choking the bloodhounds with thine own hands.”

“I have told thee a hundred times.”

“But I want to hear it again.”

“Use thy memory and thy imagination.”

“Oh, no, please tell me. I like to hear some one tell something.”

“Thee does? Then listen to the whip-poor-will, the cricket or the brook.”

“I hear them, but I do not know what they say. Tell me.”

“Tell thee! No one can tell thee, child, if thee can not understand for thyself. The message differs for the hearers, and the difference is in the ear and not the sound.”

They both paused for a moment, and listened to those soothing lullabies with which nature sings the world to sleep. So powerful was the tide that floated the mystic out on the ocean of dreams, he would have drifted away again if the child had not suddenly recalled him.

“I can not make out what they say,” he cried, “and anyhow there is no time to try. Come, let us go. Everybody is waiting for us.”

“Thee is right,” answered his uncle. “Go and let down the bars and we will hurry home.”

The child, bounding forward, did as he was told, and the tired procession entered the barnyard. The plowman fed his horses, and stopped to listen for a moment to their deep-drawn sighs of contentment, and to the musical grinding of the oats in their teeth. His imaginative mind read his own thoughts into everything, and he believed that he could distinguish in these inarticulate sounds the words, “Good-night. Good-night.”

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“Good-night,” he said, and stroking their great flanks with his kind hand, left them to their well-earned repose. On his way to the house he stopped to bathe his face in the waters of a spring brook that ran across the yard, and then entered the kitchen where supper was spread.

“Thee is late,” said the woman who had watched and waited, her fine face radiant with a smile of love and welcome.

“Forgive me, mother,” he replied. “I have had another vision.”

“I thought as much. Thee must remember what thee has seen, my son,” she said, “for all that thee beholds with the outer eye shall pass away, while what thee sees with the inner eye abides forever. And had thee a message, too?”

“It was delivered to me that on the holy Sabbath day I should go to the camp in Baxter’s clearing and preach to the lumbermen.”

“Then thee must go, my son.”

“I will,” he answered, taking her hand affectionately, but with Quaker restraint, and leading her to the table.

The family, consisting of the mother, an adopted daughter Dorothea, the daughter’s husband Jacob and son Stephen, sat down to a simple but bountiful supper, during which and late into the evening the young mystic pondered the vision which he believed himself to have seen, and the message which he believed himself to have heard. In his musings there was not a tremor or a doubt; he would have as soon questioned the reality of the old farm-house and the faces of the family gathered about the table. Of the susceptibility of the nerves to morbid activity, or the powers of the overdriven brain to objectify its concepts, he had never even dreamed. He was a credulous and unsophisticated youth, dwelling in a realm of imagination rather than in a world of reality and law. He had much to learn. His education was about to begin, and to begin as does all true and effective education, in a spiritual temptation. The Ghebers say that when their great prophet Ahriman was thrown into the fire by the order of Nimrod, the flames into which he fell turned into a bed of roses, upon which he peacefully reclined. This innocent Quaker youth had been reclining upon a bed of roses which now began to turn into a couch of flames.

CHAPTER II.

AND SATAN CAME ALSO

> “It is the little rift within the lute
> That by and by will make the music mute,
> And ever widening slowly silence all.”
>
> —Tennyson.

At the moment when Stephen was sounding the horn to summon the young mystic to his supper, a promiscuous crowd of loafers with chairs tilted against the wall of the village tavern received a shock.

They heard the tinkle of bells in the distance, and looking in the direction of this unusual sound, saw a team of splendid coal-black horses dash round a corner and whirl a strange vehicle to the door of the inn.

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There were two extraordinary figures on the front seat of the wagon. The driver was a sturdy, thick-set man whose remarkable personal appearance was fixed instantly and ineradicably in the mind of the beholder by an enormous moustache whose shape, size and color suggested a crow with outstretched wings. As if to emphasize the ferocious aspect lent him by this hairy canopy which completely concealed his mouth, Nature had duplicated it in miniature by brows meeting above his nose and spreading themselves, plume-like, over a pair of eyes which gleamed so brightly that they could be felt, altho' they were so deep-set that they could scarcely be seen.

This fierce and buccaneerish person summoned the dozing hostler in a coarse, imperative voice, flung him the reins, sprang from his seat, and assisted his companion to alight. She gave him her hand with an air of utter indifference, bestowed upon him neither smile nor thanks, and dropped to the ground with a light flutter like a bird. Turning instantly toward the tavern, she ascended the steps of the porch under a fusillade of glances of astonishment and admiration. Young and beautiful, dressed in a picturesque and brilliant Spanish costume, she carried herself with the ease and dignity of a princess, and looked straight past, or rather through the staring crowd, fastened like inverted brackets to the tavern wall. Her great, dreamy eyes did not seem to note them.

When she and her companion had entered the hall and closed the door behind them, every tilted chair came down to the floor with a bang, and many voices exclaimed in concert, “Who the devil is she?” Curiosity was satisfied at eight o’clock in the evening, for at that hour Doctor Paracelsus Aesculapius, as he fantastically called himself, opened the doors of his traveling apothecary shop and exposed his “universal panacea” for sale, while at the same time, “Pepeeta, the Queen of Fortune Tellers,” entered her booth and spread out upon a table the paraphernalia by which she undertook to discover the secrets of the future.

When the evening’s work was ended, Pepeeta at once retired; but the doctor entered the bar-room, followed by a curious and admiring crowd. He was in a happy and expansive frame of mind, for he had done a “land office” business in this frontier village which he was now for the first time visiting.

“Have a drink, b-b-boys?” he asked, looking over the crowd with an air of superiority and waving his hand with an inclusive gesture. The motley throng of loafers sidled up to the bar with a deprecatory and automatic movement. They took their glasses, clinked them, nodded to their entertainer, muttered incoherent toasts and drank his health. The delighted landlord, feeling it incumbent upon him to break the silence, offered the friendly observation: “S-s-see you s-s-stutter. S-s-stutter a little m-m-my own self.”

“Shake!” responded the doctor, who was in too complacent a mood to take offence, and the worthies grasped hands.

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“Don’t know any w-w-way to s-s-stop it, do you?” asked the landlord.

“No, I d-d-don’t; t-t-tried everything. Even my ‘universal p-p-panacea’ won’t do it, and what that can’t do can’t be d-d-done. Incurable d-d-disease. Get along all right when I go slow like this; but when I open the throttle, get all b-b-balled up. Bad thing for my business. Give any man a thousand d-d-dollars that’ll cure me,” the quack replied, slapping his trousers pocket as if there were millions in it.

“Co-co-couldn’t go q-q-quite as high as that; but wouldn’t mind a hu-hu-hundred,” responded the landlord cordially.

“Ever hear the story about the landlord’s troubles in the Mexican war?” asked one of the by-standers turning to the quack.

“Tell it,” he responded laconically.

Several members of the group looked at each other and exchanged significant winks as the narrator began his tale.

“They made him sergeant of a company, but had to reduce him to the ranks, because when he was drilling the boys one day they all marched into the river and got drowned before he could say h-h-halt.”

The doctor laughed and the others joined him out of courtesy, for the story was worn threadbare in the bar-room.

“Tell about his going on picket duty,” suggested some one.

“Captain ordered him out on the line,” said the first speaker, “and he refused. ‘T-t-tain’t no use,’ says he.

“‘Why not?’ says the captain.

“‘C-c-cause,’ says he, ’if some d-d-dirty Mexican g-g-greaser should c-c-come along, he’d run me through the g-g-gizzard before I could ask him for the c-c-countersign.’”

More tipsy laughter followed.

“Tell you what it is, b-b-boys,” said the quack, growing communicative under the influence of the liquor and the fellowship, “if it wasn’t for this b-b-blankety-blanketed impediment in my s-s-speech, I wouldn’t need to work more’n about another y-y-year!”

“How’s that?” asked someone in the crowd.

“C-c-cause if I could talk as well as I c-c-can think, I could make a fortune ’side of which old John Jacob Astor’s would look like a p-p-penny savings b-b-bank!”

“You could?”

“You bet your sweet life I c-c-could. And I’m just keeping my eyes open for some young f-f-fellow to help me. For ’f I can find a man that can do the t-talking (I mean real talk, you know; talk a crowd blind as b-b-bats), I’ve got something better’n a California g-g-gold mine.”

“Better get Dave Corson,” said the village wag from the rear of the crowd, and up went a wild shout of laughter.

“Who’s D-D-Dave Corson?” asked the doctor.

“Quaker preacher. Young feller ’bout twenty years old.”

“Can he t-t-talk?”

“Talk! He kin talk a mule into a trottin’ hoss in less’n three minutes.”

“He’s my man!” exclaimed the doctor, at which the crowd laughed again.

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“What the d-d-deuce are you laughing at?” he asked, turning upon them savagely, his loud voice and threatening manner frightening those who stood nearest, so that they instinctively stepped back a pace or two.

“No offence, Doc,” said one of them; “but you couldn’t get him.”

“Couldn’t get him! Why couldn’t I g-g-get him?”

“He’s pious.”

“Pious! What do *I* care?”

“Well, these here pious Quakers are stiff in their notions. But you kin jedge fer yourself ‘bout his talkin’, fer there’s goin’ ter be an appinted Quaker meetin’ to-morrow night, and he’ll speak. You kin go an’ listen, if you want to.”

“I’ll be there, boys, and d-d-don’t you forget it. I’ll hook him! Never saw anything I couldn’t buy if I had a little of the p-p-proper stuff about me. Drink to my l-l-luck, boys, and watch me!”

The landlord filled their glasses once more, and low gurglings, smothered swallows, and loud smacking of lips filled the interim of interrupted conversation.

“I say, Doc, that daughter of yours knows her biz when it comes to telling fortunes,” ventured a young dandy, whose head had been turned by Pepeeta’s beauty.

“D-d-daughter!” snapped the quack, turning sharply upon him; “she’s not my daughter, she’s my wife!”

“Wife! Gosh! You don’t say?” exclaimed the crestfallen dandy.

“Yes, wife! And I’ll j-j-just warn any of you young f-f-fellers that if I catch you trying to p-p-plow with my heifer, you’ll be food for buzzards before sun-up!”

He swept his eyes savagely round the circle as he spoke, and the subject dropped.

The conversation turned into other channels, and flowed in a maudlin, sluggish manner far into the night. Every member of the bibulous party was as happy as he knew how to be. The landlord’s till was full of money, the loafers were full of liquor, and the doctor’s heart was full of vanity and trust in himself.

CHAPTER III.

THE EGYPTIANS

> “Steal! to be sure they may; and egad, serve your best thoughts as gypsies do stolen children,—disfigure them to make them pass for their own.”
>
> —Sheridan.

In order to comprehend the relationship of this strangely mated pair, we must go back five or six years to a certain day when this same Doctor Aesculapius rode slowly down the main street of a small city in Western Pennsylvania, and then out along a rugged country highway. A couple of miles brought him to the camp of a band of gypsies.

A thin column of smoke ascending from a fire which seemed almost too lazy to burn, curled slowly into the air.

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Around this campfire was a picturesque group of persons, all of whom, with a single exception, vanished like a covey of quail at the approach of the stranger. The man who stood his ground was a truly sinister being. He was tall, thin and angular; his clothing was scant and ragged, his face bronzed with exposure to the sun. A thin moustache of straggling hairs served rather to exaggerate than to conceal the vicious expression of a hare-lipped mouth. He stood with his elbow in the palm of one hand and his chin in the other, while around his legs a pack of wolf-like dogs crawled and growled as the traveler drew near. Throwing himself lightly to the ground the intruder kicked the curs who sprang at him, and as the terrified pack went howling into the door of the tent, said cheerily.

“Good-morning, Baltasar.”

The gypsy acknowledged his salutation with a frown.

“I wish to sell this horse,” the traveler added, without appearing to notice his cold reception.

The gypsy swept his eye over the animal and shook his head.

“If you will not buy, perhaps you will trade,” the traveler said.

“Come,” was the laconic response, and so saying, the gypsy turned towards the forest which lay just beyond the camp. The “doctor” obeyed, and the dogs sneaked after him, still growling, but keeping a respectful distance. A moment later he found himself in a sequestered spot where there was an improvised stable; and a dozen or more horses glancing up from their feed whinnied a welcome.

“Look zem over,” said the gypsy, again putting his elbow in his left hand and his chin in his right—a posture into which he always fell when in repose.

The quack, moving among the animals with an easy, familiarity, glanced them over quickly but carefully, and shook his head.

“What!” exclaimed the gypsy with well feigned surprise; “ze senor doez not zee ze horse he wanz?”

“Horses!” exclaimed the quack; “these are not horses. These are boneyards. Every one of them is as much worse than mine as mine is than the black stallion you stole in Pittsburg on the twenty-first day of last October.”

“Worze zan yourz! It eez impozzeeble!” answered the gypsy, as if he had not heard the accusation. “Ziz horze ov yourz eez what you call a crow-zcare! Zhe eez two hunner year ol’. Her teeth are fell oud. Zhe haz ze zpavins. Zhe haz ze ringa bonze. But, senor,” growing suddenly respectful, and spreading out his hands in open and

persuasive gestures, “ere eez a horze zat eez a horze. Ee knowz more zan a man! Ee gan work een ze arnez, ee gan work een ze zaddle; ee gan drot; ee can gallop; ee gan bead ze winz!”

The gypsy had played his part well and concealed with consummate art whatever surprise he might have felt at the charge of theft. His attitude was free, his look was bold and his manner full of confidence.

The demeanor of the quack suddenly altered. From that of an easy nonchalance, it turned to savage determination.

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“Baltasar,” he said, his face white and hard; “let us stop our acting. Where is that stallion?”

“Whad ztallion?” asked the imperturbable gypsy, with an expression of child-like innocence.

“I will not even take time to tell you, but if you do not take me to him this instant there will be a dead gypsy in these woods,” said the quack fiercely.

“Ze zdranger jesz!” the gypsy answered blandly, showing his teeth and spreading out the palms of his hands.

The quack reached into his bosom, drew forth a pistol, pointed it at the right eye of the gypsy, and said: “Look into the mouth of that and tell me whether you see a bullet lying in its throat!”

“I zink zat ze senor an’ heez piztol are boz lying in zeir zroats,” he answered with easy irony.

“Good! But I am not here to match wits with you. I want that horse, and lie or no lie, I will have it. Take me to it, or I swear I will blow out your brains as sure as they are made of bacon and baby flesh!”

The gypsy vouchsafed no reply, but turned on his heel and led the way into the forest.

After a walk of a hundred yards or more they came to a booth of boughs, through the loose sides of which could be seen a black stallion.

“Lead him out,” said the doctor imperatively; and the gypsy obeyed.

The magnificent animal came forth snorting, pawing the ground and tossing his head in the air.

The eye of the quack kindled, and after regarding the noble creature for a moment in silent admiration he turned to the gypsy and said, “Baltasar, do not misunderstand me, I am neither an officer of the law nor in any other way a minister of justice. I have as few scruples as you as to how I get a horse; but we differ from each other in this, that if you were in my place you would take the horse without giving an equivalent. Now I am a man of mercy, and if you will ask a fair price you shall have it. But mark me! Do not overreach yourself and kill the goose that is about to lay the golden egg.”

“Wat muz be, muz be,” the gypsy answered, shrugging his shoulders as if in the presence of an inexorable fate, and added: “Ze brice iz zwo hunner and viftee dollars, wiz ze mare drown een.”

Putting his pistol back into his pocket with an air of triumph, the doctor said: “There seems to be persuasive power in cold lead. Stretch forth your palm and I will cross it for you.”

The gypsy did so, and into that tiger-like paw he counted the golden coin; at the musical clink of each piece the eye of the gypsy brightened, and when he closed his hand upon them and thrust them into his pocket his hair-lip curled with a cynical smile.

The stranger took the bridle and saddle from his mare, placed them on the stallion and mounted.

As they moved forward through the silent forest the gypsy sang softly to himself:

“The Romany chal to his horse did cry
As he placed the bit in his jaw,
Kosko gry, Romany gry,
Muk, man, kuster, tute knaw.”

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He was still humming this weird tune when they emerged into the open fields, and there the traveler experienced a surprise.

A little rivulet lay across their path, and up from the margin of it where she had been gathering water cresses there sprang a young girl, who cast a startled glance at him, then bounded swiftly toward the tent and vanished through the opening.

Now it happened that this keen admirer of horses was equally susceptible to the charms of female beauty, and the loveliness of this young girl made his blood tingle. In her hand she carried a bunch of cresses still dripping with the water of the brook. A black bodice was drawn close to a figure which was just unfolding into womanhood. The color of this garment formed a striking contrast to a scarlet skirt which fell only a little below her knees. On her feet were low-cut shoes, fastened with rude silver buckles. A red kerchief had become untied and let loose a wave of black hair, which fell over her half bare shoulders. Her face was oval, her complexion olive, her eyes large, eager and lustrous.

All this the man who admired women even more than he admired horses, saw in the single instant before the girl dashed toward the tent and disappeared. So swift an apparition would have bewildered rather than illumined the mind of an ordinary man. But the quack was not an ordinary man. He was endowed with a certain rude power of divination which enabled him to see in a single instant, by swift intuition, more than the average man discovers by an hour of reasoning. By this natural clairvoyance he saw at a glance that this face of exquisite delicacy could no more have been coined in a gypsy camp than a fine cameo could be cut in an Indian wigwam. He knew that all gypsies were thieves, and that these were Spanish gypsies. What was more natural than that he should conclude with inevitable logic that this child had been stolen from people of good if not of noble blood!

He who had coveted the horse with desire, hungered for the maiden with passion; and with him, to feel an appetite, was to rush toward its gratification, as fire rushes upon tow.

“Baltasar!” he said.

The gypsy turned.

“You are a girl-thief as well as a horse-thief.”

If the gypsy had felt astonished before, he was now terrified in the presence of a man who seemed to read his inmost thoughts; and for the first time in his life acknowledged to himself that he had met his master in cunning.

Bewildered as he was by this new charge, he still remembered that if speech was silver, silence was golden, and answered not a word.

“Baltasar,” continued the strange man on horseback, rightly judging from the gypsy’s confusion that he had hit the mark and determining to take another chance shot; “you stole this girl from the family of a Spanish nobleman. I am the representative of this family and have followed your trail for years. You thought I had come to get the horse. You were mistaken; it was the girl!”

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“Perdita!” exclaimed the gypsy, taken completely off his guard.

“Lost indeed,” responded the quack, scarcely able to conceal his pride in his own astuteness. And then he added slowly: “She must be a burden to you, Baltasar. You evidently never have been able or never have dared to take her back and claim the ransom which you expected. I will pay you for her and take her from your hands. It is the child I want and not vengeance.”

“Ze Caballero muz be a Duquende (spirit),” gasped the gypsy.

“At any rate I want the child. You were reasonable about the horse. Be reasonable about her, and all will be well.”

“Ze Caballero muz be made of gol’.”

The horseman drew a silver coin from his pocket and flipped it into the waters of the brook.

The gypsy’s face gleamed with avarice and springing into the water he began to scrape among the stones where it had fallen.

The stranger watched him for awhile with an expression of mingled amusement and contempt, and finally said: “Baltasar, I am in haste. You can search for that trifle after I am gone. Let us finish our business. What will you take for the girl?”

Still standing in the water, which he seemed reluctant to leave, he shrugged his shoulders and replied: “We muz azk Chicarona. Zhe eez my vife.”

“And master?” asked the quack, smiling sardonically.

The gypsy did not answer, but, stepping from the brook and looking backward, reluctantly led the way to the tent.

“Chicarona! Chicarona!” he cried as they approached it.

The flap of the tent was thrown suddenly backward, and three figures emerged—a tall and stately woman, a little elfish child; and an old hag, wrinkled, toothless and bent with the weight of unrecorded years. The woman was the mother of the little child and the daughter of the old hag.

“Chicarona,” said the gypsy, “ze Gacho az byed ze ztallion for zwo hunner an’ viftee dollars, an’ now he wanz to buy Pepeeta.”

“Wad vor?” she asked.

“Berhabs he zinkz zhe eez a prinzez, I dunno,” he answered, digging the toe of his bare foot nervously into the sand.

“Zen dell ’im zat he zhold not look vor ztrawberries in ze zea, nor red herring in ze wood,” she said with a look of scorn.

The eyes of the stranger and the gypsy met. They confronted each other like two savage beasts who have met on a narrow path and are about to fight for its possession. It was not an unequal match. The man’s eyes regarded the woman with a proud and masterful determination. The woman’s seemed to burn their way into the inmost secrets of the man’s soul.

Chicarona was a remarkable character. In her majestic personality, the virtues and the vices of the Spanish Gypsy fortune-teller were incarnate. The vices were legion; the virtues were two—the love of kindred, and physical chastity—the chastity of the soul itself being unknown.

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“We are wasting time gazing at each other like two sheep in a pasture. Will you sell the girl?” the horseman asked, impatiently.

“I will nod!” she answered, with proud defiance.

“Then I will take her by force!”

“Ah! What could nod ze monkey do, if he were alzo ze lion!”

“I am the lion, and therefore I must have this lamb!”

“Muz? Say muz to ze clouds; to ze winz; to ze lightningz; but not to Chicarona!”

“If you do not agree to accept a fair offer for this girl, you will be in jail for kidnapping her in less than one hour!”

At this threat, the brilliant black eyes emitted a shower of angry sparks, and she exclaimed in derision, “Ze Buzno will dake us do brizon, ha! ha! ha!”

“Ze Buzno will dake us do brizon, hee! hee! hee!” giggled the little impish child who tugged at her skirts.

The old woman pressed forward and mumbled, “‘Ol’ oud your ‘an’, my pretty fellow. Crozz ze ol’ gypsy’s palm, and zhe will dell your fortune.”

With every new refusal, the resolute stranger became still more determined. “Pearls are not to be had without a plunge,” he murmured to himself, and dismounted.

Throwing the bridle of his horse over the limb of a tree, he approached the woman with a threatening gesture.

As he did so, the three female figures began to revolve around him in a circle, pointing their fingers at him and hissing like vipers. As the old woman passed before his face she threw a handful of snuff in his eyes—an act which has been, from time immemorial, the female gypsy’s last resort.

Had he been less agile than he was, it would have proved a finishing stroke, but there are some animals that can never be caught asleep, or even napping, and he was one. He winked and dodged, and, quicker than a flash, brought the old crone a sharp cut across her knuckles with his riding whip.

As he did so, Baltasar sprang at his throat, but he once more drew his pistol and leveled it at the gypsy’s head. His patience had been exhausted.

“Fool!” he cried, “Bring this woman to reason. This is a wild country, and a family of gypsies would be missed as little as a litter of blind puppies! Bring her to reason, I say, or I will murder every one of you!”

Once more shrugging those expressive shoulders which seemed to have a language of their own, the gypsy said “Chicarona, you do not luf ze leedle pindarri. Zell ’er to ze Buzno. Ee eez made of gol’.”

As Baltasar uttered these words, he approached his wife and whispered something in her ear at which she started. Turning with a sudden motion to the stranger, she fixed her piercing eyes upon him and exclaimed, “You zay you know ze parenz of zis chil’?”

“I do.”

“You lie!”

“How, then, did I know that you had stolen her?”

“You guezz zat! Any vool gan guezz zat! I zdole ’er, but who I zdole ’er vrom, you do not know any more zan you know why ze frogs zdop zinging when ze light zhines.”

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“Ah! You did steal her, did you? Why do gypsies steal children when they have so many of their own, and it is so easy to raise more, Chicarona?”

“Azk ze tiger why it zpringz, or ze lightning why it zdrikes! I will alzo azk ze Caballero a queztion. What doez he wan’ wiz zis leedle gurrl?”

“To be a father to her!” he answered, with a sly wink at Baltasar.

“Alzo’ I am dressed in wool, I am no sheep! Tell me,” she cried, stamping her foot.

“Why should I tell secrets to one who can read the future?” he asked banteringly.

Chicarona’s mood was changing. It was evident from her looks, either that she was defeated in the contest by this wily and resistless combatant or that she had succumbed to the temptation of his money.

“How much will you gif vor zis chil’?” she asked.

“One hundred dollars,” he replied.

“One hunner dollars! You paid more zan twize as much vor ze horze! Eez nod a woman worth more zan a horze?”

“She will be, when she is a woman. She is a child now.”

“Let me zee ze color of your money!”

He drew a leather wallet from his pocket and held it tantalizingly before her eyes.

Its influence was decisive upon her avaricious soul, and she clutched at it wildly.

“Put it into my han’!” she cried.

“Put Pepeeta into mine,” he said.

“Pepeeta! Pepeeta!” she called.

“Pepeeta! Pepeeta!” shrilled the old crone.

Out of the door of the tent she came, her eyes fixed upon the ground, and her fingers picking nervously at the tinsel strings which fastened her bodice.

“Gif me ze money and take her,” said Chicarona.

He counted out the gold, and then approached the child. For the first time in his life he experienced an emotion of reverence. There was something about her beauty, her helplessness and his responsibility that made a new appeal to his heart.

Yielding to the gentle pressure of his hand, she permitted herself to be led away. Not a goodbye was said. Chicarona's feeling toward her had been fast developing from jealousy into hatred as the child's beauty began to increase and attract attention. The others loved her, but dared not show it. Not a sign of regret was exhibited, except by the old crone, who approached her, gave her a stealthy caress, and secretly placed a crumpled parchment in her hand.

The Doctor lifted the child upon the horse's back and climbed into the saddle. As they turned into the highway, he heard Chicarona say, "Bring me my pajunda, Baltasar, and I will sing a grachalpa."

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The beautiful child trembled, for the words were those of hatred and triumph. She trembled, but she also wept. She was parting from those whose lives were base and cruel; but they were the only human beings that she knew. She was leaving a wagon and a tent, but it was the only home that she could remember. In a vague and childish way, she felt herself to be the sport of mysterious powers, a little shuttlecock between the battledores of Fortune. Whatever her destiny was to be, there was no use in struggling, and so she sobbed softly and yielded to the inevitable. Her little hands were folded across her heart in an instinctive attitude of submission. Folded hands are not always resigned hands; but Pepeeta's were. She submitted thus quietly not because she was weak, but because she was strong, not because she was contemptible, but because she was noble. In proportion to the majesty of things, is the completeness of their obedience to the powers that are above them. Gravitation is obeyed less quietly by a grain of dust than by the rivers and planets. Those half-suppressed sobs and hardly restrained sighs would have softened a harder heart than that of this young man of thirty years. He was rude and unscrupulous, but he was not unkind. His breast was the abiding place of all other passions and it was not strange that the gentlest of all should reside within it, nor that it should have been so quickly aroused at the sight of such loveliness and such helplessness.

To have a fellow-being completely in our power makes us either utterly cruel or utterly kind, and all that was gentle in that great rough nature went out in a rush of tenderness toward the little creature who thus suddenly became absolutely dependent upon his compassion. After they had ridden a little way, he began in his rough fashion to try to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Pepeeta! You ought to be thankful that you have got out of the clutches of those villains. You could not have been worse off, and you may be a great deal better! They were not always kind to you, were they? I shouldn't wonder if they beat you sometimes! But you will never be beaten any more. You shall have a nice little pony, and a cart, and flowers, and pretty clothes, and everything that little girls like. I don't know what they are, but whatever they are you shall have them. So don't cry any more! What a pretty name Pepeeta is! It sounds like music when I say it. I have got the toughest name in the world myself. It's a regular jaw-breaker—Doctor Paracelsus Aesculapius! What do you think of that, Pepeeta! But then you need not call me by the whole of it! You can just call me Doctor, for short. Now, look at me just once, and give me a pretty smile. Let me see those big black eyes! No? You don't want to? Well, that's all right. I won't bother you. But I want you to know that I love you, and that you are never going to have any more trouble as long as you live."

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These were the kindest words the child had ever had spoken to her, or at least the kindest she could remember. They fell on her ears like music and awakened gratitude and love in her heart. She ceased to sigh, and before the ride to town was ended had begun to feel a vague sense of happiness.

* * * * *

The next few years were full of strange adventures for these singular companions. The quack had discovered certain clues to the past history of the child whom he had thus adopted, and was firmly persuaded that she belonged to a noble family. He had made all his plans to take her to Spain and establish her identity in the hope of securing a great reward. But just as he was about to execute this scheme, he was seized by a disease which prostrated him for many months, and threw him into a nervous condition in which he contracted the habit of stammering. On his recovery from his long sickness he found himself stripped of everything he had accumulated; but his shrewdness and indomitable will remained, and he soon began to rebuild his shattered fortune.

During all these ups and downs, Pepeeta was his inseparable and devoted companion. The admiration which her childish beauty excited in his heart had deepened into affection and finally into love. When she reached the age of sixteen or seventeen years, he proposed to her the idea of marriage. She knew nothing of her own heart, and little about life, but had been accustomed to yield implicit obedience to his will. She consented and the ceremony was performed by a Justice of the Peace in the city of Cincinnati, a year or so before their appearance in the Quaker village. An experience so abnormal would have perverted, if not destroyed her nature, had it not contained the germs of beauty and virtue implanted at her birth. They were still dormant, but not dead; they only awaited the sun and rain of love to quicken them into life.

The quack had coarsened with the passing years, but Pepeeta, withdrawing into the sanctuary of her soul, living a life of vague dreams and half-conscious aspirations after something, she knew not what, had grown even more gentle and submissive. As she did not yet comprehend life, she did not protest against its injustice or its incongruity. The vulgar people among whom she lived, the vulgar scenes she saw, passed across the mirror of her soul without leaving permanent impressions. She performed the coarse duties of her life in a perfunctory manner. It was her body and not her soul, her will and not her heart which were concerned with them. What that soul and that heart really were, remained to be seen.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOMAN

“One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace.”—Much Ado About Nothing.

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True to his determination, the doctor devoted the night following his advent into the little frontier village to the investigation of the Quaker preacher's fitness for his use. He took Pepeeta with him, the older habitues of the tavern standing on the porch and smiling ironically as they started.

The meeting house was one of those conventional weather-boarded buildings with which all travelers in the western states are familiar. The rays of the tallow candles by which it was lighted were streaming feebly out into the night. The doors were open, and through them were passing meek-faced, soft-voiced and plain-robed worshipers.

The silhouettes of the men's broad hats and the women's poke bonnets, seen dimly against the pale light of the windows as they passed, plainly revealed their sect. The similarity of their garments almost obliterated the personal identity of the wearers.

The two strangers, so different in manners and dress, joined the straggling procession which crept slowly along the road and chatted to each other in undertones.

"What queer people," said Pepeeta.

"Beat the Dutch, and you know who the D-d-dutch beat!"

"What sort of a building is that they are going into?"

"That's a church."

"What is a church for?"

"Ask the marines! Never b-b-been in one more'n once or twice.
G-g-g-guess they use 'em to p-p-pray in. Never pray, so never go."

"Why have you never taken me?"

"Why should I?"

"We go everywhere else, to theaters, to circuses, to races."

"Some sense in going there. Have f-f-fun!"

"Don't they have any fun in churches?"

"Fun! They think a man who laughs will go straight to the b-b-bow-wows!"

"What are they for, then, these churches?"

"For religion, I tell you."

“What is religion?”

“Don’t you know?”

“No.”

“Your education has been n-n-neglected.”

“Tell me what it is!”

“D-d-d-don’t ask so many questions! It is something for d-d-dead folks.”

“How dark the building looks.”

“Like a b-b-barn.”

“How solemn the people seem.”

“Like h-h-hoot owls.”

“It scares me.”

“Feel a little b-b-bit shaky myself; but it’s too late to b-b-back out now. I’m going if they roast and eat me. If this f-f-feller can talk as they say he can, I am going to get hold of him, d-d-d-dead or alive. I’ll have him if it takes a habeas c-c-corpus.”

At this point of the conversation they arrived at the meeting-house. Keeping close together, Pepeeta light and graceful, the doctor heavy and awkward, both of them thoroughly embarrassed, they ascended the steps as a bear and gazelle might have walked the gang-plank into the ark. They entered unobserved save by a few of the younger people who were staring vacantly about the room, and took their seats on the

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last bench. The Quaker maidens who caught sight of Pepeeta were visibly excited and began to preen themselves as turtle doves might have done if a bird of paradise had suddenly flashed among them. One of them happened to be seated next her. She was dressed in quiet drabs and grays. Her face and person were pervaded and adorned by simplicity, meekness, devotion; and the contrast between the two was so striking as to render them both self-conscious and uneasy in each other's presence.

The visitors did not know at all what to expect in this unfamiliar place, but could not have been astonished or awed by anything else half so much as by the inexplicable silence which prevailed. If the whole assemblage had been dancing or turning somersaults, they would not have been surprised, but the few moments in which they thus sat looking stupidly at the people and then at each other seemed to them like a small eternity. Pepeeta's sensitive nature could ill endure such a strain, and she became nervous.

"Take me away," she imploringly whispered to the doctor, who sat by her side, ignorant of the custom which separated the sexes.

He tried to encourage her in a few half-suppressed words, took her trembling hand in his great paw, pressed it reassuringly, winked humorously, and then looked about him with a sardonic grin.

To Pepeeta's relief, the silence was at last broken by an old man who rose from his seat, reverently folded his hands, lifted his face to heaven, closed his eyes and began to speak. She had never until this moment listened to a prayer, and this address to an invisible Being wrought in her already agitated mind a confused and exciting effect; but the prayer was long, and gave her time to recover her self-control. The silence which followed its close was less painful because less strange than the other, and she permitted herself to glance about the room and to wonder what would happen next. Her curiosity was soon satisfied. David Corson, the young mystic, rose to his feet. He was dressed with exquisite neatness in that simple garb which lends to a noble person a peculiar and serious dignity. Standing for a moment before he began his address, he looked over the audience with the self-possession of an accomplished orator. The attention of every person in the room was at once arrested. They all recalled their wandering or preoccupied thoughts, lifted their bowed heads and fixed their eyes upon the commanding figure before them.

This general movement caused Pepeeta to turn, and she observed a sudden transformation on the countenance of the dove-like Quaker maiden. A flush mantled her pale cheek and a radiance beamed in her mild blue eyes. It was a tell-tale look, and Pepeeta, who divined its meaning, smiled sympathetically.

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But the first word which fell from the lips of the speaker withdrew her attention from every other object, for his voice possessed a quality with which she was entirely unfamiliar. It would have charmed and fascinated the hearer, even if it had uttered incoherent words. For Pepeeta, it had another and a more mysterious value. It was the voice of her destiny, and rang in her soul like a bell. The speech of the young Quaker was a simple and unadorned message of the love of God to men, and of their power to respond to the Divine call. The thoughts to which he gave expression were not original, but simply distillations from the words of Madam Guyon, Fenelon, Thomas a Kempis and St. John; and yet they were not mere repetitions, for they were permeated by the freshness and the beauty of his own pure feelings.

“We are all,” said he, “the children of a loving Father whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, who yet dwells in every contrite human heart as the light of the great sun reproduces itself in every drop of dew. To have God dwell thus in the soul is to enjoy perfect peace. This life is a life of bitterness to those who struggle against God, a world of sorrow to those who doubt Him, and of darkness to those who refuse His sweet illumination. But the sorrow and the struggle end, and the darkness becomes the dawn to every one who loves and trusts the heavenly Father, for He bestows upon all a Divine gift. This gift is the ’inner light,’ the light which shines within the soul itself and sheds its rays upon the dark pathway of existence. This God of love is not far from every one of us and we may all know Him. He is to be loved, not hated; trusted, not feared! Why should men tremble at the consciousness of His presence? Does the little sparrow in its nest feel any fear when it hears the flutter of its parent’s wings? Does the child shudder at its mother’s approaching footsteps?” As he uttered these words, he paused and awaited an answer.

Each sentence had fallen into the sensitive soul of the Fortune Teller like a pebble into a deep well. She was gazing at him in astonishment. Her lips were parted, her eyes were suffused and she was leaning forward breathlessly.

“If we would live bravely, hopefully, tranquilly,” he continued, “we must be conscious of the presence of God. If we believe with all our hearts that He knows our inmost thoughts, we shall experience comfort beyond words. This life of peace, of aspiration, of communion, is possible to all. The evil in us may be overthrown. We may reproduce the life of Christ on earth. We may become as He was—one with God. As the little water drop poured into a large measure of wine seems to lose its own nature entirely and take on the nature and the color of both the water and the wine; or as air filled with sunlight is transformed into the same brightness so that it does not appear to be illuminated by another light so much as to be luminous of itself; so must all feeling toward the Holy One be self-dissolved and wholly transformed into the will of God. For how shall God be all in all, if anything of man remains in man?”

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In words and images like these the young mystic poured forth his soul. There were no flights of oratory, and only occasional bursts of anything that could be called eloquence. But in an inexplicable manner it moved the heart to tenderness and thrilled the deepest feelings of the soul. Much of the effect on those who understood him was due to the truths he uttered; but even those who, like the two strangers, were unfamiliar with the ideas advanced, or indifferent to them, could not escape that nameless influence with which all true orators are endowed, and were thrilled by what he said. In our ignorance we have called this influence by the name of "magnetism." Whatever it may be, this young man possessed it in a very high degree, and when to it was added his personal beauty, his sincerity, and his earnestness, it became almost omnipotent over the emotions, if not over the reason. It enslaved Pepeeta completely.

It was impossible that in so small a room a speaker should be unconscious of the presence of strangers. David had noticed them at once, and his glance, after roaming about the room, invariably returned and fixed itself upon the face of the Fortune Teller. Their fascination was mutual. They were so drawn to each other by some inscrutable power, that it would not have been hard to believe that they had existed as companions in some previous state of being, and had now met and vaguely remembered each other.

When at length David stopped speaking, it seemed to Pepeeta as if a sudden end had come to everything; as if rivers had ceased to run and stars to rise and set. She drew a long, deep breath, sighed and sank back in her seat, exhausted by the nervous tension to which she had been subjected.

The effect upon the quack was hardly less remarkable. He, too, had listened with breathless attention. He tried to analyze and then to resist this mesmeric power, but gradually succumbed. He felt as if chained to his seat, and it was only by a great effort that he pulled himself together, took Pepeeta by the arm and drew her out into the open air.

For a few moments they walked in silence, and then the doctor exclaimed: "P-p-peeta, I have found him at last!"

"Found whom?" she asked sharply, irritated by the voice which offered such a rasping contrast to the one still echoing in her ears.

"Found whom? As if you didn't know! I mean the man of d-d-destiny! He is a snake charmer, Pepeeta! He just fairly b-b-bamboozled you! I was laughing in my sleeve and saying to myself, 'He's bamboozled Pepeeta; but he can't b-b-bamboozle me!' When he up and did it! Tee-totally did it! And if he can bamboozle me, he can bamboozle anybody."

"Did you understand what he said?" Pepeeta asked.

“Understand? Well, I should say not! The d-d-devil himself couldn’t make head nor tail out of it. But between you and me and the town p-p-pump it’s all the better, for if he can fool the people with that kind of g-g-gibberish, he can certainly f-f-fool them with the Balm of the B-B-Blessed Islands! First time I was ever b-b-bamboozled in my life. Feels queer. Our fortune’s made, P-p-pepeeta!”

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His triumph and excitement were so great that he did not notice the silence and abstraction of his wife. His ardent mind invariably excavated a channel into which it poured its thoughts, digging its bed so deep as to flow on unconscious of everything else. Exulting in the prospect of attaching to himself a companion so gifted, never doubting for a moment that he could do so, reveling in the dreams of wealth to be gathered from the increased sales of his patent medicine, he entered the hotel and made straight for the bar-room, where he told his story with the most unbounded delight.

Pepeeta retired at once to her room, but her mind was too much excited and her heart too much agitated for slumber. She moved restlessly about for a long time and then sat down at the open window and looked into the night. For the first time in her life, the mystery of existence really dawned upon her. She gazed with a new awe at the starry sky. She thought of that Being of whom David had spoken. Questions which had never before occurred to her knocked at the door of her mind and imperatively demanded an answer. “Who am I? Whence did I come? For what was I created? Whither am I going?” she asked herself again and again with profound astonishment at the newness of these questions and her inability to answer them.

For a long time she sat in the light of the moon, and reflected on these mysteries with all the power of her untutored mind. But that power was soon exhausted, and vague, chaotic, abstract conceptions gave place to a definite image which had been eternally impressed upon her inward eyes. It was the figure of the young Quaker, idealized by the imagination of an ardent and emotional woman whose heart had been thrilled for the first time.

She began timidly to ask herself what was the meaning of those feelings which this stranger had awakened in her bosom. She knew that they were different from those which her husband inspired; but how different, she did not know. They filled her with a sort of ecstasy, and she gave herself up to them. Exhausted at last by these vivid thoughts and emotions, she rested her head upon her arms across the window sill and fell asleep. It must have been that the young Quaker followed her into the land of dreams, for when her husband aroused her at midnight a faint flush could be seen by the light of the moon on those rounded cheeks.

There are all the elements of a tragedy in the heart of a woman who has never felt the emotions of religion or of love until she is married!

CHAPTER V.

THE LIGHT THAT LIES

> “Oh! why did God create at last
> This novelty on earth, this fair defect
> Of nature, and not till the world at once
> With men as angels, without feminine?”
>
> —Paradise Lost.

On the following morning the preacher-plowman was afield at break of day. The horses, refreshed and rested by food and sleep, dragged the gleaming plowshare through the heavy sod as if it were light snow, and the farmer exulted behind them.

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That universal life which coursed through all the various forms of being around him, bounded in tides through his own veins. The fresh morning air, the tender light of dawning day, the odors of plants and songs of birds, filled his sensitive soul with unutterable delight.

In the midst of all these beauties and wonders, he existed without self-consciousness and labored without effort. His heart was pure and his oneness with the natural world was complete. Whatever was beautiful and gentle in the manifold operations of the Divine Spirit in the world around him, he saw and felt. To all that was horrible and ferocious, he was blind as a child in Paradise. He did not notice the hawk sweeping upon the dove, the swallow darting upon the moth, nor the lizard lying in wait for the fly; or, if he did, he saw them only as he saw the shadows flitting across the sunny landscape. His soul was like a garden full of light, life, perfume, color and the music of singing birds and whispering leaves. Before his inward eye the familiar figures of his daily life passed and repassed, but among them was also a new one. It was the figure that had arrested his attention and inspired him the night before.

For hours he followed the plow without the consciousness of fatigue, but at length he paused to rest the horses, who were beginning to pant with their hard labor. He threw back his head, drew in deep inspirations of pure air, glanced about and felt the full tide of the simple joy of existence roll over him. Life had never seemed sweeter than in those few moments in which he quaffed the brimming cup of youth and health which nature held to his lips. Not a fear, not an apprehension of any danger crossed his soul. His glances roved here and there, pausing a moment in their flight like hummingbirds, to sip the sweetness from some unusually beautiful cloud or tree or flower, when he suddenly caught sight of a curious equipage flying swiftly down the road at the other side of the field. The spirited horses stopped. A man rose from the seat, put his hands to his mouth like a trumpet, uttered a loud “hallo,” and beckoned.

David tied the reins to the plow handles and strode across the fresh furrows. Vaulting the fence and leaping the brook which formed the boundary line of the farm, he ascended the bank and approached the carriage. As he did so the occupants got out and came to meet him. To his astonishment he saw the strangers whom he had noticed the night before. The man advanced with a bold, free demeanor, the woman timidly and with downcast eyes.

“Good morning,” said the doctor.

David returned his greeting with the customary dignity of the Quakers.

“My name is Dr. Aesculapius.”

“Thee is welcome.”

“I was over to the m-m-meeting house last night, and heard your s-s-speech. Didn’t understand a w-w-word, but saw that you c-c-can talk like a United States Senator.”

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David bowed and blushed.

“I came over to make you a p-p-proposition. Want you to yoke up with me, and help me sell the ‘B-B-Balm of the Blessed Islands.’ You can do the t-t-talking and I’ll run the b-b-business; see?”

He put his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, spread his feet apart, squared himself and smiled like a king who had offered his throne to a beggar.

David regarded him with a look of astonishment.

“What do you s-s-say?”

Gravely, placidly, the young Quaker answered: “I thank thee, friend, for what thee evidently means as a kindness, but I must decline thy offer.”

“Decline my offer? Are you c-c-crazy? Why do you d-d-decline my offer?”

“Because I have no wish to leave my home and work.”

Although his answer was addressed to the man, his eyes were directed to the woman. His reply, simple and natural enough, astounded the quack.

“What!” he exclaimed. “Do you mean that you p-p-prefer to stay in this p-p-pigstye of a town to becoming a citizen of the g-g-great world?”

“I do.”

“But listen; I will pay you more money in a single month than you can earn by d-d-driving your plow through that b-b-black mud for a whole year.”

“I have no need and no desire for more money than I can earn by daily toil.”

“No need and no desire for money! B-b-bah! You are not talking to sniveling old women and crack-b-b-brained old men; but to a f-f-feller who can see through a two-inch plank, and you can’t p-p-pass off any of your religious d-d-drivel on him, either.”

This coarse insult went straight to the soul of the youth. His blood tingled in his veins. There was a tightening around his heart of something which was out of place in the bosom of a Quaker. A hot reply sprang to his lips, but died away as he glanced at the woman, and saw her face mantled with an angry flush.

Calmed by her silent sympathy, he quietly replied: “Friend, I have no desire to annoy thee, but I have been taught that ’the love of money is the root of all evil,’ and believing as I do I could not answer thee otherwise than I did.”

It was evident from the look upon the countenance of the quack that he had met with a new and incomprehensible type of manhood. He gazed at the Quaker a moment in silence and then exclaimed, “Young man, you may mean what you say, b-b-but you have been most infernally abused by the p-p-people who have put such notions in your head, for there is only one substantial and abiding g-g-good on earth, and that is money. Money is power, money is happiness, money is God; get money! get it anywhere! get it anyhow, but g-g-get it.”

Instead of mere resentment for a personal insult, David now felt a tide of righteous indignation rising in his soul at this scorn and denial of those eternal principles of truth and duty which he felt to be the very foundations of the moral universe.

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“Sir,” said he, with the voice and mien of an apostle, “I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity. Thy money perish with thee. The God of this world hath blinded thine eyes.”

The quack, who now began to take a humorous view of the innocence of the youth, burst into a boisterous guffaw.

“Well, well,” he said in mingled scorn and pity, “reckon you are more to be pitied than b-b-blamed. Fault of early education! Talk like a p-p-parrot! What can a young fellow like you know about life, shut up here in this seven-by-nine valley, like a man in a b-b-barrel looking out of the b-b-bung-hole?”

Offended and disgusted, the Quaker was about to turn upon his heel; but he saw in the face of the man’s beautiful companion a look which said plainly as spoken words, “I, too, desire that you should go with us.”

This look changed his purpose, and he paused.

“Listen to me now,” continued the doctor, observing his irresolution. “You think you know what life is; but you d-d-don’t! Do you know what g-g-great cities are? Do you know what it is to m-m-mix with crowds of men, to feel and perhaps to sway their p-p-passions? Do you know what it is to p-p-possess and to spend that money which you d-d-despise? Do you know what it is to wear fine clothes, to d-d-drink rare wines, to see great sights, to go where you want to and to do what you p-p-please?”

“I do not, nor do I wish to. And thee must abandon these follies and sins, if thee would enter the Kingdom of God,” David replied, fixing his eyes sternly upon the face of the blasphemer.

“God! Ha, ha, ha! Who is He, anyhow? Same old story! Fools that can’t enjoy life, d-d-don’t want any one else to! Ever hear ’bout the fox that got his tail b-b-bit off? Wanted all the rest to have theirs! What the d-d-deuce are we here in this world for? T-t-tell me that, p-p-parson!”

“To do the will of our Father which is in heaven.”

“To do the will of our Father in heaven! I know but one will, and it is the w-w-will of Doctor P-p-paracelsus Aesculapius. I’m my own lord and law, I am.”

“Know thou that for all thy idle words, God will bring thee to judgment?” David answered solemnly.

“Rot!” muttered the doctor, disgusted beyond endurance, and concluding the interview with the cynical farewell,

“Good-bye, d-d-dead man! I have always hated c-c-corpses! I am going where men have red b-b-blood in their veins.”

With these words he turned on his heel and started toward the carriage, leaving David and Pepeeta alone. Neither of them moved. The gypsy nervously plucked the petals from a daisy and the Quaker gazed at her face. During these few moments nature had not been idle. In air and earth and tree top, following blind instincts, her myriad children were seeking their mates. And here, in the odorous sunshine of the May morning, these two young, impressionable and ardent beings, yielding themselves unconsciously to the same mysterious attraction which was uniting other happy couples, were drawn together in a union which time could not dissolve and eternity, perhaps, cannot annul.

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Having stalked indignantly onward for a few paces, the doctor discovered that his wife had not followed him, and turning he called savagely: "Pepeeta, come! It is folly to try and p-p-persuade him. Let us leave the saint to his prayers! But let him remember the old p-p-proverb, 'young saint, old sinner!' Come!"

He proceeded towards the carriage; but Pepeeta seemed rooted to the ground, and David was equally incapable of motion. While they stood thus, gazing into each other's eyes, they saw nothing and they saw all. That brief glance was freighted with destiny. A subtle communication had taken place between them, although they had not spoken; for the eye has a language of its own.

What was the meaning of that glance? What was the emotion that gave it birth in the soul? He knew! It told its own story. To their dying day, the actors in that silent drama remembered that glance with rapture and with pain.

Pepeeta spoke first, hurriedly and anxiously: "What did you say last night about the 'light of life?' Tell me! I must know."

"I said there is a light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

"And what did you mean? Be quick. There is only a moment."

"I meant that there is a light that shines from the soul itself and that in this light we may walk, and he who walks in it, walks safely. He need never fall!"

"Never? I do not understand; it is beautiful; but I do not understand!"

"Pepeeta!" called her husband, angrily.

She turned away, and David watched her gliding out of his sight, with an irrepressible pain and longing. "I suppose she is his daughter," he said to himself, and upon that natural but mistaken inference his whole destiny turned. Something seemed to draw him after her. He took a step or two, halted, sighed and returned to his labor.

But it was to a strangely altered world that he went. Its glory had vanished; it was desolate and empty, or so at least it seemed to him, for he confounded the outer and the inner worlds, as it was his nature and habit to do. It was in his soul that the change had taken place. The face of a bad man and of an incomprehensible woman followed him through the long furrows until the sun went down. He was vaguely conscious that he had for the first time actually encountered those strenuous elements which draw manhood from its moorings. He felt humiliated by the recognition that he was living a dream life there in his happy valley; and that there was a life outside which he could not master so easily. That confidence in his strength and incorruptibility which he had always felt began to waver a little. His innocence appeared to him like that of the great first father in the garden of Eden, before his temptation, and now that he too had

listened to the voice of the serpent and had for the first time been stirred at the description of the sweetness of the great tree's fruit,

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there came to him a feeling of foreboding as to the future. He was astonished that such characters as those he had just seen did not excite in him loathing and repulsion. Why could he not put them instantly and forever out of his mind? How could they possess any attractiveness for him at all—such a blatant, vulgar man or such an ignorant, ah! but beautiful, woman; for she was beautiful! Yes—beautiful but bad! But no—such a beautiful woman could not be bad. See how interested she was about the "inner light." She must be very ignorant; but she was very attractive. What eyes! What lips!

Thoughts which he had always been able to expel from his mind before, like evil birds fluttered again and again into the windows of his soul. For this he upbraided himself; but only to discover that at the very moment when he regretted that he had been tempted at all, he also regretted that he had not been tempted further.

All day long his agitated spirit alternated between remorse that he had enjoyed so much, and regret that he had enjoyed so little. Never had he experienced such a tumult in his soul. He struggled hard, but he could not tell whether he had conquered or been defeated.

It was not until he had retired to his room at night and thrown himself upon his knees, that he began to regain peace. There, in the stillness of his chamber, he strove for the control of his thoughts and emotions, and fell asleep after long and prayerful struggles, with the sweet consciousness of a spiritual triumph!

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT

> "Every man living shall assuredly meet with an hour of temptation, a critical hour which shall more especially try what metal his heart is made of"—South.

It was long after he had awakened in the morning before the memory of the adventure of yesterday recurred to David's mind. His sleep had been as deep as that of an infant, and his rest in the great ocean of oblivion had purified him, so that when he did at last recall the experience which had affected him so deeply, it was with indifference. The charm had vanished. Even the gypsy's beauty paled in the light of the Holy Sabbath morning. He could think of her with entire calmness, and so thoroughly had the evil vanished that he hoped it had disappeared forever. But he had yet to learn that before evil can be successfully forgotten it must be heroically overcome.

