

**GLASGOW
ELLEN
GHOLSON**

THE ROMANCE OF A
PLAIN MAN

Ellen Glasgow

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CHAPTER I

IN WHICH I APPEAR WITH FEW PRETENSIONS

As the storm broke and a shower of hail rattled like a handful of pebbles against our little window, I choked back a sob and edged my small green-painted stool a trifle nearer the hearth. On the opposite side of the wire fender, my father kicked off his wet boots, stretched his feet, in grey yarn stockings, out on the rag carpet in front of the fire, and reached for his pipe which he had laid, still smoking, on the floor under his chair.

"It's as true as the Bible, Benjy," he said, "that on the day you were born yo' brother President traded off my huntin' breeches for a yaller pup."

My knuckles went to my eyes, while the smart of my mother's slap faded from the cheek I had turned to the fire.

"What's become o' th' p-p-up-p?" I demanded, as I stared up at him with my mouth held half open in readiness to break out again.

"Dead," responded my father solemnly, and I wept aloud.

It was an October evening in my childhood, and so vivid has my later memory of it become that I can still see the sheets of water that rolled from the lead pipe on our roof, and can still hear the splash! splash! with which they fell into the gutter below. For three days the clouds had hung in a grey curtain over the city, and at dawn a high wind, blowing up from the river, had driven the dead leaves from the churchyard like flocks of startled swallows into our little street. Since morning I had watched them across my mother's "prize" red geranium upon our window-sill – now whipped into deep swirls and eddies over the sunken brick pavement, now rising in sighing swarms against the closed doors of the houses, now soaring aloft until they flew almost as high as the living swallows in the belfry of old Saint John's. Then as the dusk fell, and the street lamps glimmered like blurred stars through the rain, I drew back into our little sitting-room, which glowed bright as an ember against the fierce weather outside.

Half an hour earlier my father had come up from the marble yard, where he spent his days cutting lambs and doves and elaborate ivy wreaths in stone, and the smell from his great rubber coat, which hung drying before the kitchen stove, floated with the aroma of coffee through the half-open door. When I closed an eye and peeped through the crack, I could see my mother's tall shadow, shifting, not flitting, on the whitewashed wall of the kitchen, as she passed back and forth from the stove to the wooden cradle in which my little sister Jessie lay asleep, with the head of her rag doll in her mouth.

Outside the splash! splash! of the rain still sounded on the brick pavement, and as I glanced through the window, I saw an old blind negro beggar groping under the street lamp at the corner. The muffled beat of his stick in the drenched leaves passed our doorstep, and I heard it grow gradually fainter as he turned in the direction of the negro hovels that bordered our end of the town. Across the street, and on either side of us, there were rows of small boxlike frame houses built with narrow doorways, which opened from the sidewalk into funny little kitchens, where women, in soiled calico dresses, appeared to iron all day long. It was the poorer quarter of what is known in Richmond as "Church Hill," a portion of the city which had been left behind in the earlier fashionable progress westward. Between us and modern Richmond there were several high hills, up which the poor dripping horses panted on summer days, a railroad station, and a broad slum-like bottom vaguely

described as the "Old Market." Our prosperity, with our traditions, had crumbled around us, yet there were still left the ancient church, with its shady graveyard, and an imposing mansion or two inherited from the forgotten splendour of former days. The other Richmond – that "up-town" I heard sometimes mentioned – I had never seen, for my early horizon was bounded by the green hill, by the crawling salmon-coloured James River at its foot, and by the quaint white belfry of the parish of old St. John's. Beneath that belfry I had made miniature graves on summer afternoons, and as I sat now opposite to my father, with the bright fire between us, the memory of those crumbling vaults made me hug myself in the warmth, while I edged nearer the great black kettle singing before the flames.

"Pa," I asked presently, with an effort to resume the conversation along cheerful lines, "was it a he or a she pup?"

My father turned his bright blue eyes from the fire, while his hand wandered, with an habitual gesture, to his coarse straw-coloured hair which stood, like mine, straight up from the forehead.

"Wall, I'll be blessed if I can recollect, Benjy," he replied, and added after a moment, in which I knew that his slow wits were working over a fresh attempt at distraction, "but speaking of dawgs, it wouldn't surprise me if yo' ma was to let you have a b'iled egg for yo' supper."

Again the storm was averted. He was so handsome, so soft, so eager to make everybody happy, that although he did not deceive even my infant mind for a minute, I felt obliged by sheer force of sympathy to step into the amiable snare he laid.

"Hard or soft?" I demanded.

"Now that's a matter of ch'ice, ain't it?" he rejoined, wrinkling his forehead as if awed by the gravity of the decision; "but bein' a plain man with a taste for solids, I'd say 'hard' every time."

"Hard, ma," I repeated gravely through the crack of the door to the shifting shape on the kitchen wall. Then, while he stooped over in the firelight to prod fresh tobacco into his pipe, I began again my insatiable quest for knowledge which had brought me punishment at the hand of my mother an hour before.

"Pa, who named me?"

"Yo' ma."

"Did ma name you, too?"

He shook his head, doubtfully, not negatively. Above his short growth of beard his cheeks had warmed to a clear pink, and his foolish blue eyes were as soft as the eyes of a baby.

"Wall, I can't say she did that – exactly."

"Then who did name you?"

"I don't recollect. My ma, I reckon."

"Did ma name me Ben Starr, or just Ben?"

"Just Ben. You were born Starr."

"Was she born Starr, too?"

"Good Lord, no, she was born Savage."

"Then why warn't I born Savage?"

"Because she married me an' I was born Starr."

I gave it up with a sigh. "Who had the most to do with my comin' here, God or ma?" I asked after a minute.

My father hesitated as if afraid of committing himself to an heretical utterance. "I ain't so sure," he replied at last, and added immediately in a louder tone, "Yo' ma, I s'pose."

"Then why don't I say my prayers to ma instead of to God?"