He did not yet realize this, however, and his bath, his morning prayer, a passage from the gospel, the hearty breakfast, the kind and trustful faces of his family, dispelled the last cloud from the sky of his soul. Having finished the round of morning duties, he made himself ready to visit the lumber camp, there to discharge the sacred duty revealed to him in the vision.

The confidence reposed by the genuine Quaker in such intimations of the Spirit is absolute. They are to him as imperative as the audible voice of God to Moses by the burning bush.

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“Farewell, mother, I am off,” he said, kissing her upon the white forehead.

“Thee is going to the lumber camp, my son?” she asked, regarding him with ill-concealed pride.

“I am, and hope to press the truth home to the hearts of those who shall hear me,” replied the young devotee, his face lighting up with the blended rapture of religious enthusiasm, youth and health.

“The Lord be with thee and make thy ministrations fruitful,” his mother said, and with this blessing he set off.

As the young mystic had yesterday thought the world dark and stormy because of the tempest in his soul, so now he thought it still and peaceful, because of his inward calm. The very intensity of his recent struggles had rendered his soul acutely sensitive, like a delicate musical instrument which responded freely to the innumerable fingers wherewith Nature struck its keys. Her manifold forms, her gorgeous colors, her gigantic forces thrilled and intoxicated him.

That sense of fellowship with all the forms of life about him, which is characteristic of all our moments of deepest rapture in the embrace of Nature, filled his soul with joy. He accosted the trees as one greets a friend; he chatted with the brooks; he held conversation with the little lambs skipping in the pastures, and with the horses that whinnied as he passed.

Such opulent moments come to all in youth; moments when the soul, unconscious of its chains because they have not been stretched to their limits, roams the universe with God-like liberty and joy.

Had he been asked to analyze these exquisite emotions, the young Quaker would have said that they were the joys of the indwelling of the Divine Spirit. He did not realize how much of his exhilaration came from the feelings awakened by the experiences of the day before. One might almost say that a spiritual fragrance from the woman who had crossed his path was diffusing itself through the chambers of his soul. It was like the odor of violets which lingers after the flowers themselves are gone.

Up to this time, he had never felt the mighty and mysterious emotion of love. More than once, when he had seen the calm face of Dorothy Fraser, soft and tender feelings had arisen in his heart; but they were only the first faint gleams of that conflagration which sooner or later breaks forth in the souls of men like him.

It was this confusion of the sources of his happiness which made him oblivious to the struggle that was still going on within his mind. The question had been raised there as to whether he had chosen wisely in turning his back upon the joys of an earthly life for

the joys of heaven. It had not been settled, and was waiting an opportunity to thrust itself again before his consciousness. In the meantime he was happy. Never had he seemed to himself more perfectly possessed by the Divine Spirit than at the moment when he reached the summit of the last hill, and looked

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down into the valley where lay the lumber-camp. He paused to gaze upon a scene of surpassing loveliness, and was for a moment absorbed by its beauty; but a sudden discovery startled and disturbed him. There was no smoke curling from the chimneys. There were no forms of men moving about in their brilliant woolen shirts; he listened in vain for voices; he could not even hear the yelp of the ever-watchful dogs.

“Can it be possible that I have been deceived by my vision?” he asked himself.

It was the first real skepticism of his life, and crowding it back into his heart as best he could, he pressed on, excited and curious. As he approached the rude structure, the signs of its desertion became indubitable. He called, but heard only the echo of his own voice. He tried the door, and it opened. Through it he entered the low-ceiled room. On every hand were evidences of recent departure; living coals still glowed in the ashes and crumbs were scattered on the tables. There could be no longer any doubt that the lumbermen had vanished. The last and most incontrovertible proof was tacked upon the wall in the shape of a flat piece of board on which were written in a rude scrawl these words: “We have gone to the Big Miami.”

The face so bright and clear a moment ago was clouded now. He read the sentence over and over again. He sat down upon a bench and meditated, then rose and went out, walking around the cabin and returning to read the message once more. If he had spoken the real sentiment of his heart he would have said: “I have been deceived.” He did not speak, however, but struggled bravely to throw off the feelings of surprise and doubt; and so, reassuring his faith again and again by really noble efforts, took from his pocket the lunch his mother had prepared, and ate it hungrily although abstractedly. As he did so, he felt the animal joy in food and rest, and his courage and confidence revived.

“It is plain,” he said to himself, “that God has sent me here to try my faith. All he requires is obedience! It is not necessary that I should understand; but it is necessary that I should obey!”

The idea of a probation so unique was not distasteful to his romantic nature, and he therefore at once addressed himself to the business upon which he had come. He had been sent to preach, and preach he would. Drawing from the inner pocket of his coat a well-worn Bible, he turned to the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John, rose to his feet and began to read. It was strange to be reading to this emptiness and silence, but after a moment he adjusted himself to the situation. The earnest effort he was making to control his mind achieved at least a partial success. His face brightened, he conjured up before his imagination the forms and faces of the absent men. He saw them with the eye of his mind. His voice grew firm and clear, and its tones reassured him.

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Having finished the lesson, he closed the volume and began to pray. Now that his eyes were shut, the strangeness of the situation vanished entirely. He was no longer alone, for God was with him. The petition was full of devotion, tenderness and faith, and as he poured it forth his countenance beamed like that of an angel. When it was finished he began the sermon. The first few words were scarcely audible. The thoughts were disconnected and fragmentary. He suffered an unfamiliar and painful embarrassment, but struggled on, and his thoughts cleared themselves like a brook by flowing. Each effort resulted in a greater facility of utterance, and soon the joy of triumph began to inspire him. The old confidence returned at last and his soul, filled with faith and hope and fervor, poured itself forth in a full torrent. He began to be awed by the conjecture that his errand had some extraordinary although hidden import. Who could tell what mission these words were to accomplish in the plans of God? He remembered that the waves made by the smallest pebble flung into the ocean widen and widen until they touch the farthest shore, and he flung the pebbles of his speech into the great ocean of thought, transported by the hope of sometime learning that their waves had beat upon the shores of a distant universe.

Suddenly, in the midst of this tumultuous rush of speech, he heard, or thought he heard, a sound. It seemed to him like a sob and there followed stumbling footsteps as of some one in hurried flight, but he was too absorbed to be more than dimly conscious of anything save his own emotions.

And yet, slight as was this interruption, it served to agitate his mind and bring him down from the realms of imagination to the world of reality. His thoughts began to flow less easily and his tongue occasionally to stammer; the strangeness of his experience came back upon him with redoubled force; the chill influence of vacancy and emptiness oppressed him; his enthusiasm waned; what he was doing began to seem foolish and even silly.

Just at that critical moment there occurred one of those trifling incidents which so often produce results ridiculously disproportionate to their apparent importance. Through the open door to which his back was turned, a little snake had made its way into the room, and having writhed silently across the floor, coiled itself upon the hearth-stone, faced the speaker, looked solemnly at him with its beady eyes, and occasionally thrust out its forked tongue as if in relish of his words.

That fixed and inscrutable gaze completed the confusion of the orator. He suddenly ceased to speak, and stood staring at the serpent. His face became impassive and expressionless; the pupils of his eyes dilated; his lips remained apart; the last word seemed frozen on his tongue. Not a shade of thought could be traced on his countenance and yet he must have been thinking, for he suddenly collapsed, sank

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down on a rude bench and rested his head on his hands as if he had come to some disagreeable, and perhaps terrible conclusion. And so indeed he had. The uneasy suspicions which had been floating in his mind in a state of solution were suddenly crystallized by this untoward event. The absurdity of a man's having tramped twenty miles through an almost unbroken wilderness to preach the gospel to a garter snake, burst upon him with a crushing force. This grotesque denouement of an undertaking planned and executed in the loftiest frame of religious enthusiasm, shook the very foundation of his faith.

"It is absurd, it is impossible, that an infinite Spirit of love and wisdom could have planned this repulsive adventure! I have been misled! I am the victim of a delusion!" he said to himself, in shame and bitterness.

To him, Christianity had been not so much a system of doctrines based upon historical proofs, as emotions springing from his own heart. He believed in another world not because its existence had been testified to by others, but because he daily and hourly entered its sacred precincts. He had faith in God, not because He had spoken to apostles and prophets, but because He had spoken to David Corson. Having received direct communication from the Divine Spirit, how could he doubt? What other proof could he need?

Suddenly, without warning and without preparation, the foundation upon which he had erected the superstructure of his faith crumbled and fell. He had been deceived! The communications were false! They had originated in his own soul, and were not really the voice of God.

Through this suspicion, as through a suddenly-opened door, the powers of hell rushed into his soul and it became the theater of a desperate battle between the good and evil elements of life. Doubt grappled with faith; self-gratification with self-restraint; despair with hope; lust with purity; body with soul.

He heard again the mocking laughter of the quack, and the stinging words of his cynical philosophy once more rang in his ears. What this coarse wretch had said was true, then! Religion was a delusion, and he had been spending the best portion of his life in hugging it to his bosom. Much of his youth had already passed and he had not as yet tasted the only substantial joys of existence,—money, pleasure, ambition, love! He felt that he had been deceived and defrauded.

A contempt for his old life and its surroundings crept upon him. He began to despise the simple country people among whom he had grown up, and those provincial ideas which they cherished in the little, unknown nook of the world where they stagnated.

During a long time he permitted himself to be borne upon the current of these thoughts without trying to stem it, till it seemed as if he would be swept completely from his moorings. But his trust had been firmly anchored, and did not easily let go its hold. The convictions of a lifetime began to reassert themselves. They rose and struggled heroically for the possession of his spirit.

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Had the battle been with the simple abstraction of philosophic doubt, the good might have prevailed, but there obtruded itself into the field the concrete form of the gypsy. The glance of her lustrous eye, the gleam of her milk-white teeth, the heaving of her agitated bosom, the inscrutable but suggestive expression of her flushed and eager face, these were foes against which he struggled in vain. A feverish desire, whose true significance he did not altogether understand, tugged at his heart, and he felt himself drawn by unseen hands toward this mysterious and beautiful being. She seemed to him at that awful moment, when his whole world of thought and feeling was slipping from under his feet, the one only abiding reality. She at least was not an impalpable vision, but solid, substantial, palpitating flesh and blood. Like continuously advancing waves which sooner or later must undermine a dyke, the passions and suspicions of his newly awakened nature were sapping the foundations of his belief.

At intervals he gained a little courage to withstand them, and at such moments tried to pray; but the effort was futile, for neither would the accustomed syllables of petition spring to his lips, nor the feelings of faith and devotion arise within his heart. He strove to convince himself that this experience was a trial of his faith, and that if he stood out a little longer, his doubt would pass away. He lifted his head and glanced at the serpent still coiled upon the hearth. Its eyes were fixed upon him in a gorgon-like stare, and his doubts became positive certainties, as disgust became loathing. The battle had ended. The mystic had been defeated. This sudden collapse had come because the foundations of his faith had been honeycombed. The innocent serpent had been, not the cause, but the occasion.

Influences had been at work, of which the Quaker had remained unconscious. He had been observing, without reflecting upon, many facts in the lives of other men, experiences in his own heart, and apparent inconsistencies in the Bible. There was also a virus whose existence he did not suspect running in his very blood! And now on top of the rest came the bold skepticism of the quack, and the bewildering beauty of the gypsy.

Yes, the preliminary work had been done! We never know how rotten the tree is until it falls, nor how unstable the wall until it crumbles. And so in the moral natures of men, subtle forces eat their way silently and imperceptibly to the very center.

A summer breeze overthrows the tree, the foot of a child sets the wall tottering; a whisper, a smile, even the sight of a serpent, is the jar that upsets the equilibrium of a soul.

The Quaker rose from his seat in a fever of excitement. He seized the Bible lying open on the table, hurled it frantically at the snake and flung himself out of the open door into the sunshine. A wild consciousness of liberty surged over him.

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“I am free,” he exclaimed aloud. “I have emancipated myself from superstition. I am going forth into the world to assert myself, to gratify my natural appetites, to satisfy my normal desires. It was for this that life was given. I have too long believed that duty consisted in conquering nature. I now see that it lies in asserting it. I have too long denied myself. I will hereafter be myself. That man was right—there is no law above the human will.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHANCE WORD

“A man reforms his habits altogether or not at all.”
—Bacon.

David was not mistaken in his vague impression that he had heard a sob and footsteps outside the cabin door.

The little band of lumbermen abandoning their camp in the early light of the morning for another clearing still farther in the wilderness, had already covered several miles of their journey when their leader suddenly discovered that he had forgotten his axe, and with a wild volley of oaths turned back to get it.

Even in that region, where new types of men sprang up like new varieties of plants after a fire has swept over a clearing, there was not to be found a more unique and striking personality than Andy McFarlane. In physique he was of gigantic proportions, his hair and beard as red as fire, his voice loud and deep, his eyes blue and piercing. Clad in the gay-colored woolen shirt, the rough fur cap, and the high-topped boots of a lumberman, his appearance was bold and picturesque to the last degree.

Nor were his mental powers inferior to his physical. Although unable to read or write, he could both reason and command. His keen perceptions, his ready wit, his forcible logic and his invincible will had made him a leader among men and the idol of the rude people among whom he passed his days.

Repelled and disgusted with those manifestations of the religious life with which alone he was familiar, he was still an unconscious worshiper. The woods, the hills, the rivers and the stars awoke within him a response to the beautiful, the sublime and awe-inspiring in the natural universe.

But because of ignorance, the mysteries of existence which ought to have made him devout had only rendered him superstitious, though, all unknown to himself, his bosom was full of inflammable materials of a deeply religious life. A spark fell upon them that Sunday morning and kindled them into a conflagration. Nothing else can so enrage a nature like his as having to retrace its steps. He could have walked a hundred miles

straight forward without a feeling of fatigue or a sense of hardship; but every backward step of his journey had put him more out of temper. He reached the clearing in a towering passion and was bewildered at hearing in what he supposed to be a deserted room, the sound of a human voice in whose tones there was a peculiar quality which aroused his interest and perhaps excited his superstition. He crept toward the rude cabin on his tiptoes, paused and listened. What he heard was the voice of the young mystic, pouring out his heart in prayer.

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For the first time in his life McFarlane gave serious attention to a petition addressed to the Supreme Being. Other prayers had disgusted him because of their vulgar familiarity with the Deity, or repelled him by their hypocrisy; but there was something so sincere and simple in the childlike words which issued from the cabin as to quicken his soul and turn his thoughts upon the mysteries of existence. He had received the gift of life as do the eagles and the lions—without surprise. Had any one asked him: "Andy McFarlane, what is life?" he would have answered: "Life? Why it is just life."

But suddenly a voice, heard in the quiet of a wilderness, a voice full of tenderness and pathos, issuing from unknown and invisible lips and ascending into the vast and illimitable spaces of air, threw wide open the gates of mystery. His heart was instantly emptied of its passions; his soul grew calm and his whole nature became as impressionable as wax.

When at length the prayer had ended and the sermon began, every power of his mind was strained to its utmost capacity, and he listened as if for life. The buried germs of desires and aspirations of which he had never dreamed were quickened into life with the rapidity of the outburst of vegetation in a polar summer. Words and phrases which had hitherto seemed to him the utterances of fools or madmen, became instinct with a marvelous beauty and a wondrous meaning. They flashed like balls of fire. They pierced like swords. They aroused like trumpets. Such was the susceptibility of this great soul, and such was the power of that simple eloquence.

Andy McFarlane, the child of poverty, the rude lumberman, the hardy frontiersman, was by nature a poet and a seer, and this was his new birth into his true inheritance. Those eyes which had never wept, swam in tears. Those knees which had never trembled before the visible, shook in the presence of the unseen.

The emotions have their limitations as well as the thoughts, and McFarlane had endured all that he was capable of sustaining. With a profound sob, in which he uttered the feelings he could not speak, he turned and fled. It was this sob and these footsteps which David heard.

Plunging into the depths of the forest as a wounded animal would have done, he cast himself upon the bosom of the earth at the foot of a great tree, to find solitude and consolation.

There are wounds in the soul too deep to be healed by the balm which exudes from the visible elements of Nature. There are longings and aspirations which the palpable and audible cannot satisfy. Not what he sees and touches, but what he hopes and trusts, can save man in these dark moments from the final despair and terror of existence.

Upon such an hour as this the lumberman had fallen. God had thrust Himself upon his attention. Instead of being compelled to seek a religious experience, he found it impossible to escape it.

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The religious experiences of men in any such epoch possess a certain general similarity. Sometimes thought, sometimes action and sometimes emotion furnish the all-pervasive element. Whatever this peculiar characteristic may be, its manifestations are always most vivid and violent in ignorant periods, and along the uncultivated frontiers of advancing civilization. In those rude days and regions, the victims (if one might say so) of religion experienced nervous excitations and emotional transports which not infrequently terminated in convulsions. Days and nights, weeks and even months, were often spent by them in struggles which were always painful and often terrible.

Andy McFarlane had often enough witnessed and despised these experiences; but through those almost inexorable laws of association and imitation, they were more than likely to reproduce themselves in him. And so indeed they did. Under the influence of these new thoughts that had seized him with such power, he writhed in agony on the ground. A profound “conviction of sin” took possession of his soul and he felt himself to be hopelessly and forever lost. That hell at which he had so often scoffed suddenly opened its jaws beneath his feet, and although he shuddered at the thought of being engulfed in its horrors, he felt that such a doom would be the just desert of a life like his.

Hours passed in which his calmest thoughts were those of complete bewilderment and helplessness, and in which he seemed to himself to be floating upon a wide and shoreless sea, or wandering in a pathless wilderness or winging his way like a lost bird through the trackless heavens. However large an element of unreality and absurdity there may have been in such experiences, it is certain that changes of the most startling and permanent character were often wrought in the natures of those who passed through them, and when McFarlane at last emerged from this spiritual excitement he was a strangely altered man. He seemed to find himself in another and more beautiful world. Looking around him with a childlike wonder, he rose and made his way back to the cabin. He listened at the door, but heard no sound. He entered, found the room empty, and gave himself up to rude and unscientific speculation as to the nature of this mysterious adventure. Nothing helped to solve the problem, until at last he discovered the Bible, which the Quaker had hurled at the snake, lying upon the hearthstone. It did not explain everything, but it served to connect the inexplicable with the real and human, and he carried the book with him when he returned to his companions with his recovered axe.

That Bible became a “lamp to his feet and a light to his path.” By patient labor he learned to read it, and soon grew to be so familiar with its contents, that he was able not only to communicate its matter to others, in the new and beautiful life which he began to live, but to give it new power for those men in the plain and homely language of which he had always been a master.

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The lion had become a lamb, the eagle a dove. He moved among his men, the incarnation of gentleness and truth. Under his powerful influence the camp passed through a marvelous transformation. From this limited sphere of influence, his fame began to extend into a larger region. He was sent for from far and near to tell the story of his strange conversion, and in time abandoned all other labor and gave himself entirely to the preaching of the Gospel.

It was as if the spirit of love and faith which had departed from the Quaker had entered into the lumberman.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BROKEN REED

“Superstition is a senseless fear of God.”
—Cicero.

The address of the young Quaker in the meeting house and the interview with him by the roadside had opened a new epoch in the life of the Fortune Teller.

Her idea of the world was a chaos of crude and irrational conceptions. The superstitions of the gypsies by whom she had been reared were confusedly blended with those practical but vicious maxims which governed the conduct of her husband.

For her, the world of law, of order, of truth, of justice had no existence. The quack cared little what she thought, and had neither the ability nor the interest to penetrate to the secrets of her soul.

She had lived the dream life of an ignorant child up to the moment when David had awakened her soul, and now that she really began to grapple with the problems of existence, she had neither companion nor teacher to help her.

The two objects about which her thoughts had begun to hover helplessly were the God of whom David had spoken and the Quaker himself. Both of them had profoundly agitated her mind and heart, and still haunted her thoughts.

During all of Saturday after the interview, through the evening which she had passed in her booth, and far into the night, she had revolved in her mind the words she had heard, and attempted to weave these two mysterious beings into her confused scheme of thought.

Her disappointment at David’s refusal to accompany them in their wandering life had been bitter. She did not comprehend the nature of her feeling for him; but his presence

gave her so exquisite a happiness that the thought of never seeing him again had become intolerable.

For the first time she, who had been for years, as she thought, disclosing the future to other people, was seized with a burning curiosity as to her own. Up to this crisis of her experience she had lived in the present moment; but now she must look into to-morrow and see if the Quaker was ever to cross her path again. For so important, so delicate and so difficult a discovery it seemed to her that the ordinary instruments of her art were pitifully inadequate. The playing cards, the lines upon her hands, the leaves in her tea cup would not do. She would resort to that charm which the old gypsy had given her at parting, and which she had reserved for some great and critical moment of life. That moment had arrived.

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As she enjoyed the most perfect freedom in all her movements, she snatched an early and hurried breakfast Sunday morning, told her husband that she was going to the woods for wild flowers, and set forth upon an errand pregnant with destiny.

With an instinct like that of a wild creature she made her way swiftly towards the great forest which lay at a little distance from the outskirts of the village.

Her ignorance, her inexperience, her sadness and her beauty would have stirred the hardest heart to compassion. Arrived at the point where she was to confront the great spiritual problems of existence, she might almost as well have been the first woman who had ever done so, for she knew nothing of the experiences of others who had encountered them, and she had scarcely heard an echo of the great life-truths which seers have been ages in discovering. She had to sound her way across the perilous sea of thought without any other chart than the faded parchment of the gypsy, and those few incomprehensible words which she had heard from the lips of the young Quaker.

It is good for us that upon this vast and unknown sea of life, God's winds and waves are wiser and stronger than the pilots, and often bring our frail crafts into havens which we never sought! Perhaps the act which Pepeeta was about to perform had more ethical and spiritual value than the casual observer would suppose, because of the perfect sincerity with which she undertook its performance. No priestess ever entered an oracle, no vestal virgin a temple, nor saint a shrine with more reverence than she felt, as she passed into the silence of this primeval forest.

Neither David nor Pepeeta knew anything of each other's movements, but they started upon their different errands at almost the same moment and were pursuing parallel courses with only a low ridge of hills between them. Each was following the brightest light that had shone upon the pathway of life. Both were absorbed with the highest thoughts of which they were capable. As invisible planets deflect the stars from their orbits, these two were imperceptibly diverting each other from the way of duty. The experiences of this beautiful morning were to color the lives of both forever.

As soon as Pepeeta had escaped from the immediate environments of the village, she gave herself wholly to the task of gathering those ingredients which were to constitute the mixture she planned to offer to her god. She first secured a cricket, a lizard and a frog, and then the herbs and flowers which were to be mingled with them. Thrusting them all into a little kettle which swung on her arm, she surrendered herself to the silent and mysterious influences of the forest. At the edge of the primeval wilderness a solemn hush stole over her. She entered its precincts as if it were a temple and she a worshiper with a votive offering. Threading her way through the winding aisles of the great cathedral, she was

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exalted and transported. The fitful fever cooled in her veins. She absorbed and drew into her own spirit the calm and silence of the place, and she was in turn absorbed and drawn into the majestic life around her. The distinctively human seemed to slip from her like a garment, and she was transformed into a creature of these solitudes. Her movements resembled those of a fawn. Her great, gazelle-like eyes peered hither and thither, as if ever upon the watch for some hidden foe. It was as if her life in the habitations of men had been an enforced exile, and she had now returned to her native haunts.

As she penetrated more and more deeply into the wood, her confidence increased; she stepped more firmly, removed her hat, shook out her long black tresses, listened to the songs of birds piping in the tops of trees, and exulted in the consciousness of freedom and of kinship with these natural objects. With a sudden and impulsive movement, she drew near to the smooth trunk of a great beech, put her arms around it, laid her cheek against it and kissed the bark. She was prompted by the same instinct which made St. Francis de Assisi call the flowers “our little sisters,—” an inexplicable sense of companionship and fraternity with living things of every kind.

Her swift footsteps brought her at last to the summit of a low line of hills, and she glided down into an unpeopled and shadow-haunted valley through which ran a crystal stream. Perceiving the fitness of the place for her purpose, she hastened forward smiling, and, heated with her journey, threw herself down by the side of the brook and plunged her face into its cool and sparkling waters. Then she lifted her head and carried the water to her lips in the palm of her dainty hand, and as she drank beheld the image of her face on the surface of a quiet little pool. Small wonder that she stooped to kiss the red lips which were mirrored there! So did the fair Greek maidens discover and pay tribute to their own loveliness, in the pure springs of Hellas.

Refreshed by the cooling draught, the priestess now addressed herself to her task. Gazing for an instant around the majestic temple in which her act of worship was to be performed, she began like some child of a long gone age to rear an altar. Selecting a few from the many boulders that were strewn along the edge of the stream, she arranged them so as to make an elevated platform upon which she heaped dry leaves, brushwood and dead branches. Over it she suspended a tripod of sticks, and from this hung her iron kettle. Drawing from her pocket flint and steel, she struck them together, dropped a spark upon a piece of rotten wood, purred out her pretty cheeks and blew it into a flame. As the fire caught in the dry brushwood and began to leap heavenward, she followed it with her great brown eyes until it vanished into space. Her spirit thrilled with that same sense of awe and reverence which filled the souls of primitive men when they traced the course of the darting flames toward the sky. In the presence of fire, some form of worship is inevitable. Before conflagrations our reveries are transformed

into prayers. The silently ascending tongues of flame carry us involuntarily into the presence of the Infinite.

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Filling her kettle with water from the running brook, she stirred into it the herbs, the berries, the lizard, the frog and the cricket. This part of her work completed, she sat down upon a bed of moss, drew forth the sacred parchment and read its contents again and again.

“When the cauldron steams, dance about the fire and sing this song. As the last words die away Matizan will leap from the flames and reveal to thee the future.”

Credulous child that she was, not the faintest shadow of a doubt floated across her mind. She thrust the parchment back into her bosom, and as the water began to bubble, leaped to her feet, threw her arms above her head, sprang into the air, and went whirling away in graceful curves and bacchantean dances.

There were in these movements, as in every dance, mysterious and perhaps incomprehensible elements.

Who can tell whether they have their origin in the will of the dancer alone, or in some outside force? The daisies in the meadow and the waves of the sea dance because they are agitated by the wind. The little cork automaton upon the sounding board of a piano dances because it is agitated by the vibrations of the strings. The little children in the alleys of a great city seem to be agitated in the same way by the hurdy-gurdy!

Perhaps the rhythmic beating of the feet upon the ground surcharges the body with electrical force, as by the touch of a magnet. There is a mystery in the simplest phenomena of life.

Pepeeta, dancing upon the green moss beneath the great beech trees, seemed to be in the hands of some external power, and could scarcely have been distinguished from an automaton! She had brought her tambourine, and holding it on high with her left hand or extending it far forward, she tapped it with her fingers or her knuckles, until all its brazen disks tingled and its little bells gave out a sweet and silvery tintinnabulation.

The dancer’s movements were alternately sinuous, undulatory and gliding. At one moment her supple form, bending humbly toward the earth, resembled the stem of a lily over-weighted with its blossom; the next, a branch of a tree flung upward by a tempest; the next, a column of autumn leaves caught up by a miniature whirlwind and sent spinning along a winding path.

Her eyes glowed, her cheeks burned and her bosom heaved with excitement. She seemed either to have caught from nature her own mood, or else to have communicated hers to it, for while she danced all else danced with her, the water in the brook, the squirrels in the tree-tops, the shadows on the moss, and the leaves on the branches.

Following the directions of the parchment, she continued to spin and flutter around the fire until the water in the kettle began to boil. At the first ebullitions, she stood poised for an instant upon her toe, like the famous statue of Mercury, and so lightly that she seemed to be sustained by undiscoverable wings, or to float, like a bubble, of her own buoyancy.

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Settling down at length as if she were a hummingbird lighting upon a flower, she began to circle slowly around the fire and sing. The melody was in a minor key and full of weird pathos. The words were these:

> "God of the gypsy camp, Matizan, Matizan,
> Open the future to me—
> Me thy true worshiper, here in this solitude,
> Offering this incense to thee.
>
> "Matizan, Matizan, God of the future days,
> Come in the smoke and the fire;
> Kaffaran, Kaffaran, Muzsubar, Zanzarbee;
> Bundemar, Omadar, Zire."

As the last syllable fell from her lips, the loathsome decoction boiled over, and the singer, pausing as if suddenly turned to marble, stood in statuesque beauty, her arms extended, her lips parted, her eyes fixed. Expectancy gave place to surprise, surprise to disappointment, disappointment to despair.

The lips began to quiver, the eyes to fill with tears; her girlish figure suddenly collapsed and sank upon the ground as the sail of a vessel falls to the deck when a sudden blast of wind has snapped its cordage.

While the broken-hearted and disillusioned priestess lay prostrate there, the fire spluttered, the birds sang cheerfully in the treetops, and the brook murmured to the grasses at its marge. No unearthly voice disturbed the tranquillity of the forest, and no unearthly presence appeared upon the scene. The great world spirit paid no more attention to the prone and weeping woman than to the motes, that were swimming gaily in the sunbeams.

As for her, poor child, her life faith had been dissipated in a single instant, and the whole fabric of her thought-world demolished in a single crash.

What had happened to the Quaker in the lumber camp, had befallen the gypsy in the forest. But while in his case the disappearance of faith had been followed by a sudden eruption of evil passions, in hers a vanished superstition had given place to a nascent spiritual life.

The seed of religious truth sown by his hand in the fertile soil of her heart already struck its roots deep down. She did not in any full degree comprehend his words; but that reiterated statement that "there is a light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" had made an indelible impression upon her mind and was destined to accomplish great results.

As she lay crushed and desolate in her disillusionment, her mind began of its own accord suddenly to feed upon this new hope. She could not be said to have been reasoning, as David was doing in the cabin. Her nature was emotional rather than intellectual, or at least her powers of reason had never been developed. She could not therefore think her way through these pathless regions over which she was now compelled to pass; she could only feel her way. The thoughts which began to course through her mind did not originate in any efforts of the will, but issued spontaneously from the depths of her soul, and as they arose without volition, so did they flow on until they finally became as pure and clear as the waters of the brook by whose banks she lay.

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When her emotions had expended their force and she arose, an experience befell her which revealed the immaturity of her mind.

The idea of that “inner light” had taken complete possession of her soul, and so when she suddenly perceived a long bright path of gold which a beam of the setting sun had thrown along the floor of the forest, like a shining track in the direction of the village, she thought it had emerged from the depths of her own spirit.

Without a moment’s hesitation she entered this golden highway and sped along! Not for another instant did she regret the failure of the gypsy god to meet her. She knew well enough, now, the way to find her path amid the mysteries of life! She had but to follow this light!

The shining pathway led her to the summit of the hill; and as she began to descend the other slope, it vanished with the sun. But she was not troubled, for she saw at a glance that the brook to whose banks she was coming was the one flowing through the farm of the Quaker. “Perhaps I shall see him again,” she said to herself, and the hope made her tumultuously happy.

She had lost all consciousness of the flight of time, and now noticed with surprise that it was evening. The crows were winging their way to their nesting ground; the rabbits were seeking their burrows; the whole animal world was faring homeward. Some universal impulse seemed to be driving them along their predestined paths, as it drove the brooks and the clouds, and Pepeeta appeared, as much as they, to be borne onward by a power above herself. She was but little more conscious of choosing her path than the doe who at a little distance was hurrying home to her mate; so completely were all her volitional powers in abeyance to the emotional elements of her soul.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE PATHS CONVERGE

“If we do meet again, we’ll smile indeed;
If not, ’tis true this parting was well made.”
—Julius Caesar.

Violent emotions, like the lunar tides, must have their ebb because they have their flow. The feelings do not so much advance like a river, as oscillate like a pendulum.

Striding homeward after his downfall in the log cabin, David’s determination to join his fortunes to those of the two adventurers began to wane. He trembled at an unknown future and hesitated before untried paths.

Already the strange experience through which he had just passed began to seem to him like a half-forgotten dream. The refluent thoughts and feelings of his religious life began to set back into every bay and estuary of his soul.

With a sense of shame, he regretted his hasty decision, and was saying to himself, “I will arise and go to my Father,” for all the experiences of life clothed themselves at once in the familiar language of the Scriptures.

It is more than likely that he would have carried out this resolution, and that this whole experience would have become a mere incident in his life history, if his destiny had depended upon his personal volition. But how few of the great events of life are brought about by our choice alone!

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Just at sunset, he crossed the bridge over the brook which formed the boundary line of the farm, and as he did so heard a light footstep. Lifting his eyes, he saw Pepeeta, who at that very instant stepped out of the low bushes which lined the trail she had been following.

Her appearance was as sudden as an apparition and her beauty dazzled him. Her face, flushed with exercise, gleamed against the background of her black hair with a sort of spiritual radiance. When she saw the Quaker, a smile of unmistakable delight flashed upon her features and added to her bewitching grace. She might have been an Oread or a Dryad wandering alone through the great forest. What bliss for youth and beauty to meet thus at the close of day amid the solitudes of Nature!

Had Nature forgotten herself, to permit these two young and impressionable beings to enjoy this pleasure on a lonely road just as the day was dying and the tense energies of the world were relaxed? There are times when her indifference to her own most inviolable laws seems anarchic. There are moments when she appears wantonly to lure her children to destruction.

They gazed into each other's eyes, they knew not how long, with an incomprehensible and delicious joy, and then looked down upon the ground. Having regained their composure by this act, they lifted their eyes and regarded each other with frank and friendly smiles.

"I thought thee had gone," said David.

"We stayed longer than we expected," Pepeeta replied.

"Has thee been hunting wild flowers?" he asked, observing the bouquet which she held in her hand.

"I picked them on the way."

"Has thee been walking far?"

"I have not thought."

"It is easy to walk in these spring days."

"I must have found it so, for I have been out since sunrise, and am not tired."

"Thee does love the woods?"

"Oh, so much! I am a sort of wild creature and should like to live in a cave."

“I am afraid thee would always turn thy face homeward at dusk, as thee is doing now,” he said with a smile.

“Oh, no! I am not afraid! I go because I must.”

“I will join thee, if I may. The same path will take us toward our different destinations.”

“Oh, I shall be glad, for I want to ask you many questions. I can think of nothing else but what I heard you say in the meeting house.”

“I fear I have said some things which I do not understand myself,” he replied, with a flush, remembering the experience through which he had just passed.

The path was wide enough for two, and side by side they moved slowly forward.

The somber garb in which he was dressed, and the brilliant colors of her apparel, afforded a contrast like that between a pheasant and a scarlet tanager. Color, form, motion—all were perfect. They fitted into the scene without a jar or discord, and enhanced rather than disturbed the harmony of the drowsy landscape.

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As they walked onward, they vaguely felt the influence of the repose that was stealing upon the tired world; the intellectual and volitional elements of their natures becoming gradually quiescent, the emotions were given full sway. They felt themselves drawn toward each other by some irresistible power, and, although they had never before been conscious of any incompleteness of their lives, they suddenly discovered affinities of whose existence they had never dreamed. Their two personalities seemed to be absorbed into one new mysterious and indivisible being, and this identity gave them an incomprehensible joy. Over them as they walked, Nature brooded, sphynx-like. Their young and healthy natures were tuned in unison with the harmonies of the world like perfect instruments from which the delicate fingers of the great Musician evoked a melody of which she never tired, reserving her discords for a future day. On this delicious evening she permitted them to be thrilled through and through with joy and hope and she accompanied the song their hearts were singing with her own multitudinous voices. “Be happy,” chirped the birds; “be happy,” whispered the evening breeze; “be happy,” murmured the brook, running along by their side and looking up into their faces with laughter. The whole world seemed to resound with the refrain, “Be happy! Be happy! for you are young, are young, are young!”

Pepeeta first broke the silence.

“I had never heard of the things about which you talked,” she said.

“Thee never had? How could that be? I thought that every one knew them!”

“I must have lived in a different world from yours.”

“What sort of a world has thee lived in?”

“A world of fairs and circuses, of traveling everywhere and never stopping anywhere.”

“Has thee never been in a church?”

“Never until that night.”

“And thee knows nothing of God?”

“Nothing except the gypsy god, and he was not like yours.”

“And thee was happy?”

“I thought so until I heard what you said. Since then I have been full of care and trouble. I wish I knew what you meant! But I have seen that wonderful light!”

“Thee has seen it?”

“Yes, to-day! And I followed it; I shall always follow it.”

“When does thee leave the village?” David asked, fearing the conversation would lead where he did not want to go.

“To-morrow,” she said.

“Does thee think that the doctor would renew his offer to take me with him?”

“Do I think so? Oh! I am sure.”

“Then I will go.”

“You will go? Oh! I am so happy! The doctor was very angry; he has not been himself since. You don’t know how glad he will be.”

“But will not thee be happy, too?” he asked.

“Happier than you could dream,” she answered with all the frankness of a child. “But what made you change your mind?”

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“I will tell thee sometime; it is too late now. There is my home and I have much work to do before dark.”

“Home!” she echoed. “I never had a home, or at least I cannot remember it. We have always led a roving life, here to-day and gone to-morrow. It must be sweet to have a home!”

“Thee has always led a roving life and wishes to have a home? I have always had a home, and wish to lead a roving life,” said David.

They looked at each other and smiled at this curious contradiction. They smiled because they were not yet old enough to weep over the restlessness of the human heart.

Having reached the edge of the woods, where their paths separated, they paused.

“We must part,” said David.

“Yes; but we shall meet to-morrow.”

“We shall meet to-morrow.”

“You are sure?”

“I am sure.”

“You will not change your mind?”

“I could not if I would.”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

At the touch of their hands their young hearts were swayed by tender and tumultuous feelings. A too strong pressure startled them, and they loosened their grasp. The sun sank behind the hill. The shadows that fell upon their faces awakened them from their dreams. Again they said goodbye and reluctantly parted. Once they stopped and, turning, waved their hands; and the next moment Pepeeta entered the road which led her out of sight.

In this interview, the entire past of these two lives seemed to count for nothing.

If Pepeeta had never seen anything of the world; if she had issued from a nunnery at that very moment, she could not have acted with a more utter disregard of every principle of safety.

It was the same with David. The fact that he had been reared a Quaker; that he had been dedicated to God from his youth; that he had struggled all his days to be prepared for such a moment as this, did not affect him to the least degree.

The seasoning of the bow does not invariably prevent it from snapping. The drill on the parade ground does not always insure, courage for the battle. Nothing is more terrible than this futility of the past.

Such scenes as this discredit the value of experience, and attach a terrible reality to the conclusion of Coleridge, that “it is like the stern-light of a vessel—illuminating only the path over which we have traveled.”

Nor did the future possess any more power over their destinies than the past. Not a conscious foreboding disturbed their enjoyment of that brief instant which alone can be called the present.

And yet, no moment in their after lives came up more frequently for review than this one, and in the light of subsequent events they were forced to recognize that during every instant of this scene there was an uneasy but unacknowledged sense of danger and wrong thrilling through all those emotions of bliss.

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It is seldom that any man or woman enters into the region of danger without premonitions. The delicate instincts of the soul hoist the warning signals, but the wild passions disregard them.

It was to this moment that their consciences traced their sorrows; it was to that act of their souls which permitted them to enjoy that momentary rapture that they attached their guilt; it was at that moment and in that silent place that they planted the seeds of the trees upon which they were subsequently crucified.

CHAPTER X.

A POISONED SPRING

> "It was the saying of a great man, that if we could trace our descents, we should find all slaves to come from princes and all princes from slaves!"—Seneca.

Early the next morning the two adventurers took their departure.

The jovial quack lavished his good-byes upon the landlord and the "riff-raff" who gathered to welcome the coming or speed the parting guest at the door of the country tavern. He drove a pair of beautiful, spirited horses, and had the satisfaction of knowing that he excited the envy of every beholder, as he took the ribbons in his hand, swung out his long whip and started.

If her husband's heart was swelling with pride, Pepeeta's was bursting with anxiety. An instinct which she did not understand had prevented her from telling the doctor of her interview with the Quaker. Long before the farmhouse came in sight she began to scan the landscape for the figure which had been so vividly impressed upon her mind.

The swift horses, well fed and well groomed, whirled the light wagon along the road at a rapid pace and as they passed the humble home of the Quaker, Pepeeta saw a little child driving the cows down the long lane, and a woman moving quietly among the flowers in the garden; but David himself was not to be seen.

"He has gone," she said to herself joyously.

On through the beech grove, around the turn of the road, into full view of the bridge, they sped.

It was empty! And yet it was there that he had agreed to meet them!

A tear fell from her eye, and her chin quivered. With the utmost effort of her will she could not repress these evidences of her disappointment, and with a spasmodic motion she clutched the arm of the driver as if it were that of Destiny and she could hold it back.

So sudden and so powerful was the grasp of her young hand, that it turned the horses out of the road and all but upset the carriage.

With a violent jerk of the reins, the astonished driver pulled them back, and exclaimed with an oath:

“You little wild cat, if you ever d-d-do that again, I will throw you into the d-d-ditch!”

“Excuse me!” she answered humbly, cowering under his angry glances.

“What in the d-d-deuce is the matter?” he asked more kindly, seeing the tears in her eyes.

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“I do not know. I am nervous, I guess,” she answered sadly.

“Nervous? P-p-pepeeta Aesculapius nervous? I thought her nerves were m-m-made of steel? What is the m-m-matter?” he asked, looking at her anxiously.

His gentleness calmed her, and she answered: “I am sorry to leave a place where I have been so happy. Oh! why cannot we settle down somewhere and stay? I get so tired of being always on the wing. Even the birds have nests to rest in for a little while. Are we never going to have a home?”

“Nonsense, child! What do we want with a h-h-home? It is better to be always on the go. I want my liberty. It suits me best to fly through the heavens like a hawk or swim the deep sea like a shark. A home would be a p-p-prison. I should tramp back and forth in it like a polar bear in a c-c-cage.”

Pepeeta answered with a sigh.

“Cheer up, child,” he cried in his hearty fashion. “Your voice sounds like the squeak of a mouse! B-b-be gay! Be happy! How can you be sad on a morning like this? Look at the play of the muscles under the smooth skins of the horses! Remember the b-b-bright shining dollars that we coaxed out of the tightly b-b-buttoned breeches pockets of the gray-backed Q-Q-Quakers. What more do you ask of life? What else can it g-g-give?”

“It does not make me happy! I shall never be happy until I have a home,” she said, still sobbing, and trying to conceal the cause of her grief from herself as well as from her husband.

Nothing could have astonished the great, well-fed animal by her side more than this confession. In all his life he had never heaved a sigh. His contentment was like that of a lion in a forest full of antelopes. But if he was fierce and cruel to others, he was at least kind to his mate, and he now put his great paw around her little shoulders and gave her one of his leonine kisses.

“You are as melancholy as an unstrung d-d-drum,” he said. “I must cheer you up. How would you like a s-s-song? What shall it be? ’Love’s Young D-D-Dream’? All right. Here g-g-goes.”

And at the word, he opened his great mouth and stuttered it forth in stentorian tones that went bellowing among the hills like the echoes of thunder.

Pepeeta smiled at his kindness and was grateful for his clumsy efforts at consolation; but they did not dispel her sadness. Her spirits sank lower and lower. The light seemed to have faded out of the world, and the streams of joy to have run dry. She sighed again in spite of herself, and in that sigh exhaled the hope which had sprung from her heart at the prospects of a new and sweet companionship.

She had divined the cause of her disappointment with an unerring instinct. It was exactly as she thought. At the last instant, David's heart had failed him.

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On the preceding evening, he had hurried through his “chores,” excused himself from giving an account of the adventures of the day on the ground of fatigue, and retired to his room to cherish in his heart the memories of that beautiful face and the prospects of the future. He could not sleep. For hours he tossed on his bed or sat in the window looking out into the night, and when at last he fell into an uneasy slumber his dreams were haunted by two faces which struggled ceaselessly to crowd each other from his mind. One was the young and passionate countenance of the gypsy, and the other was that of his beautiful mother with her pale, carven features, her snow-white hair, her pensive and unearthly expression. They both looked at him, and then gazed at each other. Now one set below the horizon like a wan, white moon, and the other rose above it like the glowing star of love. Now the moon passed over the glowing star in a long eclipse and then disappearing behind a cloud left the brilliant star to shine alone.

When he awoke the gray dawn revealed in vague outline the realities of the world, and warned him that he had but a few moments to execute his plans. He sprang from his couch strong in his purpose to depart, for the fever of adventure was still burning in his veins, and the rapturous looks with which Pepeeta had received his promise to be her companion still made his pulses bound. He hurriedly put a few things into a bundle and stole out of the house.

As he moved quietly but swiftly away from the familiar scenes, his heart which had been beating so high from hope and excitement began to sink in his bosom. He had never dreamed of the force of his attachment to this dear place, and he turned his face toward the old gray house again and again. Every step away from it seemed more difficult than the last, and his feet became heavy as lead. But he pressed on, ashamed to acknowledge his inability to execute his purpose. He came to the last fence which lay between him and the bridge where he had agreed to await the adventurers, and then paused.

He was early. There was still time to reflect. Had the carriage arrived at that moment he would have gone; but it tarried, and the tide of love and regret bore him back to the old familiar life. “I cannot go. I cannot give it up,” he murmured to himself.

Torn by conflicting emotions, inclining to first one course and then another, he finally turned his face away from the bridge and fled, impelled by weakness rather than desire. He did not once look back, but ran at the top of his speed straight to the old barn and hid himself from sight. There, breathless and miserable, he watched. He had not long to wait. The dazzling “turn-out” dashed into view. On the high seat he beheld Pepeeta, saw the eager glance she cast at the farm house, followed her until they arrived at the bridge, beheld her disappointment, raved at his own weakness, rushed to the door, halted, returned, rushed back again, returned, threw himself upon the sweet smelling hay, cursed his weakness and indecision and finally surrendered himself to misery.

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From the utter wretchedness of that bitter hour, he was roused by the ringing of the breakfast bell. Springing to his feet, he hastened to the spring, bathed his face, assumed a cheerful look and entered the house.

For the first time in his life he attempted the practice of deception, and experienced the bitterness of carrying a guilty secret in his bosom. How he worried through the morning meal and the prayer at the family altar, he never knew, and he escaped with inexpressible relief to the stable and the field to take up the duties of his daily life. He found it plodding work, for the old inspirations to endeavor had utterly vanished. He who had hitherto found toil a beatitude now moved behind the plow like a common drudge.

Tired of the pain which he endured, he tried again and again to forget the whole experience and to persuade himself that he was glad the adventure had ended; but he knew in his heart of hearts that he had failed to follow the gypsy, not because he did not really wish to, but because he did not wholly dare. The consciousness that he was not only a bad man but a coward, added a new element to the bitterness of the cup he was drinking.

Each succeeding day was a repetition of the first, and became a painful increment to his load of misery and unrest. The very world in which he lived seemed to have undergone a transformation. The sunlight had lost its glory, the flowers had become pale and odorless, the songs of the birds dull and dispiriting.

What had really changed was the soul of the young recluse and mystic. The consciousness of God had vanished from it; the visions of the spiritual world no longer visited it; he ceased to pray in secret, and the petitions which he offered at the family altar were so dull and spiritless as even to excite the observation and comment of his little nephew.

“Uncle Dave,” remarked that fearless critic, “you pray as if you were talking down a deep well.”

No wonder that the child observed the fact upon which he alone had courage to comment, for there is as great a difference between a prayer issuing from the heart and one merely falling from the lips as between water gushing from a fountain and rain dripping from a roof.

Some men pass their lives in the midst of environments where insincerity would not have been so painful; but in a home and a community where sham and hypocrisy were almost unknown these perpetual deceptions became more and more intolerable with every passing hour. Nothing could be more certain than that in a short time, like some foreign substance in a healthy body, his nature would force him out of this uncongenial

environment. With some natures the experience would have been a slow and protracted one, but with him the termination could not be long delayed.

It came in a tragedy at the close of the next Sabbath. The day had been dreary, painful and exasperating beyond all endurance, and he felt that he could never stand the strain of another. And so, having detained his mother in the sitting room after the rest of the family had retired, he paced the floor for a few moments, and after several unsuccessful attempts to introduce the subject gently, said bluntly:

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“Mother, I am chafing myself to death against the limitations of this narrow life.”

“My son,” she said calmly, “this has not come to me as a surprise.”

He moved uneasily and looked as if he would ask her “Why?”

“Because,” she said, as if he had really spoken, “a mother possesses the power of divination, and can discern the sorrows of her children, by a suffering in her own bosom.”

The consciousness that he had caused her pain rendered him incapable of speech, and for a moment they sat in silence.

“What is thy wish and purpose, my son?” she asked at last, with an effort which seemed to exhaust her strength.

“I wish to see the world,” he answered, his eye kindling as he spoke.

This reply, foreseen and expected as it was, sent a shiver through her. She turned paler, if possible, than before; but summoning all the powers of self-control resident in that disciplined spirit, she replied with an enforced tranquillity:

“My son, does thee know what this world is which thee fain would see?”

“I have seen it in my dreams. I have heard its distant voices calling to me. My spirit chafes to answer their summons. I strain at my anchor like a great ship caught by the tide.”

“Shall I tell thee what this world of which thee has dreamed such dreams is really like, my son?” she asked, struggling to maintain her calm.

“How should thee know?”

“I have seen it.”

“Thee has seen it? I thought that thee had passed thy entire life among the Quakers,” he answered with surprise.

“I say that I have seen it. Shall I tell thee what it is?” she resumed, as if she had not heard him.

“If thee will,” he answered, awed by a strange solemnity in her manner.

Her quick respirations had become audible. Small but intensely red spots were burning on either cheek. Her white hands trembled as they clutched the arms of the old rocking chair in which she sat.

“I will!” she said, regarding him with a look which seemed to devour him with yearning love. “This world whose voices thee hears calling is a fiction of thine own brain. That which thee thinks thee beholds of glory and beauty thee hast conjured up from the depths of a youthful and disordered fancy, and projected into an unreal realm. That world which thee has thus beheld in thy dreams will burst like a pin-pricked bubble when thee tries to enter it. It is not the real world, my son. How shall I tell thee what that real world is? It is a snare, a pit-fall. It is a flame into which young moths are ever plunging. It promises, only to deceive; it beckons, only to betray; its smiles are ambushes; it is sunlight on the surface, but ice at the heart; it offers life, but it confers death. I bid thee fear it, shun it, hate it!”

She leaned far forward in her chair, and her face upon which the youth had never seen any other look but that of an almost unearthly calm, was glowing with excitement and passion.

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“Mother,” he exclaimed, “what does thee know of this world, thee who has passed thy life in lonely places and amongst a quiet people?”

She rose and paced the floor as if to permit some of her excitement to escape in physical activity, and pausing before him, said: “My only and well-beloved son, thee does not know thy mother. A veil has been drawn over that portion of her life which preceded thy birth, and its secrets are hidden in her own heart. She has prayed God that she might never have to bring them forth into the light; but he has imposed upon her the necessity of opening the grave in which they are buried, in order that, seeing them, thee may abandon thy desires to taste those pleasures which once lured thy mother along the flower-strewn pathway to her sin and sorrow.”

Her solemnity and her suffering produced in the bosom of her son a nameless fear. He could not speak. He could only look and listen.

“Thee sees before thee,” she continued, “the faded form and features of a woman once young and beautiful. Can thee believe it?”

He did not answer, for she had seemed to him as mothers always do to children, to have been always what he had found her upon awakening to consciousness. He could not remember when her hair was not gray.

Something in her manner revealed to the startled soul of the young Quaker that he was about to come upon a discovery that would shake the very foundation of his life; for a moment he could not speak.

The silence in which she awaited the answer to her question became profound and in it the ticking of the old clock sounded like the blows of a blacksmith’s hammer, the purring of the cat like the roar of machinery, and the beating of his heart like the dull thud of a battering ram.

As if reading his inmost thoughts, the white-faced woman said: “And so thee thought that I was always old and gray?”

As she uttered these words in a tone of indescribable sadness, a faint smile played around the corners of her mouth—such a marble smile as might have appeared upon the face of Niobe. In an instant more it had composed itself into its former sadness, as a sheet of pure water resumes its calmness, after having been lightly stirred by a summer wind.

So long did she stand regarding him with looks of unutterable love that he could not endure the strain of the withheld secret, but exclaimed hoarsely: “Go on! Mother, for God’s sake, go on! If thee has something to disclose, reveal it at once!”

It seemed impossible for her to speak. The opening of the secrets of her heart to God before the bar of judgment could have cost her no greater effort than this confession to her son.

“David,” she said, in a voice that sounded like an echo of a long-dead past, “the fear that the sins of thy parents should be visited upon thee has tormented every hour of my life. I have watched thee and prayed for thee as no one but a mother who has drunk the bitter cup to its dregs could ever do. I have trembled at every childish sin. In every little fault I have beheld a miniature of the vices of thy mother and thy father—thy father! Oh! David, my son—my son!”

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The white lips parted, but no sound issued from them. She raised her white hand and clutched at her throat as if choking. Then she trembled, gasped, reeled, and fell forward into his arms.

In a moment more, the agitated heart had ceased to beat, and the secret of her life was hidden in its mysterious silence. The sudden, inexplicable and calamitous nature of this event came near unsettling the mental balance of the sensitive and highly organized youth. Coming as it did upon the very heels of the experiences which had so thoroughly shaken his faith in the old life, he felt himself to be the target for every arrow in the quiver of misfortune.

He seemed to himself not so much like a boat that had sprung a single leak, as like one out of which every nail had been pulled and the joints left open to the inrushing waters.

Into the unfilled gap in his mother's narrative, ten thousand suspicions crept, each displacing the other and leaving him more and more in darkness and in dread with regard to the origin of his own life. Wherever he went and whatever he did these confused suspicions resounded in his ears like the murmur in a seashell.

He did not dare communicate this story even to his sister; for if she knew nothing he feared to poison her existence by telling her, and if she knew all he had not the courage to listen to the sequel. Perhaps no other experience in life produces a more profound shock than a discovery like that upon which David had so suddenly stumbled. It leads to despair or to melancholy, and many a life of highest promise has been suddenly wrecked by it. While he brooded over this mystery the days slipped past the young mystic almost unnoted; he wandered about the farm, passing from one fit of abstraction into another, doing nothing, saying nothing, thinking everything.

The world was shrouded in a gloom through whose shifting mists a single star shone now and then, emitting a brilliant and dazzling ray. It was the figure of a gypsy.

In his heavy, aching heart thoughts of her alone aroused an emotion of joy. As other objects lost their power to attract or charm, she more and more filled all his horizon.

Her name was whispered by each passing breeze. It was syllabled by every singing bird. The old clock ticked it on the stairway. The hoofs of his horse which he rode recklessly over the country uttered it to the hard roads on which they fell—"Pepeeta, Pepeeta, Pepeeta."

Whenever he really tried to banish the temptations which haunted his soul, they always returned to the swept and garnished chamber bringing with them seven spirits worse than themselves.

He tried to look forward to the future with hope. But how can a man hope for harvests, when all his seed corn has been destroyed? If his father was bad, what hope was there that he could be better?

He made innumerable resolves to take up the duties of life where he had laid them down, but they were all like birds which die in the nest where they are born.

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Pepeeta was drawing him irresistibly to herself; he was like a man in the outer circle of a vortex, of which she was the center. The touch of her soft hand which he could still feel, the farewell glance of eyes which still glowed before his imagination, attracted him like a powerful magnet. It was true that he did not know where she was; but he felt that he could find her in the uttermost parts of the earth by yielding himself to the impulse which she had awakened in his heart.

“A dark veil of mystery hangs over my past. My present is full of misery and unrest. I will see if the future has any joys in store for me,” he said to himself at the close of one of his restless days.

Without so much as a word of farewell, he crept out of the house in the gathering dusk, and started in pursuit of the bright object that floated like a will-o’-the-wisp before his inner eye.

A feeling of exultation and relief seized him as he left the place made dark and dreadful by the memory of that tragic scene through which he had so recently passed; the quiet of the evening soothed his perturbed spirits, and the tranquil stars looked down upon him with eyes that twinkled as if in sympathy.

It is an old tradition of the monks, that when the sap begins to run in the vines on sunny slopes, a revolt and discontent thrills in the bottles imprisoned in the darkness of the wine vaults. Such a discontent and fever had been thrilling in David’s veins during these warm spring days, when the whole world had been in a ferment of life, and he had been bottled up in the gloom and narrowness of the little country village; and yielding himself to the emotions that seethed in his breast, he broke all the tender ties of the past and went blindly into the future.

He had been suddenly fascinated by a beautiful woman and bewildered by an unscrupulous man; he had felt the foundations of his religious faith shaken, and discovered that his own life had sprung from an illicit passion. These are violent blows, and many a man has gone down before a single one of them. If the blows had been delivered singly at long intervals he might have survived the shock; but following each other in swift succession like great tidal waves they had literally swept him from his moorings.

Such collapses fill us with horror and questioning. How do they come about? Can they be prevented? These are the deepest problems of life, and our psychology is still impotent to solve them. We can detect and measure the dross in metals or the poison in drugs; but we have no solvent that will reduce a complex nature like David’s into its original elements and enable us to differentiate a son’s responsibility from that of his father.

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We make bold guesses and confident affirmations as to the comparative influence of heredity and environment. We enter into learned disputations as to the blessing or the bane of an education such as his. But every such case is still a profound and insoluble mystery. The most comprehensive laws and the most careful generalizations meet with too many exceptions to enable us to form a science. The children of the good are too often bad and the children of the bad too often good to permit us to dogmatize about heredity. We learn as our experience deepens and our horizon widens to regard such collapses with a compassionate sympathy and a humbled consciousness of our own unfitness to judge and condemn. Whether we create our individuality or only bring it to light—is the question that makes us stumble! But while we move in the midst of uncertainties in this realm, there is another in which we walk in the glare of noonday. We know beyond the peradventure of a doubt that whatever may be the origin of such weakness as that of the young mystic, the results are always inevitable! Nature never asks any questions nor makes any allowances. To her mind, sin is sin! Whatsoever a man sows—that shall he also reap. Whether he yield to evil voluntarily or be driven into it by resistless force; whether he sin because of a self-originating propensity or because his father sinned before him, is all one to those resistless executors of Nature's law, sickness, sorrow, disaster, death!

No man ever defeated Nature! No man ever will! From the instant when he turned his back upon his home, David's fate was sealed. He was playing against a certainty and he knew it. But he ought to have remembered it! It was of this that he ought to have been thinking, and not of the gypsy's eyes!

Sometimes such men escape from the final catastrophe of the long series; but not from the intermediate lashings!

This brutal, idiotic step of Corson's looks like a final plunge; a fatal fall; a hopeless retrogression. But we must not judge prematurely. "Man advances; but in spiral lines," said Goethe. The river goes forward, in spite of its eddies. You can complete a geometric circle from a minute portion of its curve; but not a human cycle. We can not predict the final issue of a human life until the last sigh is drawn.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

> "To tell men they cannot help themselves is to fling them into recklessness and despair."—Froude.

Although David did not know the exact route the quack had laid out for his journey, he was certain that it would be easy enough to trace him in that sparsely-settled region, and so he turned his face in the direction in which the equipage vanished when he

watched it from the barn. His movements did not seem to come from his own volition but to originate in something external. He had a sense of yielding to necessity. There are heroic moments in our lives, when that subtle force we call our “will” demonstrates, or at all events persuades us, that we are “*free*.” There are others, like those through which the young adventurer was now passing, when we experience a feeling of utter helplessness amidst cosmic forces and believe ourselves to be straws in a mighty wind or ill-fated stars borne along a predestined orbit.

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Surrendering himself to the current of events, the recalcitrant Quaker escaped for a time the painful consciousness of personal responsibility.

The tranquil stars above him seemed to look down upon the wanderer in silent approval. The night birds chanted their congratulations from the tree tops, and reading his own thoughts into their songs he imagined he heard them saying, “Let each one find his mate; let each one find his mate.”

The cool night breeze caressed and kissed him as it hurried by on silent wings, and for an hour or two he tramped along with a peace in his heart which seemed to be a reflection from the outside world.

But gradually a change came over the face of nature, and this, too, reflected itself in the mirror of his soul.

In the heavens above him the clouds commenced to gather like hostile armies. They skirmished, sent out their flying battalions and then fell upon each other in irresistible fury. Great, jagged flashes of lightning, like sword thrusts from gigantic and hidden hands rent the sky; wild crashes of thunder pealed through the reverberating dome of heaven; the rain fell in torrents; the elements of nature seemed to have evaded their master, vaulted their barriers and precipitated themselves in a furious struggle.

The lonely pilgrim perceived the resemblance which his conflicting emotions bore to this wild scene, and smiled grimly. He found in all this tumult a justification for the tempest in his soul.

It was not until the light of morning struggled through this universal gloom, that the weary and bedraggled traveler entered the outskirts of the then straggling but growing and busy village of Hamilton. Tired in body and benumbed in mind, he made his way to the hotel, conscious only of his desire and determination to look once more upon the face of the woman whose image was so indelibly impressed upon his mind.

Approaching the desk he nervously asked if the doctor was among the guests, flushed at the answer, demanded a room, ascended the steep staircase, and was soon in bed and asleep. Fatigued by his long tramp, he did not awaken until after noon, and then, having bathed, dressed and broken his long fast, he knocked at the door of the room occupied by the doctor and his wife.

There was a quick but gentle step in answer to his summons, and at the music of that footfall his heart beat tumultuously. The door opened, and before him stood the woman who had brought about this mysterious train of events in his life.

She started back as she saw him, with an involuntary and timid motion, but so great was her surprise and joy that she could not control her speech or action sufficiently to greet him.

“Who is there?” cried the doctor, in his loud, imperative voice.

“Mr. Corson,” she answered in tones that were scarcely audible.

“Corson? Who the d-d-deuce is Corson, and what the deuce does he want?” he asked, rising and approaching the door.

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The instant his eyes fell on the countenance of the Quaker, he threw up both hands and uttered a prolonged whistle of astonishment.

“The preacher!” he exclaimed. “The lost is found. The p-p-prodigal has returned. Come in, and let us k-k-kill the fatted calf!”

Coarse as the welcome was, it was full of sincerity, and its heartiness was like balm to the wounded spirit of the youth. He grasped the extended hand and permitted himself to be drawn into the room.

Pepeeta, who had recovered from the first shock of surprise and delight, came forward and greeted him with a shy reserve. She gave him her hand, and its gentle touch reanimated his soul. She smiled at him,—a gracious smile, and its light illumined the darkness of his heart. His sadness vanished. He once more felt an emotion of joy.

The excitement of their meeting having subsided they seated themselves, David in an easy chair, the doctor on the broad couch, and Pepeeta on a little ottoman at his feet. Vivid green curtains partially obscured the bright sunshine which beat upon the windows. The wall-paper was cheap, vulgar, faded. On the floor was an old ingrain carpet full of patches and spattered with ink stains. A blue-bottle fly buzzed and butted his head against the walls, and through the open casement hummed the traffic of the busy little town.

Nothing could have been more expressive of triumph and delight than the face of the quack. Whenever his feelings were particularly bland and expansive, he had a way of taking the ends of his enormous moustache and twirling them between his spatulate thumbs and fingers. He did this now, and twisted them until the coarse hairs could be heard grating against each other.

“Well, well!” he said, “so you could not resist the temptation? Ha! ha! ha! No wonder! It’s not every young fellow behind the p-p-plow-tail that has a fortune thrust under his nose. Shows your g-g-good sense. I was right. I always am. I knew you were too bright a man to hide your light under a half b-b-bushel of a village like that. In those seven-by-nine towns, all the sap dries out of men, and before they are forty they begin to rattle around like peas in a p-p-pod. In such places young men are never anything but milk sops, and old men anything but b-b-bald-headed infants! You needed to see the world, young man. You required a teacher. You have put yourself into good hands, and if you stay with me you shall wear d-d-diamonds.”

“Whatever the results may be, I have determined to make the experiment,” said David, shrugging his shoulders.

“Right you are. But what b-b-brought you round? You were as stiff as a ramrod when I left you.”

“Circumstances over which I had no control, and which I want to forget as soon as possible. My old life has ended and I have come to seek a new one.”

“A new life? That’s good. Well—we will show it to you, P-P-Pepeeta and I! We will show you.”

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“The sooner the better. What am I to do?”

“Not too fast! There are times when it is better to g-g-go slow, as the snail said to the lightning. We must make a b-b-bargain.”

“Make it to suit yourself.”

“You d-d-don’t expect me to stick to my old offer, I reckon. When I made it, Mahomet went to the m-m-mountain, and now the mountain comes to Mahomet; see?”

“Do as you please, I am in no mood to split hairs, nor pennies. All I ask is a chance to put my foot upon the first round of the ladder and if I do not get to the top, I shall not hold you responsible,” David replied, dropping the “thees” of his Quaker life, in his determination to divest himself of all its customs as rapidly as he could.

“Hi! hi! There’s fire in the flint! Good thing! you don’t want to split pennies! Well, if you d-d-don’t, I don’t. You take me on the right side, D-D-Davy. I’ll do the square thing by you—see if I d-d-don’t. Let’s have a drink. Bring the bottle, Pepeeta!”

She went to the mantel and returned with a flask and two glasses. The quack filled them both and passed one to David. It was the first time in his life that he had ever even smelt an intoxicant. He recoiled a little; but having committed himself to his new life, he determined to accept all that it involved. He lifted the fiery potion to his lips, and drank.

“Hot, is it, my son?” cried the doctor, laughing uproariously at his wry face. “You Quakers drink too much water! Freezes inside of you and t-t-turns you into what you might call two-p-p-pronged icicles. Give me men with red blood in their veins! And there’s nothing makes b-b-blood red like strong liquors!”

The whisky revived the courage and loosened the tongue of the youth. The repugnance which he had instinctively felt for the vulgar quack began to mellow into admiration. He asked and answered many questions.

“What part am I to take in this business?” he asked.

“What part are you to take in the business? That’s good, ’Never put off till to-morrow what you can d-d-do to-day.’ ’Business first and then pleasure.’ ‘The soul of business is dispatch.’ These are good mottoes, my lad. I learned them from the wise men; but if I had not learned them, I should have invented them. What’s your p-p-part of the business, says you; listen! You are to be its m-m-mouth-piece. That tongue of yours must wag like the tail of a d-d-dog; turn like a weather-vane; hiss like a serpent, drip with honey and poison, be tipped with p-p-persuasion; tell ten thousand t-t-tales, and every tale must sell a bottle of p-p-panacea!”

He paused, and looked rapturously upon the face of his pupil.

“This panacea—has it merits? Will it really cure?” asked David.

The doctor laughed long and loud.

“Has it merits? Will it really cure? Ho! ho! ’Is thy bite good for the b-b-backache?’ said the sick mouse to the cat. What difference does it make whether it will cure or not? Success in b-b-business is not based upon the quality of the m-m-merchandise, my son.”

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“Upon what, then?” said David.

“Upon the follies, the weaknesses and the p-p-passions of mankind! Since time began, a universal panacea’ has been a sure source of wealth. It makes no difference what the panacea is, if you only have the b-b-brains to fool the people. There are only two kinds of people in the world, my son—the fools and f-f-foolers!”

Even whisky could not make David listen to this cold-blooded avowal without a shudder.

The keen eye of the quack detected it; but instead of adulterating his philosophy, he doubled his dose.

“Shocks you, does it? You will g-g-get over that. We are not angels! we are only men. Remember what old Jack Falstaff said? ’If Adam fell in a state, of innocency, what shall I d-d-do in a state of villainy?’”

The boldness of the man and the radicalness of his philosophy dazzled and fascinated the inexperienced youth.

This was what the astute and unscrupulous instructor expected, and he determined to pursue his advantage and effect, if possible, the complete corruption of his pupil in a single lesson; and so he continued:

“Got to live, my son! Self-p-p-preservation is the first law, and so we must imitate the rest of the b-b-brute creation, and live off of each other! The big ones must feed upon the little and the strong upon the weak. ‘Every man for himself and the d-d-devil take the hindmost!’ That’s my religion.”

“You may be right,” said David, “but I cannot say that I take to it kindly. I do not see how a man can practice this cruelty and injustice without suffering.”

“Suffering! Idea of suffering is greatly exaggerated. Ever watch a t-t-toad that was being swallowed by a snake? Looks as if he positively enjoyed it. It’s his mission. Born to be eaten! If there was as much pain in the world as p-p-people say, do you think anybody could endure it! Isn’t the d-d-door always open? Can’t a man quit when he wants to? Suffering! Pshaw! Do I look as if I suffered? Does Pepeeta look as if she suffered? And yet she b-b-bamboozles them worse than I do.”

The head of the gypsy bent lower and lower over her crocheting.

“She plays upon them like a fife! They d-d-dance when she whistles! Next to wanting a universal panacea for pain, the idiots want a knowledge of the future! Everybody but me wants to know what kind of a to-morrow God Almighty has made for him. I make my own to-morrows! I don’t ask to have my destiny made up for me like a t-t-tailor coat. I make my own destiny. If things d-d-don’t come my way, I just pull them! People talk

about ‘following Providence!’ I follow Providence as an Irishman follows his wheel-barrow. I shove it! See? But that is not the way of the rest of them, thank Fortune! And so Pepeeta gathers them in! Strange fish g-g-get into her net, Davy. Back there in your own little t-t-town she caught some of your long-faced old Quakers, b-b-big fellows with broad-brimmed hats, drab coats and ox eyes, regular meetin’-goers! And there was that little d-d-dove-eyed girl. What was it she wanted to know, P-P-Pepeeta? Tell him. Ha! ha! Tell him and we will see him b-b-blush.”

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“She asked me if her father was going to send her to Philadelphia this winter,” she answered, without lifting her eyes.

“I don’t mean that!”

“She asked me whether I could tell them where to find the spotted heifer.”

“The d-d-deuce, child! Why don’t you tell me what she asked you ’bout D-D-Davy?”

“It is time for us to go to supper or we shall be late,” she replied, laying aside her work and rising.

“Sure enough!” cried the doctor, springing to his feet. “The Q-Q-Quaker has knocked everything out of my head. Come on!”

He rose and began bustling about the room.

When Pepeeta glanced up from her work she saw in David’s eye a grateful appreciation of her courtesy and tact, and his look filled her with a new happiness.

The disgust awakened in the Quaker’s mind by the coarseness of the quack was more than offset by the beauty and grace of the gypsy. When he looked at her, when he was even conscious of her presence, he felt a happiness which compensated for all that he had suffered or lost. He did not stop to ask what its nature was. He had cast discretion to the winds. He had in these few hours since his departure broken so utterly with the past that he was like a man who had been suddenly awakened from a long lapse of memory. His old life was as if it had never been. He felt himself to be in a vacuum, where all his ideas must be newly created. This epoch of his experience was superimposed upon the other like a different geological formation. Like the old monks in their cells, he was deliberately trying to erase from the parchment of his soul all that had been previously written, in order that he might begin a new life history.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MOTH AND THE FLAME

“Misled by Fancy’s meteor-ray
  By passion driven:
But yet the light that led astray
  Was light from heaven.”

—Burns.

A little before dusk the three companions started upon their evening's business. The horses and carriage were waiting at the door and they mounted to their seats. David was embarrassed by the novelty of the situation, and Pepeeta by his presence; but the quack was in his highest spirits. He saluted the bystanders with easy familiarity, ostentatiously flung the hostler a coin, flourished his whip and excited universal admiration for his driving.

During the turn which they took around the city for an advertisement, he indoctrinated his pupil with the principles of his art.

"People to-day are just what they were centuries ago. G-g-gull 'em just as easy. Make 'em think the moon is made of g-g-green cheese—way to catch larks is to p-p-pull the heavens down—extract sunbeams from c-c-cucumbers and all the rest! There's one master-weakness, Davy. They all think they are sick, or if they d-d-don't, you can make 'em!"

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“What! Make a well man think he is sick?” the Quaker asked in astonishment.

“Sure! That’s the secret of success. I can pick out the strongest man in the c-c-crowd and in five minutes have pains shooting through him like g-g-greased lightning. They are all like jumping-jacks to the man that knows them. You watch me pull the string and you-you’ll see them wig-wig-wiggle.”

“It seems a pity to take advantage of such weakness in our fellow men,” said David, whose heart began to suffer qualms as he contemplated this rascality and his own connection with it.

“Fellow men! They are no fellows of mine. They are nuts for me to c-c-crack. They are oysters for me to open!” responded the quack, as he drove gaily into the public square and checked the horses, who stood with their proud necks arched, champing their bits and looking around at the crowd as if they shared their master’s contempt.

Pepeeta descended from the carriage and made her way hastily into the tent which had already been pitched for her. The doctor lighted his torch and set his stock of goods in order while David, obeying his directions, began to move among the people to study their habits. Elbowing his way here and there, he contemplated the crowd in the light of the quack’s philosophy, and as he did so received a series of painful mental shocks.

“The first principle in the art of painting a picture is to know where to sit down;” in other words, everything depends upon the point of view. Now that David began to look for evidences of the weaknesses and follies of his fellow men, he saw them everywhere. For the first time in his life he observed that startling prevalence of animal types which always communicates such a shock to the mind of him who has never discovered it before. Every countenance suddenly seemed to be the face of a beast, but thinly and imperfectly veiled. There were foxes and tigers and wolves, there were bulldogs and monkeys and swine. He had always seen, or thought he saw, upon the foreheads of his fellow men some evidence of that divinity which had been communicated to them when God breathed into the great first father the breath of life; but now he shuddered at the sight of those thick lips and drooping jaws, those dull or crafty eyes, those sullen, sodden, gargoyle features, as men do at beholding monstrosities.

A few weeks ago he would have felt a profound pity at this discovery, but so rapid and radical had been the alteration in his feelings that he was now seized by a sudden revulsion and contempt. “Are these creatures really men?” he asked himself. He stood there among them taller, straighter, keener, handsomer than them all, and the old feelings that have made men aristocrats and tyrants in every age of the world, surged in his heart and hardened it against them.

By this time the quack had finished his few simple preparations, and, standing erect before his audience, began the business of the evening.

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Having observed the habits of the game, David now chose a favorable position to study those of the hunter. He watched with an almost breathless interest every expression upon that sinister face and listened with a boundless interest to every word that fell from those treacherous lips.

He was not long in justifying the quack's honest criticism of his own oratory. His voice lacked the vibrant tones of a musical instrument and his rhetoric that fluency, without which the highest effects of eloquence can never be attained. By speaking very slowly and deliberately he avoided stammering, but this always acted like a dragging anchor upon the movement of his thought. These were radical defects, but in every other respect he was a consummate artist. He arrested the attention of his hearers with an inimitable skill and held it with an irresistible power.

His piercing eye noted every expression on the faces of his hearers, and seemed to read the inmost secrets of their hearts. He perceived the slightest inclination to purchase, and was as keen to see a hand steal towards a pocket-book as a cat to see a mouse steal out of its hole.

He coaxed, he wheedled, he bantered, he abused,—he even threatened. He fulfilled his promise to the letter, "to make the well men think that they were sick," and many a stalwart frontiersman whose body was as sound as an ox, began to be conscious of racking pains.

Nor were those legitimate arts of oratory the only ones which this arch-knave practiced.

"I gave you two dollars, and you only gave me change for one," cried a thin-faced, stoop-shouldered, helpless-looking fellow, who had just purchased a bottle of the "Balm of the Blessed Islands."

With lightning-like legerdemain the quack had shuffled this bill to the bottom of his pile, and lifting up the one that lay on top, exposed it to the view of his audience.

"That's a lie!" he said, in his slow, impressive manner. "There is always such a man as this in every crowd. Some one is always trying to take advantage of those who, like myself, are living for the public good. Gentlemen, you saw me lay the b-b-bill he gave me down upon the top! Here it is; judge for yourselves. That is a bad man! Beware of him!"

The bold effrontery of the quack silenced the timid customer, who could only blush and look confused. His blushes and confusion condemned him and the crowd hustled him away from the wagon. They believed him guilty and he half believed it of himself.

David, who had seen the bill and knew the victim's innocence but not the doctor's fraud, pressed forward to defend him. The quack stopped and silenced him with an inimitable

wink, and then instantly and with consummate art diverted his auditors with a series of droll stories which he always reserved for emergencies like this. They were old and thread-bare, but this was the reason he chose them. He had one for every circumstance and occasion.

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There was a man standing in an outer circle of the crowd around whose forehead was a bandage. “Come here, my friend,” said the quack. “How did you get this wound? Don’t want to tell? Oh! well, that is natural. A horse kicked him, no doubt; never got it in a row! No! No! Couldn’t any one hit him! Reminds me of the man who saw a big black-and-blue spot on his boy’s forehead. ‘My son,’ said he, ’I thought I told you not to fight? How did you get this wound?’ ‘I bit it, father,’ replied the boy.

“‘Bit it!’ exclaimed the old man in astonishment, ’how could you bite yourself upon the forehead?’

“‘I climbed onto a chair,’ says he.

“And have you been climbing on a chair to bite your forehead, too, my friend?” he asked with humorous gravity, while a loud guffaw went up from the crowd.

“Well,” he continued soothingly, “whether you did it or not, just let me rub a little of this b-b-balm upon it, and by to-morrow morning it will be well. There! that’s right. One dollar is all it costs. You don’t want it? What the d-d-deuce did you let me open the b-b-bottle for? I’ll leave it to the crowd if that is fair? There, that is right. Pay for it like a man. It’s worth double its price. Thank you. By to-morrow noon you will b-b-be sending me a testimonial to its value. Do you want to hear some of my testimonials, gentlemen?”

The crowd shuffled and stood over on its other foot. The doctor, putting an enormous pair of spectacles upon his nose, took up a piece of paper and pretended to read slowly and carefully to avoid stammering:

“’Dr. Aesculapius.

“’Dear Sir: I was wounded in the Mexican war. I have been unable to walk without crutches for many years; but after using your liniment, I ran for office!’ Think of it, gentlemen, the day of miracles has not passed. ’I lost my eyesight four years ago, but used a bottle of your “wash” and saw wood.’ Saw wood, gentlemen, what do you think of that? He saw wood! ’Some time ago I lost the use of both arms; but a kind friend furnished me with a box of your pills, and the next day I struck a man for ten dollars.’ There is a triumph of the medical art, my friends. And yet even this is surpassed by the following: ’I had been deaf for many years, stone deaf; but after using your ointment, I heard that my aunt had died and left me ten thousand dollars.’ Think of it, gentlemen, ten thousand dollars! And a written guarantee goes with every bottle, that the first thing a stone-deaf man will hear after using this medicine will be that his aunt has died and left him ten thousand dollars.”

During all these varied operations, David had never taken his eyes from the face of the quack. Even his quick wit had often been baffled by the almost superhuman adroitness of this past grandmaster of his art.

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The novelty of the scene, the skill of the principal actor, the rapid growth of the piles of coin and bills, the frantic desire of the people to be gulled, all served to obscure those elements which were calculated to appeal to the Quaker's conscience. He felt like one awakened from a dream. While he was still in the half dazed condition of such an awakening, the quack gave him a sign that this part of his lesson was ended, and following the direction of the thumb which he threw over his shoulder towards Pepeeta's tent, he eagerly took his way thither.

Before the door stood several groups of young men and maidens, talking under their breath as if in the presence of some august deity. Now and then a couple disentangled itself from the crowd, and with visible trepidation entered. As they reappeared, their friends gathered about them and besought them to disclose the secrets they had discovered.

Some of them giggled and simpered, others laughed boisterously and skeptically, while others still, looked scared and anxious. It was evident that even those who tried to make light of what they had seen and heard were moved by something awe-inspiring.

David listened to their silly talk, observed their bold demeanor and their vulgar manners, while the impression of weakness, of stupidity, of the lowness and beastiality of humanity made upon his mind by the aged and the mature, was intensified by his observation of the young and callow.

He did not anywhere see a spark of true nobility. He did not hear a word of wisdom. Everything was moving on a low, material and animal plane. He felt that manhood and womanhood was not what he had believed it to be.

From the outside of the gypsy's tent, he could make but few discoveries of her method; and he waited impatiently until the last curious couple had departed. When they had disappeared, he entered.

At the opposite side of the tent and reclining upon a low divan was the gypsy. Above her head a tallow candle was burning dimly. Before her was a rough table covered with a shawl, upon which were scattered cups of tea with floating grounds, ivory dice, cards, coins and other implements of the "Black Art."

Pepeeta sprang to her feet when she saw who her visitor was, and exhibited the clearest signs of agitation. David's own emotions were not less violent, for although the gypsy's surroundings were poor and mean, they served rather to enhance than to diminish her exquisite beauty. Her shoulders and arms were bare, and on her wrists were gold bracelets of writhing serpents in whose eyes gleamed diamonds. On her fingers and in her ears were other costly stones. Her dress was silk, and rustled when she moved, with soft and sibilant sounds.

“The doctor has sent me here to study the methods by which you do your work,” said David approaching the table and gazing at her with undisguised admiration.

“You should have come before. How can you study my methods when I am not practicing them? And any way, you have no faith in them. Have you? I always had until I heard your sermon in the little meeting house.”

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“And have you lost it now?”

“It has been sadly shaken.”

“You can at least show me how you practice the art, even if you have lost your faith in it. I too have lost a faith; but we must live. What are these cards for?”

“If you wish me to show you, you may shuffle and cut them, but I would rather tell your fortune by your hand, for I have more faith in palmistry than in cards.”

He extended his hand; she took it, and with her right forefinger began to trace the lines. Her gaze had that intensity with which a little child peers into the mechanism of a watch or an astronomer into the depths of space.

A thrill of emotion shot through the frame of the Quaker at the touch of those delicate and beautiful fingers.

The contrast between his own hands and hers was marked enough to be almost ridiculous. Hers were tiny, soft and white. His were large, brown and calloused. He thought to himself, “It is as if two little white mice were playing about an enormous trap which in a moment may seize them.”

Neither of them, spoke. The delicate finger of the gypsy moved over the lines of the palm like that of a little school-girl over the pages of a primer. They did not realize how dangerous was that proximity, nor how fatal that touch. Through those two poles of Nature’s most powerful battery, the magnetic and mysterious current of love was passing.

“What do you see?” said David, at last.

“Shall I tell you?” she asked, lifting her eyes to his.

“If you please,” he said.

“I will do so if you wish; but if the story of your life is really written in the palm of your hands, it is sad indeed, and you would be happier if you knew it not.”

“But it is not written there. I do not believe it, nor do you.”

“Let us hope that it is not,” she answered, and began the following monologue in a low musical monotone:

“Marked as it is with the signs of toil, this hand has still retained all those characteristics that an artist would choose as a model. It is perfect in its form. The palm is of medium size, the fingers without knots, the third phalanges are all long and pointed, and the

thumb is beautifully shaped. Whoever possesses a hand like this must be guided by ideals. He is a worshiper of the sublime and beautiful. He disdains small achievements, embarks enthusiastically upon forlorn hopes, and is spurred to victory by the fervor of his desires.

“See this thumb! How finely it is pointed. The first phalanx is short, and indicates that above all other things he is a man of heart and will be dominated by his affections. He will yield to temptations, perhaps; but the second phalanx is long and reveals a power of reason and logic which will probably triumph at last.”

Not a single word of all this had David heard. Her voice sounded to him like the low droning of bees in a meadow, and he had been watching the movements of her fingers, as he used to watch the dartings of the minnows in the pools of the brook which ran through his farm.

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“How smooth the fingers are! And how they taper to the cone,” continued Pepeeta. “Here is this one of Jupiter, for example. How plainly it tells of religiousness and perhaps of fanaticism! The Sun finger is not long. Nay, it is not long enough. There is too little love of glory here. And the Saturnian finger is too long. The life is too much under the dominion of Fate or Destiny. The Mercurial finger is short. He will be firm in his friendships. The moons all correspond. They, also, are too large. The Mount of Venus, here at the base of the thumb, is excessively developed, and indicates capacity for gentleness, for chivalry, for tenderness and love. The Mount of the Moon is small. That is good. There will be no disturbance of the brain, no propensity towards lunacy. Mars is not excessive, but it is strong, and he will be bold and courageous, but not quarrelsome.”

The pleasant murmur of the voice, the gentle pressure of her hand, her nearness and her beauty, had rendered the Quaker absolutely oblivious to her words.

“Let me now examine the lines,” she continued. “Here is the line of the heart. It passes clear across the palm. It is well marked at every point and is most pronounced upon the upper side. The love will not be a sensual passion, but look! it is joined to the head below the finger of Saturn. It is the sign of a violent death! Heavens!”

As she uttered this exclamation, she pressed the hand convulsively between her own, and looked up into his face.

The involuntary and sudden action recalled him to his consciousness. “What did you say?” he asked.

“Have you not been listening?” she replied, repressing both her anxiety and her annoyance.

“No; was it a good story or a bad one which you were reading?”

“It was both.”

“Well—it is no matter, those accidental marks can have no significance.”

“Do you think so?”

“I am sure.”

“You do not believe in any signs?”

“None.”

“You know that the traveler on the desert told the Bedouin that he did not, and yet from the foot prints of the camels the Bedouin deciphered the whole history of a caravan.”

Astonished at her reply, David did not answer.

“And then, you know,” she continued, “there are the weather signs.”

“Yes—that is so.”

“And what are the letters of a book but signs?”

“You are right again.”

“And is not hardness a sign of something in a stone, and heat of something in fire? And are not deeds the sign of some quality in a man’s soul, and the expressions of his face signs of emotions of his heart?”

“They are.”

“So that by his gait and gestures each man says: ’I am a farmer—a quack—a Quaker—a soldier—a priest’?”

“This, too, is true.”

“Why, then, should not the character and destiny of the man disclose itself in signs and marks upon his hands?”

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David was too much astonished by these words to answer. They revealed a mental power which he had not even suspected her of possessing. He discovered that while she was as ignorant as a child in the realms of thought to which she had been unaccustomed, in her sphere of experience and reflection she was both shrewd and deep.

“You have thought much about this matter,” he said.

“Too much, perhaps.”

“It is deeper than I knew.”

“And so is everything deeper than we know. Tell me, if you can, why it is that having met you I have lost faith in my art, and having met me you have lost faith in your religion.”

“It is strange.”

“Something must be true. Do you not think so?”

“I have begun to doubt it.”

“I believe that what *you* said is true.”

As they stood thus confronting each other, they would have presented a study of equal interest to the artist or to the philosopher. There was both a poem and a picture in their attitude. Grace and beauty revealed themselves on every feature and in every movement. They had arrived at one of those dramatic points in their life-journey, where all the tragic elements of existence seem to converge. Agitated by incomprehensible and delicious emotions, confronting insoluble problems, longing, hoping, fearing, they hovered over the ocean of life like two tiny sparrows swept out to sea by a tempest.

The familiar objects and landmarks had all vanished. As children rise in the morning to find the chalk lines, inside of which they had played their game of “hop-scotch,” washed out by the rain, they had awakened to find that the well known pathways and barriers over which and within which they had been accustomed to move had all been obliterated. They had nothing to guide them and nothing to restrain them except what was written in their hearts, and this mysterious hieroglyph they had not yet learned to decipher.

They were awakened from their reveries by the footsteps of the quack, and by his raucous voice summoning them back into the world of realities from which they had withdrawn so completely.

“Well, little wife,” he said, “how is b-b-business?”

“Fair,” she said, gathering up a double hand-full of change and passing it over to him indifferently.

The question fell upon the ears of the Quaker like a thunder bolt. It was to him the first intimation that Pepeeta was not the daughter of the quack. “His wife!” The heart of the youth sank in his bosom. Here was a new and unexpected complication. What should he do? It was too late to turn back now. The die had been cast, and he must go forward.

The doctor rattled on with an unceasing flow of talk, while the mind of the Quaker plunged into a series of violent efforts to adjust itself to this new situation. He tried to force himself to be glad that he had been mistaken. He for the first time fully admitted the significance of the qualms which he felt at permitting himself to regard this strolling gypsy with such feelings as had been in his heart.

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“But now,” he said to himself, “I can go forward with less compunction. I can gratify my desire for excitement and adventure with perfect safety. I will stay with them for a while, and when I am tired can leave them without any entanglements.” When the situation had been regarded for a little while from this point of view, he felt happier and more care-free than for weeks. He solaced his disappointment with the reflection that he should still be near Pepeeta, but no longer in any danger.

At this profound reflection of the young moth hovering about the flame, let the satirist dip his pen in acid, and the pessimist in gall! There is enough folly and stupidity in the operations of the human mind to provoke the one to contempt and the other to despair.

The cuttle-fish throws out an inky substance to conceal itself from its enemies; but the soul ejects an opaque vapor in which to hide from itself! In this mist of hallucination which rises and envelopes us, the whole appearance of life alters. Passion and desire repress the judgment and pervert the conscience. Conclusions that are illogical, expectations that are irrational and confidences that are groundless to the most final and fatal absurdity seem as natural and reasonable as intuitions.

It is not in human nature to escape this perversion of thought and feeling under the stress of temptation. One may as well try to prevent the rise of temperature in the blood in the rage of fever. There are times when even the upright in heart must withdraw to the safe covert of the inner sanctuary and there fervently put up the master prayer of the soul, “Lord, lead me not into temptation!” But if necessity or duty calls them out into the midst of life’s dangers, let them remember that what they feel in the calm retreat, is not what will surge through their disordered intellects and their bounding pulses when they come within the reach of those fearful fascinations!

It was such a prayer that David had need of when he gave his hand to the gypsy.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOUND WANTING

> “How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done!”—King John.

The spring and summer had passed, autumn had attained the fullness of its golden beauty, and the inevitable had happened. David and Pepeeta had passed swiftly though not unresistingly through all the intervening stages between a chance acquaintance and an impassioned love.

Any other husband than the quack would have foreseen this catastrophe; but there is one thing blinder than love, and that is egotism such as his. His colossal vanity had not

even suspected that a woman who possessed him for her husband could for a single instant bestow a thought of interest on any other man.

Astute student of men, penetrating judge of motive and conduct that he was, he daily beheld the evolution of a tragedy in which he was the victim, with all the indifference of a lamb observing the preparations for its slaughter. Because of this ignorance and indifference, the fellowship of these two young people had been as intimate as that of brother and sister in a home, and this new life had wrought an extraordinary transformation in the habits and character of both.

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David had abandoned the Quaker idiom for the speech of ordinary men, and discarded his former habiliments for the most conventional and stylish clothes. Contact with the world had sharpened his native wit, and given him a freedom among men and women, that was fast descending into abandon. Success had stimulated his self-confidence and made him prize those gifts by which he had once aroused the devotion of adoring worshipers in the Quaker meeting house; he soon found that they could be used to victimize the crowds which gathered around the flare of the torch in the public square.

That which his friends had once dignified by the name of spiritual power had deteriorated into something but little above animal magnetism. He had learned to cherish a profound contempt for men and morals, and the shrewd maxims which the quack had instilled into his mind became the governing principles of his conduct. Those qualities which he had inherited from his dissolute father, and which had been so long submerged, were upheaved, while all that he had received from his mother by birth and education sank out of sight and memory. Three elemental passions assumed complete possession of his soul—the love of admiration, of gambling and of the gypsy.

A transformation of an exactly opposite character had been taking place in Pepeeta. Under the sunshine of David's love, and the dew of those spiritual conceptions which had fallen upon her thirsty spirit, the seeds of a beautiful nature, implanted at her birth, germinated and developed with astonishing rapidity. Walking steadily in such light as fell upon her pathway and ever looking for more, her spiritual vision became clearer and clearer every day; and while this affection for God purified her soul, her love for David expanded and transformed her heart. Her unbounded admiration for him blinded her to that process of deterioration in his character which even the quack perceived. To her partial eye a halo still surrounded the head of the young apostate. But while these two new affections wrought this sudden transformation in the gypsy and filled her with a new and exquisite happiness, the circumstances of her life were such that this illumination could not but be attended with pain, for it brought ever new revelations of those ethical inconsistencies in which she discovered herself to be deeply if not hopelessly involved.

There was, in the first place, the inevitable conflict between her new sense of duty, and the life of deception which she was leading. The practice of her art of fortune-telling was daily becoming a source of unendurable pain as she saw more and more clearly the duty of leaving the future to God and living her daily life in humble, child-like faith. And in the second place, she was slowly awaking to the terrifying consciousness that her affection for David was producing a violent and ungovernable disgust for her husband.

By the flood of sorrows which poured from these two discoveries, she seemed to be completely overwhelmed and if, like a diver, she rose to the sunlight now and then, it was only to seize a few breaths of air by which she might be able to endure her existence in the depths to which she was compelled to return.

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No wonder that life became a mystery to this poor child. It seemed as if its difficulties increased in a direct ratio with her wish to discharge its duties; as if the darkness gained upon the light, and the burden grew heavy, faster than her shoulders grew strong.

The discovery of the nature of that affection which she felt for David had been slow and unwelcome, coming to her even before David's protestations of his love; yet one day the passionate feelings of their hearts found expression in wild and startling confessions. They were terrified at what they told each other; but it became necessary therefore to seek the comfort of still other confessions and confidences.

Their interviews had steadily become more ardent and more dangerous; and the doctor's negligence giving them the utmost freedom, they often spent hours together in wandering about the cities they visited, or the fields and woods lying near.

On one of these tramps, their relationship reached a critical stage. It was the early morning of a beautiful autumn day that they strolled up Broadway in the city of Cincinnati, turned into the Reading road, and sauntered slowly out into the country.

"In which direction shall we go?" asked David.

"Let us wander without thought or purpose, like those beautiful clouds," Pepeeta answered, pointing upward.

David watched them silently for a moment and then said, "Pepeeta, men and women are like those clouds. They either drift apart forever, or meet and mingle into one. It must be so with us."

She walked silently by his side, sobered by the seriousness of his voice and words.

"Perhaps," he continued, "it makes but little difference what becomes of us, for our lives are like the clouds, a morning mist, a momentary exhalation. And yet, how filled with joy or woe is this moment of parting or commingling! Pepeeta, I have decided that this day must terminate my suspense. I cannot endure it any longer. I must know before night whether our lives are to be united or divided. You have told me that you love me, and yet you will not give yourself to me. What am I to think of this?"

"My friend," she cried with an infinite pain in her voice, "how can you force me to such a decision when you know all the difficulties of my life? How can you thus forget that I have a husband?"

"I do not forget it," he answered bitterly, "I cannot forget it. It is an eternal demonstration of the madness of faith in any kind of Providence. It makes me hate an order which unites a lion to a lamb, and marries a dove to a hawk! You say that you loathe this man! Then leave him and come with me! The world lies before us. We are as free as those clouds!"

“We are not free, and neither are they,” she answered. “Something binds them to their pathway, as it binds me to mine. I cannot leave it. I must tread it even though I have to tread it alone.”

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“You can leave it if you will; but if you will not, I must know the reason why.”

“Oh! why will you not see? I have tried so hard to show you! I have told you that there is a voice which speaks within my soul, that to it I must listen and that the inward light of which you told me shines upon the path and I must follow it.”

“I could curse that inward light! Must I be always confronted by the ravings of my youth? All my life long must the words of my credulous childhood hang about my neck like a millstone? There is no inward light. You are living a delusion. You are restrained by the conventionalities of life and are the slave of the customs of society. Because the miserable herd of mankind is willing to submit to that galling yoke of marriage, does it follow that you must? By what right can society demand that men and women who abhor each other should be doomed to pass their lives in hopeless agony? Against such laws I protest! I defy those customs. The path of life is short. We go this way but once! Who is to refuse us all the joy that we can find? There will be sorrow enough, any way!”

“Oh! my friend, do not talk so! Do not break my heart! Have pity on me. I know that it is hard for you; but it is I who have to suffer most. It is I who must continually exert this terrible resistance which alone keeps us from being swept away. Have mercy, David! Spare me a little longer. Spare me this one day at least. If any troubled heart had ever need of the rest and peace of such a day as this, it is mine! Let us give ourselves up to these soothing influences. Let us wander. Let us dream and let us love.”

“Love! This accursed Platonic affection is not love,” he answered savagely.

“David,” she said with an enforced calmness, “you must not speak so. It will do no good. There is something in me stronger than this passion. From the bottom of my soul there has come a sense of duty to a power higher than myself and I will be true to it. I believe that it is God who speaks. You may appeal to my mind, and I cannot answer you, but my heart has reasons of its own higher than the reason itself. It was you who told me this! You told me when you were so beautiful, so good, so true that I know you were right, and I shall never doubt it. I am not what I was. I am, oh! so different. I cannot understand; but I am different.”

There was in this delicate and ethereal girl who spoke so fearlessly something which held the man, strong in his physical might, in an inexplicable and irresistible awe. Before a mountain, beside the sea, beneath the stars and in the presence of a virtuous woman, emotions of wonder and reverence possess the souls of men.

Subdued by this influence, David said, with more gentleness: “But what are we to do? We cannot live in this way. We have been forced into a situation from which we must escape, even if we have to act against our consciences.”

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“I do not think that this is so! I do not believe that any one can be placed against his will in a situation that is opposed to his conscience! There must be some other way to do. A door will open. Let us wait and hope a little longer. Let us have another happy day at least,” Pepeeta said.

Heaving a sigh and shrugging his shoulders as if to throw off a burden, David answered, “Well, let it be as you wish. I have had to suffer so much that perhaps I can endure it a little longer. I do not want to make you unhappy. I will try.”

“Oh! thank you, thank you a thousand times; that is like yourself!” Pepeeta said, her face aglow with gratitude.

It was a light from the soul itself that shone through the thin transparency of that face, pale with thought and suffering, and gave it its new radiance.

The world around them was steeped in autumn beauty. A gigantic smile was on the face of Nature. Fleecy, fleeting clouds were chasing each other across the blue dome of the heavens. The hazy atmosphere of the Indian summer softened the landscape and lent it a mystical and unearthly charm. The forests were resplendent with those brilliant colors which appear like a last flush of life upon the dying face of summer, as she sinks into her wintry grave. The autumn birds were singing; the autumn flowers were blooming; yellow golden rod and scarlet sumach glowed in the corners of the fences; locusts chirped in treetops; grasshoppers stridulated in the meadows, one or two of them making more noise than a whole drove of cattle lying peacefully chewing their cud beneath an umbrageous elm and lifting up their great, tranquil, blinking eyes to the morning sun. Here and there boys and girls could be seen in the vineyards and orchards gathering grapes and apples. Farmers were cutting their grain and stacking it in great brown shocks, digging potatoes, or plowing the fertile soil. Now and then a traveler met or passed them, clucking to his horses and hurrying to the city with his produce. Amid these gracious influences, life gradually lost its stern reality and took on the characteristics of a pleasant dream. The fever and unrest abated, burdens weighed less heavily, sorrow became less poignant; the finer joys of both the waking and sleeping hours of existence were mysteriously blended.

Sharp and irritating as the encounter had been between the two lovers, the momentary antipathy passed away as they moved along. They drew nearer together; they lifted their eyes furtively; their glances met; they smiled; they spoke; their sympathies flowed back into the old channel; their hopes and affections mingled. They gave themselves up to joy with the abandon of youth, falling into that mood in which everything pleases and delights. Nature did not need to tell them her secrets aloud, for they comprehended her whispers and grasped her meaning from sly hints. They melted into her moods.

What joys were theirs! To be young; to be drawn together by an affinity which produced a mysterious and ineffable happiness; to wander aimlessly over the earth; to yield to

every passing fancy; to dream; to hope; to love. It was the culminating hour of their lives.

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Passing through the little village since called Avondale, they turned down what is now the Clinton Springs road, climbed a hill, descended its other slope, and came upon an old spring house where, as they paused to drink, David scratched their names with his penknife on one of the stones of the walls, where they may be read to-day.

Leaving the turnpike, they entered a grove through which flowed a noisy stream; cast themselves upon a bank, bathed their faces, ate their lunch and rested. There for a few moments, in the tranquil and uplifting influence of the silence and the solitude, all that was best in their natures came to the surface. Pepeeta nestled down among the roots of a great beech tree, her hat flung upon the ground by her side, her arms folded across her bosom, her face upturned like a flower drinking in the sunshine or the rain. At her feet her lover reclined, his head upon his arms and his gaze fixed upon the canopy of leaves which spread above them and through which as the branches swayed in the breeze he caught glimpses of the sky.

Pepeeta broke the silence. “I could stay here forever,” she said. “I nestle here in the roots of this great tree like a little child in the arms of its mother. I feel that everything around me is my friend. I feel, not as if I were different from other things, but as if I were a part of them. Do you comprehend? Do you feel that way?”

“More than at any time since leaving home,” he said. “That was the way I always felt in the old days—how far away they seem! I could then sit for hours beside a brook like this, and thoughts of God would flow over my soul like water over the stones; and now I do not think of Him at all! It was by a brook like this that we first met. Do you remember, Pepeeta?”

“I shall never forget.”

“Are you sure?”

“As certain as that I live.”

“Sure—certain! Of what are we sure but the present moment? Into it we ought to crowd all the joys of existence.”

Her feminine instinct discovered the return of his thoughts into the old dangerous channel, and her quick wit diverted them.

“Tell me more about your home, and how you felt when you used to sit like this and think.”

He determined to yield himself for a little while longer to her will, and said: “In those days Nature possessed for me an irresistible fascination; but the spell is broken now. I then thought that I was face to face with the eternal spirit of the universe. How far I have drifted away from the world in which I then existed! I could never return to it. I am

like a bird which has broken its shell and which can never be put back again. I have found another face into which I now look with still deeper wonder than into that of Nature, and which exerts a still deeper fascination. It is the face of a woman, in whom all the beauties of nature seem to be mirrored. She is everything to me; she is the entire universe embodied in a gentle heart."

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He gazed at her with a look that made her pulses beat; but she was determined not to permit him to drift back into that dangerous mood from which she had drawn him with such difficulty.

“One time you told me,” she said, “that the birds and squirrels were such good friends to you, that if you called them they would come to you like your dog. I should love to see that. Look! There is a squirrel sitting on the limb of this very tree! How saucy he looks! How shy! Bring him to me! I command you! You have said that I am your mistress; go, slave!”

Rising to her feet she pointed to the squirrel. Her lithe form was outlined against the green background of the forest in a pose of exquisite grace and beauty, her eyes glowed with animation, and her lips smiled with the consciousness of power. It was impossible to resist her.

He rose, looked in the direction toward which she pointed, and saw the squirrel cheeping among the branches. Imitating its cries, he began to move slowly toward it. The little creature pricked up its ears, cocked its head on one side, flirted its bushy tail and watched the approaching figure suspiciously. As it drew nearer and nearer, he began to creep down the branches. Stopping now and then to reconnoiter, he started forward again; paused; retreated; returned, and still continued to advance, until he was within a foot or two of David’s hand, which he examined first with one eye and then the other and made a motion as if to spring upon it. Suddenly the spell was broken. With a wild flirt of his tail and a loud outcry, he sprang up the tree and disappeared in the foliage.

David watched him until he had vanished, and then turned toward Pepeeta with a look of disappointment and chagrin.

“It is too bad,” she cried, hastening toward him sympathetically, “but see, there is a redbird on the top of that old birch tree. Try again! You will have better success this time, I am sure you will.”

He determined to make another experiment. The brilliant songster was pouring out his heart in that fine cry of strength and hope which he sends resounding over hill and vale. Suddenly hearing his own voice repeated to him in an echo sweet and pure as his own song, he fluttered his wings, peered this way and that, and sang again. Once more the answering call resounded, true as an image in a mirror.

David now began to move with greater caution than before toward the little creature, who looked at him with curious glances. Back and forth resounded the sweet antiphonal, and the bird hopped down a branch or two. Neither of the actors in this woodland drama removed his eyes from the other, and the spectator watched them both with breathless interest.

Presently David lifted his hands—the palms closed together in the form of a cup or nest. The songster bent farther forward on the twig, and suddenly with a downward plunge shot straight toward them; but just as his tiny feet touched the fingers, turned as the squirrel had done, and uttering a loud cry of terror flew away. David dropped his hands and his eyes.

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“I have lost my power,” he said sadly.

“You are out of practice, you must exercise it oftener. It will all come back,” Pepeeta responded cheerfully.

They walked slowly and silently back to the place where they had been sitting, and David began tossing pebbles into the brook.

“Three times to-day,” he said, pausing and turning toward Pepeeta, “I have opened my hands and my heart, and each time the object whose love I sought has fluttered away from me in terror or repugnance.”

“Oh! no, not in terror and repugnance,” she said eagerly.

“Am I then incapable of exciting love?” he asked.

“You will break my heart if you speak so. I love you more than I love my own life.”

“I do not believe it. Can I believe that the squirrel and the redbird love me, when they flee from me? If they had loved me, they would have come to me and nestled to my heart. And so would you. I have come back to the old subject. I cannot refrain any longer. Will you go with me, or will you not?”

“Oh! David,” she cried, wringing her hands, “why, why will you break my heart? Why can you not permit me to finish this day in peace? Wait until some other time. Why can you not enjoy this present moment? I could wish it to last forever, if you were only kind. If the flight of time could be stopped, if we could be forever what we are just now, I could not ask for any other thing. See how beautiful the world is. See how happy we are. See how everything hangs just like a balance! Do not speak, do not move; one unkind word would jar and spoil it all.”