"I wouldn't begin to worry over that at my age, if I were you," replied my father, with angelic patience, "seein' as it's near supper time an' the kettle's a-bilin'."

"But I want to know, pa, why it was that I came to be named just Ben?"

"To be named just Ben?" he repeated slowly, as if the fact had been brought for the first time to his attention. "Wall, I reckon 'twas because we'd had considerable trouble over the namin' of the

first, which was yo' brother President. That bein' the turn of the man of the family, I calculated that as a plain American citizen, I couldn't do better than show I hadn't any ill feelin' agin the Government. I don't recollect just what the name of the gentleman at the head of the Nation was, seein' 'twas goin' on sixteen years ago, but I'd made up my mind to call the infant in the cradle arter him, if he'd ever answered my letter – which he never did. It was then yo' ma an' I had words because she didn't want a child of hers named arter such a bad-mannered, stuck-up, ornary sort, President or no President. She raised a terrible squall, but I held out against her," he went on, dropping his voice, "an' I stood up for it that as long as 'twas the office an' not the man I was complimentin', I'd name him arter the office, which I did on the spot. When 'twas over an' done the notion got into my head an' kind of tickled me, an' when you came at last, arter the four others in between, that died befo' they took breath, I was a'ready to name you 'Governor' if yo' ma had been agreeable. But 'twas her turn, so she called you arter her Uncle Benjamin – "

"What's become o' Uncle Benjamin?" I interrupted.

"Dead," responded my father, and for the third time I wept.

"I declar' that child's been goin' on like that for the last hour," remarked my mother, appearing upon the threshold. "Thar, thar, Benjy boy, stop cryin' an' I'll let you go to old Mr. Cudlip's burial to-morrow."

"May I go, too, ma?" enquired President, who had come in with a lighted lamp in his hand. He was a big, heavy, overgrown boy, and his head was already on a level with his father's.

"Not if I know it," responded my mother tartly, for her temper was rising and she looked tired and anxious. "I'll take Benjy along because he can crowd in an' nobody'll mind."

She moved a step nearer while her shadow loomed to gigantic proportions on the whitewashed wall. Her thin brown hair, partially streaked with grey, was brushed closely over her scalp, and this gave her profile an angularity that became positively grotesque in the shape behind her. Across her forehead there were three deep frowning wrinkles, which did not disappear even when she smiled, and her sad, flint-coloured eyes held a perplexed and anxious look, as if she were trying always to remember something which was very important and which she had half forgotten. I had never seen her, except when she went to funerals, dressed otherwise than in a faded grey calico with a faded grey shawl crossed tightly over her bosom and drawn to the back of her waist, where it was secured by a safety pin of an enormous size. Beside her my father looked so young and so amiable that I had a confused impression that he had shrunk to my own age and importance. Then my mother retreated into the kitchen and he resumed immediately his natural proportions. After thirty years, when I think now of that ugly little room, with its painted pine furniture, with its coloured glass vases, filled with dried cat-tails, upon the mantelpiece, with its crude red and yellow print of a miniature David attacking a colossal Goliath, with its narrow window-panes, where beyond the "prize" red geranium the wind drove the fallen leaves over the brick pavement, with its staring whitewashed walls, and its hideous rag carpet – when I think of these vulgar details it is to find that they are softened in my memory by a sense of peace, of shelter, and of warm firelight shadows.

My mother had just laid the supper table, over which I had watched her smooth the clean red and white cloth with her twisted fingers; President was proudly holding aloft a savoury dish of broiled herrings, and my father had pinned on my bib and drawn back the green-painted chair in which I sat for my meals – when a hurried knock at the door arrested each one of us in his separate attitude as if he had been instantly petrified by the sound.

There was a second's pause, and then before my father could reach it, the door opened and shut violently, and a woman, in a dripping cloak, holding a little girl by the hand, came from the storm outside, and ran straight to the fire, where she stood shaking the child's wet clothes before the flames. As the light fell over them, I saw that the woman was young and delicate and richly dressed, with a quantity of pale brown hair which the rain and wind had beaten flat against her small frightened face. At the time she was doubtless an unusually pretty creature to a grown-up pair of eyes, but my gaze,

burning with curiosity, passed quickly over her to rest upon the little girl, who possessed for me the attraction of my own age and size. She wore red shoes, I saw at my first glance, and a white cloak, which I took to be of fur, though it was probably made of some soft, fuzzy cloth I had never seen. There was a white cap on her head, held by an elastic band under her square little chin, and about her shoulders her hair lay in a profuse, drenched mass of brown, which reminded me in the firelight of the colour of wet November leaves. She was soaked through, and yet as she stood there, with her teeth chattering in the warmth, I was struck by the courage, almost the defiance, with which she returned my gaze. Baby that she was, I felt that she would scorn to cry while my glance was upon her, though there were fresh tear marks on her flushed cheeks, and around her solemn grey eyes that were made more luminous by her broad, heavily arched black eyebrows, which gave her an intense and questioning look. The memory of this look, which was strange in so young a child, remained with me after the colour of her hair and every charming feature in her face were forgotten. Years afterwards I think I could have recognised her in a crowded street by the mingling of light with darkness, of intense black with clear grey, in her sparkling glance.

"I followed the wrong turn," said the pale little woman, breathing hard with a pitiable, frightened sound, while my mother took her dripping cloak from her shoulders, "and I could not keep on because of the rain which came up so heavily. If I could only reach the foot of the hill I might find a carriage to take me up-town."

My father had sprung forward as she entered, and was vigorously stirring the fire, which blazed and crackled merrily in the open grate. She accepted thankfully my mother's efforts to relieve her of her wet wraps, but the little girl drew back haughtily when she was approached, and refused obstinately to slip out of her cloak, from which the water ran in streams to the floor.

"I don't like it here, mamma, it is a common place," she said, in a clear childish voice, and though I hardly grasped the meaning of her words, her tone brought to me for the first time a feeling of shame for my humble surroundings.