“It is impossible,” he cried roughly, “you must leave your husband and come with me. You cannot put me off any longer. I am desperate.”

He was looking at her with eyes no longer full of pleading, but of determination and command.

“What will you do?” he asked.

“Oh!” she answered, trembling, “why will you compel me to act? Let something happen! Wait! It is not necessary always to act! Sometimes it is better to sit still! We are in God’s hands. Let us trust Him. Has He not awakened this love in our hearts? He has not made us love and long for each other only to thwart us!”

“Thwart us! Who coaxes the flowers from the ground, only that the frost may nip them? Who opens the bud only to permit it to be devoured by the worm? Who places the babe in its mother’s arms only to let it be snatched away by the hand of death? You cannot appeal to me in that way,” he retorted, bitterly.

“Do not speak so,” she exclaimed with genuine terror. “It is wicked to say such things in this quiet and holy place. Oh! why have you lost that faith you once possessed? What has blinded your eyes to the light that you taught me to see? I see it now! All will be well! Something says to me in my heart, ‘All will be well,’ if we only follow the light!”

Nothing could have given stronger proof that inspiration and intuition are as natural and legitimate functions of the spiritual nature as sensation and sense perception are of the physical, than her words and looks. They would have convinced and mastered him, except for the self-denial which they demanded of his love! But he was now far past all reason.

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“Pepeeta,” he cried, approaching her, “you must be mine and mine alone! I can no longer endure the thought of your being the wife of another man. You must come with me. I will not take ‘no’ for an answer. I command you to leave this man and go with me. It is a worse crime for you to live with him when you hate him than to leave him! Come, let us go! I have money! There are horses to be had. He does not know where we are. Let us fly!”

It was evident that he had brooked her refusal as long as he could. The man was mad. He seized her by the arm.

In a single instant this gentle creature passed through an incredible transformation. She wrenched her arm from his hand and stood before him fearless, resolute, magnificent! Her gypsy training stood her in good stead now. Young as she was when a pupil in that hard school, she had learned from her wild teachers the cardinal principle of their code —*loyalty to her marriage vows*. They had taught her to believe that this breach was the one unpardonable sin.

She drew a little stiletto from the folds of her dress, placed its point upon her heart and said: “It is not necessary that a gypsy should live; but it is necessary that she should be virtuous!”

Her resplendent beauty, her fearless courage, her invincible determination quenched the wild impulses of the reckless youth in a single instant. All the manhood, all the chivalry of his better nature rose within him and did homage. He threw himself on his knees and frantically besought her pardon.

In an instant the fierce light died from her eyes. She stooped down, laid her hand on his arm, and with an all-forgiving charity lifted him to his feet. They stood regarding each other in silence. All that their souls could reveal had been manifested in actions. The brief scene was terminated by a common impulse. They turned their faces toward the city and walked quietly, each reflecting silently upon the struggle that had been enacted and the denouement which was yet to come.

In her ignorance and inexperience, Pepeeta hoped that a scene so dreadful would quench the madness in her lover’s soul; but this revelation of the grandeur of her nature only inflamed his desires the more. The momentary feeling of shame and penitence passed away. His determination to possess her became more fixed than ever and during the homeward walk assumed a definite form.

For a long time a sinister purpose had been rolling about in his soul. That purpose now crystallized into resolution. He determined to commit a crime if need be in order to gain his end.

Nothing can be more astonishing than the rapidity and ease with which the mind becomes habituated to the presence of a criminal intention. The higher faculties are at first disturbed, but they soon become accustomed to the danger, and permit themselves to be destroyed one after another, with only feeble protestations.

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CHAPTER XIV.

TURNED TEMPTER

"All men have their price."
—Walpole.

The plan which David had chosen to compel Pepeeta to abandon her husband was not a new one. For its execution he had already made a partial preparation in an engagement to meet the justice of the peace who had performed her marriage ceremony. The engagement was conditioned upon his failure to persuade the gypsy to accompany him of her own free will.

Immediately after supper he took his way to the place appointed for the meeting. This civil officer had been a companion of the quack's for many years. His natural capacity, which was of the highest order, had secured him one place of honor after another; but he had lost them through the practice of many vices, and had at last sunk to that depth of degradation in which he was willing to barter his honor for almost any price.

The place at which he had agreed to meet David was a low saloon in one of the most disreputable parts of the city, and to this spot the infatuated youth made his way. Now that he was alone with his thoughts, he could not contemplate his purpose without a feeling of dread, and yet he did not pause nor seriously consider its abandonment. His movements, as he elbowed his way among the outcasts who infested this degraded region, were those of a man totally oblivious to his surroundings.

"Curse him," he muttered in an undertone, and did not know that he had spoken.

To talk to one's self is so often a premonitory symptom of either insanity or crime, that a policeman standing on the corner eyed him closely and followed him down the street.

Having reached the door of the saloon, David cast a glance about him, as if ashamed of being observed, and entered. It was a fitting place to hatch an evil deed. The floor was covered with filthy sawdust; the air was rank with the fumes of sour beer and adulterated whisky; the lamps were not yet lighted, and his eyes blinked as he entered the dirty dusk of the interior. Against the wall were rude shelves strewn with bottles, decanters, jugs and glasses. The landlord was leaning against the inside of the bar glaring about him like an octopus. The habitues of the place, looking more like scarecrows than men, stood opposite him with their blear eyes uplifted in ecstasy, draining into their insatiable throats the last precious drops from their upturned glasses.

At a table four human shapes which seemed to be operated by some kind of clumsy mechanical motors rather than animated by sentient spirits were playing a game of

chance and slapping the greasy cards down upon the table to the accompaniment of coarse laughter and hideous profanity.

The Quaker, who was not yet thoroughly enough corrupted to witness this spectacle without horror, hurried through the room like a man who has suddenly found himself in a pest-house. The door which he pushed open admitted him to a parlor scarcely less dirty and disgusting that the saloon itself, at the opposite end of which, wreathed in a cloud of tobacco smoke, he beheld the object of his search.

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“Well, I see you are here,” he said, drawing a chair to the table.

“And waiting,” a deep and rich but melancholy voice replied.

“Can’t we have a couple of candles? These shadows seem to crawl up my legs and take me by the throat. I feel as if some one were blindfolding and gagging me,” said David, looking uneasily about.

The judge ordered the candles, and while they were waiting observed: “You had better accustom yourself to shadows, young man, for you will find plenty of them on the road you are traveling. They deepen with the passing years, along every pathway; but the one on which you are about to set your feet leads into the hopeless dark.”

These unexpected words agitated the soul of the young plotter, but while he was still shuddering the barkeeper entered with the candles and set them down on the table between the two men, who found themselves vis-a-vis in the flickering gleams.

They leaned on their elbows and looked into each other’s faces. The contrast was remarkable. The countenance of the judge had unquestionably once been noble, and perhaps also beautiful; but the massive features were now coarsened by dissipation. A permanent curl of scorn had wreathed itself around the mouth. A look of ennui brooded over his features. One would as soon expect to see a flower in the crater of a volcano as a smile on the lips of this extinct man.

David’s face was young and beautiful. The features were still those of a saint, even if the aureole had for a time been eclipsed by a cloud. These two human beings gazed incredulously at each other for a moment.

“I was once like this youth,” the judge was saying to himself with a sigh.

“I shall never be like this beast,” thought David with a shudder of repulsion and disgust.

The “Justice” (grotesque parody) broke the silence.

“Did you succeed?” he asked.

“No,” said David, sullenly.

“She would not yield, then?”

“No more than adamant or steel.”

“You should have pressed her harder.”

“I used my utmost skill.”

“You are a novitiate, perhaps. An adept would have succeeded.”

“Not with her.”

“Ah! who ever caught a trout at the first cast? What you need is experience.”

“What I want is help.”

“And so you have appealed to me? You wish me to go to this woman and tell her that her marriage was a fraud?”

“I do.”

“There have been pleasanter tasks.”

“Will you do it, or will you not?”

“Suppose she will not believe me?”

“You must compel her.”

“Young man, have you no compunctions about this business?” said the judge, leaning forward and looking earnestly into the blue eyes.

“Compunctions?” said David, in a dry echo of the question.

“Yes, compunctions,” replied the judge, repeating the word again.

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“Oh! some. But for every compunction I have a thousand desperate determinations. Were you ever in love, Judge?”

“Yes, I have been in love, such love as yours, and that is why I am what I am now.”

As he uttered these words, he lifted the glass which his hand had been toying with, drained it to the dregs, fixed his eyes on David once more, and after regarding him a moment with a look of pity, said slowly and solemnly: “Young man, I am about to give you good advice. You smile? No wonder! But I beg you to listen to me. Sometimes a shipwrecked sailor makes the best captain, for he knows the force of the tempest. I have no conscience for myself, but some unaccountable emotion impels me to bid you abandon this project. Somehow, as I look at you, I cannot bear to have you become what I am. You seem so young and innocent that I would like to have you stay as you are. I wish to save you. How strange it is. When I look at you, I seem to behold myself as I was at your age.”

As he spoke these words the whole expression of his countenance altered, and faint traces of an almost extinguished manhood appeared. It was as if beauty, sunk below the horizon, had been thrown up in a mirage.

So tender an appeal would have broken a heart like David’s, except for the madness of illicit love.

“Judge!” he cried, striking the table with his fist, “I did not come here for advice, I came for help. I am determined to have this woman. She is mine by virtue of my desire and my capacity to acquire her! I must have her! I will have her, by fair means or foul. And, Judge, in this case, the foulest means are fair. What seems an act of injustice is in reality an act of mercy. You know her husband, and you know as well as I do that her life with him will be her ruin. You know that the complacency with which she once regarded him has already turned to disgust, and that it is only a single step from disgust to hate and another from hate to murder. She will kill him some day! She cannot help it. It is human nature and if she doesn’t I will! Come now, Judge, you will help me, won’t you?”

A cynical smile wreathed itself around the mouth of the old roue. In his debauched nature, the oil of sympathy had long ago been exhausted. This was a last despairing flicker. A wick cannot burn alone.

“Help you?” he said languidly. “Oh, yes, I will help you. There is no use trying to save you. You are only another moth! You want the fire, and you will have it! You will burn your wings off as millions have done before you and as millions will do after you. What then? Wings are made to be burned! I burned mine. Probably if I had another pair I would burn them also. It is as useless to moralize to a lover as to a tiger. I am a fool to

waste my breath on you. Let us get down to business. You say that she loves you, and that she will be glad to learn that she is free?"

"I do! her heart is on our side. She will believe you, easily!"

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“Yes, she will believe me easily! She will believe me too easily! For six thousand years desire has been a synonym for credulity. All men believe what they want to, except myself. I believe everything that I do not want to, and nothing that I do! But no matter. How much am I to get for this job?”

They haggled a while over the price, struck a bargain and shook hands—the same symbol being used among men to seal a compact of love or hate, virtue or vice.

“Be at the Spencer House at eleven o’clock,” said David, rising. “You will find us on the balcony. The doctor is to spend the night in a revel with the captain of the Mary Ann, and we shall be uninterrupted. Be an actor. Be a great actor, Judge. You are to deal with a soul which possesses unusual powers of penetration.”

“Do not fear! She will be no match for me, for she is innocent—and when was virtue ever a match for vice? She is predestined to her doom! Farewell! Fare-ill, I mean,” he muttered under his breath, as David passed from the room.

He gazed after him with his basilisk eyes, drank another glass of whisky and relapsed into reveries.

The mind of the lover was full of tumultuous emotions. On the thin ice of his momentary joy, he hovered like an inexperienced skater over the great deeps of sin which were waiting to engulf him.

There was still an hour before the time when he would have to take his part in the business of the evening. He determined to walk off his excitement, and chose the way along the edge of the river.

It was now quite dark. The stars were shining in the sky and lamps were twinkling in the windows. The streets were almost deserted; the citizens, wearied with the toils of the day, were eating their evening meal, or resting on the balconies and porches. Here and there on the surface of the swift-flowing river a huge steamer swept past, or little ferry-boats shot back and forth like shuttles. His thoughts composed a strangely blended web of good and evil. At the same moment in which he reiterated his resolve to prosecute this deed he consecrated himself to a life of tenderness and devotion to the woman whom he loved with all the energy of his nature! Of such inconsistencies is the soul capable!

It seemed an easy matter to him to control the august forces which he was letting loose! He was like a little child who wanders through a laboratory uncorking bottles and mixing explosives.

Having regained his calmness by a long walk, he hurried back and reached the open space along the river front where peddlers, mountebanks and street venders plied their crafts, just in time to meet the doctor as he drove up with his horses.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER

> “Thinks thou there are no serpents in the world
> But those who slide along the grassy sod
> And sting the luckless foot that presses them?
> There are those who in the path of social life
> Do bask their skins in Fortune’s sun
> And sting the soul.” —Joanna Baillie.

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That evening's business was one of unprecedented success. Never had the young orator been so brilliant. All the faculties of his mind seemed wrought up to their highest pitch and all its resources under perfect control. The boisterous crowd laughed itself hoarse at his humor, wept itself silly at his pathos, and laid its shekels at his feet.

It is no wonder that such scenes and others like them have generated both satirists and saviors, and that while men like Savonarola have been ready to die for the redemption of such creatures other men, like Juvenal, have sneered.

The three companions returned to the hotel and counted their ill-gotten gains. Pepeeta was sober, David exultant and the doctor hilarious. He pulled out the ends of his long black mustache to their utmost limit, twisted them into ropes, rubbed his hands together, slapped his great thigh and laughed long and loud.

"David, my son," he exclaimed, "you have the touch of Midas; g-g-give us a few years more and we will outrank the fabled Croesus. We shall yet be masters of the world. We shall ride upon its neck as if it w-w-were an ass! How about the old farm life now? Do you want to return to the p-p-plow-tail? Would you rather milk the b-b-brindle cow than the b-b-bedeviled people? This has been a g-g-great night, and I must go and finish it in the c-c-cabin of the Mary Ann with the captain, his mate and the judge. They will know how to appreciate it! Such a t-t-triumph must not be allowed to p-p-pass without a celebration."

He bustled about the room a few moments, kissed his wife, shook hands with David and hastened away.

After he had vanished, David and Pepeeta passed down the long corridor and out upon the balcony of the old Spencer House, to the place appointed for the interview of the judge. The night was bright; a refreshing breeze was blowing up from the river and the frequent intermissions in the gusts of wind that swept over the sleeping city gave the impression that Nature was holding her breath to listen to the tales of love that were being told on city balconies and in country lanes. Under the mysterious influence of the full moon, and of the silence, for the noises of the city had died away, their imaginations were aroused, their emotions quickened, their sensibilities stirred. It seemed impossible that life could be seriously real. Their conceptions of duty and responsibility were sublimated into vague and misty dreams, and the enjoyment of the moment's fleeting pleasures seemed the only reality and end of life.

The two lovers placed their chairs close to the railing and leaning over it looked down into the deserted street or off toward the distant hills swimming like islands on a sea of light, or up to the infinite sky in the immensity of which their individual being seemed to be swallowed up, or down into each other's eyes, in the depths of which they discovered realities which they had never before perceived, and lost sight of those in which they had always believed. For a long time they sat in silence. Afterwards, there

came a few whispered interchanges of feeling, as the stillness of a grove is broken by gentle agitations among the leaves, and finally David said,

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“Pepeeta, you have long promised to tell me all you knew of your early life; will you do it now?”

“Of what possible interest can it be to you?” she asked.

“It seems to me,” he replied, “that I could linger forever over the slightest detail. It is not enough to know what you are. I wish to know how you came to be what you are.”

“You must reconcile yourself to ignorance; the origin of my existence is lost in night.”

“Did not the doctor discover anything at all from the people in whose possession he found you?”

“Nothing. They kept silence like the grave. He heard from a gypsy in another camp that my parents belonged to a noble family in Spain, and has often said that when he becomes very rich he will go with me to my native land and find them. But I believe, myself, that the veil will never be lifted from the past. I must be content!”

“But you can tell me something of that part of your childhood that you do remember?”

“It is too sad! I do not want to think of anything that happened before I met you. My life began from that moment. Before, I had only dreamed.”

He was intoxicated with her beauty and her love; but he carried himself carefully, for he was playing a desperate game and must keep himself under control.

“And do you think,” he said, “that having awakened from this dream you can ever fall asleep again?”

“Can the bird ever go back into the shell or the butterfly into the chrysalis? No, no, it is impossible.”

“But would you, if you could?”

“Perhaps I ought to want to; but I cannot.”

“And do you think that we can drift on forever as we are going?”

“I do not know. I do not dare to think. I only live from day to day.”

“And you still refuse to take your future into your own hands?”

“It is not mine. I must accept what has been appointed.”

“And you still believe that some door will be opened through which we may escape?”

“With all my heart.”

“I wish I could share your faith.”

They ceased to speak, and sat silently gazing into each other’s faces, the heart of the woman rent with a conflict between desire and duty, that of the man by a tempest of evil passions. At that moment, a slow and heavy step was heard in the hallway. They looked toward the door, and in the shadows saw a man who contemplated them silently for a moment and then advanced.

David rose to meet him.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, feigning embarrassment, “I had an errand with the lady, and hoped I should find her alone.”

“You may speak, for the gentleman is the friend of my husband and myself,” Pepeeta said.

“I will begin, then,” he responded, “by asking if you recognize me?” And at that he stepped out into the moonlight.

Pepeeta gave him a searching glance and exclaimed in surprise, “You are the judge who married me.”

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He let his head fall upon his breast with well-assumed humility, remained a moment in silence, looked up mournfully and said, “I would to God that I had really married you, for then I should not have been bearing this accursed load of guilt that has been crushing me for months.”

At these words, Pepeeta sprang from her seat and stood before him with her hands clasped upon her breast.

“Be quick! go on!” she cried, when she had waited in vain for him to proceed.

“Prepare yourself for a revelation of treachery and dishonor. I can conceal my crime no longer. If I hold my peace the very stones in the street will cry out against me.”

“Make haste!” Pepeeta exclaimed, imperatively.

“Madam,” continued the strange man, “I have betrayed you.”

“You have betrayed me?”

“Yes, I have betrayed you. Do you understand? You are not married to your husband. I deceived you as I was bribed to do. I was not a justice. I had no right to perform that ceremony. It was a solemn farce. Your false lover desired to possess the privileges without assuming the responsibilities of marriage.”

These words, spoken slowly, solemnly, and with a simulation of candor which would have deceived her even if she had not desired to believe them, produced the most profound impression upon the mind of Pepeeta. She approached the judge and cried: “Sir, I beg you in the name of heaven not to trifle with me! Is what you have told me true?”

“Alas, too true.”

“If it is true, you will say it before the God in heaven? Raise your right hand!”

Before an appeal so solemn and a soul so pure a man less corrupt would have faltered; but without a moment’s hesitation this depraved, remorseless creature did as she commanded.

“I swear it,” he said.

“Oh! sir,” she cried, “you cannot understand; but this is the happiest moment of my life!”

“Madam?” he exclaimed, interrogatively and with consummate art.

“It is not necessary for you to know why,” she answered; “but on my knees I thank you.”

He lifted her up. “What can it mean? I implore you to tell me,” he said.

“Do not ask me!” she replied. “I cannot tell you now! My heart is too full.”

“But does this mean that I have nothing to regret and that you have forgiven me?”

“It does. For it is against God only you have sinned! As for myself, I bless you from the bottom of my heart!”

She gave him her hand. He took it in his own and held it, looking first at her and then at David with an expression of such surprise as to deceive his accomplice scarcely less than his victim. Young, inexperienced, innocent in this sin at least, she stood between them—helpless.

It is one thing for a woman deliberately to renounce her marriage vows to taste the sweets of forbidden pleasure, but quite another for a heart so loyal to duty, to be betrayed into crime by an ingenuity worthy of devils.

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Child of misfortune that she was, victim of a series of untoward and fatal circumstances, she had reason all her life to regret her credulity; but never to reproach herself for wrong intentions. Her heart often betrayed her; but her soul was never corrupted. She ought to have been more careful—alas, yes, she ought—but she meant no sin.

Now that the confidence of Pepeeta had been secured, David's part in this drama became comparatively easy.

He listened to the brief conversation in which by a well-constructed chain of fictitious reasonings the judge riveted upon the too eager mind of the child-wife the conclusion that she was free. When this arch villain had concluded his arguments every suspicion had vanished from her soul, and as he rose to depart she took him by the hand and bade him a kindly and almost affectionate farewell. "Do not afflict yourself with this painful memory," she said gently.

"I shall not need to afflict myself," he replied; "my memory will afflict me, for I am as guilty as if the result had been what I expected; and if in the coming years you find a moment now and then in which you can lift up a prayer for a man who has forfeited his claim to mercy, I beg you to devote it to him who from the depths of his heart wishes you joy. Good-bye."

With many assurances of her pardon, Pepeeta followed him to the door and bade him farewell.

When she returned to David her face was luminous with happiness, and although he had begun already to experience a reaction and to suffer remorse for his successful infamy, it was only like a drop of poison in the ocean of his joy.

"Did I not tell you that all would be well?" she cried, approaching him and extending both her hands. "But how sudden and how strange it is. It is too good to be true. I cannot realize that I am free. I am like a little bird that hops about its cage, peeps through the door which its mistress' hand has opened, and knows not what to think. It wishes to go; but it is frightened. What shall it do, David? Tell it! Shall it fly?"

"I also am too bewildered to act and almost too bewildered to think," he said with unaffected excitement and anxiety, for now that the time and opportunity for him to take so momentous a step had come, his heart failed him. It was only with the most violent effort and under a most pressing necessity that he pulled himself together and continued,

"The little bird must fly, and its mate must fly with it. There are too few hours before daylight and we must not lose a single one. But are you sure that you are quite ready? Is your mind made up? Will you go with me trustfully? Will you accept whatever the future has in store?"

She took him in her strong young arms, printed her first kiss upon his lips, and said: “I will go with you to the ends of the earth! I will go with you through water and through fire! The future cannot bring me anything from which I shall shrink, if it lets us meet it hand in hand!”

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Silently and swiftly they gathered together the few necessities of a sudden journey, stole out of the quiet building and hurried away to a livery stable. In a few moments they were rattling down the rough cobble-stone pavement to the river. The ferryman, who had been retained for this very purpose, pretended to be asleep. They aroused him, drove onto the platform of his primitive craft and floated out upon the stream. As the boat swung clear of the shore they heard music issuing from the cabin windows of a steamer under whose stern they were passing. It was the “Mary Ann.” They listened. The music ceased for a moment and a deep voice called out “B-b-bravo! Another song!”

They recognized it instantly, and Pepeeta pressed close to the side of her lover.

“You hear it for the last time,” he whispered.

“Thank God,” she said.

That name uttered in the darkness of the night startled him. The idea that he had cast a shuttle of crime into the great loom upon which the fabric of his life was being woven, took complete possession of his mind. With unerring prescience, he saw that it began to be entangled in the mysterious meshes. A consciousness that he was no longer the master but the victim of his destiny seized him and he shuddered. Pepeeta perceived the shudder through the arm which embraced her.

“You are cold, my love,” she said.

“My joy has made me tremble,” he replied.

She pressed the hand which was holding hers and looked up into his face with ineffable love.

The swift current seized the boat, twisting it hither and thither till it seemed to the now trembling fugitive a symbol of the stream of tendencies upon which he had launched the frail bark containing their united lives.

“I wonder if I am strong enough to stem it?” he asked himself.

Pepeeta continued to press his hand and that gentle sign of love revived his drooping courage. Perhaps there is no other act so full of reassuring power as the pressure of a human hand. Neither a glance from the eye nor a word from the lips can equal it. The fainting pilgrim, the departing friend, the discouraged toiler, the returning prodigal welcome it beyond all other symbols of helpfulness or love, and the dying saint who leans the hardest on the “rod and the staff of God” as he goes down into the dark valley finds a comfort scarcely less sweet in the warm clasp of a human hand. Just as the courage of this daring navigator of the sea of crime had been restored by this signal of his loved one’s trust, the boat grated on the beach.

“Can we find a minister who will marry us at this time of night?” David said to the ferryman, although he had been careful to ask this question before.

“Two blocks south and three east, second door on the right hand side,” he answered laconically, as he received the fare.

Such adventurers passed often through his hands and their ways were nothing new.

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The fugitives drove hurriedly to the designated house, knocked at the door, were admitted and in a few moments the final act which sealed their fate had been performed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DERELICTS

"Born but to banquet and to drain the bowl."

—Homer.

The "Mary Ann" had just returned from a trip to New Orleans, and while waiting for her cargo lay moored at the foot of Broadway. As the quack ascended her gang-plank the captain and mate rose to greet him. There was not on the entire river, where so many extraordinary characters have been evolved, a more remarkable pair.

The captain was five feet four inches in height, round, ruddy, mellow and jocund. A complete absence or suppression of moral sense, together with health as perfect as an animal's, had rendered him insensible to all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. He had never shed a tear save in excessive laughter, and sorrow had never yet struck a dart through the armor of fat in which he was sheathed.

The mate was his counterpart and foil. Six feet and three inches tall, he was long-legged, lantern-jawed and goggle-eyed. Bilious in his constitution, he was melancholic in his temperament, had been crossed in love and soured at twenty, betrayed and bankrupted at thirty, and at forty had turned his back upon the world, forswearing all its amusements but those of the table, which his poor digestion made more painful than pleasurable, all of its ambitions but those of getting money And all friendships but those of the captain, to whom he was attached like a limpet to a rock.

Such were the leading characteristics of the two worthies who rose from their deck-stools to meet the doctor as he rolled up the gangway.

"Howdy, doctor?" said the mate, in the peculiar drawling vernacular of the poor whites of the south, extending a hand as cold and hard as an anchor.

"Welcome, prince of quacks! For a man who has made so many others walk the plank with poison drugs, you do it but poorly yourself," cried the captain, merrily.

"You will d-d-draw your last breath with a joke, as a d-d-drunkard sips his last drop with a sigh," responded the doctor.

“The captain was born with the corners of his mouth turned up like a dead man’s toes,” drawled the lugubrious mate.

“Where is the judge?” asked the doctor, hitting the captain a hearty slap on the back.

“He will be here a little later,” the host replied.

The three boon companions seated themselves by the gunwale of the vessel, basking in the mellow light of the moon and quaffing the liquor which a negro brought them.

While they were drinking and recalling the many revels which they had held together, an hour passed by, and at its close a form was seen coming leisurely down the sloping bank of the river. It was the justice of the peace, come to make merry with the husband of the woman he had just betrayed. Upon that cynical countenance a close observer might have noted even in the pale light of the moon an expression of sardonic pleasure when he returned the hearty greetings with which his coming was hailed.

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“I am sorry to have kept you waiting,” he said.

“We have all the b-b-better appetite,” responded the doctor.

“If, as the old saw says, the time to eat is when the stomach rings the bell, I am ready!” the captain piped, in his high-pitched voice.

“Diogenes being asked what time a man ought to eat, responded, ’The rich, when he is hungry, and the poor, when he has food,’” said the judge, whose mind threw up old scraps of classical knowledge as the ocean throws up shells.

“As for hunger, my appetite is sharper than a scythe; but my indigestion is duller than a whetstone,” said the mate, to whom a feast was always prophetic of subsequent fasting.

“Good digestion waits on appetite; but waits too long, eh?” the judge replied.

The captain led the way to the cabin. It was a low, dingy room, but ruddy with the light of a dozen tallow candles. On the table was spread a feast that would have tempted the palates of the epicures who gathered about the festive board of the immortal Lucullus. There was neither art nor display in the accompaniments of the food, but every luxury that an ample market could supply had been prepared by a cook who could have won immortality in a Paris restaurant, and the finest whisky that could be distilled in old Kentucky, the rarest wines that could be imported from the Rhine or from sunny Italian slopes, were ready to flow.

Four slaves received the banqueters and then took their places behind the chairs at the table. The captain’s face was shining like a full moon; the doctor’s was swarthy, sinister and piratical; the judge’s possessed the dignity of a splendid ruin; the mate’s was haunted by an expression of unsatisfied and insatiable desire. Observing it and calling the attention of the others, the justice remarked, “Like the old Romans, we have a skeleton at our table to remind us of death.”

“You would look like death yourself if you had to sit staring at these bounties like a muzzled dog in a market,” snarled the mate.

“Be like the dyspeptic who was about to be hanged,” said the doctor. “The sheriff asked him to make his last request. ’I will have a dozen hot waffles well b-b-buttered; and let there be a *full* dozen, for I shall not suffer from the cramps t-t-this time,’ says he.”

The first few courses of the feast were eaten in almost uninterrupted silence; but as the keen edge of their appetites became a little dulled, the tongues of the banqueters were unloosed and a torrent of talk began to flow, interlarded with oaths and stories of a more than questionable character. Corks popped from bottles with loud explosions, the darkies greeted the sallies of wit with boisterous laughter and surreptitiously emptied the glasses.

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The fun grew fast and furious, the thoughts of the revelers flowing in the usual channels of such feasts. At a certain pitch of this wild frenzy, a desire for music invariably recurs and so at a signal from the captain the slaves who performed the functions of deck-hands, waiters or musicians as the exigencies of the occasion demanded, brought in their musical instruments and the rafters were soon ringing with their simple melodies to the accompaniment of banjos and guitars. The deep rich voices blended harmoniously with the tingle of the stringed instruments and the clicking of the bones. Plantation songs were followed by revival hymns, and these by coarse and licentious ditties. At a second stage of every orgie, desire for the dance is kindled by music, and so, at the command of their master, two of the slaves began to execute a “double shuffle.”

The clatter and the beating of negro feet to the accompaniment of the banjo and the bones, and the shouting of the spectators gave vent to the boisterous emotions of the revelers. Even the melancholy mate caught the enthusiasm, and for a time at least forgot his misery. Of them all, the judge alone preserved his gravity. He sat looking unmoved at these wild antics, and murmured to himself:

> “If music be the food of love, play on.
> Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
> The appetite may sicken and so die.
> That strain again! It had a dying fall.
> O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound
> That breathes upon a bank of violets
> Stealing and giving odor.”

Nothing could be more horrible than the sight of this gifted man herding with these beasts. It was like a lion devouring carrion with wolves. Aside from the pleasure of the palate, his enjoyment of the scene was derived from the cynical contempt with which he regarded it. Having descended to the lowest depths of human degradation, he had arrived at a point where he drew his keenest relish from the inconsistencies, the absurdities and the sufferings of his fellow-men. In order that he might behold a scene in which all the elements of the horribly grotesque were combined, he determined to provoke the egotism and complacency of the quack to the very highest activity at this moment when his fortunes and his hopes were being undermined.

After the excitement of the dance had abated, the concluding phase of all such orgies came in its inevitable sequence, and they began to drink great bumpers to each other’s health. After all had been pledged, the judge proposed a toast to the “gypsy bride.”

The tongue of the quack was loosened in an instant and he poured forth an extravagant eulogy of her beauty and her devotion.

“If she were mine, I should be on the ragged edge with jealousy every hour of the day and night,” said the judge, as they set their glasses down.

“Y-y-you’d have reason to! B-b-but I’m a horse of a different c-c-color, old boy! W-w-women have p-p-preferences,” the doctor replied, pulling out the ends of his mustache and winking at the captain and his mate, who stupidly nodded their appreciation of the hit.

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“When honeysuckles close their petals to hummingbirds, Venus will shut the door on Adonis,” responded the judge, draining his glass and smiling into its depths.

The quack was too far gone in his cups to comprehend or even to be curious as to the significance of this sneer and went on sounding his own virtues and Pepeeta’s beauty while the judge provoked him to the fullest exhibition of his colossal vanity. He took a sinister delight in drawing him out. It was the pleasure of a cat playing with the mouse, which it is about to devour, or of savages mocking the man who is about to run the gauntlet. He exulted in the contrast of this proud man’s present confidence, and the humiliation which awaited him within the next few hours.

The quack was an easy victim. His career of prosperity had met with but a single serious interruption and he had so entirely forgotten his dangerous sickness in his perfect health that he was seldom troubled by foreboding as to the future. Never had he possessed more confidence of life than at the very moment when all his hopes, all his confidence, all his faith, were about to be shattered.

Our misfortunes draw a train of shadows behind them; but they often project a glowing light before them. Sickness is often preceded by the most bounding health, failure by unexampled success, misery by irrepressible emotions of exultation. Too bright a sunshine as well as too dark a shadow is often the herald of a storm upon the sea of life.

But ebullitions of happiness and confidence did not excite the apprehension of the quack. Each bumper of wine was followed by a new outburst of vanity. The captain and the mate had already succumbed to the potent influence of the liquors which they had been drinking, and amidst his maudlin speeches the quack’s tongue was becoming hopelessly tangled.

The judge was as sober as at the beginning of the feast and with a smile upon his lips in which cynicism was incarnate, waited until the doctor had just begun to snore and then aroused him by another question.

“Who is this paragon of virtue to whom you so confidently trust the chastity of your wife?”

“This w-w-what?”

“This paragon of virtue—this ice-cold Adonis?”

“Say whatcher mean.”

“Who is this pure young man with whom the beautiful Pepeeta is so safe? What is it you call him, David Crocker?”

“’Tain’t his real name.”

“What is his real name?”

“D’n I ever t-t-tell you?”

“No.”

“Real name’s C-C-Corson—David Corson.”

“What?” cried the judge, springing to his feet.

“C-C-Corson—I tell you,” stuttered the quack, too drunk to notice the peculiar effect of his announcement.

“What do you know about him?” the judge asked with ill-suppressed excitement.

“Keep still—wan’ go sleep.”

“Wake up and tell me what you know about him, I say.”

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“He’ Squaker.”

“A Quaker?”

“Yes, Squaker.”

“Great heavens!” speaking under his breath and trembling visibly. “What else do you know?”

“Illegitimate child.”

“What?” passing around the table, seizing him by the collar and shaking him. “Say that again.”

“‘S true—s’ help me! What you c-c-care?”

“How do you know he is an illegitimate child—I say?”

“I know—that’s nuf! Sh’tup and lemme g-g-go sleep.”

“Tell me, curse you!” shaking him until his teeth rattled.

He was too far gone to answer and fell under the table. The judge kicked him, and with a muttered curse took up a glass of whisky, and tossing it down his throat, hurriedly left the cabin, and began to pace the deck in violent agitation.

This man who had so ruthlessly set a pitfall for his neighbor had suddenly tumbled into one which retributive justice had dug deep for himself!

“It must be true,” he was saying. “It accounts for the strange feeling I had toward him when he asked me to help him do that infernal deed. I could not understand it then, but it is plain enough now. He is my son! And I have not only transmitted a tainted life to him, but helped to damn him in its possession! God! what irony! Of course the quack never knew that I, too, am living under a false name! I wonder if it is too late to stop him? Yes—it’s done, and he is miles away! It’s almost daybreak now! Whewwwh! It’s horrible!”

He dashed his clenched fist on the railing of the vessel. While he stood there, his mind ran back into the past. He lived over again those passionate days when he had won and betrayed a young, beautiful, impressionable girl. His heart beat with a swifter stroke as he remembered the excitement of their hurried flight from her parents, and the wild joy of their adventurous lives, and then sank again to its steady, hopeless throb as he recalled her penitence and misery after the birth of the boy, his consenting to marry her, the ceremony, the respite from self-reproach, the few happy months, the relapse into old bad habits, the sobered mother becoming a devout and faithful member of a

Quaker church, his disgust at this, his quarrels with her and finally his desertion of her. And then the whole subsequent series of adventures and disasters passed before him —a moving panorama of dishonor and crime! He paced the deck again; then he paused and leaned over the gunwale, listening to the water lapping the sides of the vessel. Nothing could have been more astonishing to him than the sudden activity of his conscience. It had been so long since he had experienced remorse that he believed himself incapable of it. But suddenly a fierce and unendurable pang seized him. To a man who had been long accustomed to feeling nothing in the contemplation of his deeds, but a dull consciousness of unworthiness, this sharp and terrible attack of shame and guilt was startling indeed. He could

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not understand it. The pain seemed disproportionate to the sin; but he could not resist the repugnance and horror with which it filled him! And this is an element in the moral life with which bad men forget to deal! Because conscience ceases to remonstrate and remorse to torment, they think the exemption permanent. They do not know that at any moment, in some unforeseen emergency—this abused faculty of the soul may spring into renewed life. This elemental power, this primal endowment, can no more be permanently dissociated from the soul than heat from fire! It may smoulder unobserved, but a breath will fan it into flame! Without it, the soul would cease to be a soul; its permanent eradication would be equivalent to annihilation! If conscience can be eliminated, man has nothing to brag of over a tadpole! We are no more safe from it than from memory! Who can be sure that what he has forgotten has ceased to survive? The sweet perfume of a violet may revive a bitter memory dormant for fifty years! At a word, a look, a glance, conscience—abused, suppressed, despised, inoperative—may rise in all her majesty and fill the heart with torment and despair!

This corrupted judge, this faithless lover, this dishonorable parent, had become accustomed to dull misery; but this fierce onslaught of an avenging sense of personal unworthiness and dread of divine justice was more than he could bear. Life had long since lost its charms and he had more than once seriously contemplated suicide.

“There seems to be no use in trying to beat nature in any other way, and so I will try the dernier resort,” he said aloud. Opening his pocket knife, he cut a piece of rope from the flagstaff, looked around, found a heavy bar of iron, and fastened rope and weight together. In one end of the rope he made a noose, slipped it over his neck, approached the railing and leaned upon it to reflect. His mind now went back into the still more remote past; he was a boy again, and at his mother’s knee. Half audibly and half unconsciously, he began murmuring, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray—no—I’ll be consistent,” he added, with a sigh. “I have lived without the mummery of prayer, and I will die without it.”

And then by one of those strange freaks of the mind that make people do the most absurd things at the most sacred times—mourners laugh at funerals, and soldiers in the thick of battles long for puddings—he began to say over that old doggerel which he used to repeat when shivering on the spring-board over the cold waters of the Hudson river:

> “One, two, three, the bumble bee,
> The rooster crows and away she goes!”

The absurdity of so trivial a memory at such a serious moment excited his sense of humor, and he smiled.

By this time the violence of his remorse had begun to subside and proved to be only a fitful, fleeting protest of that abused and neglected moral sense. Something more terrible than even this discovery of the wrong done to his own son would have to come. There was plenty of time! Nature was in no haste! This was only a warning, a little danger signal.

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By a short, swift revulsion, his feelings changed from horror to indifference. “After all, why should I care?” he said. “The boy is nothing to me, and at any rate he would have gained his end in some other way. Let him have his fling; I have had mine. If he didn’t break that old impostor’s heart, he would probably break a better one! And as for the gypsy—it’s only a question of who and when. What a fool I have made of myself! Who would believe that such a trifle could give me such a shock? There is something to live for yet. I must see what sort of a face the quack makes when he takes his medicine to-morrow.”

He threw the iron weight into the water, entered the cabin, took another drink, smiled contemptuously at the drunken wretches under the table, crossed the deck, descended the gang-plank and climbed the steep path to the city.

Against his inheritance from such a nature as this, the young mystic had to make his life struggle.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

“There are moral as well as physical assassinations.”—Voltaire.

When he awoke the next morning, the poor bedeviled doctor crawled back to the hotel as best he could, his head throbbing with pain, his wits dull and his temper wild. Stumbling up the long flight of stairs which seemed to him to reach the sky, he burst open his door and entered the room. It was empty. The bed had not been occupied. Pepeeta was nowhere to be seen.

It took him some moments to comprehend that he did not comprehend. Then he called, “Pepeeta! Pepeeta!”

The silence at first bewildered, then aroused hims and crossing the corridor he entered David’s room. It, too, was empty. He was now thoroughly astonished and awake. Recrossing the hall he once more entered his room and began in earnest to seek an explanation of this mystery. It did not take him long, for on the table were lying the jewels in which he had invested his profits and which he had confided to Pepeeta—and beside them a piece of paper on which he slowly spelled out these startling words:

“I have discovered your treachery and fled.”

“*Pepeeta*.”

He drew his hand across his eyes, took a piece of his cheek between his thumb and first finger and pinched it to see if he were awake, then read the words again, this time

aloud: “I have discovered your treachery and fled. Pepeeta.” “Treachery?” he said. “What t-t-treachery? Whose t-t-treachery? Fled? Fled with whom, fled where? I wonder if I am still d-d-drunk?”

Laying the paper down, he went to the wash-stand, filled the bowl with water, plunged his head into it and expected to find that he had been suffering some sort of hallucination. But when he returned to the table and again took up the missive, the same words stared him in the face.

At last, and almost with the rapidity of a stroke of lightning, the whole mystery solved itself. It flashed upon his mind that Pepeeta had abandoned him, and in company with the man he had so implicitly trusted. The serpent he had nourished in his bosom had at last stung him! Tearing the paper into shreds, and stamping upon the floor, he cursed and raved.

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“I see it all,” he cried. “Fool, ass, bat, mole! Curse me! Yes, curse me! But curse them also! Oh! G-G-God, help me to avenge this wrong!”

As soon as a God is necessary to the atheist he invents one, and in a single instant this hopeless skeptic had become a firm believer in the Deity. It seemed for a few moments as if his passions would destroy him by their internal violence; but their first ebullition was soon expended and he began to grow calm. The electric fires of his anger were no longer permitted to play at random, but were gathered up into a thunderbolt to be hurled at his foe; this half-crazed man suddenly became as cool and calculating as he was desperate and determined.

A purpose shaped itself instantly in his mind, and he began its execution without delay. He made no confidant, took no advice; but having smoothed his ruffled clothing and combed his disheveled hair so as to excite no comment and provoke no question, he passed through the hotel corridor and office, greeting his acquaintances with his accustomed ease, and made his way to the livery stable. He went at once to the stalls where his famous team was accustomed to stand, and to his astonishment and delight found his horses both there.

“Tom,” he said to the hostler, “did you hire a horse and b-b-buggy to a young couple last night?”

“I did not,” answered the surly groom.

“Tell me the truth,” said the doctor in a voice that made every word sound like the crack of a rifle.

“What do you take me for?” asked the stableman, trying to appear indignant and innocent.

“You’re a l-l-liar, and I am in no mood for trifling. Out with it, you scoundrel!” he cried, seizing him by the throat.

With a sign of terror the groom indicated his readiness to come to terms, and the doctor relaxed his grip.

Still trembling, he told the truth.

“Do you know which road they took?”

He waved his hand toward Kentucky.

“Put a saddle on Hamlet—no, on Romeo,” he ordered, tersely.

The groom entered a box stall and led out the black beauty. The doctor glanced him over and smiled. And well he might, for every muscle, every motion betokened speed, intelligence, endurance.

The pursuer made a single stop on his way to the river and that was at a gun store, from which he emerged carrying a pair of saddle bags on his arm. In the holsters were two loaded pistols.

He smiled as he mounted, having already consummated vengeance in his heart. Once across the river and safe upon the Louisville pike, he loosened the reins. The horse, whose sympathetic heart had already been imbued with the spirit of his rider, shook his long black mane, plunged forward and pounded along the hard turnpike. His hoof-beats—sharp, sonorous, rhythmical—seemed to be crying for vengeance; for hoof-beats have a language, and always utter the thoughts of a rider.

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Now that he was well on his way the outraged husband had time to reflect, and the past few months rose vividly before him. He saw his own folly and did not spare himself in his condemnation; but this folly did not for an instant modify the guilt of the two fugitives. Every moment his injuries seemed more colossal, more unpardonable, more unendurable. He had been wounded in his affections and also in his vanity, which was far more dreadful, and an agonizing thirst for vengeance overpowered him.

The great veins began to swell in his neck. He would have choked, had he not violently torn off his collar and cravat and flung them into the dust.

His thirst for blood outstripped his fleet horse, who seemed to him, in his impetuous haste, to be creeping like a snail. He drove his spurs deep into the sides of the frightened animal, which almost leaped through his girth. A less expert horseman would have been unseated; but an earthquake could not have thrown this Centaur out of his saddle.

The forests, hills and houses flowed past him like a river. Occasionally he halted an instant to inquire of some lonely traveler if he had seen a horse and buggy passing that way, but he was cunning enough to conceal his anxiety and to hide his joy as every answer made him more certain that he was on the trail of the fugitives.

The road was perfectly familiar. He had traversed it a hundred times, and not having to inquire the way he had only to remember and to reflect. An undercurrent of speculation had been flowing through his mind as to where he should overtake the fugitives.

“They will have arrived almost at the edge of the great forest and I will let them enter,” he said to himself.

Having reached the foot of a long hill, he dismounted, led his horse to a little brook and permitted him to drink. When the noble animal had quenched his thirst, the quack patted his neck, picked him a little wisp of grass and talked to him as if he were a man.

“We will rest ourselves a little now, for we shall need all our strength and nerve. One more b-b-burst of speed and we shall overhaul them. Have you got your wind, Romeo? Come then, let us be off!”

Once more he sprang into the saddle, the restive horse pawing the ground and leaping forward before he was seated. His master held him back while they ascended the long slope of the hill, and stopped him as they gained its summit.

The descent was a gradual one, down into a beautiful valley. For a mile or two the road was perfectly straight and the rider, shading his eyes, glanced along it. In the distance a moving object attracted his attention, and as he gazed at it, long and strainingly, the terrible smile once more wreathed his white lips.

He opened the holsters, drew out the pistols, examined them carefully, replaced them, felt of the stirrup straps, tightened the girth, settled himself in the saddle and shouted "Go!"

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The command electrified the horse, and he dashed forward again faster than ever. As they tore down the slope of the hill, it occurred to the doctor that he had not formed any definite plan as to what he should do to Pepeeta! "Shall I kill her, also?" he asked himself.

The thought sent a shudder through him and he instinctively pulled on the bridle.

"My heart will tell me," he cried aloud, and loosened the reins of his horse and of his passions. The very semblance of humanity seemed to be suddenly obliterated from his countenance. This was no longer a man, but an agent of destruction rushing like a missile projected from a cannon. There were only two things present to his consciousness—the carriage upon which he was swiftly gaining, and the fierce smiting of the horse's hoofs which seemed to be echoing the cries of his heart for vengeance. On he swept, nearer, nearer, nearer. He was now within hailing distance, and his brain reeled; he forgot his discretion and his plan.

"Halt," he screamed, in a voice that cut the silent air like a knife.

A face appeared above the top of the buggy, and looked back. It was his foe.

With a howl of rage, he snatched a pistol from the holster and fired. The bullet went wide of the mark and the next instant he saw the whip-lash cut the air and descend on the flank of the startled mare. The buggy lurched forward, and for an instant drew rapidly away. Overwhelmed by the fear that he might be baffled in his vengeance, he drew the other pistol and fired again more wide of the mark than before.

With a wild oath he flung the smoking weapons into the road, and again drove the spurs into the steaming sides of his horse. There could be no doubt as to the result of the chase after that. The half-maddened animal was overhauling the fugitives perceptibly at every enormous stride, and in a few moments more shot by the buggy and up to the head of the terrified mare. As he did so, his rider reached out his left hand and caught the mare by her bridle, reined up his own horse and threw both of the animals back upon their haunches.

In another instant the two men stood confronting each other on the road, the quack black and terrible, the Quaker white and calm. Not a word was spoken, and like two wild beasts emerging from a jungle they sprang at each other's throats. They were oddly, but not unequally, matched, for while the doctor was short, thick-set and muscular, but clumsy and awkward like a bear, David was tall and slim, but lithe and sinewy as a panther. Locked in each other's arms, they seemed like a single hideous monster in some sort of convulsion.

As it was impossible for them in this deadly embrace to strike, they wrestled rather than fought, and bit with teeth and tore with hands with equal ferocity.

At the instant when the two infuriated men seized each other in this deadly grip, Pepeeta fainted, while the terrified mare backed the buggy into the bushes by the roadside. Romeo, snorting and pawing the ground, approached the combatants, snuffed at them a moment as if profoundly concerned at their strange maneuvers, then, turning away, began to crop the rich blue grass in entire indifference to the results of this mad quarrel between two foolish men.

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The combatants surged and swayed back and forth along the dusty road, tripping and stumbling in vain efforts to throw each other to the ground. Their danger lent them strength, and their hatred skill. At last, after protracted efforts, they fell and rolled over and over, now one on top, now the other. Suddenly and as if by a single impulse changing their tactics, their right hands unclasped and began to feel each for the other's throat. A sudden slip of David's hold permitted the doctor to turn him over, and sprawling across his breast he pinioned him to the earth. His great hand stole toward the throat of his prostrate foe and fastened upon it with the grip of an iron vise.

The beautiful face turned pale, then grew purple. This would have been the last moment in the life of the Quaker had not his right hand, convulsively clawing the road, touched a piece of broken rock. It was as if a life-line had swung up against the hand of a drowning man.

Through the body which had seemed to be emptied of all its resources, a tide of reserve energy swelled, under the impulse of which the exhausted youth untwisted the grip of the iron hand, flung off the heavy body, mounted upon it, crowded the great head with its matted hair and staring eyes down into the dust, seized the stone with his right hand, raised it, and struck.

The effect of the blow was twofold—paralyzing the brain of the smitten and the arm of the smiter. Across the low forehead of the quack it left a great gaping wound like a bloody mouth. A death-like pallor spread itself over his countenance, the lids dropped back and left the eyes staring hideously up into the face above them.

David's arm, spasmodically uplifted for a second blow, was suspended in air. He did not move for a long time; and when at length his scattered senses began to return he threw down the stone, rose to his feet and exclaimed in accents of terror, "My God! I have killed him."

He could not overcome the fascination of the lifeless face and wide-staring eyes. They drew him towards them; he stooped down and felt for the pulse, which was imperceptible; laid his hand upon the heart, but could not feel it beat; he raised an arm, and it fell back limp and lifeless.

Suddenly one elemental passion gave place to another. Horror had displaced anger, and now in its turn gave way to the instinct of self-preservation. He looked toward the carriage and saw that Pepeeta had fallen into a swoon. "Perhaps she has not seen what has happened," he said to himself, and a cunning smile lit up his pale face.

Stooping down, he seized the loathsome object lying there in the dust of the road and dragged it off into the thick shrubbery. Stumbling along, he came to a hollow made by the roots of an upturned tree. Into this he flung the thing, hastily; covered it with moss and leaves, and stood staring stupidly at the rude sepulchre. He experienced a

momentary feeling of relief that the hideous object was out of sight; but the consciousness of his guilt and his danger soon surged back upon him like a flood. In such moments the mind works wildly, like a clock with a broken spring, but sometimes with an astonishing accuracy and wisdom.

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It occurred to him that if he left the body where it was and it should be eventually discovered, it would afford the gravest suspicions of foul play; but that if he dragged it back again to the road and laid it with its face in the dust, against the rock with which the deed was done, it might pass for an accident.

Once more that hideous smile of cunning lit up the face which in these few moments had undergone a mysterious deterioration. He hastily removed the heap of rubbish, shuddered as he saw the loathsome thing once more exposed to view, but seized it, dragged it back, and placed it with consummate art in the position which his criminal prescience had suggested.

As it lay there in the road nothing could have seemed more natural than that it had fallen from the horse; he felt another momentary relief from terror, in which he cunningly conceived a still more sagacious plan, on noticing Romeo. They were the best of friends; it was easy to catch him. He did so, removed the saddle, broke the girth and placed it near the prostrate figure of the quack. Nothing could have more perfectly resembled an accident. An adept in crime could not have performed this task with finer skill, and he was free now to turn to the rest of the work that he must do to conceal this ghastly deed.

Approaching the buggy, he found to his immense relief that Pepeeta was still unconscious. With swift and silent movements he freed the mare, led her out into the road and drove hurriedly away.

The wood through which they were passing was wide and somber. The shadows of the evening had already begun to creep up the tree-trunks and lurk gloomily among the branches. Plaintive bird songs were heard from the treetops, and among them those of the mourning dove, whose solemn, funereal note sent shudders through the heart of the trembling fugitive.

But all had gone successfully so far, and he actually began to cherish hope that he would escape detection. There still remained, however, the uneasy fear that Pepeeta herself had been a witness of the deed. Horrible as was his own consciousness of his crime, he dared to hope that he could stand it, if only she did not know! He dreaded to have her waken, and yet it seemed as if he could not endure the suspense until he found whether she had seen the deed or not.

Without trying to rouse her, he drove rapidly forward, and just as he emerged from the wood came to another brook, so similar to the one by the side of which the struggle had occurred, that he conceived the idea of stopping by its side and awakening Pepeeta from her stupor there. “She will not notice the difference,” he said to himself; “and if she did not witness the fatal blow I can persuade her that I overpowered the doctor and forced him to return while she was in her swoon.”

Stopping the horse, he lifted her inanimate form from the carriage, bore it to the side of the brook, laid it gently upon the bank and dashed a handful of the cold water into her white face. She gasped, opened her eyes, and, sitting up, looked about her with an expression of terror.

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“Where am I?” she asked.

“Do you not remember? You are here in the wood where the doctor overtook us,” he replied.

“And where is he?”

“He has returned.”

“Has something dreadful happened?”

“Nothing.”

“But I saw you clench with each other, and it was awful! What happened then? I must have fainted. Did I?”

“Yes, you fainted. Were you so frightened?”

“Oh, terribly! I thought that you would kill each other! It was horrible, horrible! But where is he now?”

“He has returned.”

“Returned? Do you mean that he has gone back without me? How did you persuade him to do that?”

“How did I persuade him? Ha! ha! I persuaded him with my fists. You should have seen me, Pepeeta! Are you quite sure that you did not see me? I should like you to know what a coward he was at last, and how he went home like a whipped puppy.”

“But did he acknowledge that he had deceived me?”

“He did indeed, upon his knees.”

“And do you think he has gone, never to return?”

“Yes, he has gone, never to return,” he answered, shuddering at the double meaning of his words. “He made his confession and relinquished his claim, and I made him swear that he would renounce you forever. And so we have nothing to do but forget him and be happy. Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, I am better; but I am not well; I cannot shake it off. It seems too dreadful to have been real. And yet how much better it is than if one of you had been killed! Oh! I wish I could stop seeing it” (putting her hands over her eyes). “Let us go! Let us leave this

gloomy wood. Let us get out into the sunshine. See! It is getting dark. We must not stay here any longer."

"Yes, let us go," he said, rising, lifting her gently from the ground and leading her back to the buggy in which they took their seats and drove rapidly forward.

In a few moments they emerged from the forest. The sun was still a little way above the horizon; its cheerful beams partially restored Pepeeta's spirits, and David felt a momentary pleasure as he saw a slight smile upon her pale countenance.

"Do you feel happier now?" he said.

"Yes, a little," she answered, looking into his face with eyes suffused with tears. "And I am so thankful that you are safe!"

"And so you fainted before we fell?" he asked, compelled to reassure himself.

"Did you fall?" she said, trembling again and laying her hand upon his arm.

"There, there," he answered gently; "I ought not to have asked you. We must never allude to it again. We must forget it. Will you try?"

"Yes, I will try, but it is hard. It belongs to the past, and we must live in the present and in the future. I will try. I love you so, and I am so thankful that you are safe." As she said this, she took his hand in both of hers and pressed it to her breast.

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This tender caress produced a revulsion in his heart and he shuddered. Pepeeta observed it. “What makes you tremble so?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he answered, regaining his self-control. “It is only that I have been very angry, and I cannot recover from it at once.”

“No wonder,” she said, taking his hand again and kissing it.

In the distance they saw the steeple of a church. “Look,” said David, “there must be a village near. We will top and rest here to-night, and in the morning we will push on toward New Orleans and forget the past.”

They rode in silence. Pepeeta’s thoughts were full of gladness; and David’s full of agony—they rushed tumultuously back and forth through his mind like contrary winds through a forest.

“Was it not enough that I should be an Adam, and fall? Must I also become a Cain and go forth with the brand of a murderer on my forehead?” he kept saying to himself.

His life seemed destined to reproduce that whole series of archetypal experiences, whose records make the Hebrew Scriptures the inspired mirror of human life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FUGITIVE AND A VAGABOND

> “That is the bitterest of all,—to wear the yoke of our own wrong-doing!”—Daniel Deronda.

The morning after the fight David and Pepeeta hurried on to Louisville, and from there took a steamer to New Orleans.

However hard it is to find stepping-stones when one wishes to rise, those by which he can descend have been skilfully planted at every stage of life’s journey, and Satanic ingenuity could not have devised an instrument better fitted to complete the destruction of the young mystic’s moral nature than a Mississippi steamboat, such as he found lying at the wharf. He had been subjected to the fascination of love, now he was to be tried by that of money. It is by a series of such consecutive assaults upon every avenue of approach to the soul that it is at last reduced to ruin.

Pepeeta was radiant with joy as they embarked. “How happy I am!” she cried. “It seems as if I had left my old life and the old world behind me!”

“And I am happy to see you glad,” answered the wretched youth, whose heart lay in his bosom like lead and whose conscience was writhing with a torture of whose like he had never even dreamed. They embarked unknown and unobserved; but as soon as the first confusion had passed, their singular beauty and unusual appearance made them the cynosure of every eye.

“Who is that splendid fellow?” women asked each other, as David passed with Pepeeta on his arm, while under their breaths men swore that his companion was the loveliest woman who had ever set foot on a Mississippi steamer.

The pilot forgot to turn his wheel and the stevedores to put out the gang plank when she stood looking at them. Love, and her freedom, had transfigured her. She was radiant with health, happiness and hope, and entered into the novelty and excitement of this floating world with the ardor of a child.

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All was gaiety and animation oh board the vessel. People from countries widely separated mingled with each other and chatted with the greatest freedom on every subject of human interest. Acquaintances were made without the formality of an introduction, and it was not long before the two adventurers were drawn into conversation.

“I have traveled all over the world,” said a gentleman of foreign air, “but I have never seen anything so picturesque as this boat. Look at the variegated colors and styles of these costumes, at the manifold types of countenance, at the blending of races—black and white and red! Listen to the discordant but altogether charming sounds, the ringing of the great bell, the roar of the whistle, the splash of the paddlewheels, the songs of the negroes, and the clatter of dishes in the cabins! It is a hurly-burly of noise! Then what varied scenery, what constant excitement at the landing, what a hodge-podge, a pot-pourri of merchandise! There is nothing like it in the world.”

“Wait until you see a race with another steamer,” said an officious Yankee, who rejoiced in a knowledge which frequent trips had given him.

“Are they exciting?” asked the foreigner.

“Well I should say! I have seen horse races and prize fights in my day, but I never ran against anything that shook up my nerves like a race between two of these river boats! Every pound of steam is crowded on, the engines groan like imprisoned devils, a darkey sits on the safety valve, the stokers jam the furnaces, the passengers crowd the gunwales, everybody yells at the top of his voice until pandemonium is mere silence compared to it! And then the betting! Lord, you never saw betting if you never saw a river race.”

“They bet, do they?”

“Bet? They don’t do anything else! Just got on at Louisville? Oh! well, you’ll see sights in the cabin to-night that will open your eyes. Isn’t that so?” he asked, turning to a southern planter who had been edging his way toward Pepeeta.

“Reckon the gentleman’ll see a little gambling, sah, if that’s what you refeh to. I’ve heard those that ought to know say that a Mississippi river boat is the toughest spot on top of earth for little games of pokah and that soht of thing, sah. ’Spect the gentleman can be accommodated if he likes a lively game of chance.”

“I don’t expect to be surprised in that line,” the foreigner said, with the air of one who knew a thing or two; “for I have been in Monte Carlo, Carlsbad and every famous gambling place in Europe.”

“Well, sah, I don’t know; I have never been in those places myself, but I have heard those who have say that what they play there is mere ’penny ante’ to what goes on in one of these yere Mississippi boats. Like a little game now and then myself, sah. Glad to have you join me.”

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While these men and others pretended to address their remarks to David or to each other, their free glances were more and more directed to Pepeeta who began to be embarrassed by them and gently drew David away to more retired places. He went with her reluctantly, for he was in need of excitement. The thought of his crime was constantly agitating his heart, the prostrate form of the doctor with the bloody wound on his forehead was never absent from his mind, and through all the ceaseless rumble around him he could hear the dull thud of the stone upon the hard skull. The efforts which he made to throw off these horrible weights that crushed him were like those of a man awakening from a nightmare. He scarcely dared to speak for fear of uttering words which would betray him and which seemed to tremble on his lips. Had he been on shore he would have fled to the solitude of a forest; but here he was resistlessly impelled to that other solitude—a crowd. The necessity of being gay with his beautiful bride and of concealing every trace of his terror and remorse taxed his resources to their utmost limit, and in his nervousness he kept Pepeeta moving with him all day long. At its close she was completely exhausted, and retired early to her stateroom. Freed from her company and craving relief from thought, David made his way straight to the gambling tables where the nightly games were in full swing.

The claim of the southerner that the excitement at those tables, when the river traffic was at its height, had never been surpassed in the history of games of chance, was no exaggeration. Not a semblance of restraint was put upon the players, and experts from all over the world gathered to pluck the exhaustless supply of victims, as buzzards assemble to feed on carrion. Fortunes were made and lost in a night. Men sat down to play worth thousands of dollars, and rose paupers! They staked and lost their money, their slaves, their business and their homes. In the wild frenzy which such misfortunes kindle the most shocking crimes were committed, but the criminals were never called to account, for the law was powerless.

What the fugitive sought was diversion, and he found it! Tragedies became commonplace in those cabins. Men crowded into single hours the experience and excitement of months. It was this very night that an encounter occurred which is still a tradition on the river.

An old planter approached a table where his son, who did not know of his father's presence on the boat, was playing. He stood in the background and watched a gambler strip the boy of his last penny, and when the young fellow rose from his chair, white as a sheet, he turned to look into the whiter face of his father. The enraged parent did not speak a word, but took the seat left vacant by the boy and commenced playing. Rage at the financial loss, mortification at the boy's defeat, and old scores to be settled with this very gambler, conspired to rouse him to a frenzy. His terrible earnestness paralyzed the dealer, who seemed to form some premonition of a tragic termination and lost his nerve. In a little while, in the presence of a crowd of excited spectators, the father won back the exact amount his son had lost, and then rising from his chair sprang at the gambler, seized him, dragged him from the cabin and flung him into the river.

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Terrible as was the furor which this tragedy aroused, it subsided almost as soon as the ripples of the water which closed over the drowning man, and the players returned to their games as if nothing had happened.

In the months which they had spent together the quack had indoctrinated David into all the best-known secrets of this vice, and besides this, had familiarized him with the use of a certain “hold out” of his own invention, with which he had achieved incredible results and which was new to the fraternity of the river. Having watched the players for a long time, David convinced himself that he could employ this trick successfully, and took his place at the table.

The young man’s nerves were tested by the circumstances in which he found himself, if nerves are tested to tension anywhere, for he faced the most experienced masters of the craft who could be found anywhere in the world, and staked not only his little fortune, but his existence, for, as he had just seen, these determined and reckless men thought no more of taking life than of taking money.

David felt his way along with a coolness that astonished himself, and his very first experiment with the delicate apparatus concealed in his sleeve was such a brilliant triumph that he saw it was undetected. With a strengthened confidence, he made the stakes larger and larger, and his winnings increased so rapidly as to make him the center of attention. The crowd swarmed round the table. The spectators became breathless. The gamblers were first astonished, then bewildered. As their nerve failed them, David’s assurance increased, and when day broke ten thousand dollars lay upon the table before him as the result of his skilful and desperate efforts.

Their loss astonished and enraged the gamblers to such a degree that with a preconcerted signal they sprang at their opponent, determined to regain their money by violence. The move was not unexpected, nor was he unprepared. He fought as he had played, and so won the sympathies of the bystanders that in an instant there was a general melee in which he was helped to escape with the winnings.

He was the hero of the trip, and a career had opened before him. Satellites began to circle around him and to solicit his friendship and patronage.

When he disembarked at New Orleans he had already entered into a partnership with one of the most notable members of the gambling fraternity, and purchased an interest in one of those “palaces” where games of chance attracted and destroyed their thousands.

The newspapers made the gay throngs of that gayest of all cities familiar with the incidents of David’s advent. He and Pepeeta became the talk of the town. They rented a fashionable house, and swung out into the current of the mad life of the metropolis of the South.

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For a little while this excitement and glory softened the pain in the heart of the man who believed himself to be a murderer and encouraged him to hope that it might eventually pass away. He played recklessly but successfully, for he was a transient favorite of the fickle goddess. When gambling lost its power to drown the voice of conscience, there was the race, the play and the wine cup! To each of them appealing in turn, he went whirling madly around the outer circles of the great maelstrom in which so many brilliant youths were swallowed in those ante-bellum days.

CHAPTER XIX.

ALIENATION

> "There can never be deep peace between two spirits, never mutual respect, until, in their dialogue, each stands for the whole world."—Emerson.

For two years David and Pepeeta lived together in New Orleans. They were years full of import, and of trouble. A baby came to them, lingered a few weeks, and then died.

David pursued the occupation he had chosen, with the vicissitudes of fortune usually attending the votaries of games of chance, and the moral and spiritual deterioration which they invariably develop.

Pepeeta altered strangely. Her bloom disappeared and an expression of sadness became habitual on her face. She was surrounded by luxuries of every kind, but they did not give her peace. With an ambition which never flagged she sought self improvement, and attained it to a remarkable degree. Endowed with an inherited aptitude for culture, she read and studied books, observed and imitated elegant manners, and rapidly absorbed the best elements of such higher life as she had access to, until her natural beauty and charm were wonderfully enhanced. Yet she was not happy, for her life with David had brought her nothing but surprise and disappointment; something had come between them, she knew not what.

"Dey des growed apaht," said the old negro "mammy," who was with them during those two years. "Seemed to des tech each other like mahbles at a single point, stade of meltin' togedder lak two drops of watah runnin' down a window pane. Mars' David, he done went he own way, drinkin', gamblin' and cussin'; he lak a madman when he baby die. He seem skeered when he see Miss Pepeeta. She look at him wid her big black eyes full of wonder and s'prise, stretch out her li'l han's, and when he run away or struck her, she des go out to the li'l baby's grave, creeping along lak a shadder through the gyahden, soft lak and still. Dar she des set down all alone and sigh lak de breeze in de ole pine tree. Some days she gone away all alone and de brack folks say she wanner all aroun' in de woods. When Sunday come, she des slip into de churches lak a li'l

mouse and nibble up de gospel crumbs and den run away before de priests cotch her. Dark days dose, in de ole Ballantrae mansion! And den come de night when dey pahted. You done heah about dat?”

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The old colored mammy was right. “They just grew apart,” as it was inevitable that they should. Perfect self-manifestation is the true principle and law of love, and when a guilty secret comes between two lovers, suspicion and fear inevitably result. They become incomprehensible to each other.

David’s secret preyed upon him night and day like that insect which, having once entered the brain of an elk, gnaws ceaselessly at it until the miserable victim’s last breath is drawn. While he retained for Pepeeta a devotion which tormented him with its intensity, his guilt made him tremble in her presence. He shuddered when he approached her, like a worshiper who enters a shrine with a stolen offering. Instead of calming and soothing him as she would have done had he only suffered some misfortune instead of committing a sin, she filled him with an unendurable agitation. If the nerves are diseased, a flute can rasp them as terribly as a file.

As for Pepeeta, she must have been bewildered by this phenomenon which she could not possibly comprehend, for while she saw her lover swayed from his orbit she could not see the planet which produced the disturbance. Feeling that he had not given her his full confidence she resented his distrust, and as his melancholy and irritability increased, withdrew more and more into herself, and in that solitude sought the companionship of God.

It was a frightful discipline; but she was sanctified by it.

Day by day she became more patient, gentle and resigned, and in proportion as she grew in these graces, her lover’s awe and fear increased, and so they drifted farther and farther apart.

Such relationships cannot continue forever, and they generally terminate in tragedy.

After the first few months’ excitement of his new life, David’s conscience began to torment him anew. He became melancholy, then moody, and finally fell into the habit of sitting for hours among the crowds which swarmed the gambling rooms, brooding over his secret. From stage to stage in the evolution of his remorse he passed until he at last reached that of superstition, which attacks the soul of the gambler as rust does iron. And so the wretched victim of many vices sat one evening at the close of the second year with his hat drawn down over his eyes, reflecting upon his past.

“What’s the matter, Davy?” asked a player who had lost his stake, and was whistling good-humoredly as he left the room.

“Nothing,” he muttered.

“Brace up, old man! There is no use taking life so hard! You’ve got everything, and I’ve got nothing; and I am happy and you are miserable. Brace up, I say!” And with that he slapped him familiarly on the shoulder.

“Leave me alone,” David growled, and reached for a glass mug containing a strong decoction to which he was resorting more and more as his troubles grew intolerable. A strange thing happened! As he put it to his lips its bottom dropped upon the table and the contents streamed into his lap and down to the floor. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back, for it had aroused a superstitious terror.

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With a smothered cry he sprang to his feet and gazed around upon his companions. They, too, had observed the untoward accident, and to them as well as to him it was a symbol of disaster. Not one of them doubted that the bottom would fall out of his fortunes as out of his glass, for by such signs as these the gambler reads his destiny.

He pulled himself together and made a jest of the accident, but it was impossible for him to dissipate the impression it had made on the minds of his companions or to banish the gloom from his own soul. And so after a few brave but futile efforts to break the spell of apprehension, he slipped quietly away, opened the door and passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XX.

THE INEVITABLE HOUR

> "How shall I lose the sin yet keep the sense,
> And love th' offender, yet detest the offense?"
> —Pope.

After wandering aimlessly about the city for awhile the half-crazed gambler turned his footsteps toward home. He longed for and yet dreaded its quiet and repose. The forces of attraction and repulsion were so nearly balanced that for a long time he oscillated before his own door like a piece of iron hung between the opposite poles of a battery.

At last he entered, both hoping and fearing that Pepeeta would be asleep. He had a vague presentiment that he was on the verge of some great event. The guilty secret so long hidden in the depths of his soul seemed to have festered its way dangerously near to the surface, and he felt that if anything more should happen to irritate him he might do something desperate.

So quiet had been his movements that he stood at Pepeeta's door before she knew that he had entered the house, and when he saw her kneeling by her bedside he stamped his foot in rage. The worshiper, startled by the interruption, although she was momentarily expecting it, hastily arose.

As she turned toward him, he saw that there was a light on her pale countenance which reflected the peace of God to whom she had been praying, as worshipers always and inevitably reflect, however feebly, the character of what they worship. Her beauty, her humility, her holiness goaded him to madness. He hated her, and yet he loved her. He could either have killed her or died for her.

She smiled him a welcome which revealed her love, but did not conceal her sadness nor her suffering, and, approaching him, extended her hands for an embrace. He pushed her aside and flung himself heavily into a chair.

“You are tired,” she said soothingly, and stroked his hair.

He did not answer, and her caress both tranquilized and frenzied him.

She placed before him the little lunch which she always prepared with her own hands and kept in readiness for his return.

“Take it away,” he said.

She obeyed, and returning seated herself upon an ottoman at his feet.

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The silence was one which it seemed impossible to break, but which at last became unendurable.

“How often have I told you never to let me find you on your knees when I come home?” he at last asked, brutally.

“Oh! my beloved,” she exclaimed, “you will at least permit me to kneel to you! See! I am here in an attitude of supplication! Listen to me! Answer me! What is the matter? Do you not love me any more? Tell me!”

He drew away his hands which she had clasped, and folded them across his breast.

“What has come between us?” she continued. “Tell me why it is that instead of growing together, we are continually drawing apart? Sometimes I feel that we are drifting eternally away from each other. I can no longer get near to you. An ocean seems to roll between us! What does it mean? Is this the nature of love? Does it only last for a little time? Do you not love me any more? Will you never love me again?”

He still gazed sullenly at the floor.

“Will you not answer me?” she begged imploringly. “I cannot endure it any longer. My heart will break. I am a woman, you must remember that! I need love and sympathy so much. It is my daily bread. What is the matter? I beseech you to tell me! Is it your business? Do you feel, as I do, that it is wrong? I have sometimes thought so, and that you were worried by it and would be glad to give it up but for the fear that it might deprive me of some of these luxuries. Is it that? Oh! you do not know me. You do not know how happy I should be to leave these things forever, and to go out into the street this very night a pauper. It is wrong, David. I see it now. I feel it in the depths of my heart.”

“Wrong, is it,” he cried savagely, “and whose fault is it that I am in this wrong business?”

“It is mine,” she said, “mine! I own it. It was I who led you astray. How often and how bitterly have I regretted it! How strange it is, that love like mine could ever have done you harm. I do not understand this. I cannot see how love can do harm. I have loved you so truly and so deeply, and I would give my life for you, and yet this love of mine has been the cause of all your trouble! It would seem that love ought to bless us. Would you not think so?”

He sat silent; any one but Pepeeta could have seen that this silence would soon be broken by an explosion.

“Speak to me, my love!” she pleaded, “speak to me. I confess that I have wronged you. But is there not something that I can do to make you happy? Surely a wrong like this cannot be irreparable. Tell me something that I can do to make you happy!”

With a violent and convulsive effort, he pushed her away and exclaimed fiercely, “Leave me! Do not touch me! I hate you!”

“Hate me?” she cried, “hate me? Oh! David. You cannot mean it. You cannot mean that you hate me?”

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“But I do!” he exclaimed bitterly. “I hate you. You have ruined me, and now you confess it. From the time that I first saw you I have never had a moment’s peace. Why did you ever cross my path? Could you not have left me alone in my happiness and innocence? Look at me now. See what you have brought me to. I am ruined! But I am not alone. You have pulled yourself down with me. What will you say when I tell you that you are involved in a crime that must drag us both to hell?”

“A crime?” she cried, clasping her hands in terror.

“Yes, a crime. You need not look so innocent. You are as guilty as I, or at least you are as deeply involved. We are bound together in misery. We are doomed.”

“Doomed! Doomed! What do you mean? Tell me, I implore you—— do not speak in riddles!”

“Tell you? Do you wish to know? Are you in earnest? Then I will! You are not my wife! There! It is out at last!”

Pepeeta sprang to her feet and stood staring at him in horror.

“Not your wife?” she gasped.

“No, not my wife,” he said, repeating the bitter truth. “I deceived you. You were married to your beast of a husband lawfully enough; but as you would not leave him willingly, I determined that you should leave him any way. And so I bribed the justice to deceive you.”

“You-bribed-the-justice-to-deceive-me?”

“Yes, bribed him. Do you understand? You see now what your cursed beauty has brought you to?”

She stood before him white and silent.

He had risen, and they were confronting each other with their sins and their sorrows between them.

It was as if a flash of lightning had in an instant lit up the darkness of her whole existence, and she saw in one swift glance not only her misery, but her sin. He was cruel; but he was right. She had been ignorant; but she had not been altogether innocent. There was a period in this tragedy when she had gone against the vague but powerful protest of her soul. With a swift and true perception she traced her present sorrow to that moment in the twilight when, against that protest, she besought David to accompany them on their travels. She felt, but did not observe nor heed that admonition. She had even forgotten it, but now it rose vividly before her memory.

These moments of revision, when the logic of events throws into clear light the vaguely perceived motives of the soul, are always dramatic and often terrible.

It was Pepeeta who broke the silence following David's outburst. In a voice preternaturally calm, she said, "We are in the presence of God, and I demand of you the truth. Is what you have told me true?"

"As true as life. As true as death. As true as hell," he answered bitterly.

"This, then," she said, "is the clue to all this mystery. The tangled thread has begun to unravel. Many times this suspicion has forced itself upon my mind; but it was too terrible to believe! And yet I, who could not endure the suspicion, must now support the reality."

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They had not taken their eyes from each other and were trying to penetrate each other's minds, but realized that it was impossible. There was in each something that the other could not comprehend.

The strain on his overwrought nerves soon became unendurable to David, and he sank into a chair.

"Well," he said, as he did so, "what are you going to do about it?"

She had not at first realized that the emergency called for action, but this inquiry awakened her to the consciousness that she was in a situation from which she must escape by an effort of her will. She was before a horrible dilemma and upon one horn or the other she must be cruelly impaled.

But David, who asked the question, had not realized this necessity at all.

"Do?" she said, "do? Must I do something? Yes, you are right. We cannot go on as we are. Something must be done. But what? Is it possible that I must return to my husband? How can I do that—I who cannot think of him without loathing! What is the matter? Why do you tremble so? Is it then as terrible to you as to me? I see from your emotion that I am right. And yet I cannot see what good it will do! How can it undo the wrong? It will be a certain sort of reparation, but it cannot bring him happiness, for I cannot give him back my heart. To whom will it bring happiness? Has happiness become impossible? Are we all three doomed to eternal misery? Oh! David, why have you done this?"

He did not reply, but sat cowering in his chair.

"Forgive me," she cried, when she noticed his despair, "I did not mean to reproach you, but I am so bewildered! And yet I see my duty! If he is my husband, I must go back to him. A wife's place is by her husband's side. I do not see how I can do it, but I must. How hard it is! I cannot realize it. The very thought of seeing him again makes me shudder! And yet I must go!"

"It is impossible," gasped the trembling creature to whom she looked for confirmation.

"Why impossible?"

"Because, because—he—is—dead," he whispered, through his dry lips.

"Dead? Did you say dead?" Pepeeta cried. "When did he die? How did he die?"

"I killed him," he shouted, springing to his feet and waving his hands wildly. "There! It has told itself. I knew it would. It has been eating its way out of my heart for months. I should have died if I had kept it secret for another moment. I feel relieved already. You

do not know what it means to guard a secret night and day for years, do you? Oh, how sweet it is to tell it at last. I killed him! I killed him! I struck him with a stone. I crushed his skull and turned him face downward in the road and left him there so that when they found him they would think that he had fallen from his horse. It was well done, for one who had had no training in crime! No one has suspected it. I am in no danger. And yet I could not keep the secret any longer.

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Explain that, will you? If my tongue had been torn out by the roots, my eyes would have looked it, and if my eyes had been seared with a red-hot iron, my hands would have written it. A crime can find a thousand tongues! And now that I have told it, I feel so much happier. You would not believe it, Pepeeta. I am like myself again. I feel as if I should never be unkind or irritable any more. The load has fallen from my heart. Come, now, and kiss me. Let me take you in my arms."

Extending his hands, he approached her. As he did so, the look of horror with which she had regarded him intensified and she retreated before him until she reached the wall, looking like a sea-bird hurled against a precipice by a storm. Such dread was on her face that he dared not touch her.

"What is the matter?" he said. "Are you afraid of me?"

She did not reply, but gazed at him as if he were some monster suddenly risen from the deep. He endured the glance for a single moment, and then, realizing the crime which he had committed had excited an uncontrollable repulsion for him in her soul, he staggered backward and sank once more into his chair, the picture of helpless and hopeless despair.

For a long time Pepeeta gazed at him without moving or speaking. And then, as she beheld his misery, the look of horror slowly melted into one of pity, until she seemed like an angel who from some vast distance surveys a sinful man. Gradually she began to realize that he who had committed this dreadful deed was her own lover, and that it was the result of that guilty affection which they bore each other. The consciousness of her own complicity softened her. She moved towards him; she spoke.

"Forgive me," she said, "for seeming even for a moment to despise and abhor you. It was all so sudden. I do not mean to condemn you. I do not mean to act or feel as if I were any less guilty than you are in all this wrong. But when one has to face something awful without preparation, it is very hard. No wonder that we do not know what to do. Who but God can extricate us from this trouble? We are both guilty, David. I think that it is because I have had so large a share in all the rest that has been wrong that I cannot now feel towards you as I think I ought. It is true that you have injured me terribly and irretrievably. It is true that your hands are stained with blood, and yet I love you! My heart yearns for you this moment as never before since we have known each other. I long to take you in my arms."

He interrupted her by springing from his chair and attempting to embrace her; but she waved him back with a strange majesty in her mien, and continued. "I long to take you to my heart and comfort you. I could live with you or I could die with you. But there is a voice within my soul that tells me that we must part. Lives cannot be bound together by

crime. While misfortunes and mistakes may knit the hearts of lovers together, evil deeds must force them apart! We are not lawfully married, and so—”

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“But we can be!” he exclaimed.

“No,” she answered, in a voice that sounded to him like that of destiny. “No, we cannot. No one would marry us if the facts were known. And if we concealed them from others, we could not hide them from ourselves! We have no right to each other. We could not respect and therefore we could not truly love each other. Into every moment of our lives this guilty secret would intrude. No, it is impossible. I see it clearly. Every passing moment only makes it more plain. It is terrible, but it is necessary, and what must be, must!”

“We shall not part!” he cried, springing towards her and seizing her by the wrist. “God has bound us together and no man shall put us asunder! We are as firmly linked by vice as by virtue. This secret will draw us together! We cannot keep away from each other. I should find you if you were in heaven and I in hell. You are mine! mine, I say! Nothing shall part us. Have I not suffered for you and sinned for you? What better title is there than that? It was not the sin, but the secret which has alienated us, and now that I am not compelled to guard it any longer, there can be no more trouble between us. The deed has passed unsuspected. We should have heard of it long ago if any one had ever doubted that it was an accident. Let the dead past bury its dead! Let us be happy.”

He looked down upon her as if his will were irresistible; but she remained unmoved and immovable, and gazed at him with deep, sad eyes in which he saw his doom.

“No,” she answered, calmly, “it is impossible. You need not argue. You cannot change my mind. I see it all too clearly. We must part.”

“Oh! pity me,” he cried, falling on his knees. “What shall I do? I cannot bear this burden alone. It will crush me. Have mercy, Pepeeta. Do not drive me away. I cannot endure to go forth with this brand of Cain upon my forehead and realize that I shall never hear from your lips another word of love or comfort. Pity me. You are not God. He has not put justice into your hands for execution. You are only human!”

“Alas,” she cried, “and all too human. But, my beloved, I am not acting for myself. It is not my mind or heart that speaks. It is God speaking through me. I feel myself to be acting under an influence apart from myself. We have resisted these voices and this influence too long. Now we must obey them.”

“But, Pepeeta,” he continued, “you do not really think that you have the power to suppress the love you feel for me?”

“I shall not try,” she answered.

“But can you not see that this passion of ours will bring us together again? Sooner or later, love will conquer. It conquers or crushes. Everything gives way to it at last. It disrupts the most solemn contracts. It burns the strongest bonds like tow. Always and everywhere, men and women who love will come together. It is the law of life, it is destiny. We cannot remain apart, we are linked together for time and eternity.”

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She listened to him calmly until he had finished and then said, “Nevertheless, I must go. And I will go now; delay is useless. I see only too clearly that as long as I am near, you must steadily get worse instead of better. While you possess the fruits of your sin you will not truly repent. You must either surrender them or be deprived of them. We can never become accustomed to this awful secret. Our lives are doomed to loneliness and sorrow; we must accept our destiny; we must go forth alone to seek the forgiveness of God. Good-bye; but remember, David, in every hour of trial, wherever you may be, there will be a never-ceasing prayer ascending to God for you. My life shall be devoted to supplication. I shall never lose hope; I shall never doubt. Love like that I bear you must in some way be redemptive in its nature. All will be well. Once more, good-bye.”

She smiled on him with unutterable tenderness, and with her eyes still fixed upon his haggard face began to move slowly toward the door.

He did not stir; he could not move, but remained upon his knees with his hands extended towards her in supplication.

Like some exalted figure in a dream he saw her vanish from his sight; the world became empty and dark; his powers of endurance had been overtaxed; he lost all consciousness, and fell forward on the floor.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SIGNAL IN THE NIGHT

> “How far that little candle throws his beams!”
>
> —Merchant of Venice.

A month of dangerous and almost fatal sickness followed. When at last, through the care of a faithful negro “mammy,” the much-enduring man crept out from the valley of the shadow of death, he learned that Pepeeta had secured a little room in a tenement house and was supporting herself with her needle, in the use of which she had become an expert in those glad hours when she made her baby’s clothes, and those sad ones when she sat far into the night awaiting David’s return.

On the morning of the first day in which he was permitted to leave the house he made his way to Pepeeta’s new quarters.

“And so this is to be her home,” he said with a shudder as he looked up to the attic window. Every day this pale young man was seen, by the curious neighbors, hovering about the place. As for the object of his love and solicitude, she began at once to be a bread-winner. The delicate girl who never in her life until now had experienced a care about the necessities of existence began to struggle for bread in company with the

thousands of poor and needy, creatures by whom she found herself surrounded. The only hunger she experienced was that of the heart. She soon became conscious of David's presence, and derived from it a pleasure which only added to her pain. She avoided him as best she could, and her determination and her sanctity prevented him from approaching her.

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David could never remember how many days were passed in this way, for he lost count of time, and lived more like a man in a dream than like one in a world of life and action.

But as his strength slowly returned, he grew more and more restive under the restraint which Pepeeta's will imposed upon him. And so, while he did not dare to approach her in person, he determined to put his case to a final test, and if he could not win her back to leave forever a place in which he was doomed to suffer perpetual torment.

In the execution of this purpose, he wrote her a letter in which, after passionately pleading for her love, he asked her to give him a sign of willingness to take him once more back into her life. "If I may cherish hope of your ultimate relenting," he wrote, "place your candle on the window sill. I will wait until midnight, and if you extinguish it then, I shall accept your decision as final, and you will be responsible for what follows. I am a desperate man, and life without you has become intolerable."

With this letter in his hand, he waited until the street was quiet and the halls of the tenement house deserted, and then crept up the long staircase with trembling knees.

On tiptoe he picked his way across the corridor and slipped the note under the door. So quietly did he step that he did not hear his own footfall; but it did not escape the ears of the woman who sat stitching her life into the garment lying upon her knees. There is often in a footfall music sweeter than bird songs or harp tones.

Having thrust the letter under the door, David fled hastily down the stairway and into the street, where he began to pace back and forth like a sentry on his beat, never for a single instant losing sight of the window whence streamed the feeble rays of the candle from which he was to receive the signal of hope or despair.

Never did a condemned felon in a cell watch for the coming of a messenger of pardon with more wildly beating heart than his as he gazed at that window up in the wall of the gloomy tenement house. Never did a mariner on a storm-tossed vessel keep his eye more resolutely fixed on beams from a distant lighthouse.

It was then ten o'clock, and as he watched the slow-moving hands upon the moonlit dial in the church tower, it seemed to him they were held back by invisible fingers, and there came to his mind a forgotten story of a man who, having been accidentally imprisoned in a sepulchre, suffered in the twenty minutes which elapsed before his release all the pangs of starvation, so powerfully was his imagination excited. This story which he had once discredited he now believed, for it seemed to him as if eternities were being crowded into single moments.

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He had also heard that drowning men could review their entire lives in the few instants that preceded their loss of consciousness, and he acquired a new comprehension of this mystery. All the experiences of his entire existence swept through his mind again and again with a rapidity and a distinctness that astonished him. Like a great shuttle darting back and forth through a fabric, his mind seemed to be passing again and again forward and backward through all the scenes of the past. Finally, and after what seemed uncounted ages, the great clock struck the hour of midnight. One, two, three —he stood like a man rooted to the ground,—four, five, six—his heart beat louder than the bell,—seven, eight, nine—the blood seemed bursting through his temples,—ten, eleven, twelve!—the light went out! The universe seemed to have been instantaneously swallowed up in darkness. He could not see the figure that crept to the window and gazed down upon him from behind the drapery of the curtains. He did not know that Pepeeta had fallen upon her knees in an agony deeper than his own, and was gazing down at him through streaming tears. In those few succeeding moments the sense of his personal loss was displaced by a sudden and overpowering sense of his personal guilt. The full consciousness of his sin burst upon him. He saw the selfishness of his love and the wickedness of his lust in a light brighter than day.

There is a kind of rhododendron about Trebizond of which the bees make a honey that drives people mad! He saw that illicit love was that honey of Trebizond! He felt, as he had never felt before, the pressure of that terrible power that over all and through all the discords and sins of life makes resistlessly for righteousness. He perceived that a system of wheels is attached to every thought and act, and that, each one sets in motion the entire machinery of justice. He felt that every sleepless starry eye in heaven penetrated the guilty secrets of his soul and was pledged to the execution of judgment.

These perceptions confounded him with fear. His thoughts ceased to move in order, tossing and teasing each other like straws in the wind. They ceased to illumine the depths of his soul and only hung like flickering candles above a dark mine.

Whether he looked up or down, without or within, he saw no hope, but it was not until after the lapse of many and unnoted moments that the disturbed machinery of his mind began to move. He awakened as from a nightmare, drew his hands across his eyes and looked this way and that as if to get his bearings.

“What next?” he said aloud, as if speaking to some one else. Receiving no answer, he turned instinctively toward his gambling house, and went stumbling along through the deserted streets. What is a man, after all, but a stumbling machine? Progress is made by falling forward over obstacles! The poor stumbler tottered across his own threshold into that brilliant room where he had always received an enthusiastic welcome, but which he had not visited since his sickness. If ever a man needed kindness and encouragement it was he; but his sensitive spirit instantly discovered that all was changed.

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His superstitious companions had not forgotten the broken glass, and had heard of his subsequent calamities. With them the lucky alone were the adorable! The gods of the temples of fortunes are easily and quickly dethroned and the worshipers had already prostrated themselves before other shrines.

The coldness of his greeting sent a chill to his already benumbed heart and increased his desperation. He was nervous, excited, depressed, and feeling the need of something to distract his thought from his troubles, he sat down and began to play; but from the first deal he lost—lost steadily and heavily.

The habitues of the place exchanged significant glances as much as to say, “I told you so!”

Whispered phrases passed from lip to lip.

“He is playing wild.”

“He has lost his nerve.”

“His luck has turned.”

And so indeed it had! Within a few short hours he had staked his entire fortune and lost it. It had gone as easily and as quickly as it had come.

“I guess that is about all,” he said, pushing himself wearily back from the table at which he had just parted with the title to his desolated home.

“Shall I stake you, Davy?” asked one of his friends, touched by the pathos of the haggard face and hopeless voice.

“No,” he answered, rising. “I have played enough. I am going away. Good-bye, boys.”

Without another word, he left them and passed out of the door.

“Good-bye,” they cried, as he vanished, scarcely raising their eyes from the tables.

Even in a crowd like that there will generally be found some heart which still retains its tenderness. The young man who had offered to stake him, followed the ruined gambler into the street.

“Where are you going, old man?” he said kindly, slipping his hand through David’s arm.

“I don’t know,” he answered absently.

“Are you dead broke, Davy?”

“Dead broke,” in a lifeless echo.

“Will you accept a little loan? You can’t go far without money.”

“It’s no use.”

“Take it! I wouldn’t have had it if it hadn’t been for you, and I won’t have it long whether you take it or not.”

As he spoke he slipped a roll of bills into his friend’s pocket.

“Thanks!” said David.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied.

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

The sun was just rising as they parted. The first faint stir of life was perceptible in the city streets; the green-grocers were coming in with their fresh vegetables; the office boys were opening the doors and putting away the shutters; there was a bright, morning look on the faces which peered into the haggard countenance of the gambler as he crept aimlessly along, but the fresh, sweet light gave him neither brightness nor joy. His heart was cold and dead; he had not even formed a purpose.

And so he drifted aimlessly until the current that was setting toward the levee caught him and bore him on with it. The sight of a vessel just putting out to sea communicated to his spirit its first definite impulse and he ascended the gang-plank without even inquiring its destination.

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In a few moments the boat swung loose and turned its prow down the river. The bustle of the embarkation distracted him. He watched the hurrying sailors, gazed at the piles of merchandise, walked up and down the deck, listened to the fresh breeze that began to play upon the great, sonorous harp of the shrouds and the masts, and when at last the vessel glided out into the waters of the gulf he lay down in a hammock and fell into a long and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

HEART HUNGER

> "Only; I discern
> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn."
>
> —Browning.

For a moment after she had read the note which David thrust beneath her door, Pepeeta held her breath; then sinking to her knees, she prostrated herself before that august Being to whom all men bow in last extremities; her head resting upon arms pathetically crossed on the low window sill—bruised but not broken, cast down, but not destroyed—she drank the cup of sorrow to its dregs.

Men hang birds in dark rooms, sometimes, until they learn to sing, and it was to a kindred discipline of her Heavenly Father's that Pepeeta was being subjected. In that supreme hour of trial she performed the greatest feat of which the soul is capable. She defied her own nature; she committed an act of sacred violence against the most clamorous propensities of her heart.

What that struggle cost her no mortal mind can know. That in her decision she chose the better part some will doubt. The most common justification of our conduct is that we have followed the "dictates of our natures." But because those natures are double, and the good and evil perpetually struggle for the mastery, we are sometimes compelled to reverse their most strenuous demands.

Those lofty souls who are enabled to perceive their duty clearly and to commit bravely this act of sacred violence must always remain a mystery to those who meanly live upon a lower plane of existence.

It was as certain when this pure soul entered upon her renewed struggle to find the path of duty that she would succeed, as that the carrier pigeon, launched into an unknown region, will find the homeward way; but for a little time she fluttered her wings in ignorance and despair; she found no rest for the soles of her feet, and the ark of refuge was nowhere to be seen.

The nearness of her lover, she could see him in the street; his sorrow, she could behold his white face even by the pale light of the moon; his tender love, whose real depth she had never for a moment doubted; his bitter agony, which she knew she could terminate in a single instant, all appealed to her with an indescribable power. Her own sorrow and loneliness were eclipsed by the consciousness of the sorrow and loneliness of the man whom she loved more than life. She felt the pain in his bosom far more than in her own; but this feeling which added so much to her suffering became a clear interpreter of her duty.

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She acted from a single, undivided impulse; it was to do him good and bring to him the final beatitude of life. She saw as clearly as when the facts about this tragedy were flashed upon her that her presence in David's life would be a perpetual source of irritation, and that so long as he possessed her he would never be able to face the truly spiritual problems which remained to be solved.

How she acquired those powers of divination is a mystery. Such women possess a certain prescience that cannot wholly be accounted for. What Pepeeta did was right because she was Pepeeta. It does not follow that because such natures see so clearly that they act with less pain than others. Indeed, the more clear those spiritual perceptions, the more poignant are the sufferings which they involve; life can scarcely afford a situation more pathetic than hers.

Alone in a great city, young and beautiful, capable of enjoying happiness with a singular appreciation, the victim of a complicated set of circumstances for the comprehension and management of which her early life had afforded no training; guilty of a great sin, but if one could say so, innocently guilty, and penitent; consecrated to duty, but torn asunder by conflicting emotions as if upon a wheel—of what deeper sorrow is the soul capable?

When she extinguished that candle she extinguished the sun of her human happiness; but it happened to her as it has happened to countless others, that in the darkness which ensued she saw a myriad beautiful stars.

The next morning Pepeeta resolutely took up the heavy burden of her life and bore it uncomplainingly, adjusting herself as the brave and patient have ever done, to the necessities of her daily existence. Her little attic room became a sort of sanctuary, and began to take upon itself a reflection of her nature. She built it to fit her own character and needs, as a bird builds its nest to fit its bosom.

It may be said of most of us that we secrete our homes as the snails do their shells. They become a sort of material embodiment of our spirits, a physical expression of our whole thought about life. Before long flowers were blooming in Pepeeta's window; a mocking bird was singing in a cage above it; on the wall hung the old tambourine and one after another many little inexpensive but brightening bits and scraps of things such as women pick up by instinct found their places in this simple attic.

She seldom left it for the outside world, except when she went to deliver the work she had finished, and on Sundays when she spent the morning wandering from one church to another. As a consequence of these brief but regular pilgrimages her beautiful face became familiar to the residents of some of the side streets where the women and children made her low courtesies and the men doffed their hats by that divine instinct of reverence which we all feel in the presence of the beautiful and the good.

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A double craving devours our human hearts—for solitude and for companionship. As there are hours when we thirst to be alone, there are others when we hunger for the touch of a human hand, the glance of a human eye, a smile from human lips. Even gross, material things like food and drink lose half their flavor when taken in solitude. Pepeeta needed friends and found them.

We never know how small a part of ourselves that fraction may be which we have taken for the whole! We come to know ourselves by struggle and endeavor, more than by thought and meditation. We have only to do our work each day in hope and trust. We can only find rest in effort. It is not in repose, but in activity—not in joy, but in sorrow, that the soul comes to its second birth. Pepeeta needed labor and suffering, and they were sent her.

She accepted all that followed her supreme decision without a question and without a murmur for many months, and then—a reaction came! The draughts upon her physical and emotional nature had been too great.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHERE I MIGHT FIND HIM

> “Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt,
> Nothing’s so hard but search will find it out.”
>
> —Herrick.

During several months of loneliness and sorrow a great change had been taking place in the mind of the patient sufferer, of which she was only vaguely conscious.

Purposes are often formed in the depths of our souls, of which we know nothing until they suddenly emerge into full view. Such a purpose had been slowly evolving in the heart of Pepeeta.

The strain which she had been undergoing began at last to exhaust her physically.

Her vital force became depleted, her step grew feeble, the light died out of her eyes, she drooped and crept feebly about her room. The determination which she had so resolutely maintained to live apart from her guilty lover slowly ebbed away. She was, after all, a woman, not a disembodied spirit, and her woman’s heart yearned unquenchably for the touch of her lover’s hand, for the kisses of his lips, for the comfort of his presence.

This longing increased with every passing hour. Fatigue, weariness, loneliness, steadily undermined her still struggling resistance to those hungerings which never left her, till at

last, when the failing resources of her nature were at their lowest point, all her remaining strength was concentrated into a single passionate desire to look once more upon the face which glowed forever before her inner eye, or at least to discover what had befallen the wanderer in his sin and wretchedness.

Slowly the diffused longing crystallized into a fixed purpose, to resist which was beyond her power. Having nobly conquered temptation while she had strength, and yielded only when her physical nature itself was exhausted, she gathered up the few possessions she had accumulated, sold them for what they would bring, and, with a heart palpitating wildly, broke every tie she had formed with the life around her and turned her face toward the little village where her happiness and sorrows had begun.

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It was a long and tedious journey from New Orleans to Cincinnati in those days, and it told terribly upon the weakened constitution of the wayfarer. Her heart beat too violently in her bosom; a fierce fever began to burn in her veins; she trembled with terror lest her strength fail her before she reached her journey's end. It was not of Death himself that she was afraid; but that he should overtake her before she had seen her lover!

Husbanding her strength as shipwrecked sailors save their bread and water, she counted the days and the miles to the journey's end, and having arrived at the wharf of the Queen City, the pale young traveler who had excited the compassion of the passengers, but who would neither communicate the secret of her sorrow nor accept of any aid, took her little bundle in her thin hand and started off on the last stage of her weary pilgrimage. It was the hardest of all, for her money was exhausted and there was nothing for her to do but walk.

It was a cold December day. Gray clouds lowered, wintry winds began to moan, and she had proceeded but a little way when light flakes of snow began to fall. The chill penetrated her thin clothing and shook her fragile form. She moved more like a wraith than a living woman. Her tired feet left such slight impressions in the snow that the feathery flakes obliterated one almost before she had made another, and she was haunted by the thought that every trace of her passage through life was thus to disappear!

Ignorant of the distance or the exact direction, and stopping occasionally to inquire the way, she plodded on, the exhaustion of hunger and weariness becoming more and more unendurable. All that she did now was done by the sheer force of will; but yield she would not. She would die cheerfully when she had attained her object, but not before. The winds became more wild and boisterous; they loosened and tossed her black hair about her wan face; they beat against her person and drove her back. Every step seemed the last one possible; but suddenly, just as she descended the slope of a steep hill, she saw the twinkling lights of the village and the feeble rays shot new courage into her heart. Under this accession of power she pushed forward and made her way toward the old Quaker homestead.

The night had now deepened around her; but every foot of the landscape had been indelibly impressed upon her memory, and even in the gathering gloom she chose the road unerringly. There were only a few steps more, and reeling toward the door yard fence she felt her way to the gate, opened it, staggered forward up the path in the rays of light that struggled out into the darkness, and with one final effort fell fainting upon the threshold.

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The scene within the house presented a striking contrast to that without. In a great open fireplace the flames of the beech logs were wavering up the chimney. Seated in the radiance of their light, on a low stool, was a young boy with his elbows upon his knees and his cheeks in the palms of his hands. His mother sat by his side stroking his hair and gazing at him in fond, brooding love. The father was bending over a Bible lying open on the table; it was the hour of prayer. He was reading a lesson from the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew, and had just articulated in slow and reverent tones the words of Jesus, “I was a stranger and ye took me in,” when they heard a sound at the door.

Father, mother and son sprang to their feet and, hurrying towards the door, flung it open and beheld a woman’s limp form lying on the threshold.

It was but a child’s weight to the stalwart Quaker who picked it up in his great arms and carried it into the radiance of the great fireplace, and in an instant he and Dorothea his wife were pushing forward the work of restoration. They forced a cordial between the parted lips, chafed the white hands, warmed the half-frozen feet, and in a few moments were rewarded by discovering feeble signs of life. The color came back in a faint glow to the marble face, the pulses fluttered feebly, the bosom heaved gently, as if the refluent tide of life had surged reluctantly back, and the tired heart began once more to beat. She had regained her life but not her consciousness, and lay there as white and almost as still as death. The little boy stood gazing wonderingly at her from a distance. The calm features of the Quaker were agitated with emotion. His wife knelt by the side of the pale sleeper, and her tears dropped silently on the hand which she pressed to her lips.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SAFE HAVEN

> “The human heart finds shelter nowhere but in human kind.”
>
> —George Eliot.

For many days Pepeeta’s life hung in the balance, her spirit hovering uncertainly along the border land of being, and it was only love that wooed it back to life.

When at length, through careful nursing, she really regained her consciousness and came up from those unfathomable abysses where she had been wandering, she opened her eyes upon the walls of a little chamber that looked out through an alcove into the living room of the Quaker house.

Dorothea had finished her afternoon’s work and was seated before the great fireplace, while by her side stood Steven, speaking to her in whispers, and looking often toward

the cot on which Pepeeta lay. An almost sacred stillness was in the room, for since the advent of the sufferer, even the quiet of that well-ordered household had deepened and softened.

The silence was suddenly broken by a voice feeble and tremulous, but very musical and sweet. It was Pepeeta, who gazed around her in bewilderment and asked in vague alarm, “Where am I?”

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Dorothea was by her side in an instant, and taking the thin fingers in her strong hands, replied: "Thee is among friends."

Pepeeta looked long into the calm face above her, and gathered reassurance; but her memory did not at once return.

"Have I ever been in this place before? Have I ever seen your face? Has something dreadful happened? Tell me," she entreated, gazing with agitation into the calm eyes that looked down into hers.

"I cannot tell thee whether thee has ever seen us before, but we have seen thee so much for a few days that we feel like old friends," said Dorothea, pressing the hand she held, and smiling.

Pepeeta's eyes wandered about the room restlessly for a moment, and then some dim remembrance of the past came back.

"Did I come here in a great storm?" she asked.

"Thee did, indeed. The night was wild and cold."

"Did I fall on the threshold?"

"Upon the very threshold, and let us thank God for that, because if thee had fallen at the gate or in the path we should never have heard thee."

Pepeeta struggled to a sitting posture as her memory clarified, fixed her wide open eyes upon Dorothea and asked, pathetically, "Where is he?"

"I do not know who thee means," said Dorothea, laying her hand on the invalid's shoulders and trying gently to push her back upon her pillow.

"David!" she exclaimed, "David. Tell me if you know, for it seems to me I shall die if I do not hear."

"I do not know, my love. It is a long time since we have heard from David. But thee must lie down. Thee is not strong enough to talk."

She did not need to force her now. The muscles relaxed, and Pepeeta sank back upon her pillow, sobbing like a little child, while Dorothea stroked her forehead. The soothing touch of her hand and her gentle presence calmed the agitated and disappointed heart. The sobs became less frequent, the tears ceased to flow, and sleep, coming like a benediction, brought the balm of oblivion.

The boy, with his great brown eyes, looked wonderingly from the face of the invalid to that of his mother, who sat silently weaving in her imagination the story of this life, from the few strands which she had seized in this brief and broken conversation.

The next morning when Pepeeta awakened she was not only rested and refreshed by this natural sleep, but was restored to the full possession of her consciousness and her memory.

When Dorothea came in from her morning duties to see how her patient fared, she was startled by the change, for the invalid had recovered that calm self-possession which she had lost before beginning her journey, and now that her uncertainty was ended had already begun to face disappointment with fortitude and resolution.

The nurse seated herself by the patient, who said humbly:

“May I talk now?”

“If thee feels strong enough and can do it without exciting thyself, thee may. But if thee cannot, thee had better wait a little longer. Thee is very weak.”

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“But I am much better, am I not?”

“Yes, thee is much better, but thee is far from well.”

“Yes, I am far from well; but it will do me good to talk. I have much to tell, and I cannot rest until I tell it all.”

“Thee need not hurry—need thee?”

“Yes—I feel in haste. I have no right to all this kindness, for I have done this household a great wrong and I must confess it. It is a sad, sad story. Will you listen to it now?”

“If it will do thee good instead of harm, I will.”

“Then prop me up in bed, if you please. Place me so that I can talk freely. There, thank you. You are so gentle and so kind. I have never in all my life had any one touch me so gently. And now, if you are ready, be seated in the great chair and turn your face to the wall.”

“To the wall?”