"Hush, Sally," replied her mother, "you must dry yourself. These people are very kind."

"But I thought we were going to grandmama's?"

"Grandmama lives up-town, and we are going as soon as the storm has blown over. There, be a good girl and let the little boy take your wet cap."

"I don't want him to take my cap. He is a common boy."

In spite of the fact that she seemed to me to be the most disagreeable little girl I had ever met, the word she had used was lodged unalterably in my memory. In that puzzled instant, I think, began my struggle to rise out of the class in which I belonged by birth; and I remember that I repeated the word "common" in a whisper to myself, while I resolved that I would learn its meaning in order that I might cease to be the unknown thing that it implied.

My mother, who had gone into the kitchen with the dripping cloak in her arms, returned a moment later with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a mug of hot milk in the other.

"It's a mercy if you haven't caught your death with an inner chill," she observed in a brisk, kindly tone. "'Twas the way old Mr. Cudlip, whose funeral I'm going to to-morrow, came to his end, and he was as hale, red-faced a body as you ever laid eyes on."

The woman received the cup gratefully, and I could see her poor thin hands tremble as she raised it to her lips.

"Drink the warm milk, dear," she said pleadingly to the disagreeable little girl, who shook her head and drew back with a stiff childish gesture.

"I'm not hungry, thank you," she replied to my mother in her sweet, clear treble. To all further entreaties she returned the same answer, standing there a haughty, though drenched and battered infant, in her soiled white cloak and her red shoes, holding her mop of a muff tightly in both hands.

"I'm not hungry, thank you," she repeated, adding presently in a manner of chill politeness, "give it to the boy."

But the boy was not hungry either, and when my mother, finally taking her at her word, turned, in exasperation, and offered the mug to me, I declined it, also, and stood nervously shifting from one foot to the other, while my hands caught and twisted the fringe of the table-cloth at my back. The big grey eyes of the little girl looked straight into mine, but there was no hint in them that she was aware of my existence. Though her teeth were chattering, and she knew I heard them, she did not relax for an instant from her scornful attitude.

"We were just about to take a mouthful of supper, mum, an' we'd be proud if you an' the little gal would jine us," remarked my father, with an eager hospitality.

"I thank you," replied the woman in her pretty, grateful manner, "but the coffee has restored my strength, and if you will direct me to the hill, I shall be quite able to go on again."

A step passed close to the door on the pavement outside, and I saw her start and clutch the child to her bosom with trembling hands. As she stood there in her shaking terror, I remembered a white kitten I had once seen chased by boys into the area of a deserted house.

"If – if anyone should come to enquire after me, will you be so good as to say nothing of my having been here?" she asked.

"To be sure I will, with all the pleasure in life," responded my father, who, it was evident even to me, had become a victim to her distressed loveliness.

Emboldened by the effusive politeness of my parent, I went up to the little girl and shyly offered her a blossom from my mother's geranium upon the window-sill. A scrap of a hand, as cold as ice when it touched mine, closed over the stem of the flower, and without looking at me, she stood, very erect, with the scarlet geranium grasped stiffly between her fingers.

"I'll take you to the bottom of the hill myself," protested my father, "but I wish you could persuade yourself to try a bite of food befo' you set out in the rain."

"It is important that I should lose no time," answered the woman, drawing her breath quickly through her small white teeth, "but I fear that I am taking you away from your supper?"

"Not at all, you will not deprive me in the least," stammered my father, blushing up to his ears, while his straight flaxen hair appeared literally to rise with embarrassment. "I – I – the fact is I'm not an eater, mum."

For an instant, remembering the story of Ananias I had heard in Sunday-school, I looked round in terror, half expecting to hear the dreadful feet of the young men on the pavement. But he passed scathless for the hour at least, and our visitor had turned to receive her half-dried cloak from my mother's hands, when her face changed suddenly to a more deadly pallor, and seizing the little girl by the shoulder, she fled, like a small frightened animal, across the threshold into the kitchen.

My father's hand had barely reached the knob of the street door, when it opened and a man in a rubber coat entered, and stopped short in the centre of the room, where he stood blinking rapidly in the lamplight. I heard the rain drip with a soft pattering sound from his coat to the floor, and when he wheeled about, after an instant in which his glance searched the room, I saw that his face was flushed and his eyes swimming and bloodshot. There was in his look, as I remember it now, something of the inflamed yet bridled cruelty of a bird of prey.

"Have you noticed a lady with a little girl go by?" he enquired.

At his question my father fell back a step or two until he stood squarely planted before the door into the kitchen. Though he was a big man, he was not so big as the other, who towered above the dried cat-tails in a china vase on the mantelpiece.

"Are you sure they did not pass here?" asked the stranger, and as he turned his head the dried pollen was loosened from the cat-tails and drifted in an ashen dust to the hearth.

"No, I'll stake my word on that. They ain't passed here yet," replied my father.

With an angry gesture the other shook his rubber coat over our bright little carpet, and passed out again, slamming the door violently behind him. Running to the window, I lifted the green shade, and watched his big black figure splashing recklessly through the heavy puddles under the faint

yellowish glimmer of the street lamp at the corner. The light flickered feebly on his rubber coat and appeared to go out in the streams of water that fell from his shoulders.

When I looked round I saw that the woman had come back into the room, still grasping the little girl by the hand.

"No, no, I must go at once. It is necessary that I should go at once," she repeated breathlessly, looking up in a dazed way into my mother's face.

"If you must you must, an' what ain't my business ain't," replied my mother a trifle sharply, while she wrapped a grey woollen comforter of her own closely over the head and shoulders of the little girl, "but if you'd take my advice, which you won't, you'd turn this minute an' walk straight back home to yo' husband."

But the woman only shook her head with its drenched mass of soft brown hair.

"We must go, Sally, mustn't we?" she said to the child.

"Yes, we must go, mamma," answered the little girl, still grasping the stem of the red geranium between her fingers.

"That bein' the case, I'll get into my coat with all the pleasure in life an' see you safe," remarked my father, with a manner that impressed me as little short of the magnificent.