“Yes, to the wall. I cannot bear to see the reproaches that must fill those kind eyes.”

“But, my dear, thee shall not see any reproaches in my eyes. Who am I that I should judge thee? We are commanded in the holy Bible to judge not, lest we be judged again. Tell thy story without fear. Thee shall tell it to ears that shall hear thee patiently, and a heart that is not devoid of pity.”

“I cannot, cannot,” cried Pepeeta, “do as I pray! Look out of the window. Look anywhere but at my face. Let me lie here and look up. Let me tell my story as if to God alone. It will be easy for me to do that, for I have told it to Him again and again.”

Fearing to agitate her, Dorothea did as she desired.

“Are we alone?”

“Yes, all alone.”

“Well, then, I will begin,” Pepeeta said, and in a voice choked with emotion, the poor sufferer breathed out the tale of her sin and her sorrow. She told all. She did not shield herself, and everywhere she could she softened the wrong done by David. It was a long story, and was interrupted only by the ticking of the great clock in the hallway, telling off the moments with as little concern as when three years before it had listened to the story told to David by his mother. When the confession was ended a silence followed, which Dorothea broke by asking gently:

“May I look, now?”

“If you can forgive me,” Pepeeta answered.

The tender-hearted woman rose, approached the bedside and kissed the quivering lips.

“Have you forgiven me?” Pepeeta asked, seizing the face in her thin hands and looking almost despairingly into the great blue eyes.

“As I hope to be forgiven,” Dorothea answered, kissing her again and again.

A look of almost perfect happiness diffused itself over the pale countenance.

“It is too much—too much. How can it be? It was such a great wrong!” she exclaimed,

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“Yes, it was a great wrong. Thee has sinned much, but much shall be forgiven if thee is penitent, and I think thee is. No love nor pardon should be withheld from those who mourn their sins. Our God is love! And we are so ignorant and frail. It is a sad story, as thee says, but it is better to be led astray by our good passions than by our bad. I have noticed that it is sometimes by our holiest instincts that we are betrayed into our darkest sins! It was heaven’s brightest light—the light of love—that led thee astray, my child, and even love may not be followed with closed eyes! But thee does not need to be preached to.”

Astonished at such an almost divine insight and compassion, Pepeeta exclaimed, “How came you to know so much of the tragedy of human life, so much of the soul’s weakness and guilt; you who have lived so quietly in this happy home?”

“By consulting my own heart, dear. We do not differ in ourselves so much as in our experiences and temptations. But thee has talked enough about thy troubles. Tell me thy name? What shall we call thee?”

“My name is Pepeeta.”

“And mine is Dorothea.”

“Oh! Dorothea,” Pepeeta exclaimed, “do you think we shall ever see him again?”

“I cannot tell. We had made many inquiries and given up in despair. And now when we least expected news, thee has come! We will cherish hope again. We were discouraged too easily.”

“Oh! how strong you are—how comforting. Yes, we will cherish hope, and when I am well I will start out, and search for him everywhere. I shall find him. My heart tells me so.”

“But thee is not well enough, yet,” Dorothea said, with a kind smile, “and until thee is, thee must be at rest in thy soul and, abiding here with us, await the revelation of the divine will.”

“Oh, may I stay a little while? It is so quiet and restful here. I feel like a tired bird that has found a refuge from a storm. But what will your husband say, when he hears this story?”

“Thee need not be troubled about that. His door and heart are ever open to those who labor and are heavy laden. The Christ has found a faithful follower in him, Pepeeta. It was he who first divined thy story.”

“Then you knew me?”

“We had conjectured.”

“Then I will stay, oh, I will stay a little while, and perhaps, perhaps—who knows?” she clasped her hands, her soul looked out of her eyes, and a smile of genuine happiness lit up her sad face.

“Yes, who knows?” said Dorothea, gently, rearranging the pillows and bidding the invalid fall asleep again.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LITTLE LAD

> “Better to be driven out from among men, than to be disliked of children.”
>
> —Dana.

Pepeeta took her place in this hospitable household as an orphan child might have done. Just as a flower unfolding from a plant, or a bird building its nest in a tree is almost instantly “at home,” so it was with Pepeeta.

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When she was strong enough to work, she began to assume domestic cares and to discharge them in a quiet and beautiful way which brought a sweet relief to the full hands of the overburdened housewife. And her companionship was no less grateful to Dorothea than her help, for life in a frontier household in those pioneer days was none too full of animation and brightness, even for a quiet nature like hers. To Steven she soon became a companion; and Jacob, the father, yielded no less quickly and easily to the charms of this strange guest than did mother and child.

He was a man of earnest piety and of deep insight into human nature. He had, as Dorothea said, made shrewd guesses at Pepeeta's story before she told it, and had formed his own theories as to her nature and her errand.

"I tell thee, Dorothea, she is a lady," were the words in which he had uttered his conclusions to his wife, in one of their many conversations about the mysterious stranger.

"What makes thee think so?" she asked.

"Every feature of that delicate face tells its own history. These three years of contact with David and a different life could never have so completely wiped out the traces of the vulgar breeding of a gypsy camp and the low education of a rogue's society, unless there were good blood in those veins. Mark my word, there is a story about that life that would stir the heart if it were known."

"No wonder David loved her," said the wife.

"No wonder, indeed. But if it is as it seems, there is a mystery in their influence on each other that would confound the subtlest student of life."

"To what does thee refer?"

"Two such natures ought to have made each other better instead of worse by contact. You can predict what frost and sunlight, water and oil, seed and soil will do when they meet; but not men and women! Two bads sometimes make a good, and two goods sometimes make a bad."

"Thee thinks strange thoughts, Jacob, and I do not always follow thee, but even if it be wrong, I cannot help wishing that our dear David could have had her for his lawful wife," said Dorothea.

"The tale is not all told yet," responded her husband, opening his book and beginning to read.

With feelings like these in their hearts, they could not but extend to Pepeeta that sympathy which alone could soothe the sorrow of her soul. The sweet atmosphere of

this home; the consciousness that she was among friends; the knowledge that they would do all they could to find the wanderer whom every one loved with such devotion, gave to Pepeeta's overwrought feelings an exquisite relief.

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Her natural spirits and buoyant nature, repressed so long, began to reassert themselves, and soon burst forth in gladness. The change was slow, but sure, and by the time the spring days came and it was possible to get out into the open air, the color had come back to the pale face and the light to the dimmed eyes. She was like a flower transplanted from some dark corner into an open, sunny spot in a garden. But that which, more than all else, tended to develop within her graces still unfolded, was her constant contact with Steven. A subtle sympathy had been established between them from their very first meeting and they gradually became almost inseparable comrades. Their common love of outdoor life took them on long walks into the woods, from which they came burdened with the first blossoms of the springtime, or they would return from the river, laden with fish, for Steven insisted upon making Pepeeta his companion in every excursion; nor was it hard to persuade her to join him, she was so naturally a creature of the open air and sunlight.

Among the many happy days thus passed, one was especially memorable. Steven had told her much of a famous fishing place in the big Miami, several miles away, and had promised that if she would go with him on the next Saturday he would show it to her and also reveal a secret which no one knew but himself and in which she could not but take the greatest interest. The day dawned bright and clear, and while the dew was still on the grass they started.

One of Pepeeta's sources of enjoyment in these excursions was the constant prattle of the boy about that uncle whose long absence had served rather to increase than to diminish the idolatry of his heart. This morning, so like the one on which Pepeeta had seen David by the side of the brook when first they met, awakened all the fervor of her love and she could think of nothing else.

"You must point out to me all the places where you and your uncle have ever been together, little brother," she said to him, as they crossed the field where she had first caught sight of David at the plow.

"Why does thee care to know so much about him?" he asked, naeively looking up into her face.

"Do you not know?" she inquired.

"No, I have asked father and mother, but they will not tell me."

"If I tell you, will you be true to me?"

"Won't I, though? I love thee. I would fight for thee, if I were not a Quaker's son! Perhaps I would fight for thee anyway."

“You will not need to fight for me, dearest. I could tell you a story about fighting that would make you wish never to fight again. Perhaps I will, sometime; but not now, for this must be a happy day and I do not want to sadden it by telling you too much about the shadows that cloud my life.”

He looked up with a pained expression. “Has thee had troubles?” he asked.

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“Great troubles, and they are not ended yet. I should be very wretched, but for you and your dear parents. You are but a child, and yet it would comfort me to tell you that I love your uncle with a love that can never die. And so when I ask you about him you will tell me everything you know, will you not? And remember that in doing so you are helping to make happy a poor heart that carries heavy burdens. There, that will do. I have told you more, perhaps, than I ought; but although you are young, I am sure that you are brave and true. And so, if there is any story about your uncle which you have never told me, let me hear it now. And if there is not, tell me one that you have told me over and over again.”

“Did I ever tell thee how he saved a little lamb from drowning?”

“No! did he do that?”

“Yes, he did! Thee knows that when the snow melts, this little brook swells up into a great river and sometimes it happens so suddenly that even the grown people are scared. It did that day, and came just pouring out of those woods and through the meadow where our old Maisie was playing with two little lambs. One of them was bounding around her, and it slipped over the edge of the bank and fell into the bed of the creek. It wasn’t a very high bank, you know; but the lamb was little, and it just stood bleating in the bed, and its mother stood bleating on the bank. Well, Uncle David heard them and started to see what was the matter, and though the rain had begun to fall, he ran across the field as hard as he could. But by the time he reached the place the flood caught up the little lamb and rolled it over and over like a ball. Uncle Dave didn’t even wait to take off his coat, but plunged right into that water, boiling like a soap kettle, and swam out and grabbed that little lamb and hung to it until he landed down there on a high bank a quarter of a mile away. What does thee think of that, Pepeeta?”

Her eyes kindled; pride swelled in her heart, and her spirits rose with that wild feeling of joy with which women always hear of the bold deeds of those they love.

“How beautiful and noble he is,” she cried.

“And strong!” added the boy, to whose youthful imagination physical prowess was still the greatest grace of life. And as he said it they reached a little rivulet so swollen by the spring rains as to be a formidable obstacle to their progress. Steven had not considered it in laying out their route and stood before it in dismay.

“How is thee ever going to get across?” he asked, and then under the impulse of a sudden inspiration rushed to the fence, took off the top rail and hurrying to the side of the brook flung it across for a bridge, with all the gallantry of a Sir Walter Raleigh.

But the spirits of his companion were too high to accept of aid! The strength of her lover had communicated itself to her, and with a light, free bound, she leaped to the other side.

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The boy's first feeling was one of chagrin at having his offer so proudly scorned; but his second was that of boundless pride at a feat so worthy of the hero whose praises they had just been sounding. "Hurrah!" he cried, bounding after her and flinging his hat into the air.

"Thee is as good a jumper as a man," he exclaimed, regarding her with astonishment and admiration.

As they moved forward Nature wove her spells around them and they gave themselves utterly to her charms, pausing to look and listen, rapt in an ecstasy of communion and sympathy. Pepeeta's familiarity with the flowers was greater than Steven's, but she knew little about birds, and propounded many questions to the young naturalist whose knowledge of the inhabitants of field, forest and river seemed to be communicated by the objects themselves, rather than by human teachers.

"Hark! What is that bird, singing on the top of that tall stake?" she asked, pausing to listen, her hand lifted as if to invoke silence.

"That? Why, it's a meadow lark," said Steven.

"And there is another, 'way up in the top of that tall tree. Oh! how sweet and rich his song is. What is his name?"

"That's a red bird, and if thee listens thee can hear a brown thrasher over there in the woods."

They paused and drank in the rich music until each of these voices was silenced, and out of a copse of dense shade by the brookside there began to bubble a spring of melody so liquid, so clear, and withal of such beauty, that Pepeeta trembled with delight, hearing in that audible melody the unheard songs of the soul itself.

"What is it, Steven?" she asked in a whisper.

"Why, that is a cat bird! Doesn't thee know a cat bird? I cannot remember when I did not know what that song was! It is such a crazy bird! It has only two tunes and is like our teacher at school. She either praises or else scolds us. And that is the way with the cat bird. It is either talking love to its mate, or else abusing it! I don't like such people or such birds; I like those who have more tunes. Now thee has a lot of tunes, Pepeeta!"

This quaint reflection and delicate compliment broke the bird's spell and made Pepeeta laugh,—a laugh as musical and sweet as the song of the bird itself. It passed through the fringe of trees along the river bank, rippled across it over against the smooth face of a cliff and came back sweetly on the spring air.

"Oh! did you hear the echo?" Pepeeta exclaimed.

“That is what I brought thee here for!” he said. “Uncle David taught me how to make it answer and told me what it was. It frightened me at first. Let us get close up to the water and listen!”

He took her by the hand and drew her along.

“Is it here that you are to tell me the secret?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” he said. “The echo tells its secrets! It is nothing but a blab any way. But I do not tell mine until the right time comes! Thee must wait.”

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They came out upon the edge of the river which makes a sweep around a sharp corner on the opposite side of which was “Echo Rock.” There they stood and shouted and laughed as their voices came back upon the still air softened and etherealized.

Becoming tired of this sport at last, the boy picked up a flat stone from the river’s edge and said, “Can thee skip a stone, Pepeeta? I never saw a girl that could skip a stone.”

“But I am not a girl,” she said.

“Oh, but thee was a girl once, and if thee did not learn then thee cannot do it now. Come, let me see thee try. Here is a stone, and a beauty, too; round, flat and smooth. That stone ought to make sixteen jumps!”

“But you must show me how,” she said.

“All right, I will,” he replied, and sent one skimming along the smooth surface of the water.

“Beautiful,” she said, clapping her hands as it bounded in ever diminishing saltations and with a finer skill than that of Giotto, drew perfect circles on the watery canvas.

Delighted with the applause, the child found another stone and gave it to Pepeeta. She took it, drew her hand back and tossed it awkwardly from her shoulder. It sank with a dull plunge into the stream, while out of the throat of the lad came a great and joyous shout of laughter. “I knew thee could not,” he said. “No girl that ever lived could skip a stone!”

And then he threw another and another, and they stood enchanted as the beautiful circles widened away from their centers and crossed each other in ever-increasing complexity of curve.

Steven did his best to teach Pepeeta this very simple art; but after many failures, she exclaimed:

“Oh dear, I shall never learn! I am nothing but a woman after all! Let us hasten to the fishing pool, perhaps I shall do better there.”

“Don’t be discouraged. Thee can learn, if thee tries long enough!” Steven said encouragingly, and led the way to a deep pool a few rods farther up the river. It was a cool, sequestered, lovely spot. Great trees overhung it, dark waters swirled swiftly but quietly round the base of a great rock jutting out into it; little bubbles of froth glided dreamily across it and burst on its edges; kingfishers dropped, stone-like, into it from the limbs of a dead sycamore, and the low, deep murmurs of the flood, as it hurried by, whispered inarticulately of mysteries too deep for the mind of man to comprehend. Except for this ceaseless murmur, silence brooded over the place, for the song-birds

had hidden themselves in the wood, and the two intruders upon the sacred privacy, by an unconscious sense of fitness, spoke in whispers.

“Beautiful!” said Pepeeta.

“Hush! See there!” Steven exclaimed, in an undertone, and pointing to a spot where a fish had broken the still surface as he leaped for a fly and plunged back again into the depths.

His eye glowed, and his whole figure vibrated with excitement.

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“And did your Uncle David used to bring you here?” Pepeeta asked.

“Well, I should say,” he whispered. “He used to bring me here when I was such a little fellow that he sometimes had to carry me on his back. He was the greatest fisherman thee ever saw. I cannot fish so well myself!”

And with this ingenuous avowal, at which Pepeeta smiled appreciatively, they laid their baskets down, and Steven began preparing the rude tackle.

“Did thee ever bait a hook, Pepeeta?” he asked under his breath.

“I never did, but I think I can,” she answered doubtfully.

And then he laughed again, not loudly, but in a fine chuckle which gave vent to his joy and expressed his incredulity in a manner fitting such solitude.

“If thee cannot skip a stone I should like to know what makes thee think that thee can bait a hook,” he said, still speaking in low whispers. “I have seen lots of girls try it, but I never saw one succeed. Just the minute they touch the worm they begin to squeal, and when they try to stick it on the hook, they generally, have a sort of fit. So I guess thee had better not try. Just let me do it for thee; I’ll fix it just as my Uncle David used to for me when I was a little fellow, and helpless like a girl.” Pepeeta laughed, and Steven laughed with her, although he did not know for what, and they took their poles and sat down by the side of the stream, the child intent on the sport and the woman intent on the child.

He was an adept in that gentle art which has claimed the devotion of so many elect spirits, and gave his soul up to his work with an entire abandon. The waters were seldom disturbed in those early days when the country was sparsely settled, and the fish took the bait recklessly. One after another the boy flung them out upon the bank with smothered exclamations of delight, with which he mingled reproaches and sympathy for Pepeeta’s lack of success.

She was catching fish he knew not of, drawing them one by one out of the deep pools of memory and imagination.

There is one thing dearer to a boy than catching fish. That is cooking and eating them.

Hunger began at last to gnaw at Steven’s vitals and to make itself imperatively felt. He looked up at the sun as if to tell the time by its location, though in reality he regulated his movements by that infallible horologue ticking beneath his jacket.

“It must be after twelve,” he said, although it was not yet eleven.

“Where are we going to have our dinner?” Pepeeta asked.

“Come, and I will show thee,” he replied, flinging down his pole and gathering his fish together.

Pepeeta followed him as he led the way up from the river’s side to a ledge of rocks that frowned above it.

Rounding a cliff, they came suddenly upon the mouth of a cave where Steven threw down the fish, assumed an air of secrecy, took Pepeeta by the hand and led her toward it, whispering:

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“This is the robbers’ cave.”

“And is it within its dark recesses that we are to eat our dinner?” Pepeeta asked, imitating his melodramatic manner.

“Yes! No one in the world knows of it, but Uncle Dave and me. We always used to cook our dinner here, and play we were robbers.”

Pepeeta saw the ashes of fires which had been built at the entrance, an old iron kettle hanging on a projecting root, a coffee pot standing on a ledge of a rock, and fragments of broken dishes scattered about, and entered with all her heart into an adventure so suddenly recalling the vanished scenes of her gypsy childhood. The eyes of the boy glistened with delight as he perceived the unmistakable evidences of her enjoyment.

“And so this is your secret!” she exclaimed.

“Not by a good deal!” he answered, “Thee is not to know the real secret until we have had our dinner. I will build the fire and clean the fish, and if thee knows how, thee can cook them.”

“Oh, you need not think I don’t know anything—just because I cannot skip stones and bait hooks,” Pepeeta said gaily, and with that they both bustled about and before long the smoke was curling up into the still air, and the fragrant odor of coffee was perfuming the wilderness.

While they were waiting for the fish to fry, Pepeeta regaled her enchanted listener with such fragments of the story of her gypsy life as she could piece together out of the wrecks of that time. He was overpowered with astonishment, and the idea that he was sitting opposite to a real gypsy, at the mouth of a cave, filled up the measure of his romantic fancy and perfected his happiness. He hung upon her words and kept her talking until the last crust had been devoured and she had repeated again and again the most trivial remembrances of those far off days.

The boy’s bliss had reached its utmost limit, and yet had not surpassed the woman’s. The vigorous walk through the woods; the silent ministrations of nature; the simple food; the sweet imaginative associations with David; but above all that most recreative force in nature,—the presence and prattle of a child,—filled her sad heart with a happiness of which she had believed herself forever incapable.

They sat for a few moments in silence, after Pepeeta had finished one of her most charming reminiscences, and then Steven, springing to his feet, exclaimed:

“Why, Pepeeta, we have forgotten the secret! Come and I will show it to thee.”

She took his proffered hand and was led into the depths of the cavern.

“Thee must shut thy eyes,” he said.

“Oh! but I am so frightened,” she answered, pretending to shudder and draw back.

“Thee need not be afraid. I will protect thee,” he said, reassuringly.

She obeyed him, and they moved forward.

“Are thy eyes shut tight? How many fingers do I hold up?” he asked, raising his hand.

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“Six,” she answered.

“All right; there were only two,” he said, convinced and satisfied.

He led her along a dozen steps or so, and then halted.

“Turn this way,” swinging her about; “do not open thy eyes till I tell thee. There—now!”

For an instant the darkness seemed impenetrable; but there was enough of a faint light, rather like pale belated moonbeams than the brightness of the sun, to enable her to read her own name carved upon the smooth wall of rock.

“Ah! little deceiver, when did you do this?” she asked, touched by his gallantry.

“Do this! Why, Pepeeta, I did not do it,” he answered, surprised and taken back by her misunderstanding.

“You did not do it?” she asked, astonished in her turn. “Who did it if you did not?”

“Why—can’t thee guess?” he asked.

And then it slowly dawned upon her that it was the work of her lover, done in those days when he wandered about the country restless and tormented by his passion. His own dear hand had traced those letters on the rock!

She kissed them, and burst into tears.

This was an indescribable shock to the child, who had anticipated a result so different, and he sprang to her side, embraced her in his young arms and cried:

“What is the matter, Pepeeta? I did not mean to make thee sad; I meant to make thee happy! Oh, do not cry!”

“You have made me a thousand times glad, my dear boy,” she said, kissing him gratefully. “You could not in any other way in the world give me such happiness as this. But did you not know that we can cry because we are glad as well as because we are sad?”

“I have never heard of that,” he answered wonderingly.

She did not reply, for her attention reverted to the letters on the wall and she stood feeding her hungry eyes upon that indubitable proof of the devotion of her lover.

The child’s instinct taught him the sacredness of the privacy of grief and love. He freed himself from her embrace, slipped out of the cave and left her alone. She laid her

cheek against the rude letters, patted them with her hand, and kissed them again and again. It was bliss to know that she had inspired this passion, although it was agony to know that it was only a memory.

The remembrance of feasts once eaten is not only no solace to physical hunger, but adds unmitigated torment to it. It is different with the hunger of the heart, which finds a melancholy alleviation in feeding upon those shadows which reality has left. The food is bitter-sweet and the alleviation is not satisfaction, but neither is it starvation! Probably a real interview with a living, present lover, would not have given to Pepeeta that intense, though poignant, happiness which transfigured her face when she came forth into the daylight world, and which subdued and softened the noisy welcome of the boy.

CHAPTER XXVI.

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OUT OF THE SHADOW

"Until the day break and the shadows flee away."

—Song of Solomon.

In due time the vessel upon which David had embarked arrived at her destination, the city of New York, and the lonely traveler stepped forth unnoticed and unknown into the metropolis of the New World.

With, an instinct common to all adventurers, he made his way to the Bowery, that thoroughfare whose name and character dispute the fame of the Corso, the Strand and the Rue de Rivoli.

Amid its perpetual excitements and boundless opportunities for adventure, David resumed the habits formed during that period of life upon which the doors had now closed. His reputation had followed him, and the new scenes, the physical restoration during the long voyage, the necessity of maintaining his fame, all conspired to help him take a place in the front rank of the devotees of the gambling rooms.

He did his best to enter into this new life with enthusiasm, but it had no power to banish or even to allay his grief. He therefore spent most of his time in wandering about among the wonders of the swiftly-growing city, observing her busy streets, her crowded wharfs, her libraries, museums and parks. This moving panorama temporarily diverted his thoughts from that channel into which they ever returned, and which they were constantly wearing deeper and deeper, and so helped him to accomplish the one aim of his wretched life, which was to become even for a single moment unconscious of himself and of his misery.

He had long ceased to ponder the problems of existence, for his philosophy of life had reached its goal at the point where he was too tired and broken-hearted to think. He could hardly be said to "live" any longer, and his existence was scarcely more than a vegetation. Like a somnambulist, he received upon the pupils of his eye impressions which did not awaken a response in his reason.

If any general conceptions at all were being formed he was unconscious of them. What he really thought of the phenomena of life upon which he thus blindly stared, he could not have definitely told; but in some vague way he felt as he gazed at the multitudes of human beings swarming through the streets, that all were, like himself, the victims of some insane folly which had precipitated them into some peculiar form of misery or crime.

And so, as he peered into their faces, he would catch himself wondering what wrong this man had done, what sin that woman had committed, and what sorrow each was

suffering. That all must be in some secret way guilty and miserable, he could not doubt, for it seemed to him impossible that in this world of darkness and disorder, any one should have been able to escape being deceived and victimized. “No man,” he thought, “can pick his way over all these hot plowshares without stepping on some of them. None can run this horrible gauntlet without

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being somewhere struck and wounded. What has befallen me, has in some form or other befallen them all. They are trying, just as I am, to conceal their sorrows and their crimes from each other. There is nothing else to do. There is no such thing as happiness. There is nothing but deception. Some of the keener ones see through my mask as I see through theirs. And yet some of them smile and look as gay as if they were really happy. Perhaps I can throw off this weight that is crushing me, as they have thrown off theirs—if I try a little harder." Such were the reflections which revolved ceaselessly within his brain.

But his efforts were in vain. In this life he had but a single consolation, and that was in a friendship which from its nature did not and could not become an intimacy.

Among the many acquaintances he had made in that realm of life to which his vices and his crimes had consigned him, a single person had awakened in his bosom emotions of interest and regard. There was in that circle of silent, terrible, remorseless parasites of society, a young man whose classical face, exquisite manners and varied accomplishments set him apart from all the others. He moved among them like a ghost, —mysterious, uncommunicative and unapproachable.

He had inspired in his companions a sort of unacknowledged respect, from the superiority of his professional code of ethics, for he never preyed upon the innocent, the weak, or the helpless, and gambled only with the rich or the crafty. He victimized the victimizers, and signalized his triumph with a mocking smile in which there was no trace of bitterness, but only a gentle and humorous irony.

From the time of their first meeting he had treated David in an exceptional manner. In unobserved ways he had done him little kindnesses, and proffered many delicate advances of friendship, and not many months passed before the two lonely, suspicious and ostracized men united their fortunes in a sort of informal partnership and were living in common apartments.

The most marked characteristic of this restricted friendship was a disposition to respect the privacy of each other's lives and thoughts. In all their intercourse through the year in which they had been thus associated they had never obtruded their personal affairs upon each other, nor pried into each other's secrets.

There was in Foster Mantel a sort of sardonic humor into which he was always withdrawing himself. In one of their infrequent conversations the two companions had grown unusually confidential and found themselves drifting a little too near that most dangerous of all shoals in the lives of such men—the past.

With a swift, instinctive movement both of them turned away. Each read in the other's face consciousness of the impossibility of discussing those experiences through which they had come to be what they were. Such men guard the real history of their lives and the real emotions of their hearts as jealously as the combinations of their cards. The old, ironical smile lighted up Mantel's features, and he said:

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“We seem to have a violent antipathy to thin ice, Davy, and skate away from it as soon as it begins to crack a little beneath our feet.”

“Yes,” said his friend, shrugging his shoulders, “it is not pleasant to fall through the crust of friendship. There is a sub-element in every life a too sudden plunge into which might result in a fatal chill. We had all better keep on the surface. I am frank enough to say that the less any one knows about my past, the better I shall be satisfied.”

“I wish that I could keep my own self from invading that realm as easily as I can keep others! Why is it that no man has ever yet been able to ‘let the dead past bury its dead’? It seems a reasonable demand.”

“He is a poor sexton—this old man, the Past. I have watched him at his work, and he is powerless to dig his own grave, however many others he may have excavated!”

“The Present seems as helpless as the Past. I wonder if the future will heap enough new events over old ones to hide them from view?”

“Let a shadow bury the sun! Let a wave bury the sea,” answered David bitterly.

“I am afraid you take life too seriously,” said Mantel, on whose face appeared that inexplicable smile behind which he constantly retired. “For, after all, life is nothing but a jest—a grim one, to be sure, but still a jest. The great host who entertains us in the banqueting hall of the universe must have his fun as well as any one, and we must laugh at his jokes even when they are at our expense. This is the least that guests can do.”

“What, even when they writhe with pain?”

“Why not? We all have our fun! You used to scare timid little girls with jack-lanterns, put duck eggs under the old hen, and tie tin cans to dogs’ tails. Where did you learn these tricks, if not from the great Trickmaster himself? Humor is hereditary! We get it from a divine original, and the Archetypal Joker must have His fun. It is better to take His horseplay in good part. We cannot stop Him, and we may as well laugh at what amuses Him. There is just as much fun in it as a fellow is able to see!”

“Then there is none, for I cannot see any. But if you get the comfort you seem to out of this philosophy of yours, I envy you. What do you call it? There ought to be a name for a metaphysic which seems to comprehend all the complex phenomena of life in one single, simple, principle of humor!”

“How would ‘will-o’-the-wispism’ do? There is a sort of elusive element in life, you see. Nature has no goal, yet leads us along the pathway by shows, enchantments and promises. She pays us in checks which she never cashes. She holds out a glittering

prize, persuades us that it is worth any sacrifice, and when we make it, the bubble bursts, the sword descends, and you hear a low chuckle."

"You have described her method well enough, but how is it that you get your fun out of your knowledge?"

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“It is the illusion itself! The boy chasing the rainbow is happier than the man counting his gold!”

“But what of that dreadful day of disenchantment when the illusion no longer deceives?”

“Ha! ha! Why, just put on your mask and smile. You can ‘make believe’ you are happy, can’t you?”

“I have got beyond that,” David answered savagely. “I am not sitting for my picture to this great, grim artist friend of yours, who first sticks a knife into me, and then tells me to look pleasant that he may photograph me for his gallery of fools! I am tired of shams and make-believes. Life is a hideous mockery, and I say plainly that I loathe and abhor it!”

“Tush, tush, whatever else you do or do not do, keep sweet, David! Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad! You take yourself and your life too seriously, I tell you. Everything will go its own way whether you want it to or not! I used to read the classics, once, and some fragments of those old fellows’ sublime philosophy are still fresh in my memory. There is a scrap in one of the Greek tragedies—the Oedipus, I think, that has always kept running through my head:

> “’Why should we fear, when Chance rules everything,
> And foresight of the future there is none?
> ’Tis best to live at random as we can!
> But thou, fear not that marriage with thy mother!
> Many, ere now, have dreamed of things like this,
> But who cares least about them, bears life best!’

“There is wisdom for you! ‘Who cares least about them bears life best!’ It’s my philosophy in a nut-shell.”

“Look here, Mantel,” said David, “your philosophy may be all right, provided a man has not done a—provided—provided a man has not committed a-a crime! I don’t care anything about your past in detail; but unless you have done some deed that hangs around your neck like a mill-stone, you don’t know anything about the subject you are discussing.”

Mantel dropped his eyes, and sat in silence. For the first time since David had known him, his fine face gave some genuine revelation of the emotions of his soul. Great tears gathered in his eyes, and his lips trembled. In a moment, he arose, took his hat, laid his hand gently upon the arm of his friend, and said “David, my dear fellow, we are skating on that thin ice again. We shall fall through if we are not careful, and get that chill you were talking about. Let’s go out and take a walk. Life is too deep for either you or me to fathom. I gave it up as a bad job long ago. What you just said about having a knife

stuck into you comes the nearest to my own notion. I feel a good deal as I fancy a butterfly must when he has been intercepted in a gay and joyous flight and stuck against the wall with a sharp pin, among a million other specimens which the great entomologist has gathered for some purpose which no one but himself can understand. All I try to do is to smile enough to cover up my contortions. Come, let us go. We need the air."

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They went down into the streets and lost themselves in the busy crowd of care-encumbered men. Half unconscious of the throngs which jostled them, they strolled along Broadway, occasionally pausing to gaze into a shop window, to rest on a seat in a park, to listen to a street musician, or to watch some passing incident in the great panorama which is ever unrolling itself in that brilliant and fascinating avenue.

Suddenly Mantel was startled by an abrupt change in the manner of his companion, who paused and stood as if rooted to the pavement, while his great blue eyes opened beyond their natural width with a fixed stare.

Following the direction of their gaze, Mantel saw that they were fixed on a blind beggar who sat on a stool at the edge of the sidewalk, silent and motionless like an old snag on the bank of a river—the perpetual stream of human life forever flowing by. His head was bare; in his outstretched hand he held a tin cup which jingled now and then as some compassionate traveler dropped him a coin; by his side, looking up occasionally into his unresponsive eyes, was a little terrier, his solitary companion and guide in a world of perpetual night.

The face of the man was a remarkable one, judged by almost any standard. It was large in size, strong in outline, and although he was a beggar, it wore an expression of power, of independence and resolution like that of another Belisarius. But the feature which first arrested and longest held attention, was an enormous mustache. It could not have been less than fourteen inches from tip to tip, was carefully trimmed and trained, and although the man himself was still comparatively young, was white as snow. Occasionally he set his cup on his knee and with both hands twisted the ends into heavy ropes.

It was a striking face and exacted from every observer more than a passing look; but remarkable as it was, Mantel could not discover any reason for the strained and terrible interest of his companion, who stood staring so long and in such a noticeable way, that he was in danger of himself attracting the attention of the curious crowd.

Seeing this, Mantel took him by the arm. “What is the matter?” he asked.

David started. “My God,” he cried, drawing his hand over his eyes like a man awakening from a dream; “it is he!”

“It is who? Are you mad! Come away! People are observing you. If there is anything wrong, we must move or get into trouble.”

“Let me alone!” David replied, shaking off his hand. “I would rather die than lose sight of that man.”

“Then come into this doorway where you can watch him unobserved, for you are making a spectacle of yourself. Come, or I shall drag you.”

With his eyes still riveted on that strange countenance, David yielded to the pressure of his friend’s hand and they retired to a hallway whence he could watch the beggar unobserved. His whole frame was quivering with excitement and he kept murmuring to himself: “It is he. It is he! I cannot be mistaken! Nature never made his double! But how he has changed! How old and white he is! It cannot be his ghost, can it? If it were night I might think so, but it is broad daylight! This man is living flesh and blood and my hand is not, after all, the hand of a mur—”

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“Hush!” cried Mantel; “you are talking aloud!”

“Yes, I am talking aloud,” he answered, “and I mean to talk louder yet! I want you to hear that I am not a murderer, a murderer! Do you understand? I am going to rush out into the streets to cry out at the top of my voice—I am not a murderer!”

Terrified at his violence, Mantel pushed him farther back into the doorway; but he sprang out again as if his very life depended upon the sight of the great white face.

“Be quiet!” Mantel cried, seizing his arm with an iron grip.

The pain restored him to his senses. “What did I say?” he asked anxiously.

“You said, ‘I am not a murderer,’” Mantel whispered.

“And it is true! I am not!” he replied, with but little less violence than before.

“Look at this hand, Mantel! I have not looked at it myself for more than three years without seeing spots of blood on it! And now it looks as white as snow to me! See how firm I can hold it! And yet through all those long and terrible years, it has trembled like a leaf. Tell me, am I not right? Is it not white and firm?”

“Yes, yes. It is; but hush. You are in danger of being overheard, and if you are not careful, in a moment more we shall be in the hands of the police!”

“No matter if I am,” he cried, almost beside himself, and rapturously embracing his friend. “Nothing could give me more pleasure than a trial for my crime, for my victim would be my witness! He is not dead. He is out there in the street. Mantel, you don’t know what happiness is! You don’t know how sweet it is to be alive! A mountain has been taken from my shoulders. I no longer have any secret! I will tell you the whole story of my life, now.”

“Not now; but later on, when we are alone. Let us leave this spot and go to our rooms.”

“No, no! Don’t stir! We might lose him, and if we did, I could never persuade myself that this was not a dream! We will stay here until he leaves, and then we will follow him and prove beyond a doubt that this is a real man and not the vision of an overheated brain. We will follow him, I say, and if he is really flesh and blood, and not a poor ghost, we will help him, you and I. Poor old man! How sad he looks! And no wonder! You don’t know of what I robbed him!”

David had now grown more quiet, and they stood patiently waiting for the time to come when the old beggar should leave his post and retire to his home, if home he had.

At last he received his signal for departure. A shadow fell from the roof of the tall building opposite, upon the pupil of an eye, which perhaps felt the darkness it could not see. The building was his dial. Like millions of his fellow creatures, he measured life by advancing shadows.

He arose, and in his mien and movements there was a certain majesty. Placing his hat upon his storm-beaten head, he folded the camp-chair under his arm, took the leading string in his hand and followed the little dog, who began picking his way with fine care through the surging crowd.

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Behind him at a little distance walked the two gamblers, pursuing him like a double shadow. A bloodhound could not have been more eager than David was. He trembled if an omnibus cut off his view for a single instant, and shuddered if the beggar turned a corner.

Unconscious of all this, the dog and his master wended their way homeward. They crawled slowly and quietly across a street over which thundered an endless procession of vehicles; they moved like snails through the surf of the ocean of life. Arriving at length at the door of a wretched tenement house, the blind man and his dog entered.

As he noted the squalor of the place, David murmured to himself, “Poor old man! How low he has fallen!”

Several minutes passed in silence, while he stood reflecting on the doctor’s misery, his own new happiness and the opportunities and duties which the adventure had opened and imposed. At last he said to his friend, “Do you know where we are? I was so absorbed that I didn’t notice our route at all.”

“Yes,” Mantel answered. “I have marked every turn of the way.”

“Could you find the place again?”

“Without the slightest difficulty.”

“Be sure, for if you wish to help me, as I think you do, you will have to come often. I have made my plans in the few moments in which I have been standing here, and am determined to devote my life, if need be, to this poor creature whom I have so wronged. I must get him out of this filthy hole into some cheerful place. I will atone for the past if I can! Atone! What a word that is! With what stunning force its meaning dawns upon me! How many times I have heard and uttered it without comprehension. But somehow I now see in it a revelation of the sweetest possibility of life. Oh! I am a changed man; I will make atonement! Come, let us go. I am anxious to begin. But no, I must proceed with caution. How do I know that this is his permanent home? He may be only lodging for the night, and when you come to-morrow, he may be gone! Go in, Mantel, and make sure that we shall find him here to-morrow. Go, and while you find out all you can about him, I will begin to search for such a place as I want to put him in. We will part for the present; but when we meet to-night we shall have much to talk about. I will tell you the whole of this long and bitter story. I am so happy, Mantel. You can’t understand! I have something to live for now. I will work, oh, you do not know how I will work to make this atonement. What a word it is! It is music to my ears. Atonement!”

And so in the lexicon of human experience he had at last discovered the meaning of one of the great words of our language. After all, experience is the only exhaustive

dictionary, and the definitions it contains are the only ones which really burn themselves into the mind or fully interpret the significances of life.

To every man language is a kind of fossil poetry, until experience makes those dry bones live! Words are mere faded metaphors, pressed like dried flowers in old and musty volumes, until a blow upon our heads, a pang in our hearts, a strain on our nerves, the whisper of a maid, the voice of a little child, turns them into living blossoms of odorous beauty.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

IF THINE ENEMY HUNGER

> "Whatever the number of a man's friends, there will be times in his life when he has one too few; but if he has only one enemy, he is lucky indeed if he has not one too many."
>
> —Bulwer-Lytton.

The blow struck by David had stunned the doctor, but had not killed him. He lay in the road until a slave, passing that way, picked him up and carried him to a neighboring plantation, where he fell into the hands of people who in the truest sense of the word were good Samaritans. Their hospitality was tested to the utmost, for he lay for weeks in a stupor, and when he recovered consciousness his reason had undergone a strange eclipse. For a long time he could not recall a single event in his history and when at last some of the most prominent began to re-present themselves to his view it was vaguely and slowly, as mountain-peaks and hill-tops break through a morning mist. This was not the only result of the blow which his rival had struck him; it had left him totally blind. Nothing could have been more pitiful than the sight of this once strong man, more helpless than an infant, sitting in the sun where kind hands had placed him. Months elapsed before he regained anything that could be called a clear conception of the past. It did at length return, however. Slowly, but with terrible distinctness he recalled the events which preceded and brought about this tragedy. And as he reflected upon them, jealousy, hatred and revenge boiled in his soul and finally crystallized into the single desperate purpose to find and crush the man who had wrecked his life.

He kept his story to himself; but made furtive inquiries of his new-found friends and of the slaves and neighbors, none of which enabled him to discover the slightest clue to the fugitives. So far as he could learn, the earth might have opened and swallowed them, and so when he had exhausted the sources of information in the region where the accident occurred, he determined to go elsewhere.

Refusing the kind offers of a permanent refuge in the home of these hospitable Kentuckians, he made his way back to Cincinnati, where he hoped not only to find traces of the fugitives, but to recover the jewels which Pepeeta had left behind her on the table, and which in his frantic haste he had forgotten to take with him.

He learned the history of the jewels in a few short hours. Not long after his own sudden disappearance and that of David and Pepeeta, the judge had called at the hotel with an order for his property. The unsuspecting landlord had honored it, and the judge not long afterward left for parts unknown.

This discovery not only turned his rage to frenzy, but increased his difficulties a hundred fold. Without friends and without money, he set himself to attain revenge. Before a purpose so resolute, many obstacles at once gave way, and although he could find no traces of David and Pepeeta, he discovered that the judge had fled to New York City, and thither he determined to go.

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Procuring a little terrier, through the charity of strangers, he trained him to be his guide, and started on his pilgrimage. Many weeks were consumed in the journey and many more in hopeless efforts to discover the thief. Through the aid of an old Cincinnati friend whom he accidentally encountered he located the fugitive at last; but in a cemetery! Ill-gotten wealth had precipitated the final disaster, for having turned the diamonds into money the fugitive entered upon a debauch which terminated in a horrible death. At the side of a grave in the potter's field, the sexton one day saw a blind man leaning on a cane. After a long silence, he stooped down, felt carefully over the low ground as if to assure himself of something, then rose, lifted his cane to heaven, waved it wildly, muttered what sounded like imprecations, and soon after followed a little terrier to the gate of the cemetery and disappeared.

It was the doctor. One of his enemies had escaped him forever, and the trail of the others seemed hopelessly lost in the darkness which had settled down upon him. There was nothing left for him but to beg his living and impotently nourish his hate.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MAN CROSSED WITH ADVERSITY

> "One sole desire, one passion now remains
> To keep life's fever still within his veins,
> Vengeance! dire vengeance on the wretch who cast
> O'er him and all he loved that ruinous blast."
>
> —Lalla Rookh.

It was late in the evening when David returned to his apartments, excited, triumphant, eager.

"Well," he cried, rushing impetuously up to Mantel, who stood waiting for him. "Is he still there? Is that place really his home?"

"Yes," his friend answered; "he has lived there for more than a year, in solitude and poverty. His health is very poor and he is growing steadily weaker. He has declined so much recently that now he does not venture out until the afternoon."

"Feeble, is he? Poor old man!" exclaimed David. "But at least he is not dead, and while there is life there is hope! I am not a murderer, and there is a possibility of my making atonement! How I cling to that idea, Mantel! In a single hour I have enjoyed more happiness than I thought a whole lifetime could contain. But even in this indescribable happiness there is a strange element of unrest, for it seems too good to last. Is all great gladness haunted by this apprehension of evanescence? But at any rate, I am happy now!"

“And I am almost happy in your happiness,” responded his friend, his face lighted up by an altogether new and beautiful smile.

“Sit down, then,” said David, giving him a chair and standing opposite to him, “and I will tell you my story.”

Words cannot describe the emotion, nay the passion, with which he poured that tragic narrative into the ears of his eager and sympathetic listener.

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Never was a story told to a more attentive and appreciative auditor. There must have been some buried sorrow in that heart which had rendered it sensitive to the griefs of others. Hours were consumed by this narrative and by the questions which had to be asked and answered, and it was long after midnight when David found time to say, “And now shall I tell you my plans for the future?”

“Yes, if you will,” said Mantel.

“Well, I have rented a sunny room in a lodging house in a quiet street, and to-morrow, if you are willing, you shall go and lead him to it. I must lean upon you, Mantel; I dare not make myself known to him. He would never accept my aid if he knew by whom it was bestowed, for he is proud and revengeful and would give himself no rest night or day until he had my life, if he knew I was within reach. I do not fear him; but what good could come of his wreaking vengeance on me, richly as I deserve it? It would only make his destiny more dark and dreadful, and defeat the one chance I have of making an atonement. You do not think I ought to make myself known, do you?”

“I do not. I think with you that an atonement is the most perfect satisfaction of justice.”

“Thank you, thank you, my dear friend. You do not know how glad I am to have you think I am doing right. You will go to him to-morrow, then, and you will tell him that some one who has seen him on the streets has taken compassion on him. You will do this, will you not?”

“Nothing could give me greater pleasure. I half feel as if I had participated with you in the wrong done to the old man, and that I shall be blessed with you in trying to make it right.”

“That is good in you, Mantel. How much nobility lies buried in every human heart! It may be that even such men as you and I are capable of some sort of rescue and redemption. I am going to spend my best strength in working for this poor old blind beggar whom I have wronged. I mean to toil for him like a galley slave, and mark me, Mantel, it is going to be honest toil!”

“Honest, did you say?” asked Mantel, lifting his eyebrows incredulously.

“Yes,” David answered, “honest. This hope that has come to me has wrought a great change in my heart. It has revived old feelings which I thought long dead. If there is a God in heaven who has decided to give me one more chance to set myself right, I am going to take it! And listen; if this great hope can come to me, why not to you?”

Mantel leaned his head on his hand a moment, and then answered with a sigh, “Perhaps—but,” and paused.

There are moments when these two indefinite words contain the whole of our philosophy of existence. “I am going to seek the great Perhaps!” said Rabelais, as he breathed his last.

David looked at him sympathetically and said, “Well, it is not strange that you cannot feel as I do. It is not by what befalls others, but by what befalls ourselves, that we learn to hope and trust.”

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The silence that came between them was broken by Mantel, who looked up at him with a trace of the old ironical smile on his face.

“Your plans are all right as far as they go, but it seems to me the hardest part of the tangle still remains to be unraveled.”

“What do you mean?” asked David.

“What are you going to do about this beautiful Pepeeta?”

“Oh, I have settled that, too! You do not know how clearly I see it all. It is as if a fog had lifted from the ocean, and the sailor had found himself inside the harbor. I shall write and tell her all.”

“Do you mean that you will tell her that her husband is alive?”

“I do.”

“And perhaps you will advise her to return to him!”

“You are right, I shall.”

Mantel shook his head.

“You do not think it best?” said David.

“I do not know.”

“But there is nothing else to do.”

“It is natural that I should see only the difficulties.”

“What difficulties can there be?”

“Will you do anything more than destroy her by binding her once more to the man she loathes?”

“You do not know Pepeeta.”

“It is true, I only know human nature.”

“But she is more than human!”

“And are you?”

“Not I!”

“Then how will you endure to see her once more the wife of your enemy and rival?”

“Mantel,” said David, pausing in his restless walk across the room, “I do not wonder that you ask this. It was the first question that I asked myself. It struck my heart like the blow of a hammer. But I have settled it. I have weighed the pains which I have suffered in a just and even balance. I know I cannot escape suffering, whichever way I turn. I have felt the pains of doing wrong, and I now deliberately choose the pains of doing right, let them be what they will!”

“It is easy to scorn the bitterness of an untasted cup.”

“No matter! I have settled it. It must be done.”

Mantel shrugged his shoulders and said, “I am afraid that the great Joker of whom we were talking yesterday is about to perpetrate another of his jests.”

“You think it absurd, then?”

“I regard it as impossible.”

“But why?”

“Because you are making a plan to act as if you were a disembodied conscience. You have forgotten that you still have the passions of a man. I fear there will be another tragedy as dark as the first. But if you are determined, I must obey you. I never know how to act for myself; but if some one wishes me to act for him I can do so without fear, even if I am compelled to do so without hope.”

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David resumed his walk for a moment, and then pausing again before his friend, said, “Mantel, a few years ago my soul was so sensitive to truth and duty that I was accustomed to regard its intuitions as the will of God revealed to me in some sort of supernatural way. I acted on the impulses of my heart without the slightest question or hesitation, and during that entire period of my life I cannot remember that I was ever for a single time seriously mistaken or misled. While I obeyed those intuitions and followed that mysterious light, I was happy. When I turned my back on that light it ceased to shine. It has been more than two years since I have thought I heard the voice of God or felt any assurance that I was in the path of duty. But now the departed vision has returned! I have had as clear a perception of my duty as was ever vouchsafed me in the old sweet days, and I shall obey it if it costs me my life.”

So deep was his earnestness that Mantel seemed to catch his enthusiasm and be convinced. But in another instant the old mocking smile had returned.

“Would you be so tractable and obedient if the old beggar were in better health?” he said, opening and shutting the leaves of a book which was lying on the table, and looking out from under half-lifted eyelids.

At this insinuation David winced, and for a moment seemed about to resent it. But he restrained himself and replied gently, “The same distrust of my motives has arisen in my own mind. I more than half suspect that if, as you say, the old beggar were young and strong, my heart would fail me. But the knowledge that I could not do my duty if the doctor were going to live cannot be any reason for my not doing it when I believe that he is likely to die! I am not called upon to do wrong simply because I see that I am not wholly unselfish in doing right. I am not asked to face a supposition, but a fact. I shall not pride myself on any righteousness that I do not possess; but I must not be kept from doing my duty because I am not a perfect man.”

“You are right,” said Mantel, but his assent seemed more like a concession than a conviction. He had grown to regard the passing panorama of life as a great spectacular exhibition. The actors seemed swayed by powers external to themselves, their movements exhibiting such gross inconsistencies as to make it impossible to predict, and almost impossible to guess them. He looked on with more curiosity than interest, as at the different combinations in a kaleidoscope. He could not conceive that David, or any one, could so come under the dominant influence of a conviction as to act coherently and consistently upon it through any or all emergencies. But he was kind and sympathetic, and his heart responded to the passionate earnestness of his friend with a new interest and pleasure.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AS A TALE THAT IS TOLD

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"First our pleasures die—and then
Our hopes and then our fears—and when
These are dead, the debt is due
Dust claims dust, and we die too."

—Shelley.

The next few weeks were passed by these two subdued and altered friends in devoted efforts to make the blind man comfortable and happy. True to his determination, David sought and found a place to work, and after reserving enough of his wages to supply the few necessities of his daily life, dedicated the rest to the purchase of comforts for the poor invalid.

Mantel acted as his almoner, and by his delicate tact and gentle manners persuaded the proud and revengeful old man to accept the mysterious charity. The moment the strain of perpetual beggary was taken from him, the physical ruin which the terrible blow of the stone, the subsequent illness, and the ensuing poverty and wretchedness had wrought, became manifest. He experienced a sudden relapse, and began to sink into an ominous decline.

Even had he not known the secret of his sorrow, it would have soon become plain to his acute and watchful nurse that some hidden trouble was gnawing at his heart, for he was taciturn, abstracted and sometimes morose. He manifested no curiosity as to the benefactor upon whose charity he was living, but received the alms bestowed by that unknown hand as children receive the gifts of God—unsolicited, uncomprehended and unobserved.

His mind, aroused by the conversation of his untiring nurse to the realities of the present existence, would sink back by a sort of irresistible gravity into the realm of memory. There, in the impenetrable privacy of his soul, he brooded over his wrongs and counted his prospects of righting them, as a miser reckons his coins.

The spasmodic workings of his countenance, the convulsive gripping of his hands, the grinding of his great white teeth, the scalding tears which sometimes fell from his sightless eyes, revealed to the mind of his patient and watchful observer the passions secretly and ceaselessly working in his soul.

Mantel became fascinated by the study of this subjective drama. He used to sit and watch the expressive curtain behind which these dark scenes were being enacted, and fancy that he could follow the soul as, in the spirit world, it tracked its foe, fell upon him and exacted its terrible revenge. At times he imagined that he could actually see the enraged thoughts issue from the body as if it were a den or cave, and they, living beasts of prey ranging abroad by day and night, and returning with their booty to devour it; or, if they had failed to take it, to brood over the failure of their hunt.

In all this time he asked for nothing, he complained of nothing, commented on nothing. Mantel would have concluded that his heart was dead had it not been for his pathetic demonstrations of affection for the little terrier who had so faithfully guided him from his lodging to the places where he sat and begged.

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The dog reciprocated these attentions with a devotion and a gratitude which were human in their intensity and depth. It was as beautiful as it was pathetic, to see these two friends bestowing upon each other their few but expressive signs of love.

Not until many weeks had passed did Mantel succeed in really engaging his patient in anything like a conversation, and even after he had begun to thaw a little under those tactful ministrations of love, whenever the past was even hinted at the old recluse relapsed instantly into silence.

Mantel might have been discouraged had he not determined at all hazards to enter into the secrets of this life, and to pave the way for the forgiveness of his friend. He therefore persisted in his efforts, and one bright day when the invalid was feeling unusually strong ventured to press home his inquiries.

“I cannot help thinking,” he said, “that you could soon be reasonably well again if you did not brood so much. I fear there is some trouble gnawing at your heart.”

“There is,” he was answered, icily.

“Have you wronged some one, then, and are these thoughts which vex you feelings of remorse and guilt?”

“Wronged some one!” the sick man fairly roared, gripping the arms of his chair and gasping for breath in the excitement which the question brought on. “Not I! I have been wronged! No one has ever b-b-been wronged as I have. I have nourished vipers in my b-b-bosom and been stung by them. I have sown love and reaped hate. I have been robbed, deceived and betrayed! My wife is gone! My health is gone! My sight is gone! He has skinned me like a sheep, c-c-curse him! My heart has turned to a hammer which knocks at my ribs and cries revenge! It ch-ch-chokes me!”

He gasped, grew purple in the face and clutched at his collar as if about to strangle. After a little the paroxysm passed away, and Mantel determined once more to try and assuage this implacable hatred.

To his own unbounded astonishment this young man who had long ago abandoned his faith in Christianity, began to plead like an apostle for the practice of its central and fundamental virtue.

“My friend,” he said, with a new solemnity in his manner, “you are on the threshold of another world; how dare you present yourself to the Judge of all the earth with a passion like this in your heart?”

In the momentary rest the beggar had recovered strength enough to reply: “It is t-t-true. I am on the threshold of another world! I didn’t use to b-b-believe there was one, but I do now. There must be! Would it b-b-be right for such d-d-devils as the one that

wrecked my life to g-g-go unpunished? Not if I know anything! They get away from us here, but if eternity is as long as they s-s-say it is, I'll find D-D-Dave Corson if it t-t-takes the whole of it, and when I f-f-find him—" he paused again, gasping and strangling.

Mantel's pity was deeply stirred, and he would gladly have spared him had he dared; but he did not, and permitting him to regain his breath, he said:

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“And so you really mean to die without bestowing your pardon upon those who have wronged you?”

“I swear it!”

“Have you ever heard the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?” asked Mantel, trembling at the name and at his own temerity in pronouncing it.

It was a strange situation into which this young skeptic had been forced by the logic of circumstances. As the old beggar felt the ethical necessity of another life, the young gambler felt the ethical necessity of the crucifixion. It seemed to him that if the redemption of this hate-smitten man hung on the capacity of his own heart to empty itself of its bitterness, there was about as much hope as of a serpent expelling the poison from its fangs! He had never before seen a man under the absolute and unresisted power of one of the basal passions, and neither he nor any one else has ever understood life until he has witnessed that fearful spectacle. A summer breeze conveys no more idea of a tornado, nor a burning chimney of a volcano, than ordinary vices convey of that fearful ruin which any elemental passion works when permitted to devastate a soul, unrestrained. The sight filled Mantel with terror, and he felt himself compelled by some invincible necessity to plead with the man in the name of the Saviour of the world. Long and earnestly he besought him to forgive as Christ forgave; but all in vain! So long had he brooded over his wrongs that his mind had either become hopelessly impotent or else irretrievably hardened. The conversation had so angered and exhausted the invalid that he presently crawled over to his bed, threw himself upon it and sank almost instantly into a deep sleep.

With a heavy heart, Mantel left him and hurried home to report the interview to David. He found him just returning from his work, and conveyed his message by the gloom of his countenance.

“Has anything, gone wrong?” David inquired, anxiously, as they entered their room.

Casting himself heavily into a seat and answering abstractedly, Mantel replied, “Each new day of life renders it more inexplicable. A man no sooner forms a theory than he is compelled to abandon it. I fear it is a labyrinth from which we shall none of us escape.”

“Do not speak in parables,” David exclaimed, impatiently, “If anything is the matter, tell me at once. Do not leave me in suspense. I cannot endure it. Is he worse? Is he dying?”

“He is both, and more,” Mantel answered, still unable to escape from the gloom which enveloped him.

“More? What more? Speak out. I cannot bear these indirections.”

“I have at last drawn from him a brief but terrible allusion to the tragedy of your lives.”

“What did he say? Quick, tell me!”

“He said that he had been wronged by those whom he had benefited.”

“It is too true, God knows; but what else did he say?”

“That he would spend eternity in revenging his wrongs.”

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“Horrible!” cried David, sinking into a chair.

“Yes, more horrible than you know.”

“Did he show no mercy? Was there no sign of pardon?”

“None! Granite is softer than his heart. Ice is warmer.”

David rose and paced the floor. Pausing before Mantel, he said, piteously, “Perhaps he will relent when Pepeeta comes!”

“Perhaps! Have you heard from her?”

“No, but her answer cannot be much longer delayed, for I have written again and again.”

“Something may have happened,” said Mantel, who had lost all heart and hope.

“Do not say it,” David exclaimed, beseechingly.

“Well, but why does she not reply?”

“It is a long distance. She may have changed her residence. She may never go to the postoffice. She may be sick.”

“Or dead!” said Mantel, giving expression in two words to the fullness of his despair.

“Impossible!” exclaimed David, his face blanching at this sudden articulation of the dread he had been struggling so hard to repress.

“You do not know her!” he continued. “If you had ever seen her, you could not speak of death. She was not made to die. I beg you to abandon this mood. You will drive me to despair. I cannot live another moment without the hope that I shall be forgiven by this old man whom I have so terribly wronged, and I know that he will not forgive me unless I put back into his hands the treasure of which I robbed him.”

“Corson,” said Mantel, rising and taking David by the hand, “you must give up this dream of receiving the old man’s pardon.”

“I cannot!”

“You must! He will not grant it even if Pepeeta comes. The knife has gone too deep! His heart is broken, and his mind, I think, is deranged. And more than this, he will not live until Pepeeta comes unless she hastens on the wings of the wind. He is dying, Corson, dying. You cannot imagine how he has withered away since you saw him. It is like watching a candle flicker in its socket. You must abandon this hope, I say.”

“And I say that it is impossible.”

“But you must. What difference can it possibly make whether he forgives you or not? The wrong is done. It cannot be undone.”

“What difference? What difference, did you say? Is it possible that you do not know? Do you think a man could endure this life, hard enough at the best, if he were haunted by a dead man’s curse?”

“Thousands have had to do so—millions; but do not let us talk about it any more. We are nervous and unstrung. You will never be persuaded until you see for yourself. If you wish to make the effort, you must do it soon; in fact you must do it now. I have come to tell you that his physician says he will not live until morning.”

“Then let us go!” cried David, seizing his hat and starting for the door, white to the lips and trembling violently.

They passed out into the night together and hurried away to the beggar’s room. Each was too burdened for talk and they walked in silence. Arriving at the house, they ascended the stairs on tiptoe and paused to listen at the door. “I will leave it ajar, so you may hear what he says, and then you can judge if I am right,” said Mantel, entering quietly.

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He approached the table and turned up the lamp which he had left burning dimly. By its pale light David could see the great head lying on the pillow, the chin elevated, the mouth partially open, the breast heaving with the painful efforts to catch a few last fluttering inspirations.

Nestling close to the ashen face and licking the cheek now and then with his little red tongue, was the terrier.

Mantel's footfall, quiet as it was, disturbed the sleeper, who moved, turned his head toward the sound and asked in a husky and but half-audible voice, "Who is there?"

"It is I. How are you now? A little better?" said Mantel, laying his soft, cool hand upon the broad forehead, wet already with the death-damp.

"I am getting weaker. It won't—last—long," he answered painfully.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it."

"Are you satisfied?"

"It can't—be—helped."

"No, it can't be helped. The doctor has told me you cannot live through the night."

"The—sooner—the—better!"

"I do not want to bother you, but I cannot bear to have you die without talking to you again about your future; I must try once more to persuade you not to die without sending some kind word to the people who have wronged you."

The expression of the white face underwent a hideous transformation.

"If you do not feel like talking to me about a matter so sacred and personal, would you not like to have me send for some minister or priest?"

The head moved slowly back and forth in a firm negation.

"In every age, and among all men, it has seemed fitting that those who were about to die should make some preparation to meet their God. Have you no desire to do this?"

A fierce light shone upon the emaciated countenance and the thin lips slowly articulated these words: "I—myself—will—settle—with—God! He—will—have—to—account—to—me—for—all—he—has—made—me—suffer!"

The listener at the door leaned against the wall for support.

“Is there absolutely no word of pardon or of kindness which you wish to send to those who have injured you, as a sort of legacy from the grave?”

“None!” he whispered fiercely.

“Suppose that your enemy should come to see you. Suppose that a great change had come over him; that he, too, had suffered deeply; that your wife had discovered his treachery and left him; that he had bitterly repented; that he had made such atonement as he could for his sin; that it was he who has been caring for you in these last hours, could you not pardon him?”

These words produced an extraordinary effect on the dying man. For the first time he identified his enemy with his friend, and as the discovery dawned upon his mind a convulsion seized and shook his frame. He slowly and painfully struggled to a sitting posture, lifted his right hand above his head and said in tones that rang with the raucous power of by-gone days:

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“Curse him! If I had known that I was eating his b-b-bread, it would have choked me! Send him to me! Where is he?”

“I am here,” said David, quietly entering the door. “I am here to throw myself on your mercy and to beg you, for the love of God, to forgive me.”

As he heard the familiar voice, the beggar trembled. He made one last supreme effort to look out of his darkened eyes. An expression of despairing agony followed the attempt, and then, with both his great bony hands, he clutched at the throat of his night robe as if choking for breath, tore it open and reaching down into his bosom felt for some concealed object. He found it at last, grasped it and drew it forth. It was a shining blade of steel.

Mantel sprang to take it from his hand; but David pushed him back and said calmly, “Let him alone.”

“Yes, let me alone,” cried the blind man, trembling in every limb, and crawling slowly and painfully from the bed.

The movements of the dying man were too slow and weak to convey any adequate expression of the tempest raging in his soul. It was incredible that a tragedy was really being enacted, and that this poor trembling creature was thirsting for the lifeblood of a mortal foe.

David did not seek to escape. He did not even shudder. There was a singular expression of repose on his features, for in his desperation he solaced himself by the reflection that he was about to render final satisfaction for a sin whose atonement had become otherwise impossible. He therefore folded his arms across his breast and stood waiting.

The contorted face of the furious beggar afforded a terrible contrast to the tranquil countenance of the penitent and unresisting object of his hatred. The opaque flesh seemed to have become transparent, and through it glowed the baleful light of hatred and revenge. The lips were drawn back from the white teeth, above which the great mustache bristled savagely. The lids were lifted from the hollow and expressionless eyes. Balancing himself for an instant he moved forward; but the emaciated limbs tottered under the weight of the body. He reeled, caught himself, then reeled once more, and lunged forward in the direction from which he had heard the voice of his enemy.

Again Mantel strove to intercept him, and again David forced him back.

Uncertain as to the exact location of the object of his hatred, he raised his knife and struck at random; but the blow spent itself in air.

The futility and helplessness of his efforts crazed him.

“Where are you? G-g-give me some sign!” he cried.

“I am here,” said David in a voice whose preternatural calmness sent a shudder to the heart of his friend.

With one supreme and final effort, the dying man lurched forward and threw himself wildly toward the sound. His hand, brandishing the dagger, was uplifted and seemed about to descend on his foe; but at that very instant, with a frightful imprecation upon his lips, the gigantic form collapsed, the knife dropped from the hand, and he plunged, a corpse, into the arms of his intended victim.

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David received the dead weight upon the bosom at which the dagger had been aimed, and the first expression of his face indicated a certain disappointment that a single blow had not been permitted to end his troubles, as well as terror at an event so appalling. He stood spellbound for a moment, supporting the awful burden, and then, overpowered with the horror of the situation, cried out,

“Take him, Mantel! take him! Help me to lay him down! Quick, I cannot stand it; quick!”

They laid the lifeless form on the bed, while the little dog, leaping up beside his dead master, threw his head back and emitted a series of prolonged and melancholy howls.

CHAPTER XXX.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH

> “Men deal with life as children with their play,
> Who first misuse, then cast their toys away.”
> —Cowper.

Bewildered by the scene through which he had just passed, Corson returned to his rooms and spent the night in a sort of stupor. What happened the next day he never knew; but on the following morning he accompanied Mantel to the cemetery where, with simple but reverent ceremony, they committed the body of the doctor to the bosom of earth.

Just as they were about to turn away, after the conclusion of the burial service, a strange thing happened. The limb of a great elm tree, which had been tied back to keep it out of the way of the workmen, was released by the old sexton and swept back over the grave.

It produced a similar impression upon the minds of both the subdued spectators. They glanced at each other, and Mantel said, “It was like the wing of an angel!”

“Yes,” added David with a sigh, “and seemed to brush away and obliterate all traces of his sorrow and his sins.”

They did not speak during their homeward journey, and when they reached their rooms David paced uneasily backward and forward until the shadows of evening had fallen. When he suddenly observed that it was dusk, he took his hat and went out into the streets. There was something so restless and unnatural about his movements as to excite the suspicion of his friend, who waited for a single moment and then hurried after him.

The night was calm and clear, the autumn stars were shining in a cloudless sky, and the tide of life which had surged through the busy streets all day was ebbing like the waters from the bays and estuaries along the shore of the ocean.

The sounds the people made in tramping over the stone pavements or hurriedly driving over the hard streets, possessed a strangely different quality from the monotonous and grinding roar of the daylight. They were sharp, clear, resonant and emphatic. A single footfall attracted the attention of a listener more than the previous shuffle of a thousand feet. David's,—soft and subdued as it was,—resounded loudly, echoing from the buildings on either side of him as he slowly paced along.

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It was evident to every one who met him that he was moving aimlessly. Now and then some keen-eyed pedestrian stopped to take a second look and, turning to do so, felt an instinctive pity for this burdened, care-encumbered man, wending his way through the almost deserted streets.

This gaze was unreturned and this sympathy unperceived. He was in one of those fits of abstraction when the whole external universe with all its beauties and sublimities has ceased to exist. His cup of misery was full, he had lost all clue to the meaning of life and a single definite idea had taken complete possession of his mind. It was that he was doomed to pass his existence under a curse.

By the very nature of its being, the soul is keenly sensitive to blessings and curses, and it is not alone the benediction of the mitred priest that thrills the heart! That of the pauper upon whom we have bestowed alms sometimes awakens in our bosom a hope and gladness out of all proportion to the insignificant source from which it has proceeded. Nor do we need to be cursed by the great and the powerful to feel a pang of terror in our souls! Let but some helpless wretch whom we have wronged commit his cause to heaven in a single syllable, and we shudder as if we already heard the approach of those avenging feet which the ancients said were shod with wool. The curse of the dead and impotent beggar rang in the ears of the fugitive like the strokes of an alarm bell. That deep sense of justice which had been formed in his early life had been revivified and endowed with a resistless power.

At such moments as these through which he was passing man experiences no doubt as to the nature and origin of conscience. He is as sure that the terror aroused in his heart is the echo of the decision of some real and awful tribunal as that the wave upon the shore is produced by some real though invisible storm at sea, or the shadow on the mountain by some palpable object between it and the sun.

The conscience is not only “a secretion in the brain,” it is not only the “accumulated observations of the universal man upon the phenomena of the moral life,” it is not only his study of the laws of cause and effect distilled into maxims and forebodings; it is this, but it is more than this—as every total is more than any of its parts. For every man has something which is in him, but not of him. It resides within his intelligence, but it is not so much the offspring of his intelligence as an emissary that has taken up its residence there! This obscure something is stronger than he. He does not subordinate it to himself, but is subordinated by it. He can rebel against it, but he cannot overthrow it. He can fly from it, but he cannot escape it.

This sublime and mysterious power had at last obtained complete ascendency in the soul of David Corson. He no longer argued and he no longer resisted. He saw no way of escape from the spiritual anaconda which was tightening its folds around him.

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This was all the more strange because the way to the satisfaction of the irrepressible hunger of his heart was now open. Pepeeta's husband was dead, and although he was not innocent of a great crime, he was at least not a murderer. Pepeeta still loved him, if she were still alive. Of this he had no more doubt than of his love for her. Why then did he thus give up to despair? Why did he not fly to her arms and claim from life that happiness which had hitherto escaped his grasp?

He did not try to solve these problems, nor to comprehend his own despair. He only knew that he had been baffled at every turn of his life by powers with which he was unable to cope, and that he was tired of the struggle. He would give himself up to the mighty stream of events and be borne along. If he was exercising any volition in the choice of the path he was following, he was doing it unconsciously. That path was leading him direct to the harbor. It was a pathway well-worn by tired feet like his own.

The miserable creatures who had preceded him seemed to have formed a sort of wake by which he was being drawn along to that "wandering grave" in the deep sea. At last he reached the water's edge, and started as he heard the waves splashing among the wooden piles. The soft, sibilant sounds seemed like kisses on the lips of the victims of their treacherous caresses.

The deed of which they whispered seemed but the logical conclusion of his entire career. He put his foot upon the edge of the wharf and looked down into the dark abyss.

It was at this critical instant that his faithful friend extended his hand to save him; but at the same instant another and mightier hand was also extended from the sky.

From a remote part of the Battery a sound cut the silent air. It was a human voice, masculine, powerful, tender and pleading, lifted in a sacred song. That sound was the first element of the objective world which had penetrated the consciousness of the tortured and desperate would-be suicide.

He turned and listened—and as he did so, Mantel sprang back among the shadows just in time to escape his observation. The full-throated music, floating on the motionless air, fell upon his ear like a benediction. He listened, and caught the words of a hymn with which he had been familiar in his childhood:

> "Light of those whose dreary dwelling
> Borders on the shades of death!
> Rise on us, thy love revealing,
> Dissipate the clouds beneath.
> Thou of heaven and earth creator—
> In our deepest darkness rise,

Scattering all the night of nature,
Pouring day upon our eyes."

By the spell of this mysterious music he was drawn back into the living world—drawn as if by some powerful magnet.

Pain and sorrow had become tired of vexing him at last, and now stretched forth their hands in a ministry of consolation. With his eyes fixed on the spot from which the music issued, he moved unconsciously toward it, Mantel following him.

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A few moments' walking brought him to a weird spectacle. A torch had been erected above a low platform on which stood a man of most unique and striking personality. He looked like a giant in the wavering light of the torch. He was dressed in the simple garb of a Quaker; his head was bare; great locks of reddish hair curled round his temples and fell down upon his shoulders. His massive countenance bespoke an extraordinary mind, and beamed with rest and peace.

As he sang the old familiar hymn, he looked around upon his audience with an expression such as glowed, no doubt, from the countenance of the Christ when He spoke to the multitudes on the shores of Lake Genessaret.

Close to the small platform was a circle of street Arabs, awed into silence and respect by the charm of this remarkable personality. Next to them came a ring of women—-some of them old and gray, with haggard and wrinkled countenances upon which Time, with his antique pen, had traced many illegible hieroglyphs; some of them young and bedizened with tinsel jewelry and flashy clothing; not a few of them middle-aged, wan, dispirited and bearing upon their hips bundles wrapped in faded shawls, from which came occasionally that most distressing of sounds, the wail of an ill-fed and unloved infant, crying in the night.

Outside of this zone of female misery and degradation, there was a belt of masculine stupidity and crime; men with corpulent bodies, bull necks, double chins, pile-driving heads; men of shrunken frames, cadaverous cheeks, deep-set and beady eyes—-vermin-covered, disease-devoured, hope-deserted. They clung around him, these concentric circles of humanity, like rings around a luminous planet, held by they knew not what resistless attraction.

The simple melody, borne upon the pinions of that resonant and cello-like voice, attained an almost supernatural influence over their perverted natures. When it ceased, an audible sigh arose, an involuntary tribute of adoration and of awe.

As soon as he had finished his hymn, this consecrated apostle to the lost sheep of the great city opened a well-worn volume.

The passage which he read, or rather chanted, was the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, the awe-inspiring sentences sending through the circles of humanity which were tightening about him visible vibrations.

When he finished his reading, he began an address full of homely wit and pathos, in which, with all the rich and striking imagery culled from a varied life in the wildernesses of the great forests and the great cities of our continent, he appealed to that consciousness of "the true, the beautiful and the good" which he believed to lie dormant, but capable of resurrection, in the soul of every man.

A few of his auditors were too far gone with fatigue or intoxication to follow him, and elbowing their way through the crowd shot off into the night upon their various tangents of stupidity or crime; but most of the spectators listened with a sort of rapt and involuntary attention.

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The influence which he exerted over the mind of the young man whom he had unconsciously saved from suicide was as irresistible as it was inscrutable. His language had the charm of perfect familiarity. Every word and phrase had fallen from his own lips a hundred times in similar exhortations. In fact, they seemed to him strangely like the echo of his own voice coming back upon him from the dim and half-forgotten past.

His interest and excitement culminated in an incident for which the listener was totally unprepared. The speaker who had been exhorting his audience upon the testimony of prophet and apostle now appealed to his own personal experience.

“Look at me!” he said, laying his great hand on his broad chest. “I was once as hardened and desperate a man as any of you; but God saved me! See this book!” he added, holding up the old volume. “I will tell you a story about it. I found it in a log cabin away out in the frontier state of Ohio. Listen, and I will tell you how. I had left a lumber camp with a company of frontiersmen one Sunday morning, to go to a new clearing which ’we were making in the wilderness, when I suddenly discovered that I had forgotten my axe. Swearing at my misfortune, I returned to get it. As I approached the cabin which I had left a few minutes before, I heard a human voice. I paused in surprise, crept quietly to the door and listened. Some one was talking in almost the very language in which I have spoken to you. I was frightened and fled! Escaping into the depths of the forest, I lay down at the root of a great tree, and for the first time in my life I made a silence in my soul and listened to the voice of God. I know not how long I lay there; but at last when I recovered my consciousness I returned to the cabin. It was silent and empty; but on the floor I found this book.”

“Good God!” exclaimed a voice.

So rapt had been the attention of the hearers that at this unexpected interruption the women screamed and the men made a wide path for the figure that burst through them and rushed toward the platform.

The speaker paused and fixed his eye upon the man who pressed eagerly toward him.

“Tell me whether a red line is drawn down the edge of that chapter, and a hand is pointing toward the fifth and sixth verses!” he cried.

“It is,” replied the lumberman.

“Then let me take it!” exclaimed David, reaching out his trembling hands.

“What for?”

“Because it is mine! I am the man who proclaimed the holy faith, and, God forgive me, abandoned it even as you received it!”

The astonished lumberman handed him the Bible, and he covered it with kisses and tears. In the meantime, the crowd, excited by the spectacular elements of the drama, surged round the actors, and the preacher, reaching down, took David by the arm and raised him to the platform.

“Be quiet, my friends,” he said with a gesture of command, “and when this prodigal has regained his composure we will ask him to tell us his story.”

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Of what was transpiring around him, David seemed to be entirely unconscious and at last the fickle crowd became impatient.

“What’s de matter wid you?” said a sarcastic voice.

“Speak out! Don’t snuffle,” exclaimed another.

“Tip us your tale,” cried a fourth.

“Go on. Go on. We’re waiting,” called many more.

These impatient cries at last aroused David from his waking dream, he drew his hand over his eyes, and began his story.

For a time the strange narrative produced a profound impression. Heads drooped as if in meditation upon the mystery and meaning of life; significant glances were exchanged; tears trembled in many eyes; these torpid natures received a shock which for a moment awakened them to a new life.

But it was only for a moment. They were incapable of the sustained effort of thought, of ambition, or of will. Impressions made upon their souls were like those made on the soft folds of a garment by the passing touch of a hand.

To their besotted perceptions this scene was like a play in a Bowery theater, and now that the dramatic denouement had come, they lost their interest and sauntered away singly or in little groups. In a few moments there were only three figures left in the light of the flaming torch, They were those of the lumberman, David, and Mantel, who now drew near, took his friend by the hand and pressed it with a gentle sympathy.

“Where did you come from?” asked David in surprise, as he for the first time recognized his companion.

“I have followed you all the evening,” Mantel replied.

“Then you have heard the story of this book?”

“I have, and I could not have believed it without hearing.”

“Can you spare us a little of your time?” said David, turning to the lumberman.

“I owe you all the time you wish and all the service I can render,” he replied.

“You have more than paid your debt by what you have done for me to-night, but who are you?”

“I am only another voice crying in the wilderness.”

“Is this your only business in life—to speak to the outcast and the wretched as you did to-night?”

“This is all.”

David looked his admiration.

“How do you support yourself?” asked Mantel, to whom such a man was a phenomenon.

“We do not any of us support ourselves so much as we are supported,” he replied.

“And this life of toil and self-denial had its origin in those words I spoke in the empty lumber camp?” asked David, incredulously.

“It is not a life of self-denial, but that was its beginning.”

“It is a mystery. I lost my faith and you found it, and now perhaps you are going to give it back again!” David said.

The lumberman turned his searching eyes kindly on Mantel’s face and said, “And how is it with thee, my friend; hast thou the peace of God?”

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The directness of the question startled the gambler. “I have, no peace of any kind; my heart is full of storms and my life is a ruin,” he answered sadly.

“Did thee never notice,” said the lumberman gently, “how nature loves to reclaim a ruin?”

“In what way?”

“By covering it with vines and moss.”

The unexpected nature of this answer and the implied encouragement produced a deep impression on the mind of the gambler, but he answered:

“I shall never be reclaimed. I have gone too far. I have often tried to find the true way of life, and prayed for a single glimpse of light! Have you ever heard how Zeyd used to spend hours leaning against the wall of the Kaaba and praying, ’Lord, if I knew in what manner thou wouldst have me adore thee, I would obey thee; but I do not! Oh! give me light!’ I have prayed that prayer with all that agony, but, to me, the universe is dark as hell!”

“There is light enough! It is eyes we need!” said the evangelist.

“Light! Who has it? Many think they have, but it is mere fancy. They mistake the shining of rotten wood for fire!”

“And sometimes men have walked in the light without seeing it, as fish swimming in the sea and birds flying in the air, might say, ’Where is the sea?’ ‘Where is the air?’”

“But what comfort is it, if there is light, and I cannot see it? There might as well be no light at all!”

“The bird never knows it has wings until it tries them! We see, not by looking for our eyes, but by looking out of them. We say of a little child that it has to ‘find its legs.’ Some men have to find their eyes.”

“It is an art, then, to see?”

“I would even call it a trick, if I dared.”

“Can you impart that capacity and teach that art?”

“No, it must be acquired by each man for himself. We can only tell others ‘we see.’”

“I only know that I wish I could see!”

“We see by faith.”

“And what is faith?”

“It is a power of the soul as much higher than reason as reason is higher than sense.”

“Some men may possess such power, but I do not.”

“You at least have an imagination.”

“Yes.”

“Well, faith is but the imagination spiritualized.”

Mantel regarded the man who spoke in these terse and pregnant sentences with astonishment. “This,” said he, “is not the same language in which you addressed the people in the Battery. This is the language of a philosopher! Do all lumbermen in the west speak thus?”

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The evangelist began to reply, but was interrupted by David, who now burst out in a sudden exclamation of joy and gratitude. He had been too busy with reflections and memories to participate actively in the conversation, for this startling incident had disclosed to him the whole slow and hidden movement of the providence of his life towards this climax and opportunity. He was profoundly moved by a clear conviction that a divine hand must have planned and superintended this whole web of events, and had intentionally led him from contemplating the tragic issue of his sinful deeds and desires, to this vision of the good he had done in the better moments of his life. This strange coincidence, to a mind like his, could leave no room for doubt that the hand of God was on him, and that, after all, he had been neither abandoned nor forgotten. The lumberman had been sent at this critical moment to save him! There was still hope!

With that instantaneous movement in which his disordered conceptions of life invariably re-formed themselves, the chaotic events of the past shifted themselves into a purposeful and comprehensible series, and revealed beyond peradventure the hand of God.

And as this conclusion burst upon him, he broke into the conversation of Mantel and the lumberman with the warmest exclamations of gratitude and happiness.

They talked a long time in the quiet night, asking and answering questions. The two friends besought the evangelist to accompany them to their rooms, but he said:

“I have given you my message and must pass on. My work is to bear testimony. I sow the seed and leave its cultivation and the harvest to others.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GREAT REFUSAL

“But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful.”

Too busy with their own thoughts to talk on the way home, on entering their rooms Mantel threw himself into a chair, while David nervously began to gather his clothes together and crowd them hastily into a satchel.

“What’s up?” asked Mantel.

“I’m off in the morning.”

“Which way are you going?”

“There is only one way. I am going to find Pepeeta.”

“Do you really expect to succeed?”

“Expect to! I am determined!”

“It’s a sudden move.”

“Sudden! everything is sudden. Events have simply crashed upon me lately! When I think of the fluctuations of hope and despair, of certainty and uncertainty through which I have gone in the past few hours, I am stupefied.”

“And I never go through any! My life is like a dead and stagnant sea—nothing agitates it. If I could once be upheaved from the bottom or churned into a foam from the top, I think I might amount to something.”

“You ought to quit this business, Mantel, and come with me. I am going to find Pepeeta, take her back to that quiet valley where I lived, and get myself readjusted to life. I need time for reflection, and so do you. What do you say? Will you join me? I cannot bear to leave you? You have been a friend, and I love you!”

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“Thanks, Corson, thanks. You have come nearer to stirring this dead heart of mine than any one since—well, no matter. I reciprocate your feeling. I shall have a hard time of it after you have gone.”

“Then join me.”

“It is impossible.”

“But why? This life will destroy you sooner or later.”

“Oh—that’s been done already.”

“No, it hasn’t. There are more noble things in you than you realize. What you need is to give them scope and let them out.”

“You don’t know me. What you see is all on the surface. If I ever had any power of decision or action it has gone. I am the victim, and not the master of my destiny. I am drifting along like a derelict, with no compass to guide, rudder to steer or anchor to grip the bottom.”

“Make another effort, old man, do! Look at me. I was in as bad a fix as you are only a little while ago.”

“Yes; but see what has happened to you! Circumstances have tumbled you out of the nest, and of course you had to fly. I wish something would happen to me! I would almost be glad to have lightning strike me.”

“What you say is true in a way, of course. I know I don’t deserve any credit for breaking out of this life. But don’t you think a man can do it alone, without any such frightful catastrophes to help him? It seems to me, now, that I could. I feel as if I could burst through stone walls.”

“Of course you do, my dear fellow, and you can. But something has put strength into you! That’s what I need.”

“Well, let me put it into you! Lean on me. I can’t bear to leave you here and see you go down! Come, brace up. Make an effort. Decide. Tear yourself away!”

“You actually make my heart flutter, Davy; I feel as if I would really like to do it. But I can’t. It’s no use. I shouldn’t get across the ferry before I’d begin to hang back.”

“But you don’t belong to this life. You are above it, naturally. You ought to be a force for good in the world. Society needs such men as you are, and needs them badly. Come! If I can break these meshes you can.”

“No, my dear fellow, that’s a non-sequitur. There is different blood flowing in our veins, and we have had a different environment and education. As far back as I know anything about them, my people have all lived on the surface of life, and I have floated along with them. But, by heavens—I have at least seen down into the depths!”

“Well, I have my inheritance of bad blood also. I had a father who was not only weak but wicked.”

“Yes, but think of your mother.”

“Mantel, you are carrying this too far. A man is something more than the mere chemical product of his ancestor’s blood and brains! Every one has a new and original endowment of his own. He must live and act for himself.”

“Maybe so, but everything seems, at least, to be a fixed and inevitable consequence of what has gone before. I don’t want to disparage this last act of yours, but see how far back its roots reach into the past. See what a chain of events led up to it, and what frightful causes have been operating to bring you up to the sticking point! How long ago was it that you were just as ready to throw up the game?”

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“Horrible! Don’t speak of it! It makes me tremble. I am not worthy to defend or even advocate a life of endeavor and victory, Mantel, and I will not try; but I know that I am right.”

“Yes, Dave, you are right; I know it as well as you. I am only talking to ease my conscience. I know I ought to snap these cords, and I know I can. But I also know that I am grinding here in this devil’s mill while every bad man makes sport and every good man weeps! And I know that I shall keep on grinding while you and thousands of other noble fellows with less brains, perhaps, and fewer chances than mine, make wild dashes for liberty and do men’s work in the world. But here I am, cold and dead, and here I remain.”

“Can nothing persuade you—not love? I love you, Mantel! Come, let us go together. Who knows what we can do if we try? I must persuade you!”

“I am like a ship in a sea of glue. You touch me, but you don’t persuade me! It’s no use. I cannot budge. The aspirations you awaken in my soul leap up above the surface like little fishes from a pond, and as quickly fall back again! No, I cannot go. Don’t press me—it makes me feel like the young man in the gospel, who made what Dante calls ’the great refusal;’ he saw that young man’s ‘shade’ in hell.”

They were sitting on the sill of a deep window in what had once been one of the most fashionable mansions of the city. The sash was raised, and the light of the moon fell full upon their young faces. They ceased speaking after Mantel had uttered those solemn words, and looked out over the housetops to the water of the great river. It was long after midnight, and not a sound broke the stillness. Fleecy clouds were drifting across the sky, and a vessel under full sail was going silently down the river toward the open sea. They had involuntarily clasped each other’s hands, and as their hearts opened and disclosed their secrets they were drawn closer and closer together until their arms stole about each other’s necks. For a few brief moments they were boys again. The vices that had hardened their hearts and shut their souls up in lonely isolation relaxed their hold. That sympathy which knit the hearts of David and Johnathan together made their’s beat as one.

David broke the silence. “I cannot bear to leave you, Mantel. Join me. Such feelings as these which stir us so deeply to-night do not come too often. It must be dangerous to resist them. I suppose there are slight protests and aspirations in the soul all the time, but these to-night are like the flood of the tide.”

“Yes,” said Mantel; “the Nile flows through Egypt every day, but flows over it only once a year.”

“And this is the time to sow the seed, isn’t it?”

“So they say. But you must remember that you feel this more deeply than I do, Davy. I am moved. I have a desire to do better, but it isn’t large enough. It is like a six-inch stream trying to turn a seven-foot wheel.

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“Don’t make light of it, Mantel!”

“I don’t mean to, but you must not overestimate the impressions made on me. I am not so good as you think.”

“I wish you had the courage to be as good as you are.”

“But there is no use trying to be what I am not. If I should start off with you, I should never be able to follow you. My old self would get the victory. In the long run, a man will be himself. ’Nature is often hidden, sometimes overcome—seldom extinguished.’”

“What a mood you are in, Mantel! It makes me shiver to hear you talk so. Here I am, full of hope and purpose; my heart on fire; believing in life; confident of the outcome; and you, a better man by nature than I am, sitting here, cold as a block of ice, and the victim of despair! I ought to be able to do something! Sweet as life is to me to-night, I feel that I could lay it down to save you.”

“Dear fellow!” said Mantel, grasping his hands and choking with emotion; “you don’t know how that moves me! It can’t seem half so strange to you as it does to me; but I must be true to myself. If I told you I would take this step I should not be honest. No! Not to-night! Sometime, perhaps. I haven’t much faith in life, but I swear I don’t believe, bad man as I am, that anybody can ever go clear to the bottom, without being rescued by a love like that! I’ll never forget it, Davy; never! It will save me sometime; but you must not talk any more, you are tired out. Go to bed, friend, brother, the only one I ever really had and loved. You will need your sleep. Leave me alone, and I will sit the night out and chew the bitter cud.”

It was not until daybreak that David ceased his supplications and lay down to snatch a moment’s rest. When he awoke, he sprang up suddenly and saw Mantel still sitting before the open window where he left him, smoking his cigar and pondering the great problem.

“I have had a wonderful dream,” he said.

“What was it?” asked Mantel.

“I dreamt that I was swimming alone in a vast ocean,—weary, exhausted, desperate and sinking,—but just as I was going down a hand was thrust out of the sky, and although I could not reach it, so long as I kept my eyes on it I swam with perfect ease; while, just the moment I took them off, my old fatigue came back and I began to sink. When I saw this, I never looked away for even a second, and the sea seemed to bear me up with giant arms. I swam and swam as easily as men float, day after day and year after year, until I reached the harbor.”

“Whose hand was it?”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“Well, swim on and look up, Davy, and God bless you.”

They parted at dawn, one to break through the meshes and escape, and the other—!

In Australia, when drought drives the rabbits southward, the ranchmen, terrified at their approach, have only to erect a woven wire fence on the north side of their farms to be perfectly safe, for the poor things lie down against it and die in droves—too stupid to go round, climb over, or dig under! It is a comfort to see one of them now and then who has determined to find the green fields on the southward side—no matter what it costs!

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Weak and bad as he had been, David at least took the first path which he saw leading up to the light.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END OF EXILE

> “Every one goes astray, and the least imprudent is he who repents soonest.” —Voltaire.

The steamer on which Corson embarked after his overland journey from New York City to Pittsburg, had descended the Ohio almost as far as Cincinnati, before other thoughts than those which were concerned with Pepeeta and his spiritual regeneration could awaken any interest in his mind. But as the boat approached Cincinnati, the places, the persons and the incidents of his childhood world began to present themselves to his consciousness. An irrepressible longing to look once more upon the place of his birth and the friends of his youth took possession of his mind.

He found, on inquiry, that the boat was to remain at the wharf in Cincinnati for several hours, and that there would be time enough for him to make the journey to his old home and back before she proceeded down the river. He decided to do so, and observed with satisfaction that those painful gropings for the next stepping stone across the streams of action which had been so persistent and painful a feature of his recent life had given place to the swift intuitions of his youth. He saw his way as he used to when a boy, and made his decisions rapidly and executed them fearlessly. The discovery of this fact gave a new zest and hope to life.

In a few moments after he had landed at the familiar wharf he was mounted upon a fleet horse, rushing away over those beautiful rolling hills which fill the mind of the traveler with uncloying delight in their variety, their fertility and their beauty. It was the first time since he had left the farm that his mind had been free enough from passion or pain to bestow its full attention upon the charms of Nature; they dawned on him now like a new discovery. The motion of the horse,—so long unfamiliar, so easy, so graceful, so rhythmical,—seemed of itself to key his spirits to his environment, for it is an elemental pleasure to be seated in the saddle and feel the thrill of power and rapid motion. The rider’s eyes brightened, his cheeks glowed, his pulses bounded. He gathered up the beauties of the world around him in great sheaves of delicious and thrilling sensations. Long-forgotten odors came sweeping across the fields, rich with the verdure of the vernal season, and brought with them precious accompaniments of the almost-forgotten past. The rich and varied colors of field and sky and forest fed his starved soul with one kind of beauty; and the sweet sounds of the outdoor world intoxicated him with another. The low of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the crowing of chanticleers, the cackling of hens, the gobble of turkeys, the multitudinous songs of the birds enveloped him in a sort

of musical atmosphere. For the first time since his restoration to hope, the past seemed like a dream, and these few blissful moments became a prophecy of a new and grander life. “For, if the burden can fall off for a single moment, why not for many moments?” So he said to himself, as the consciousness of his past misery and his unknown future thrust their disturbing faces into the midst of these blissful emotions.

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The vague joys which had been surging through his soul became vivid and well-defined as the details of the landscape around his old home began gradually to be revealed. At first he had recognized only the larger and more general features like the lines of hills, the valleys, the rivers; but now he began to distinguish well-known farms and houses, streams in which he had fished, groves in which he had hunted, roads over which he had driven; and the pleasure of reviving old memories and associations increased with every step of progress. At last he began to ascend the high hill which hid the house of his childhood from view. He reached the summit; there lay the village fast asleep in the spring sunshine. He recognized it, but with astonishment, for it looked like a miniature of its former self. The buildings that once appeared so grand had shrunk to playhouses. The broad streets had contracted and looked like narrow lanes. He rubbed his eyes to see if they were deceiving him.

An unreality brooded mysteriously over everything. It was the same, yet not the same, and he paused a moment to permit his mind to become accustomed to these alterations; to ponder upon the reasons for this change; to realize the joy and sadness which mingled in his heart; and then he turned into a side road to escape any possible encounter with old acquaintances.

The route which he had chosen did not lead to the farm house, but to the cemetery where the body of his mother lay wrapped in her dreamless sleep; that neglected grave was drawing him to itself with a magnetic force. He who, for a year, had thought of her scarcely at all, now thought of nothing else. The last incident in her life, the face white with its intolerable pain of confession, the gasp for breath, the sudden fall, the quiet funeral, his own responsibility for this tragic death—he lived it all over and over again in an instant of time as grief, regret, remorse, successively swept his heart. Tying his horse outside the lonely burying ground, he threaded his way among the myrtle-covered graves to the low mound which marked her resting place, approached it, removed his hat and stood silently, reverently, by its side.

There come to us all hours or moments of sudden and unexpected disclosures of the hidden meaning of life. Such an one came to David, there by that lowly grave. He saw, as in the light of eternity, the grandeur and beauty of that character which the story of her sin and suffering had made him in his immaturity, misinterpret and despise! He did not comprehend that tragic story when she told it; it was impossible that he should, for he had no knowledge or experience adequate to furnish him the clew. Nothing is more inconceivable and impossible to a child than the possibility of his parents dying or doing wrong. When he awakens to consciousness he finds around him eternal things,—-rocks, hills, rivers, stars, parents! They all seem to belong to the same order

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of indestructible existence, and he would as soon expect to see the sun blotted from heaven as a parent removed from earth! And when his ethical perceptions awake, he has another experience of a similar character. His father and mother stand to him for the very moral order itself! To his mind, it is inconceivable that they should ever err, and the bare suggestion that those august and venerable beings can really sin, fills him with horror and incredulity. If he, therefore, sometime learns that they have committed a trifling indiscretion, he trembles, and if, in some tragic moment, irresistible proof is brought to bear on him that they have been guilty of a dark and desperate deed, the whole moral system seems to undergo a sudden and final collapse! There is no longer any standing-ground beneath his feet and he could not be driven into a deeper despair if God himself had yielded to temptation. This discovery and this despair had fallen to the lot of David, and he had cherished the impressions, formed in that dark hour, through all these many months. But now, returning to the scenes of his boyhood and bringing back his burdens of care and sin, bringing back also his deepened experience of life and his enlarged ability, to comprehend its difficulties and sorrows, he suddenly saw the conduct and character of his mother in a new light. He, too, had met temptation, had fallen, had gone down into the depths, and in that awful and interpretative experience, comprehended the victory which his mother had won on the field of dishonor and defeat! He was now enabled to reconstruct, by the aid of his enlightened imagination, a true picture of the events which she had sketched so imperfectly in those few brief words. He realized what she must have had to struggle against, and could measure the whole weight of guilt and despair that must have rested on her heart. He knew only too well how easy was the road into darkness, and how rugged the one leading up into the light; yet this frail woman had followed it and scaled those heights! She had been able to put that past into the background, and keep it where it belonged. She had hidden her sorrows in her heart; nothing had daunted her; no discouragement had cast her down. By a wonderful grace she had concealed her sin from some, and made others fear even to whisper the knowledge they possessed. She had made that sin a torch to illumine her future. She had used it as a stepping stone to ascend into purity and holiness. He could not remember in all those long years of devotion and of love, that she had ever permitted him to feel a moment's distrust of her perfect purity and goodness; and this seemed to him a miracle! That purity and goodness must have been real! So protracted an hypocrisy would have been impossible. Whence, then, had she derived the power thus to rise superior to her past? She had shown its terrific spell over her sensibilities by dying with shame when she at last proclaimed it, and yet for twenty years she had kept it under her feet like a writhing dragon, while she calmly fought her fight. It was incredible, sublime!

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As he stood there by her grave, measuring this deep and tragic experience with his new divining rod of sympathy, there rushed upon him an overmastering desire to reveal his appreciation to that suffering heart beyond the skies. A feeling of bitterness at his inability to do this frenzied him; a new consciousness of the irony of life in permitting him to make these discoveries when they could do her no good plunged him suddenly into a struggle with the darker problems of being which for a little while had ceased to vex him.

“Do all the appreciations of heroism come too late?” he asked his sad heart. “Do we acquire wisdom only when we, can no longer be guided by it? Do we achieve self-mastery and real virtue only to be despised by our children? Where is the clue to this tangle? Oh! mother, mother, if I could only have one single hour to ask thee what thou didst learn about this awful mystery in those lonely years of struggle! If I could only tell thee of my penitence, of my admiration, my love! But it is too late—too late.”

With this despairing cry on his lips, he flung himself upon the grave, buried his face in the green turf and burst into a convulsive passion of tears, such tears as come once or twice, perhaps, in the lives of most men, when they are passing through the awful years of adjustment to the incomprehensible and apparently chaotic experiences of existence.

Like a thunderstorm, these convulsions clear the atmosphere and give relief to the strained tension of the soul. At length, when his emotion had spent itself in long-drawn sighs, David rose in a calm and tender frame of mind, plucked a bunch of violets from the grave and reluctantly turned away.

On foot, and leading his horse, he entered a quiet and secluded path which led past the rear of the farm. He had not consciously determined what he should do next; but his heart impelled him irresistibly toward that little bridge where he had encountered Pepeeta on his return from the lumber camp. It was at that place and that hour, perhaps, that he had passed through the deepest experience of his whole life, for it was there that the full power of the beauty of the woman in whom he had met his destiny had burst upon him, and it was there that for the first time he had consciously surrendered himself to those rich emotions which love enkindles in the soul.

Perhaps our spiritual enjoyments are capable of an ever-increasing development and intensity; but those pleasures that belong to the earthly life and are excited by the things of time and sense, however often they may recur, by an inviolable law of nature attain their climax in some one single experience, just as there is in the passage of a star across the sky a single climactic moment, and in the life of a rose an instant when it reaches its most transcendent beauty. They all attain their zenith and then begin to wane; that one brilliant but transitory instant of perfect bliss can no more be recalled than the passing stroke of a bell, the vanished glory of a sunset, or the last sigh of a dying friend; and many of the vainest and most unsatisfying struggles of life are expended in the effort to reproduce that one evanescent and forevermore impossible ecstasy.

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Possibly David hoped that he could live that perfect moment over again by standing on that bridge! It was thither he bent his steps, and as he approached it there did come back faint echoes, little refluent waves; his lively imagination reproduced the scene; the dazzling figure really seemed once more to emerge from the secluded forest path; he almost heard the sound of her voice!

He threw the horse's bridle over the limb of a tree, leaned over the handrail of the bridge and looked down into the water. The stillness of the world, the slumber-song of the stream, the haunting power of the past superinduced a mood of abstraction so common in other, happier days.

Oblivious to all the objects and events of that outside world, he stood there dreaming of the past. While he did so, Pepeeta, following her daily custom, left the farm-house to take an evening walk. She also sought the little bridge. Perhaps she was summoned to this spot by some telepathic message from her lover; perhaps it was habit that impelled her, perhaps it was some fascination in the place itself. She moved forward with the quiet step peculiar to natures which are sensitive to the charm of the great solitudes of the world, and came noiselessly out from the low bushes behind the lonely watcher. As she stepped out into the road, she caught sight of the solitary figure and her heart, anticipating her eye in its swift recognition, throbbed so violently that she placed her hand on her bosom as if to still it.

"David!" she said in a low whisper.

She paused to observe him for a moment and, as he did not stir, began to move quietly towards him as he stood there motionless—a silhouette against the background of the darkening sky. She drew near enough to touch him; but so profound was his reverie that he was oblivious of her presence. It could not have been long that Pepeeta waited, although it seemed ages before he moved, sighed and breathed her name.

She touched him on the arm. He turned, and so met her there, face to face.

It was an experience too deep for language, and their emotions found expression in a single simple act. They clasped each other's hands and stood silently looking into each other's eyes. After many moments of silence David asked: "Why do you not speak to me, Pepeeta?"

"My eyes have told you all," she said.

"But what they say is too good to be believed! You must confirm their mute utterance with a living word," he cried.

"I love you, love you, love you," she replied.

"You love me! I bless you for it, Pepeeta, but there is something else that I must know."

“What can it be? Is not everything comprehended in that single word? It is all-embracing as the air! It enfolds life as the sky enfolds the world!”

“Ah! Pepeeta, you loved me when we parted, but you did not forgive me!”

She dropped her eyes.

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“Have you forgiven me now?”

“It is not true that I did not forgive you,” she replied, looking up at his face again. “There has never been in my heart for a single moment any sense of a wrong which I could not pardon. It has been one of the awful mysteries of this experience that I could not feel that wrong! When I tried to feel it most, my heart would say to me, ’you are not sorry that he loved you, Pepeeta! You would rather that all this agony should have befallen you than that he should not have loved you at all!’ It is this feeling that has bewildered me, David. Explain it to me. Let me know how I could have such feelings in my heart and yet be good. It seems as if I ought to hate you; but I cannot. I love you, love you, love you.”

“But, Pepeeta, if you loved me, why did you leave me? I do not comprehend. How could you let me stand in the darkness under your window and then turn away from it into the awful blackness and solitude to which I fled?”

“Do not reproach me, I thought it was my duty, David.”

“I do not reproach you. I only want to know your inmost heart.”

“I do not know! There has been all the time something stronger than myself impelling me. I grew too weak to reason. I felt that the heart had reasons of its own, too deep for the mind to fathom, and I yielded to them. I was only a woman after all, David. Love is stronger than woman! Oh! it was I who wronged you. I ought not to have forsaken you. Ought I? I do not know, even now. Who can tell me what is right? Who can lead me out of this frightful labyrinth? If I did wrong in seeking you, I humbly ask the pardon of God, and if I did wrong in abandoning you, I ask forgiveness in all lowliness and meekness from the man I wronged.”

“No, Pepeeta, you have never wronged me; I alone have been to blame. The result could not have been really different, no matter what course you took. The scourge would have fallen anyway! All that has happened has been inevitable. Justice had to be vindicated. If it had not come in one way, it would in another, for there are no short cuts and evasions in tragedies like this! Every result that is attached to these causes must be drawn up by them like the links in a chain, and one never knows when the end has come.”

His solemn manner and earnest words alarmed Pepeeta.

“Oh, David,” she cried, “it cannot, cannot be so awful. Such consequences cannot hang upon the deeds we commit in the limitations and ignorance of this earthly life.”

“Forgive me, Pepeeta, I should not talk so. These are the fears of my darker moments. I have brighter thoughts and hopes. There is a quiet feeling in my heart about the future

that grows with the passing days. God is good, and he will give us strength to meet whatever comes. We must live, and while we live we will hope for the best. Life is a gift, and it is our duty to enjoy it."

"Oh! it is good to hear you say that! It comforts me. I think it cannot be possible that we should not be able to escape from this darkness if we are willing to follow the divine light."

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“I think so, too,” he said.

His words were spoken with such assurance as to awaken a vague surmise that he had reasons which he had not told. She pressed his hands and besought him to explain.

“Oh! tell me,” she said eagerly; “is there anything new? Has anything happened?”

“Pepeeta,” he answered slowly, “we have been strangely and kindly dealt with. It is not quite so bad as it seemed, for I did not kill him.”

“You did not kill him! What do you mean?”

“No, it is a strange story! I thought I had killed him. I knew murder was in my heart. It was no fault of mine that the blow was not fatal. I left him in the road for dead. But, thank God, he did not die; he did not die then!”

“He did, not die then? Have you seen him? Is he dead now? Tell me! Tell me!”

Quietly, gently, briefly as he could, he narrated the events of the past few months, and as he did so she drew in short breaths or long inspirations as the story shifted from phase to phase, and when at last he had finished, she clasped her hands and gazed up into the depths of the sky with eyes that were swimming in tears.

“Poor doctor, poor old man,” Pepeeta sighed at last. “Oh! How we have wronged him, how we have made him suffer. He was always kind! He was rough, but he was kind. Oh! why could I not have loved him? But I did not, I could not. My heart was asleep. It had never once waked from its slumber until it heard your voice, David. And, afterwards,—well I could not love him! But why should we have wronged him so? How base it was! How terrible! I pity him, I blame myself—and yet I cannot wish him back. Listen to me, David. I am afraid I am glad he is dead. What do you think of that? Oh! what a mystery the human heart is! How can these terrible contradictions exist together? I would give my life to undo that wrong, and yet I should die if it were undone. All this is in the heart of a woman—so much of love, so much of hate, for I should have hated him, at last! I cannot understand myself. I cannot understand this story. What does all this mean for us, David? Perhaps you can see the light now, as you used to! I think from your face and your voice that you are your old self again. Oh! if you can see that inner light once more, consult it. Ask it if there is any reason why we cannot be happy now? Tell it that your Pepeeta is too weak to endure this separation any longer. I am only a woman, David! I cannot any longer bear life alone. I love you too deeply. I cannot live without you.”

Waiting long before he answered, as if to reflect and be sure, David said quietly but confidently, “Pepeeta, I cannot see any reason why we should not begin our lives over

again, starting at this very place from which we made that false beginning three long years ago. We cannot go back, but, in a sense, we can begin again."