"But I hate to take you away from home on such a terrible night."

"Oh, don't mention the weather," responded my gallant parent, while he struggled into his rubber shoes; and he added quite handsomely, after a flourish which appeared to set the elements at defiance, "arter all, weather is only weather, mum."

As nobody, not even my mother, was found to challenge the truth of this statement, the child was warmly wrapped up in an old blanket shawl, and my father lifted her in his arms, while the three set out under a big cotton umbrella for the brow of the hill. President and I peered after them from the window, screening our eyes with our hollowed palms, and flattening our noses against the icy panes; but in spite of our efforts we could only discern dimly the shape of the umbrella rising like a miniature black mountain out of the white blur of the fog. The long empty street with the wind-drifts of dead leaves, the pale glimmer of the solitary light at the far corner, the steady splash! splash! of the rain as it fell on the brick pavement, the bitter draught that blew in over the shivering geranium upon the sill – all these brought a lump to my throat, and I turned back quickly into our cheerful little room, where my untasted supper awaited me.

CHAPTER II

THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

The funeral was not until nine o'clock, but at seven my mother served us a cold breakfast in order, as she said, that she might get the dishes washed and the house tidied before we started. Gathering about the bare table, we ate our dismal meal in a depressed silence, while she bustled back and forth from the kitchen in her holiday attire, which consisted of a stiff black bombazine dress and the long rustling crape veil she had first put on at the death of her uncle Benjamin, some twenty years before. As her only outings were those occasioned by the deaths of her neighbours, I suppose her costume was quite as appropriate as it seemed to my childish eyes. Certainly, as she appeared before me in her hard, shiny, very full bombazine skirt and attenuated bodice, I regarded her with a reverence which her everyday calico had never inspired.

"I ain't et a mouthful an' I doubt if I'll have time to befo' we start," she was saying in an irritable voice, as I settled into my bib and my chair. "Anybody might have thought I'd be allowed to attend a funeral in peace, but I shan't be, – no, not even when it comes to my own."

"Thar's plenty of time yet, Susan," returned my father cheerfully, while he sawed at the cold cornbread on the table. "You've got a good hour an' mo' befo' you."

"An' the things to wash up an' the house to tidy in my veil and bonnet. Thar ain't many women, I reckon, that would wash up china in a crape veil, but I've done it befo' an' I'm used to it."

"Why don't you lay off yo' black things till you're through?"

His suggestion was made innocently enough, but it appeared, as he uttered it, to be the one thing needed to sharpen the edge of my mother's temper. The three frowning lines deepened across her forehead, and she stared straight before her with her perplexed and anxious look under her rustling crape.

"Yes, I'll take 'em off an' lay 'em away an' git back to work," she rejoined. "It did seem as if I might have taken a holiday at a time like this – my next do' neighbour, too, an' I'd al'ays promised him I'd see him laid safe in the earth. But, no, I can't do it. I'll go take off my veil an' bonnet an' stay at home."

Before this attack my father grew so depressed that I half expected to see tears fall into his cup of coffee, as they had into mine. His handsome gayety dropped from him, and he looked as downcast as was possible for a face composed of so many flagrantly cheerful features.

"I declar, Susan, I wa'nt thinkin' of that," he returned apologetically, "it just seemed to me that you'd be mo' comfortable without that sheet of crape floatin' down yo' back."

"I've never been comfortable in my life," retorted my mother, "an' I don't expect to begin when I dress myself to go to a funeral. It's got to be, I reckon, an' it's what I'm used to; but if thar's a man alive that would stand over a stove with a crape veil on his head, I'd be obliged to him if he'd step up an' show his face."

At this point; the half-grown girl who had promised to look after the baby arrived, and with her assistance, my mother set about putting the house in order, while my father, as soon as his luncheon basket was packed, wished us a pleasant drive, and started for old Timothy Ball's marble yard, where he worked. At the sink in the kitchen my mother, with her crape veil pinned back, and her bombazine sleeves rolled up, stood with her arms deep in soapsuds.

"Ma," I asked, going up to her and turning my back while she unfastened my bib with one soapy hand, "did you ever hear anybody call you common?"

"Call me what?"

"Common. What does it mean when anybody calls you common?"

"It means generally that anybody is a fool."

"Then am I, ma?"

"Air you what?"

"Am I common?"

"For the Lord's sake, Benjy, stop yo' pesterin'. What on earth has gone an' set that idee workin' inside yo' head?"

"Is pa common?"

She meditated an instant. "Wall, he wa'nt born a Savage, but I'd never have called him common – exactly," she answered.

"Then perhaps you are?"

"You talk like a fool! Haven't I told you that I wa'nt?" she snapped.

"Then if you ain't an' pa ain't exactly, how can I be?" I concluded with triumph.

"Whoever said you were? Show me the person."

"It wa'nt a person. It was a little girl."

"A little girl? You mean the half-drowned brat I wrapped up in yo' grandma's old blanket shawl I set the muffin dough under? To think of my sendin' yo' po' tired pa splashin' out with 'em into the rain. So she called you common?"

But the sound of a carriage turning the corner fell on my ears, and running hastily into the sitting-room, I opened the door and looked out eagerly for signs of the approaching funeral.

A bright morning had followed the storm, and the burnished leaves, so restless the day before, lay now wet and still under the sunshine. I had stepped joyously over the threshold, to the sunken brick pavement, when my mother, moved by a sudden anxiety for my health, called me back, and in spite of my protestations, wrapped me in a grey blanket shawl, which she fastened at my throat with the enormous safety-pin she had taken from her own waist. Much embarrassed by this garment, which dragged after me as I walked, I followed her sullenly out of the house and as far as our neighbour's doorstep, where I was ordered to sit down and wait until the service was over. As the stir of her crape passed into the little hall, I seated myself obediently on the single step which led straight from the street, and made faces, during the long wait, at the merry driver of the hearse – a decrepit negro of ancient days, who grinned provokingly at the figure I cut in my blanket shawl.