"But can we really begin again?" she asked. "How is it possible? I do not see! We are not what we were. There is so much of evil in our hearts. We were pure and innocent three years ago. Is it not necessary to be pure and innocent? And how can we be with all this fearful past behind us? We cannot become children again!"

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“I have thought much and deeply about it,” David responded. I know not what subtle change has taken place within me, but I know that it has been great and real. My heart was hard, but now it is tender. It was full of despair, and now it is full of hope. I am not as innocent as I was that night when you heard me speak in the old Quaker meeting-house, or rather I am not innocent in the same way. My heart was then like a spring among the mountains; it had a sort of virgin innocence. I had sinned only in thought, and in the dreamy imaginations of unfolding youth. It is different now; a whole world of realized, actualized evil lies buried in the depths of my soul. It is there, but it is there only as a memory and not as a living force. There must in some way, I cannot tell how, be a purity of guilt as well as of innocence, and perhaps it is a purity of a still higher and finer kind. There was a peace of mind which I had as an innocent boy, which I do not possess now; but I have another and deeper peace. There was a childish courage; but it was the courage of one who had never been exposed to danger. There is another courage in my heart now, and it is the courage of the veteran who has bared his bosom to the foe! I know not by what strange alchemy these diverse elements of evil can have become absorbed and incorporated into this newer and better life, but this I do know, and nothing can make me doubt it—that while I am not so good, yet I am better; while I am not so pure, yet I am purer. Yes, Pepeeta, I think we can go back on our track. We can be born again! We can once more be little children. I feel myself a little child to-night—I who, a few days ago, was like an old man, bowed and crushed under a load of wretchedness and misery! God seems near to me; life seems sweet to me. Let us begin again, Pepeeta. We have traveled round a circle, and have come back to the old starting point. Let us begin again.”

“Oh! David,” she said, kissing the hands she held; “how like your old self you are to-night. Your words of hope have filled my soul with joy. Is it your presence alone that has done it, or is it God’s, or is it both? A change has come over the very world around us. All is the same, and yet all is different. The stars are brighter. The brook has a sweeter music. There is something of heaven in this intoxicating cup you have put to my lips! I seem to be enveloped by a spiritual presence! Hush! Do you hear voices?”

The excitement had been too intense for this sensitive woman to endure with tranquillity. Her heart, her conscience, her imagination had suffered an almost unendurable strain. She flung herself into the arms of her lover and trembled upon his breast, and he held her there until she had regained her composure.

“Do you really love me yet?” she asked, at length, raising her face and gazing up into his with an expression in which the simple affection of a little child was strangely blended with the passionate love of an ardent and adoring woman.

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“Love you!” he cried; “your face has been the last vision upon which I gazed when I fell into a restless slumber, and the first which greeted returning consciousness, when I waked from my troubled dream. My life has been but a fragment since we parted; a part of my individuality seemed to have been torn away. I have always felt that neither time nor space could separate us for—”

At that instant the horse which had stood patiently beside them on the bridge, shook his head, rattled his bridle and whinnied.

“Poor fellow! I had forgotten all about him in my joy!” said David, starting at the sound, and patting his shoulder. “You have had a hard run, and are tired and hungry. I must get you to the barn and feed you. They will miss you at the stable to-night, but I will send you back to-morrow, or ride you myself, that is if Pepeeta wishes to be rid of me.”

He said this teasingly, but smiled at her,—a tender and confident smile.

“Oh! you shall never leave me again—not for a moment,” she cried, pressing his arm against her heart.

He paused a moment and looked down as if a new thought had struck him.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

“Do you think they will welcome me at home?” he said, with a penitence and humility that touched her deeply.

“Welcome you home?” she exclaimed; “you do not know them, David. They talk of nothing else. They have sent messages to you in every direction. The door is never locked, and there has never been a night since you disappeared that a candle has not burned to its socket on the sill of your window; what do you think of that? You do not know them, David. They are angels of mercy and goodness. I have been selfish in keeping you so long to myself. Come, let us hasten.”

Just at that instant a loud halloo was heard—“Pepeeta, Pepeeta, Pepeeta!”

“It is Steven—the dear boy! He has missed me. You have a dangerous rival, David.”

She said this with a merry laugh and cried out, “Steven, Steven, Steven!”

“Where are you?” he called.

“I am here by the bridge!” she cried, in her silvery treble.

“She is here by the bridge!” The deep bass voice of her lover went rolling through the woods.

There was silence for a moment, and then they heard a joyous shout, “Uncle David! Uncle David! Oh! Mother, Father, it is Uncle David.”

There was a crashing in the bushes, and the great half-grown boy bounded through them and flung himself into the arms extended to him, with all the trust, all the love, all the devotion of the happy days of old.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SELF-IMPOSED EXPIATION

> “Man-like is it to fall into sin,
> Fiend-like is it to dwell therein,
> Christ-like is it for sin to grieve,
> God-like is it all sin to leave.”
> —Friedrich von Logau.

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David's welcome home was quiet, cordial and heartfelt. The Quaker life is calm; storms seldom appear on its surface, even though they must sometimes agitate its depths; mind and heart are brought under remarkable control; sympathy and charity are extended to the erring; hospitality is a duty and an instinct; domestic love is deep and powerful.

When David had frankly told his story, he was permitted to resume his place in the life of the old homestead as if nothing had happened. He expressed to his brother and sister his love for Pepeeta, and his determination to make her his wife in lawful marriage.

They assented to his plans, and at the earliest possible moment the minister and elders of the little congregation of Friends were asked to meet, in accordance with their custom, to "confer with him about a concern which was on his mind."

They came, and heard his story and his intention, told with straightforward simplicity. They, too, touched with sympathy and moved to confidence, agreed that there was no obstacle to the union. The date of the wedding was placed at the end of the month, which, by their ecclesiastical law, must elapse after this avowal, and an evening meeting was appointed for the ceremony.

In the meantime David remained quietly at home, and took up his old labors as nearly as possible where he had laid them down. Such a life as he had been leading induces a distaste for manual labor, and sometimes he chafed against it. Again and again he felt his spirit faint within him when he recalled the scenes of excitement through which he had passed, and looked forward to years of this unvaried drudgery; but he never permitted his soul to question his duty! He had decided in the most solemn reflections of his life that he would conquer himself in the place where he had been defeated, perform the tasks which he had so ignominiously abandoned, and then, when he had demonstrated his power to live a true life himself, devote his strength to helping others.

The charms of this pastoral existence gradually came to his support in his heroic resolution. The unbroken quiet of the happy valley which had irritated him at first, grew to be more and more a balm to his wounded spirit. The society of the animal world lent its gracious consolation; the great horses, the ponderous oxen, the doves fluttering and cooing about the barnyard, the suckling calves, the playful colts, all came to him as to a friend, and in giving him their confidence and affection awakened his own.

Above all Pepeeta was ever near him. It was no wonder that her beauty threw its spell over David's spirit. It had been enhanced by sorrow, for the human countenance, like the landscape, requires shadow as well as sunshine to perfect its charms. But the burst of sunshine which had come with David's return had brought it a final consummation which transfigured even the Quaker dress she had adopted. Her bonnet would never stay over her face but fell back on her shoulders, her animated countenance emerging from this envelope like the bud of a rose from its sheath. She was as a butterfly at that

critical instant when it is ready to leave its chrysalis and take wing. She was a soul enmeshed in an ethereal body, rather than a body which ensheathed a soul.

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Quietly and sedately the lovers met each other at the table, or at the spring, or at the milking.

And when the labors of the day had ended, they sat beneath the spreading hackberry trees, or wandered through the garden, or down the winding lane to the meadow, and reviewed the past with sadness or looked forward to the future with a chastened joy. Their spirits were subdued and softened, their love took on a holy rather than a passionate cast, they felt themselves beneath the shadow of an awful crime, and again and again when they grew joyous and almost gay they were checked by the irrepressible apprehension that out from under the silently revolving wheels of judgment some other punishment would roll.

Tenderly as they loved each other, and sweet as was that love, they could not always be happy with such a past behind them! In proportion to the soul's real grandeur it must suffer over its own imperfections. This suffering is remorse. In proud and gloomy hearts which tell their secrets only to their own pillows, its tears are poison and its rebukes the thrust of daggers. But in those which, like theirs, are gentle and tender by nature, remorseful tears are drops of penitential dew. David and Pepeeta suffered, but their suffering was curative, for pure love is like a fountain; by its incessant gushing from the heart it clarifies the most turbid streams of thought or emotion. Each week witnessed a perceptible advance in peace, in rest, in quiet happiness, and at last the night of their marriage arrived, and they went together to the meeting house.

The people gathered as they did at that other service when David made the address to which Pepeeta had listened with such astonishment and rapture. The entire community of Friends was there, for even Quakers cannot entirely repress their curiosity. There was evidence of deep feeling and even of suppressed excitement. The men in their broad-brimmed hats, the women in their poke bonnets, moved with an almost unseemly rapidity through the evening shadows. The pairs and groups conversed in rapid, eager whispers. They did not linger outside the door, but entered hastily and took their places as if some great event were about to happen.

There was a preliminary service of worship, and according to custom, opportunity was given for prayer or exhortation. But all minds were too intent upon what was to follow to enable them to take part with spirit. The silences were frequent and tedious. The young people moved restlessly on their seats, and their elders rebuked them with silent glances of disapproval. All were in haste, but nothing can really upset the gravity of these calm and tranquil people, and it was not until after a suitable time had elapsed that the leader of the meeting arose and said: "The time has arrived when David and Pepeeta are at liberty to proceed with their marriage, unless there be some one who can show just cause why this rite should not be solemnized."

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A flutter ran through the assembly, and a moment of waiting ensued; then David rose, while every eye was fixed on him.

“My friends,” he said, in a voice whose gentleness and sweetness stirred their hearts; “you have refrained from inquiring into the story of my life during the three years of my absence. I would be glad if I could withhold it from your knowledge; but I feel that I must make a confession of my sins.”

In the death-like stillness he began. The narrative was in itself dramatic, but the deep feeling of him who told it, his natural oratory and the hearers’ intent interest, lent to it a fascination that at times became almost unendurable. Sighs were often heard, tears were furtively wiped away, criticism was disarmed, and the tenderness of this illicit but passionate and determined love, blinded even those calm and righteous listeners to its darker and more desperate phases. By an almost infallible instinct we discover true love amid fictitious, unworthy and evil elements; and when seen there is something so sublimely beautiful that we prostrate ourselves before it and believe against evidence, even, that sooner or later it will ennoble and consecrate those who feel it.

When David had completed the narrative he continued as follows: “It is now necessary that I should convince you, if I can, that with my whole soul I have repented of this evil that I have done, and that I have sought, and I hope obtained, pardon for what is irreparable, and am determined to undo what I can. It is with awe and gratitude, my friends, that I acknowledge the aid of heaven. From the logical and well-deserved consequences of this sin I did not escape alone! I was snatched from it like a brand from the burning! No mortal-mind could have planned or executed my salvation. It is marked by evidences of Divine power and wisdom. Through a series of experiences almost too strange to be credible, I have been drawn back here to the scenes of my childhood, to encounter the one I have wronged and to find myself, so far as I know, able not only to make reparation, but to enjoy the bliss of a love of which I am unworthy. If I were wise enough, I would set before you the spiritual meaning of this terrible experience, but I am not. Three years ago I stood here in boyish confidence and boldly expounded the mysteries of our human life. It is only when we know nothing of life that we feel able to interpret it! Now that I have seen it, tasted it, drunk the cup almost to the dregs—I am speechless. Three facts, however, stand out before my vision—sin, punishment, pardon! I have sinned; I have suffered; I have been forgiven. I have been fully pardoned, but I feel that I have not been fully punished! There are issues of such an experience as this that cannot be brought to light in a day, a year, perhaps not in a lifetime. Whatever they are, I must await them and meet them; but as it is permitted a man to know his own mind, when he is determined so to do, I know that I have

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turned upon this sin with loathing! I know that I am ready to take up my burden where I left it years ago. I know that I would do anything to atone for the evil which I have wrought to others. I mean, if it seem good to you, here and now to claim as my bride her into whose life I have brought a world of sorrow. I mean, if God permits me, to live quietly and patiently among you until I have so recruited my spiritual strength that I can go forth into the great world of sorrow and of sin which I have seen, and extend to others a hand of helpfulness such as was stretched out to me at the moment of my need; but if there is any one here to whom God has given a message for me, whether it be to approve or condemn my course, I trust that I shall have grace to receive it meekly."

He took his seat, and it seemed for a few moments that every person in the room had yielded heart and judgment to this noble and modest appeal. But there was among them one whose stern and unyielding sense of justice had not been appeased. He was a man who had often suffered for righteousness sake and who attached more value to the testimony of a clear conscience than to any earthly dignity. He slowly and solemnly rose. His form was like that of a prophet of ancient days. His deep-set eyes glowed like two bright stars under the cloudy edge of his broad-brimmed hat. His face was emaciated with a self-denial that bordered upon asceticism, and wan with ceaseless contemplations of the problems of life, death and immortality. Not a trace of tender emotion was evident on features, which might have been carved in marble. It was impossible to conceive that he had ever been young, and there seemed a bitter irony in the effort of such a man to judge the cause of a love like that which pleaded for satisfaction in the hearts of David and Pepeeta, and to pronounce upon the destinies of those whose souls were still throbbing with passion.

But such was the purpose of the man. His first words sounded on the stillness like an alarm bell and shook the souls of listeners with a sort of terror.

"We did not seek to try this cause," he said. "It was brought before us by the wish of this sinful man himself. But if we must judge, let us judge like God! We read of Him—-that he 'lays righteousness to the line and judgment to the plummet.' Let us do the same. That a great wrong hath been done is evident to every mind. It is not meet that such wrongs should go unpunished! These two transgressors have suffered; but who believes that such wrongs may justly be so soon followed by felicity? It would be an encouragement to evil-doers and a premium upon vice! Who would refrain from violently rending the marriage bonds or sundering any sacred tie, if in a few short months the fruit of the guilty deed might be eaten in peace by the culprit? What assurance may we have that the lesson which has been but superficially graven on this guilty heart may not be obliterated in the

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enjoyment of triumph? Why should these youths make such unseemly haste? If they are indeed in earnest to seek the truth and lay to heart the meaning of this experience into which their sinful hearts have led them, let them of their own accord and out of their humble and contrite hearts devote a year to meditation and prayer. Let them show to others they have learned that to live righteously and soberly, and not to grasp ill-gotten gains or enjoy unhallowed pleasures, is the chief end of human life! The hour is ripe for such a demonstration. We have seen other evidences among us of an unholy hungering after the unlawful pleasures of life. It is time that a halt were called. If this community is dedicated to righteousness, then let us exalt the standard. It is at critical moments like this that history is made and character formed. If we weaken now, if we permit our hearts to overpower our consciences, God will smite us with His wrath, vice will rush upon us like a flood, and we shall be given over to the lust of the flesh and the pride of life! 'To the law and to the testimony, my brethren.'"

With his long arm extended and his deep-set eyes glowing, he repeated from memory the solemn words:

"'Behold ye trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not, and come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name and say, "We are delivered to do all these abominations?" Is this house which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have said it, saith the Lord. But go ye now into my place which was Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel! And now because ye have done all these works, saith the Lord—and I spake unto you (rising up early and speaking), but ye heard not, and I called you but ye answered not—therefore will I do unto this house which is called by my name (wherein ye trust) and unto the place which I gave unto you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh! And I will cast you out of my sight—even the whole people of Ephraim! Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayers for them, neither make intercession to me—for I will not hear thee!'

* * * * *

"This is my message! This is the advice ye have invited! Wait a year! Watch and pray! Fit yourselves for the enjoyment of your love by repentance."

The impression made by these solemn words was tremendous. It was as if eternity had suddenly dawned in that dim-lit room, and the leaves of the book of doom had been opened.

There had been stillness before, but now there was the silence of the grave, and at this dramatic moment one of the tallow candles whose feeble light had served but to render the darkness visible, spluttered, went out, and intensified the silence with a meaningless and exasperating sound. No one knew how to break the spell which these intense and terrible words had cast over them. Their limbs and faculties were both benumbed.

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Upon Pepeeta this message had fallen like a thunderbolt. Her Oriental imagination, her awakened conscience, her throbbing heart had all been thrilled. She did not move; her eyes were still fixed on the prophet; her face was white; her hands were clasped tightly in her lap.

David leaned forward in his seat and listened like a culprit hearing sentence from a judge. Those who were closely observing his noble countenance saw it suddenly light up with the glow of a spiritual ecstasy, and rightly conjectured that he was burning with the zeal of martyrdom. He saw his way, for the first time, to a worthy expiation of his sin. The prophet had interpreted the purpose of God and pointed out the path of duty. He started to his feet, but at the same instant over in the corner of the room rose the figure of a man whose full form, benignant countenance and benevolent manner afforded the most marked contrast to that of the Jeremiah who had electrified them by his appeal to righteousness.

He moved toward one of the half dozen candles which were still burning, and stood within the narrow circle of its feeble rays. Drawing from the inner pocket of his coat a well-worn volume he opened it, held it up to the light and began to read. The tones of his voice were clear and mellifluous, his articulation slow and distinct, and his soul seemed permeated with the wondrous depth and beauty of what is perhaps the most exquisite passage in the literature of the world. It was the story of the prodigal son.

As he proceeded, and that brief but perfect drama unfolded itself before the imagination of his hearers, it was as if they had never heard it before, or at least as if its profound import had never been revealed to their dull minds. Intimations and suggestions which had never been disclosed to them came out like lines written in sensitive ink, under the influence of light and heat. The living medium through which they were uttered seemed slowly to melt away, and as in a dissolving view, the sublime teacher, the humble Galilean stood before them, and they heard his voice! The last words died away; the reader took his seat without uttering a single comment. Not a person moved.

Each heart in that silent room was thrilled with emotions which were common to all. But there was one which had a burden all its own.

The demure Quaker maiden who had looked love out of her dove-like eyes three years ago when Pepeeta appeared for the first time among these quiet folk, was in her old familiar seat. Her life had never been the same since that hour, for the man whom she loved with all the deep intensity of which a heart so young, so pure, so true was capable, had been suddenly stolen from her by a stranger. Her thwarted love had never found expression, and she had borne her pain and loss as became the child of a religion of silence, patience and fortitude. But the wound had never healed, and now she was compelled to be a sad and hopeless spectator of another scene which sealed her fate and made her future hopeless. Her bonnet hid the sad face from view, as her heart hid its secret.

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The turn which had been given to the emotions of these quiet people by the reading of the parable had been so sudden and so powerful that perhaps not a single person in the room doubted that David and Pepeeta would at once rise and enter into that holy contract for which the way seemed to have been so easily opened by the tender story of the father's love for the prodigal son.

But it was the unexpected which happened. The soul of David Corson had passed through one of those genuine and permanent revolutions which sometimes take place in the nature of man. He had completed the cycle of revolt and anarchy to which he had been condemned by his inheritance from a wild and profligate father. Whether that fever had run its natural course or whether as David himself believed, he had been rescued by an act of divine intervention, it is certain that the change was as actual as that which takes place when a grub becomes a butterfly. It was equally certain that from this time onward it was the mental and spiritual characteristics of his mother which manifested themselves in his spiritual evolution.

He became his true self—a saint, an ascetic, a mystic, a potential martyr.

When he rose to his feet a moment after the reader had finished, his face shining with an inward light and glowing with a sublime purpose, all believed that he was about to summon Pepeeta to their marriage.

What was the astonishment, then, when in rapt words he began:

"God has spoken to us, my friends. We have heard his voice. It is too soon for me to enjoy this bliss! Yes, I will wait! I will dedicate this year to meditation and prayer. Pepeeta, wilt thou join me in this resolution? If thou wilt, let the betrothal of this night be one of soul to soul and both our souls to God! Give me thine hand."

Still under the spell of strange spiritual emotions to which her sensitive spirit vibrated like the strings of an AEolian harp, Pepeeta rose, and placing her hands in those of her lover, looked up into his face with a touching confidence, an almost adoring love. It was more like the bridal of two pure spirits than the betrothal of a man and woman!

Not one of those who saw it has ever forgotten that strange scene; it is a tradition in that community until this day. They felt, and well they might, those strange people who had dedicated themselves and their children to the divine life, that in this scene their little community had attained the zenith of its spiritual history.

No wonder that from an English statesman this eulogy was once wrung: "By God, sir, we cannot afford to persecute the Quakers! Their religion may be wrong, but the people who cling to an idea are the very people we want. If we must persecute—let us persecute the complacent!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FASTING IN THE WILDERNESS

“So great is the good I look for, that every hardship delights me.”

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—St. Francis.

The period of our country's history in which these characters were formed was one of tremendous moral earnestness. In that struggle in which man pitted himself against primeval forest and aboriginal inhabitant, the strongest types of manhood and womanhood were evolved, and those who conceived the idea of living a righteous life set themselves to its realization with the same energy with which they addressed themselves to the conquest of nature itself. To multitudes of them, this present world took a place that in the fullest sense of the word was secondary to that other world in which they lived by anticipation.

David Corson was only one of many who, to a degree which in these less earnest or at least more materialistic times appears incredible, had determined to trample the world under their feet. He awoke next morning with an unabated purpose and at an early hour set resolutely about its execution. He bade a brave farewell to Pepeeta, exhorted her to seek with him that preparation of heart which alone could fit them for the future, and then with a bag of provisions over his shoulder and an axe in his hand started forth to carry out a plan which he had formed in the night.

At the head of the little valley where Pepeeta had built her gypsy fire, and experienced her great disillusionment, was a piece of timber land belonging to his mother's estate. He determined to make a clearing there and establish a home for himself and Pepeeta.

He wisely calculated that the accomplishment of this arduous task would occupy his mind and strength through the year of expiation which he had condemned himself to pass.

It is one of the most impressive spectacles of human life to see a man enter a primeval forest and set himself to subdue nature with no implement but an axe! Those of us who require so many luxuries and who know how to maintain existence only by the use of so many curious and powerful pieces of mechanism would think ourselves helpless indeed in the center of a wilderness with nothing but an axe or a rifle!

No such apprehensions troubled the heart of the young woodsman, for from his earliest childhood he had handled that primitive implement and knew its exhaustless possibilities. He was young and strong, for reckless as his recent life had been, the real sources of his physical vitality had not been depleted.

When David had passed out of sight of the house and entered the precincts of the quiet forest, there surged up from his heart those mighty impulses and irresistible tides of energy which are the sublime inheritance of youth. He counted off the months and they seemed to him like days. Already he heard the monarchs of the forest fall beneath his blows, already he saw the walls of his log cabin rising in an opening of the vast

wilderness, already he beheld Pepeeta standing in the open door. The vast panorama of this virgin world began to unroll itself to his delighted vision.

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The splendid spectacle of a morning as new and wonderful as if there had never been another, drew his thoughts away from himself and his cares. The dew was sparkling on the grass; the meadow larks were singing from every quarter of the fields through which he was passing; the great limbs of the trees were tossed by the fresh breezes of June. Everywhere were color, music, fragrance, motion. The burden rolled from his heart; remorse and guilt faded like dreams; the sad past lost its hold; the present and the future were radiant! To even the worst of men, in such surroundings, there come moments of exemption from the ennui and shame of life, and to this deep soul which had issued, purified, from the fires through which it had passed, they lengthened into glorious hours, hours such as kindled on the lips of the poet those exultant and exquisite words:

> "The year's at the spring
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hillside's dew-pearled;
>
> "The lark's on the wing;
> The snail's on the thorn;
> God's in his heaven—
> All's right with the world!"

He climbed a steep hillside, descended into a secluded and beautiful valley, pressed his way through dense underbrush, and while the day was still young stood on the spot where he had determined to lay the foundation of his cabin.

Two ranges of hills came together and enclosed it as if in giant arms. Two pure crystal springs issued from clefts in the bases of these hills, and after flowing towards each other for perhaps a quarter of a mile, mingled their waters in a brawling brook. It was at the point of their junction that David had determined to erect that primitive structure which has afforded a home to so many families in our American wildernesses. He threw his bundle down and gazed with admiration on the scene.

Here was the virgin and unprofaned loveliness of Nature. He felt her charm and prostrated himself before her shrine. But he rendered to that invisible spirit of which these forms were only an imperfect manifestation, a worship deeper still, and by an instinct of pure adoration lifted his face toward the sky.

Having refreshed his soul by this communion, he drank a deep draught of the sparkling water at the point where the rivulets met. Then he threw off his coat, took his axe in hand and selected a tree on which to begin his attack.

It was an enormous oak which, with roots struck deep into the soil and branches lifted high and spread wide in the air, had maintained itself successfully against innumerable foes for perhaps a thousand years. He reflected long before he struck, for to him as to all lovers of nature there is a certain inviolable sacredness about a tree.

“Should you see me at the point of death,” said Rousseau, “carry me under the shade of an oak and I am persuaded I shall recover.”

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David was a lover of trees. From the summits of the hills he had often gazed down upon the forests and observed how “all the tree tops lay asleep like green waves on the sea.” He had harvested the fruits of the apple and peach, clubbed the branches of the walnut, butternut and beach, and boiled the sap of the maple. He had seen the trees offer their hospitable shelter to the birds and the squirrels, had basked beneath their umbrageous shadows and had listened to their whispers in the summer, and to their wild music “when winter, that grand old harper, smote his thunder-harp of pines.”

It cost him pain to lay violent hands on a thing so sacred; nevertheless he swung his axe in the air and a loud reverberating blow broke the immense solitude. There are many kinds of music; but there is none fuller of life and power and primal energy than the ring of the woodsman’s axe as blow after blow, through hour after hour, falls rhythmically upon the wound which he cuts in the great hole of a forest monarch.

The gash deepened and widened, the chips flew in showers and the woodchopper’s craft, long unpracticed, came back to him with every stroke. The satisfying consciousness of skill and power filled him with a sort of ecstasy. Just as the sun reached the zenith and looked down to see what devastation was being wrought in this solitude, the giant trembled; the blade had struck a vital place; he reeled, leaned forward, lurched, plunged headlong, and with a roar that resounded through the wide reaches of the forest, fell prone upon the ground.

The woodsman wiped the perspiration from his brow and smiled. The appetite of the pioneer had been whetted with his work. He kindled a fire, boiled a pot of coffee, fried a half dozen slices of bacon, remembered his sickly appetite in the luxurious restaurants of great cities, and laughed aloud for joy—wild, unbounded joy—the joy of primitive manhood, of health, of strength, of hope. And then he stretched himself on the ground and looked up into the blue sky through the opening he had made in the green canopy above him and through which the sun was gazing with bold, free glances on the face of the modest valley and whispering amorously of its love.

Those glances fell soft and warm on his own upturned countenance, and the rays of life-giving power penetrated the inmost core of his being, finding their way by some mysterious alchemy through the medium of matter into the very citadel of the spirit itself. They imparted a new life. He basked in them until he fell asleep, and when he awakened he felt anew the joy of mere physical existence; he rose, shook himself like a giant, and resumed his work.

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He now began to prepare for himself a temporary booth which should shelter him until he had erected his cabin; and the rest of the day was consumed in this enterprise. At its close this simple task was done, so easy is it to provide a shelter for him who seeks protection and not luxury! Having once more satisfied his hunger, he built a fire in front of his rude booth, and lay down in its genial rays, his head upon a pillow of moss. The stillness of the cool, quiet evening was broken only by the crackling of the flames, the quiet murmurs of the two little rills which whispered to each other startled interrogations as to the meaning of this rude invasion, the hoot of owls in the tall tree tops, and the stealthy tread of some of the little creatures of the forest who prowled around, while seeking their prey, to discover, if possible, the meaning of this great light, and the strange noises with which their forest world had resounded.

There came to the recumbent woodsman a deep and quiet peace. He felt a new sense of having been in some way taken back into the fraternity of the unfallen creatures of the universe, and into the all-embracing arms of the great Father. He fell asleep with pure thoughts hovering over the surface of his mind, like a flock of swallows above a crystal lake. And Nature did take him back into that all-enfolding heart where there is room and a welcome for all who do not alienate themselves. Her latchstrings are always out, and forests, fields, mountains, oceans, deserts even, have a silent, genial welcome for all who enter their open doors with reverence, sympathy and yearning. A man asleep alone in a vast wilderness! How easy it would be for Nature to forget him and permit him to sleep on forever! What gives him his importance there amid those giant trees? Why should sun, moon, stars, gravity, heat, cold, care for him? How can the hand that guides the constellations—those vast navies of the infinite sea—pause to touch the eyelids of this atom when the time comes for him to rise?

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FOREST IDYL

> “Stranger, if thou hast learned a truth which needs
> No school of long experience, that the world
> Is full of guilt and misery, and hast seen
> Enough of all its sorrows, crimes and cares
> To tire thee of it, enter this wild wood
> And view the haunts of Nature. The calm shade
> Shall bring a kindred calm, and the sweet breeze
> That makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm
> To thy sick heart.” —Bryant.

When the sleeper woke, refreshed and rested, in the morning, it was to take up the routine of duties which were to be only slightly varied for many months to come.

One after another the great trees succumbed to the blows of his axe and from their prostrate forms he carefully selected those which were best adapted to the structure of his cabin, while over the others he piled the limbs and brush and left them to dry for the conflagration which at the end of the hot summer should remove them from the clearing.

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When the rainy days came he spent his time in the shelter of his little arbor cutting the "shakes," or shingles, which were to furnish the roof of Pepeeta's home.

The days and weeks fled by and the opening in the forest grew apace. He measured it by night with a celestial arithmetic, using the stars for his triangulations, and as one after another of them became visible where before they had been obscured by the foliage of the trees, he smiled, and felt as if he were cutting his farm out of heaven instead of earth. It was really cut out of both!

His Sundays were spent at the old homestead with his loved ones, and once every week Pepeeta came with Steven to bring him luxuries which her own hands had prepared, and to pass the afternoon with him at his work in the "clearing."

Those were memorable hours, possessing that three-fold existence with which every hour can be endowed by the soul of man—anticipation—realization—recollection. In this way a single moment sometimes becomes almost synchronous with eternity.

It would have been impossible to tell which of the three was happiest, but Pepeeta was always the center of interest, attention and devotion. Her whole nature seemed to be aroused and called into play; all her countless charms were incessantly evoked; her inimitable laughter resounded through the woods and challenged the emulous birds to unsuccessful competition. Seriousness alternated with gaiety, coquetry with gravity. Some of the time she spent in gathering flowers to adorn her lover's booth, and some in carrying to the rubbish pile such limbs and branches as her strength would permit her to handle.

Nothing could have been more charming than the immense efforts that she put forth with such grace, to lift with all her might some branch that her lover had tossed aside with a single hand! The attitudes into which these efforts threw her body were as graceful as those into which the water threw the cresses by its ceaseless flow, or the wind bent the tree tops by its fitful gusts.

Steven was frantic with delight at the free, open life of the woods. He chased the squirrels and rabbits, he climbed the trees to gaze into the nests of the birds, and caught the butterflies in his hat.

David entered into all their pleasures, but with a chastened and restrained delight, for he could never forget that he was an exile and a penitent.

There were two days in the season when the regular routine of the woodsman's work was interrupted by functions which possess a romantic charm. One was when the Friends and neighbors from a wide region assembled to help him "raise" the walls of his cabin.

From all sides they appeared, in their picturesque costumes of homespun or fur. Suddenly, through the ever-open gates of the forest, teams of horses crashed, drawing after them clanking log chains, and driven by men who carried saws and “cant hooks” on their broad shoulders. Loud halloos of greeting, cheerful words of encouragement, an eager and agreeable bustle of business, filled the clearing.

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Log by log the walls rose, as the horses rolled them into place with the aid of the great chains which the pioneers wrapped around them. It was only a rude log cabin they built—with a great, wide opening through the middle, a room on either side, and a picturesque chimney at either end; but it was not to be despised even for grace, and when warmth and comfort and adaptability to needs and opportunities are considered, there have been few buildings erected by the genius of man more justly entitled to admiration.

When this single day's work was ended there remained nothing for David to do but chink and daub the walls with mud, cover the rude rafters of the roof with his shakes, build the chimneys out of short sticks, cob-house fashion, and cement them on the inside with clay to protect them from the flames.

The other day was the one on which, at the close of the long and genial summer, when the mass of timber and brushwood had been thoroughly seasoned by the hot suns, he set his torches to the carefully constructed piles.

Steven and Pepeeta were to share with him in the excitement of this conflagration, and David had postponed it until dusk, in order that they might enjoy its entire sublimity. He had taken the precaution to plow many furrows around the cabin and also around the edge of the clearing, so the flames could neither destroy his house nor devastate the forest.

Such precautions were necessary, for nothing can exceed the ferocity of fire in the debris which the woodsmen scatter about them. When the dusk had settled down on this woodland world and long shadows had crept across the clearing, wrapping themselves round the trees at its edge and scattering themselves among the thick branches till they were almost hid from view, David lighted a pine torch and gave it into the hands of the eager boy, who seized it and like a young Prometheus started forth. A single touch to the dry tinder was enough. With a dull explosion, the mass burst into flame. Shouting in his exultation, the little torch-bearer rushed on, igniting pile after pile, and leaving behind him almost at every step a mighty conflagration. At each new instant, as the night advanced, a new outburst of light illumined the darkness, until ten, twenty, fifty great heaps were roaring and seething with flames! Great jets spouted up into the midnight heavens as if about to kiss the very stars, and suddenly expired in the illimitable space above them. Immense sparks, shot out from these bonfires as from the craters of volcanoes, went sailing into the void around them and fell hissing into the water of the brooks or silently into the new-plowed furrows.

The clouds above the heads of the subdued and almost terrified beholders, for no one is ever altogether prepared for the absolute awfulness of such a spectacle, were glowing with the fierce light which the fires threw upon them. Weird illuminations played fantastic tricks in the foliage from which the startled shadows had vanished. The roar of the ever-increasing fires became louder and louder, until in very terror Pepeeta crept

into David's arms for protection, while the child who had fearlessly produced this scene of awful grandeur and destruction shouted with triumph at his play.

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“Thee’s a reckless little fire-eater!” said David, watching his figure as it appeared and disappeared. “How youth trifles with forces whose powers it can neither measure nor control! It was well that I drew a furrow around our cabin or it would have been burned.”

His gaze was fixed on the little cabin which seemed to dance and oscillate in the palpitating light; and touched by the analogies and symbols which his penetrating eye discovered in the simple scenes of daily life, he continued to soliloquize, saying, “I should have drawn furrows around my life, before I played with fire!”

“Nay, David,” replied Pepeeta, “we should never have played with fire at all.”

“How wise we are—too late!”

“Shall we walk any more cautiously when the next untried pathway opens?” he added, somewhat sadly, as he recalled the errors of the past.

“We ought to, if experience has any value,” said Pepeeta.

“But has it? Or does it only interpret the past, and not point out the future?”

“Something of both, I think.”

“Well we must trust it.”

“But not it alone. There is something, better and safer.”

“What is that, my love?”

“The path-finding instinct of the soul itself.”

“Do you believe there is such an instinct?”

“As much as I believe the carrier pigeon has it. It is the inner light of which you told me. You see, I remember my lesson like an obedient child.”

“Why, then, are we so often misled?” he asked, tempting her.

“Because we do not wholly trust it!” she said.

“But how can we distinguish the true light from the false, the instinct from imagination or desire? If the soul has a hundred compasses pointing in different ways, what compass shall lead the bewildered mariner to know the true compass?”

“He who will know, can know.”

“Are you speaking from your heart, Pepeeta?”

“From its depths.”

“And have you no doubts that what you say is true?”

“None, for I learned it from a teacher whom I trust, and have justified it by my own experience.”

“And now the teacher must sit at the feet of the pupil! Oh! beautiful instructress, keep your faith firm for my sake! I have dark hours through which I have to pass and often lose my way. The restoration of my spiritual vision is but slow. How often am I bewildered and lost! My thoughts brood and brood within me!”

“Put them away,” she said, cheerily. “We live by faith and not by sight. We need not be concerned with the distant future. Let us live in this dear, divine moment. I am here. You are here! We are together; our hands touch; our eyes meet; our hearts are one; we love! Let us only be true to our best selves, and to the light that shines within! Oh! I have learned so much in these few months, among these people of peace, David! They know the way of life! We need go no farther to seek it. It lies before us. Let us follow it!”

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“Angel of goodness,” he exclaimed, clasping her hand, “it must be that supreme Love reigns over all the folly and madness of life, or to such a one as I, a gift so good and beautiful would never have been given!”

She pressed his hand for response, for her lips quivered and her heart was too full for words.

And now, through the ghastly light which magnified his size portentously and painted him with grotesque and terrible colors, the child reappeared, begrimed with smoke and wild with the transports of a power so vast and an accomplishment so wonderful.

The three figures stood in the bright illumination, fascinated by the spectacle. The flames, as if satisfied with destruction, had died down, and fifty great beds of glowing embers lay spread out before them, like a sort of terrestrial constellation.

The wind, which had been awakened and excited to madness as it rushed in from the great halls of the forest to fan the fires, now that it was no longer needed, ceased to blow and sank into silence and repose. Little birds, returning to their roosts, complained mournfully that their dreams had been disturbed, and a great owl from the top of a lofty elm hooted his rage.

It was Saturday night. The labors of the week were over. The time had come for them to return to the farm house. They turned away reluctantly, leaving nature to finish the work they had begun.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SUPREME TEST

> “Not in the clamor of the crowded street,
> Not in the shouts and plaudits of the throng,
> But in ourselves, are triumph and defeat.”
> —Longfellow.

The emotions of the woodsman’s heart had been in the main cheerful and full of hope during the springtime and the summer; but when the autumn came, with its wailing winds, its dying vegetation, and falling leaves, new moods were superinduced in his sensitive soul.

It is impossible even for the good and innocent to behold this universal dissolution and decay without remembering that they themselves must pass through some such temporary experience. But upon those who carry guilty secrets in their hearts these impressions descend with crushing weight. David felt them to the full when at last the winter set in; when the days were shortened and he was compelled to forego his toil at

an early hour and retire to his cabin! There he was confronted by all the problems and temptations of a soul battling with the animal nature and striving to emancipate the spirit from its thraldom.

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At the close of one cold, blustering day, when his evening meal had been eaten in solitude, he sat down before the great fire which roared in the chimney. He read awhile, but grew tired of his book and threw it down. The melancholy which he had suppressed so long rose at last, and there burst on him the apparent uselessness of the task he had gratuitously assigned himself. Why had he ever done it? Why should he be sitting there alone in his cabin when by his side there might be that radiant woman whose presence would dispel instantly and forever the loneliness which ceaselessly gnawed at his heart? What, after all, was to be gained by this self-sacrifice? Life is very short, and there are few pleasures to be had, at best. Why should he not seize them as fast as they came within his reach? Had he not suffered enough already? Who had ever suffered more? It was only an unnecessary cruelty that had even suggested such agony as he was now experiencing. He was being cheated out of legitimate pleasures, and that by the advice of an old ascetic whose own capacity for enjoyment had been dried up, and who was envious of the happiness of others! As these thoughts rushed through his soul, he could not but perceive that he had been forced once more to enter the arena and to fight over the old battle which he had lost in the lumberman's cabin three years before! And he found to his dismay how much harder it was to fight these foes of virtue when they come to us not as vague imaginations of experiences which we have never tried, but as vivid memories of real events. Then he had only dreamed of the sweet fruits of the knowledge of good and evil: but now the taste was in his mouth, to whet his appetite and increase his hunger. The slumbering selfhood of his soul woke and clamored for its rights.

It was Chateaubriand who affirmed that the human heart is like one of those southern pools which are quiet and beautiful on the surface, but in the bottom of which there lies an alligator! However calm the surface of the exile's soul appeared, there was a monster in its depth, and now it rose upon him. In his struggles with it he paced the floor, sank despairingly into his chair, and fell on his knees by turns. Animal desires and brute instincts grappled with intellectual convictions and spiritual aspirations; flesh and blood with mind and spirit; skepticism with trust; despair with hope.

The old forest had been the theater of many combats. In earth, air and water, birds, animals and fishes had struggled with each other for supremacy and existence. Beasts had fought with Indians and Indians with white men; but no battle had been more significant or tragic than the one which was taking place in the quiet cabin. There was no noise and no bloodshed, but it was a struggle to the death. It was no new strife, but one which has repeated itself in human hearts since they began to beat. It cannot be avoided by plunging into the crowds of great cities, nor by fleeing to the solitudes of forests, for we carry our battleground with us. The inveterate foes encamp upon the fields, and when they are not fighting they are recuperating their strength for struggles still to come.

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But although neither combatant in this warfare is ever wholly annihilated, there is in every life a Waterloo. There comes a struggle in which, if we are not victorious, we at least remain permanent master of the field. This was the night of David's Waterloo. A true history of that final conflict in the soul of this hermit would not have disgraced the confessions of Saint Augustine!

He wrestled to keep his thoughts pure and his faith firm, until the sweat stood in beads on his forehead. He felt that to yield so much as the fraction of an inch of ground in his battle against doubt and sin this night was to be lost! And still the conflict went against him.

It turned upon another of those trivial incidents of which there had been a series in his life. His attention was arrested by a sound in the woods which summoned his consciousness from the inner world of thought and feeling to the great external world of action and endeavor. His huntsman's ear detected its significance at once, and springing to the corner of the room he seized his rifle, threw open the cabin door and stood on the threshold. A full moon shone on the snow and in that white and ghostly light his quick eye caught sight of a spectacle that made his pulses leap. A fawn bounded out into the open field and headed for his cabin, attracted by the firelight gleaming through the window and door. Behind her and snapping almost at her heels, came a howling pack of a half dozen wolves whose red, lolling tongues, white fangs and flaming eyes were distinctly visible from where he stood. Coolly raising his rifle he aimed at the leader and pulled the trigger. There was a quick flash, a sharp report, and the wolf leaped high in the air, plunged headlong, tumbled into the snow, and lay writhing in the pangs of death.

There was no time to load again, and there was no need, for the terrified fawn, impelled by the instinct of self-preservation, chose the lesser of two dangers and with a few wild bounds toward the cabin, flung herself through the wide-open door.

David had detected her purpose and stepped aside; and instantly she had entered closed and bolted the door upon the very muzzles of her pursuers. They dashed themselves against it and whined with baffled rage, while the half-frantic deer crawled trembling to the side of her preserver, licked his hands and lay at his feet gasping for breath.

To some men an incident like this would have been an incident and nothing more; but souls like Corson's perceive in every event and experience of life, elements which lie beneath the surface.

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Not only was he saved from the spiritual defeat of which he was on the verge, by being summoned instantly from the subjective into the objective world; but the rescue of the deer became a beautiful and holy symbol of life itself, and so revealed and illustrated life's main end "the help of the helpless,"—that he was at once elevated from a region of struggle and despair into one of triumph and hope. He remained in it until he fell asleep. He awoke in it on the morrow. From that high plane he did not again descend so low as he had been. The courage that had been kindled and the purposes which had been crystallized by the joy of this rescue and the gratitude of the deer remained permanently in his heart. He lived in dreams of other acts like this, in which the objects saved by his strength were not the beasts of the field, but the hunted and despairing children of a heavenly Father.

The fawn became to him a continual reminder of this spiritual struggle and victory, for he kept it in his cabin, made it a companion, trained it to follow him about his work, and finally presented it to Pepeeta.

There were many beautiful things to be seen in the winter woods; snow hanging in plumes from the trees, the smoke of the cabin curling into the still air, rabbits browsing on the low bushes, the woodsman standing in triumph over a fallen tree; but when, on the days of her visits to the exile, Pepeeta entered the clearing and the deer, perceiving her approach, ran to greet her in flying leaps, bounded around her, looked up into her face with its gentle eyes, ate the food she offered and licked the hand of its mistress—-David thought that there was nothing more beautiful in the world.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PARADISE REGAINED

> "The loves that meet in Paradise shall cast out fear,
> And Paradise hath room for you and me and all."
> —Christina Rossetti.

At last—the springtime came!

The potent energy of the sun opened all the myriad veins of the great trees, wakened the hibernating creatures of the dens and burrows from their protracted sleep, caused the seeds to swell and burst in the bosom of earth, and sent the blood coursing through David's veins, quickening all his intellectual and spiritual powers.

And then, the end of his exile was near! In a few weeks he would have vindicated the purity of his purpose to attain the divine life, and have proved himself worthy to claim the hand of Pepeeta!

All the winter long he had plied his axe. Once more, now that the snow had vanished, he set fire to the debris which he had strewn around him, and saw with an indescribable feeling of triumph and delight the open soil made ready for his plow. He yoked a team of patient oxen to it and set the sharp point deep into the black soil. Never had the earth smelled so sweet as now when the broad share threw

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it back in a continuously advancing wave. Never had that yeoman's joy of hearing the ripping of roots and the grating of iron against stones as the great oxen settled to their work, strained in their yokes and dragged the plow point through the bosom of the earth, been half so genuine and deep. It was good to be alive, to sleep, to eat, to toil! Cities had lost their charm. David's sin was no longer a withering and blasting, but a chastening and restraining memory. His clearing was a kingdom, his cabin a palace, and he was soon to have a queen! He had reserved his sowing for the last day of his self-imposed seclusion, which ended with the month of May.

On the day following, having accomplished his vow, he would go to the house of God and claim his bride! This day he would devote to that solemn function of scattering the sacred seed of life's chief support into the open furrow!

No wonder a feeling of devotion and awe came upon him as he prepared himself for his task; for perhaps there is not a single act in the whole economy of life better calculated to stir a thoughtful mind to its profoundest depths than the sowing of those golden grains which have within them the promise and potency of life. Year after year, century after century, millions of men have gone forth in the light of the all-beholding and life-giving sun to cast into the bosom of the earth the sustenance of their children! It is a sublime act of faith, and this sacrifice of a present for a future good, an actual for a potential blessing, is no less beautiful and holy because familiar and old. The Divine Master himself could not contemplate it without emotion and was inspired by it to the utterance of one of his grandest parables.

And then the field itself inspired solemn reflections and noble pride in the mind of the sower. It was his own! He had carved it out of a wilderness! Here was soil which had never been opened to the daylight. Here was ground which perhaps for a thousand, and not unlikely for ten thousand years, should bring forth seed to the sower; and he had cleared it with his own hands! Generations and centuries after he should have died and been forgotten, men would go forth into this field as he was doing to-day, to sow their seed and reap their harvests.

He slung his bag of grain over his shoulder and stepped forth from his cabin at the dawn of day. The clearing he had made was an almost perfect circle. All around it were the green walls of the forest with the great trunks of the beeches, white and symmetrical, standing like vast Corinthian columns supporting a green frieze upon which rested the lofty roof of the immense cathedral. From the organ-loft the music of the morning breeze resounded, and from the choirs the sweet antiphonals of birds. Odors of pine, of balsam, of violets, of peppermint, of fresh-plowed earth, of bursting life, were wafted across the vast nave from transept to transept, and floated like incense up to heaven.

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The priest, about to offer his sacrifice, the sacrifice of a broken heart and contrite spirit, about to confess his faith; in the beautiful and symbolic act of sacrificing the present for the future, stepped forth into the open furrow.

His open countenance, bronzed with the sun, was lighted with love and adoration; his lips smiled; his eyes glowed; he lifted them to the heavens in an unspoken prayer for the benediction of the great life-giver; he drew into his nostrils the sweet odors, into his lungs the pure air, into his soul the beauty and glory of the world, and then, filling his hand with the golden grain, he flung it into the bosom of the waiting earth.

All day long he strode across the clearing and with rhythmical swinging of his brawny arm lavishly scattered the golden grain.

As the sun went down and the sower neared the conclusion of his labor, his emotions became deeper and yet more deep. He entered more and more fully into the true spirit and significance of his act. He felt that it was a sacrament. Thoughts of the operation of the mighty energies which he was evoking; of the Divine spirit who brooded over all; of the coming into this wilderness of the woman who was to be the good angel of his life; of the ceremony that was to be enacted in the little meeting house; of the work to which he was dedicated in the future, kindled his soul into an ecstasy of joy. He ceased to be conscious of his present task. The material world loosened its hold upon his senses. His thoughts became riveted upon the elements of that spiritual universe that lay within and around him, and that seemed uncovered to his view as to the apostle of old. “Whether he was in the body, or out of the body, he could not tell!” Finally he ceased to move; his hand was arrested and hung poised in mid-air with the unscattered seed in its palm; he eyes were fixed on some invisible object and he stood as he had stood when we first caught sight of him in the half-plowed meadow—lost in a trance.

How long he stood he never knew, but he was wakened, at last, as it was natural and fitting he should be.

Fulfilling her agreement to come and bring him home on the eve of their wedding day, Pepeeta emerged like a beautiful apparition from an opening in the green wall of the great cathedral. She saw David standing immovable in the furrow. For a few moments she was absorbed in admiration of the grace and beauty of the noble and commanding figure, and then she was thrilled with the consciousness that she possessed the priceless treasure of his love. But these emotions were followed by a holy awe as she discovered that the soul of her lover was filled with religious ecstasy. She felt that the place whereon she stood was holy ground, and reverently awaited the emergence of the worshiper from the holy of holies into which he had withdrawn for prayer.

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But the rapture lasted long and it was growing late. The shadows from the summits of the hills had already crept across the clearing and were silently ascending the trunks of the trees on the eastern side. It was time for them to go. She took a step toward him, and then another, moving slowly, reverently, and touched him on the arm. He started. The half-closed hand relaxed and the seed fell to the ground, the dreamer woke and descended from the heaven of the spiritual world into that of the earthly, the heart of a pure and noble woman.

“I have come,” she said simply.

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

“Thee is not through yet?”

“So it seems! I must have lost myself.”

“I think thee rather found thyself.”

“Perhaps I did; but I must finish my labor. It will never do for me to let my visions supplant my tasks. They will be hurtful, save as incentives to toil. I must be careful!”

“Let me help thee. There are only a few more furrows. I am sure that I can sow,” she said, extending her hand.

He placed some of the seed in her apron and she trudged by his side, laughing at her awkwardness but laboring with all her might. Her lover took her hand in his and showed her how to cast the seed, and so they labored together until every open furrow was filled. It was dark when they were done. They lingered a little while to put the cabin in order, and then turned their faces towards the old farmhouse.

The two little brooks were singing their evening song as they mingled their waters together in front of that wilderness home. The lovers stood a moment at their point of junction, as Pepeeta said, “It is a symbol of our lives.” They listened to the low murmur, watched the crystal stream as it sparkled in the moonlight, stole away into the distance, chanting its own melodious lay of love. It led them out of the clearing and into the depths of the forest. They moved like spirits passing through a land of dreams. The palpable world seemed stripped of its reality. The creatures that stole across their path or started up as they passed, the crickets that chirped their little idyls at the roots of the great trees, the fire-flies that kindled their evanescent fires among the bushes, the night owls that hooted solemnly in the tree tops, the rustle of the leaves in the evening breeze, the gurgle of the waters over the stones in the bed of the brook, their own muffled footfalls, the patches of moonlight that lay like silver mats on the brown carpet of the woods, the flickering shadows, the ghostly trunks of the trees, the slowly swaying,

plume-like branches, sounded only like faint echoes or gleamed only like soft reflections of a fairy world!

“It was here,” Pepeeta said, pausing at the roots of a great beech tree, “that I came the day after we had first seen each other, to inquire of the gypsy goddess the secrets of the future. I have learned many lessons since!”

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“It was here,” said David, as they emerged from the forest into the larger valley, “that thee stood, a little way from the doctor’s side, stroking the necks of his horses and peeping at us stealthily from under thy long dark lashes on the day when he tried to persuade me to join him in his roving life.”

“It was here,” Pepeeta said, as they approached the little bridge, “that we met each other and yielded our hearts to love.”

“And met again after our tragedy and our suffering, to find that love is eternal,” David added.

They stood for a few moments in silence, recalling that bitter past, and then the man of many sins and sorrows said, “Give me thy hand, Pepeeta. How small it seems in mine. Let me fold thee in my arms; it makes my heart bound to feel thee there! We have walked over rough roads together, and the path before us may not be always smooth. We have tasted the bitter cup between us, and there may still be dregs at the bottom. It is hard to believe that after all the wrong we have done we can still be happy. God is surely good! It seems to me that we must have our feet on the right path. He paused for a moment and then continued:

“I have brought thee many sorrows, sweetheart.”

“And many joys.”

“I mean to bring thee some in the future! The love I bear thee now is different from that of the past. I cannot wait until to-morrow to pledge thee my troth! Listen!”

She did so, gazing up into his face with dark eyes in which the light of the moon was reflected as in mountain lakes. There was something in them which filled his heart with unutterable emotion, and his words hung quivering upon his lips.

“Speak, my love, for I am listening,” she said.

“I cannot,” he replied.

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