"Hi! honey, is you got on swaddlin' close er a windin' sheet?" he enquired. "I'se a-gittin' near bline en I cyarn mek out."

"You jest wait till I'm bigger an' I'll show you," was my peaceable rejoinder.

"Wat's dat you gwine sho' me, boy? I reckon I'se done seed mo' curus things den you in my lifetime."

I looked up defiantly. Between the aristocratic, if fallen, negro and myself there was all the instinctive antagonism that existed in the Virginia of that period between the "quality" and the "poor white trash."

"If you don't lemme alone you'll see mo'n you want."

"Whew! I reckon you gwine tu'n out sump'im' mighty outlandish, boy. I'se a-lookin' wid all my eyes an I cyarn see nuttin' at all."

"Wait till I'm bigger an' you'll see it," I answered.

"I'se sho'ly gwine ter wait, caze ef'n hits mo' curus den you is en dat ar windin' sheet, hit's a sight dat I'se erbleeged ter lay eyes on. Wat's yo' name, suh?" he enquired, with a mocking salute.

"I am Ben Starr," I replied promptly, "an' if you wait till I get bigger, I'll bus' you open."

"Hi! hi! wat you want bus' me open fur, boy? Is you got a pa?"

"He's Thomas Starr, an' he cuts lambs and doves on tombstones. I've seen 'em, an' I'm goin' to learn to cut 'em, too, when I grow up. I like lambs."

The door behind me opened suddenly without warning, and as I scrambled from the doorstep, my enemy, the merry driver, backed his creaking vehicle to the sidewalk across which the slow

procession of mourners filed. A minute later I was caught up by my mother's hand, and borne into a carriage, where I sat tightly wedged between two sombre females.

"So you've brought yo' little boy along, Mrs. Starr," remarked a third from the opposite seat, in an aggressive voice.

"Yes, he had a cold an' I thought the air might do him good," replied my mother with her society manner.

"Wall, I've nine an' not one of 'em has ever been to a funeral," returned the questioner. "I've al'ays been set dead against 'em for children, ain't you, Mrs. Boxley?"

Mrs. Boxley, a placid elderly woman, who had already begun to doze in her corner, opened her eyes and smiled on me in a pleasant and friendly way.

"To tell the truth I ain't never been able really to enjoy a child's funeral," she replied.

"I'm sure we're all mighty glad to have him along, Mrs. Starr," observed the fourth woman, who was soft and peaceable and very fat. "He's a fine, strong boy now, ain't he, ma'am?"

"Middlin' strong. I hope he ain't crowdin' you. Edge closer to me, Benjy."

I edged closer until her harsh bombazine sleeve seemed to scratch the skin from my cheek. Mrs. Boxley had dozed again, and sinking lower on the seat, I had just prepared myself to follow her example, when a change in the conversation brought my wandering wits instantly together, and I sat bolt upright while my eyes remained fixed on the small, straggling houses we were passing.

"Yes, she would go, rain or no rain," my mother was saying, and I knew that in that second's snatch of sleep she had related the story of our last evening's adventure. "To be sure she may have been all she ought to be, but I must say I can't help mistrustin' that little, palaverin' kind of a woman with eyes like a scared rabbit."

"If it was Sarah Mickleborough, an' I think it was, she had reason enough to look scared, po' thing," observed Mrs. Kidd, the soft fat woman, who sat on my left side. "They've only lived over here in the old Adams house for three months, but the neighbours say he's almost killed her twice since they moved in. She came of mighty set up, high falutin' folks, you know, an' when they wouldn't hear of the marriage, she ran off with him one night about ten years ago just after he came home out of the army. He looked fine, they say, in uniform, on his big black horse, but after the war ended he took to drink and then from drink, as is natchel, he took to beatin' her. It's strange – ain't it? – how easily a man's hand turns against a woman once he's gone out of his head?"

"Ah, I could see that she was the sort that's obliged to be beaten sooner or later if thar was anybody handy around to do it," remarked my mother. "Some women are made so that they're never happy except when they're hurt, an' she's one of 'em. Why, they can't so much as look at a man without invitin' him to ill-treat 'em."

"Thar ain't many women that know how to deal with a husband as well as you an' Mrs. Cudlip," remarked Mrs. Kidd, with delicate flattery.

"Po' Mrs. Cudlip. I hope she is bearin' up," sighed my mother. "'Twas the leg he lost at Seven Pines – wasn't it? – that supported her?"

"That an' the cheers he bottomed. The last work he did, po' man, was for Mrs. Mickleborough of whom we were speakin'. I used to hear of her befo' the war when she was pretty Miss Sarah Bland, in a white poke bonnet with pink roses."

"An' now never a day, passes, they say, that Harry Mickleborough doesn't threaten to turn her an' the child out into the street."

"Are her folks still livin'? Why doesn't she go back to them?"

"Her father died six months after the marriage, an' the rest of 'em live up-town somewhar. The only thing that's stuck to her is her coloured mammy, Aunt Euphronasia, an' they tell me that that old woman has mo' influence over Harry Mickleborough than anybody livin'. When he gets drunk an' goes into one of his tantrums she walks right up to him an' humours him like a child."

As we drove on their voices grew gradually muffled and thin in my ears, and after a minute, in which I clung desperately to my eluding consciousness, my head dropped with a soft thud upon Mrs. Kidd's inviting bosom. The next instant I was jerked violently erect by my mother and ordered sternly to "keep my place an' not to make myself a nuisance by spreadin' about." With this admonition in my ears, I pinched my leg and sat staring with heavy eyes out upon the quiet street, where the rolling of the slow wheels over the fallen leaves was the only sound that disturbed the silence. After ten bitter years the city was still bound by the terrible lethargy which had immediately succeeded the war; and on Church Hill it seemed almost as if we had been forgotten like the breastworks and the battle-fields in the march of progress. The grip of poverty, which was fiercer than the grip of armies, still held us, and the few stately houses showed tenantless and abandoned in the midst of their ruined gardens. Sometimes I saw an old negress in a coloured turban come out upon one of the long porches and stare after us, her pipe in her mouth and her hollowed palm screening her eyes; and once a noisy group of young mulattoes emerged from an alley and followed us curiously for a few blocks along the sidewalk.

Withdrawing my gaze from the window, I looked enviously at Mrs. Boxley, who snored gently in her corner. Then for the second time sleep overpowered me, and in spite of my struggles, I sank again on Mrs. Kidd's bosom.

"Thar, now, don't think of disturbin' him, Mrs. Starr. He ain't the least bit in my way. I can look right over his head," I heard murmured over me as I slid blissfully into unconsciousness.

What happened after this I was never able to remember, for when I came clearly awake again, we had reached our door, and my mother was shaking me in the effort to make me stand on my feet.

"He's gone and slept through the whole thing," she remarked irritably to President, while I stumbled after them across the pavement, with the fringed ends of my blanket shawl rustling the leaves.

"He's too little. You might have let me go, ma," replied President, as he dragged me, sleepy eyes, ruffled flaxen hair, and trailing shawl over the doorstep.

"An' you're too big," retorted my mother, removing the long black pins from her veil, and holding them in her mouth while she carefully smoothed and folded the lengths of crape. "You could never have squeezed in between us, an' as it was Mrs. Kidd almost overlaid Benjy. But you didn't miss much," she hastened to assure him, "I declar' I thought at one time we'd never get on it all went so slowly."

Having placed her bonnet and veil in the tall white bandbox upon the table, she hurried off to prepare our dinner, while President urged me in an undertone to "sham sick" that afternoon so that he wouldn't have to take me out for an airing on the hill.

"But I want to go," I responded selfishly, wide awake at the prospect. "I want to see the old Adams house where the little girl lives."

"If you go I can't play checkers, an' it's downright mean. What do you care about little girls? They ain't any good."

"But this little girl has got a drunken father."

"Well, you won't see *him* anyway, so what is the use?"

"She lives in a big house an' it's got a big garden – as big as that!" I stretched out my arms in a vain attempt to impress his imagination, but he merely looked scornful and swore a mighty vow that he'd "be jiggered if he'd keep on playin' nurse-girl to a muff."

At the time he put my pleading sternly aside, but a couple of hours later, when the afternoon was already waning, he relented sufficiently to take me out on the ragged hill, which was covered thickly with pokeberry, yarrow, and stunted sumach. Before our feet the ground sank gradually to the sparkling river, and farther away I could see the silhouette of an anchored vessel etched boldly against the rosy clouds of the sunset.

As I stood there, holding fast to his hand, in the high wind that blew up from the river, a stout gentleman, leaning heavily on a black walking-stick, with a big gold knob at the top, came panting

up the slope and paused beside us, with his eyes on the western sky. He was hale, handsome, and ruddy-faced, with a bunch of iron-grey whiskers on either cheek, and a vivacious and merry eye which seemed to catch at a twinkle whenever it met mine. His rounded stomach was spanned by a massive gold watch-chain, from which dangled a bunch of seals that delighted my childish gaze.

"It's a fine view," he observed pleasantly, patting my shoulder as if I were in some way responsible for the river, the anchored vessel, and the rosy sunset. "I moved up-town as soon as the war ended, but I still manage to crawl back once in a while to watch the afterglow."

"Where does the sun go," I asked, "when it slips way down there on the other side of the river?"

The gentleman smiled benignly, and I saw from his merry glance that he did not share my mother's hostility to the enquiring mind.

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if it went to the wrong side of the world for little boys and girls over there to get up by," he replied.

"May I go there, too, when I'm big?"

"To the wrong side of the world? You may, who knows?"

"Have you ever been there? What is it like?"

"Not yet, not yet, but there's no telling. I've been across the ocean, though, and that's pretty far. I went once in a ship that ran through the blockade and brought in a cargo of Bibles."

"What did you want with so many Bibles? We've got one. It has gilt clasps."

"Want with the Bibles! Why, every one of these Bibles, my boy, may have saved a soul."

"Has our Bible saved a soul? An' whose soul was it? It stays on our centre table, an' my name's in it. I've seen it."

"Indeed! and what may your name be?"

"Ben Starr. That's my name. What is yours? Is yo' name in the Bible? Does everybody's name have to be in the Bible if they're to be saved? Who put them in there? Was it God or the angels? If I blot my name out can I still go to heaven? An' if yours isn't in there will you have to be damned? Have you ever been damned an' what does it feel like?"

"Shut up, Benjy, or ma'll wallop you," growled President, squeezing my hand so hard that I cried aloud.

"Ah, he's a fine boy, a promising boy, a remarkable boy," observed the gentleman, with one finger in his waistcoat pocket. "Wouldn't you like to grow up and be President, my enquiring young friend?"

"No, sir, I'd rather be God," I replied, shaking my head.

All the gentleman's merry grey eyes seemed to run to sparkles.

"Ah, there's nothing, after all, like the true American spirit," he said, patting my shoulder. Then he laughed so heartily that his gold-rimmed eye-glasses fell from his eyes and dangled in the air at the end of a silk cord. "I'm afraid your aspiration is too lofty for my help," he said, "but if you should happen to grow less ambitious as you grow older, then remember, please, that my name is General Bolingbroke."

"Why, you're the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad, sir!" exclaimed President, admiring and embarrassed.

The General sighed, though even I could see that this simple tribute to his fame had not left him unmoved. "Ten years ago I was the man who tried to save Johnston's army, and to-day I am only a railroad president," he answered, half to himself; "times change and fames change almost as quickly. When all is said, however, there may be more lasting honour in building a country's trade than in winning a battle. I'll have a tombstone some day and I want written on it, 'He brought help to the sick land and made the cotton flower to bloom anew.' My name is General Bolingbroke," he added, with his genial and charming smile. "You will not forget it?"

I assured him that I should not, and that if it could be done, I'd try to have it written in our Bible with gilt clasps, at which he thanked me gravely as he shook my hand.

"An' I think now I'd rather be president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad, sir," I concluded.

"Young man, I fear you're with the wind," he said, laughing, and added, "I've a nephew just about your age and at least a head shorter, what do you think of that?"

"Has he a kite?" I enquired eagerly. "I have, an' a top an' ten checkers an' a big balloon."

"Have you, indeed? Well, my poor boy is not so well off, I regret to say. But don't you think your prosperity is excessive considering the impoverished condition of the country?"

The big words left me gasping, and fearing that I had been too boastful for politeness, I hastened to inform him that "although the balloon was very big, it was also bu'sted, which made a difference."

"Ah, it is, is it? Well, that does make a difference."

"If your boy hasn't any checkers I'll give him half of mine," I added with a gulp.

With an elaborate flourish the General drew out a stiffly starched pocket handkerchief and blew his nose. "That's a handsome offer and I'll repeat it without fail," he said.

Then he shook hands again and marched down the hill with his gold-headed stick tapping the ground.

"Now you'll come and trot home, I reckon," said President, when he had disappeared.

But the spirit of revolt had lifted its head within me, for through a cleft in the future, I saw myself already as the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad, with a jingling bunch of seals and a gold-headed stick.

"I ain't goin' that way," I said, "I'm goin' home by the old Adams house where the little girl lives."

"No, you ain't either. I'll tell ma on you."

"I don't care. If you don't take me home by the old Adams house, you'll have to carry me every step of the way, an' I'll make myself heavy."

For a long minute President wrinkled his brows and thought hard in silence. Then an idea appeared to penetrate his slow mind, and he grasped me by the shoulder and shook me until I begged him to stop.

"If I take you home that way will you promise to sham sick to-morrow, so I shan't have to bring you out?"

The price was high, but swallowing my disappointment I met it squarely.

"I will if you'll lift me an' let me look over the wall."

"Hope you may die?"

"Hope I may die."

"Wall, it ain't anything to see but jest a house," remarked President, as I held out my hand, "an' girls ain't worth the lookin' at."

"She called me common," I said, soberly.

"Oh, shucks!" retorted President, with fine scorn, and we said no more.

Clinging tightly to his hand I trudged the short blocks in silence. As I was little, and he was very large for his years, it was with difficulty that I kept pace with him; but by taking two quick steps to his single slow one, I managed to cover the same distance in almost the same number of minutes. He was a tall, overgrown boy, very fat for his age, with a foolish, large-featured face which continued to look sheepishly amiable even when he got into a temper.

"Is it far, President?" I enquired at last between panting breaths.

"There 'tis," he answered, pointing with his free hand to a fine old mansion, with a broad and hospitable front, from which the curved iron railing bent in a bright bow to the pavement. It was the one great house on the hill, with its spreading wings, its stuccoed offices, its massive white columns at the rear, which presided solemnly over the terraced hill-side. A moment later he led me up to the high, spiked wall, and swung me from the ground to a secure perch on his shoulder. With my hands clinging to the iron nails that studded the wall, I looked over, and then caught my breath sharply at

the thought that I was gazing upon an enchanted garden. Through the interlacing elm boughs the rosy light of the afterglow fell on the magnolias and laburnums, on the rose squares, and on the tall latticed arbours, where amid a glossy bower of foliage, a few pale microphylla roses bloomed out of season. Overhead the wind stirred, and one by one the small yellow leaves drifted, like wounded butterflies, down on the box hedges and the terraced walks.

"You've got to come down now – you're too heavy," said President from below, breathing hard as he held me up.

"Jest a minute – give me a minute longer an' I'll let you eat my blackberry jam at supper."

"An' you've promised on yo' life to sham sick to-morrow?"

"I'll sham sick an' I'll let you eat my jam, too, if you'll hold me a little longer."

He lifted me still higher, and clutching desperately to the iron spikes, I hung there quivering, breathless, with a thumping heart. A glimmer of white flitted between the box rows on a lower terrace, and I saw that the princess of the enchanted garden was none other than my little girl of the evening before. She was playing quietly by herself in a bower of box, building small houses of moss and stones, which she erected with infinite patience. So engrossed was she in her play that she seemed perfectly oblivious of the fading light and of the birds and squirrels that ran past her to their homes in the latticed arbours. Higher and higher rose her houses of moss and stones, while she knelt there, patient and silent, in the terrace walk with the small, yellow leaves falling around her.

"That's a square deal now," said President, dropping me suddenly to earth. "You'd better come along and trot home or you'll get a lamming."

My enchanted garden had vanished, the spiked wall rose over my head, and before me, as I turned homeward, spread all the familiar commonplaceness of Church Hill.

"How long will it be befo' I can climb up by myself?" I asked.

"When you grow up. You're nothin' but a kid."

"An' when'll I grow up if I keep on fast?"

"Oh, in ten or fifteen years, I reckon."

"Shan't I be big enough to climb up befo' then?"

"Look here, you shut up! I'm tired answerin' questions," shouted my elder brother, and grasping his hand I trotted in a depressed silence back to our little home.

CHAPTER III

A PAIR OF RED SHOES

I awoke the next morning a changed creature from the one who had fallen asleep in my trundle-bed. In a single hour I had awakened to the sharp sense of contrast, to the knowledge that all ways of life were not confined to the sordid circle in which I lived. Outside the poverty, the ugliness, the narrow streets, rose the spiked wall of the enchanted garden; and when I shut my eyes tight, I could see still the half-bared elms arching against the sunset, and the old house beyond, with its stuccoed wings and its grave white columns, which looked down on the magnolias and laburnums just emerging from the twilight on the lower terrace. In the midst of this garden I saw always the little girl patiently building her houses of moss and stones, and it seemed to me that I could hardly live through the days until I grew strong enough to leap the barriers and play beside her in the bower of box.

"Ma," I asked, measuring myself against the red and white cloth on the table, "does it look to you as if I were growin' up?"

The air was strong with the odour of frying bacon, and when my mother turned to answer me, she held a smoking skillet extended like a votive offering in her right hand. She was busy preparing breakfast for Mrs. Cudlip, whose husband's funeral we had attended the day before, and as usual when any charitable mission was under way, her manner to my father and myself had taken a biting edge.

"Don't talk foolishness, Benjy," she replied, stopping to push back a loosened wiry lock of hair; "it's time to think about growin' up when you ain't been but two years in breeches. Here, if you're through breakfast, I want you to step with this plate of muffins to Mrs. Cudlip. Tell her I sent 'em an' that I hope she is bearin' up."

"That you sent 'em an' that you hope she is bearin' up," I repeated.

"That's it now. Don't forget what I told you befo' you're there. Thomas, have you buttered that batch of muffins?"

My father handed me the plate, which was neatly covered with a red-bordered napkin.

"Did you tell me to lay a slice of middlin' along side of 'em, Susan?" he humbly enquired.

Without replying to him in words, my mother seized the plate from me, and lifting the napkin, removed the offending piece of bacon, which she replaced in the dish.

"I thought even you, Thomas, would have had mo' feelin' than to send middlin' to a widow the day arter she has buried her husband – even a one-legged one! Middlin' indeed! One egg an' that soft boiled, will be as near a solid as she'll touch for a week. Keep along, Benjy, an' be sure to say just what I told you."

I did my errand quickly, and returning, asked eagerly if I might go out all by myself an' play for an hour. "I'll stay close in the churchyard if you'll lemme go," I entreated.

"Run along then for a little while, but if you go out of the churchyard, you'll get a whippin'," replied my mother.

With this threat ringing like a bell in my ears, I left the house and walked quickly along the narrow pavement to where, across the wide street, I discerned the white tower and belfry which had been added by a later century to the parish church of Saint John. Overhead there was a bright blue sky, and the October sunshine, filtering through the bronzed network of sycamore and poplar, steeped the flat tombstones and the crumbling brick vaults in a clear golden light. The church stood upon a moderate elevation above the street, and I entered it now by a short flight of steps, which led to a grassy walk that did not end at the closed door, but continued to the brow of the hill, where a few scattered slabs stood erect as sentinels over the river banks. For a moment I stood among them, watching the blue haze of the opposite shore; then turning away I rolled over on my back and lay at full length in the periwinkle that covered the ground. From beyond the church I could hear Uncle

Methusalah, the negro caretaker, raking the dead leaves from the graves, and here and there among the dark boles of the trees there appeared presently thin bluish spirals of smoke. The old negro's figure was still hidden, but as his rake stirred the smouldering piles, I could smell the sharp sweet odour of the burning leaves. Sometimes a wren or a sparrow fluttered in and out of the periwinkle, and once a small green lizard glided like the shadow of a moving leaf over a tombstone. One sleeper among them I came to regard, as I grew somewhat older, almost with affection – not only because he was young and a soldier, but because the tall marble slab implored me to "tread lightly upon his ashes." Not once during the many hours when I played in the churchyard, did I forget myself and run over the sunken grave where he lay.

The sound of the moving rake passed the church door and drew nearer, and the grey head of Uncle Methusalah appeared suddenly from behind an ivied tree trunk. Sitting up in the periwinkle, I watched him heap the coloured leaves around me into a brilliant pile, and then bending over hold a small flame close to the curling ends. The leaves, still moist from the rain, caught slowly, and smouldered in a scented cloud under the trees.

"Dis yer trash ain' gwine ter bu'n twel hit's smoked out," he remarked in a querulous voice.

"Uncle Methusalah," I asked, springing up, "how old are you?"

With a leisurely movement, he dragged his rake over the walk, and then bringing it to rest at his feet, leaned his clasped hands on the end of it, and looked at me over the burning leaves. He wore an old, tightly fitting army coat of Union blue, bearing tarnished gold epaulets upon the shoulders, and around his throat a red bandanna handkerchief was wrapped closely to keep out the "chills."

"Gaud-a-moughty, honey!" he replied, "I'se so ole dat I'se done clean furgit ter count."

"I reckon you knew almost everybody that's buried here, didn't you?"

"Mos' un um, chile, but I ain't knowed near ez many ez my ole Marster. He done shuck hans w'en he wuz live wid um great en small. I'se done hyern 'im tell in my time how he shuck de han' er ole Marse Henry right over dar in dat ar church."

"Who was ole Marse Henry?" I enquired.

"I dunno, honey, caze he died afo' my day, but he mus' hev done a powerful heap er talkin' while he wuz 'live."

"Whom did he talk to, Uncle Methusalah?"

"Ter hisself mostly, I reckon, caze you know folks ain' got time al'ays ter be lisen'in'. But hit wuz en dish yer church dat he stood up en ax 'em please ter gin 'im liberty er ter gin 'im deaf."

"An' which did they give him, Uncle?"

"Wall, honey, ez fur ez I recollect de story dey gun 'im bofe."

Bending over in his old blue army coat with the tarnished epaulets, he prodded the pile of leaves, where the scented smoke hung low in a cloud. The wind stirred softly in the grass, and a small flame ran along a bent twig of maple to a single scarlet leaf at the end.

"Did they give 'em to him because he talked too much?" I asked.

"I ain' never hyern ner better reason, chile. Folks cyarn' stan' too much er de gab nohow, en' dey sez dat he 'ouldn't let up, but kep' up sech a racket dat dey couldn't git ner sleep. Den at las' ole King George over dar in England sent de hull army clear across de water jes' ter shet his mouf."

"An' did he shut it?"

"Dat's all er hit dat I ever hyern tell, boy, but ef'n you don' quit axin' folks questions day in en day out, he'll send all de way over yer agin' jes' ter shet yourn."

He went off, gathering the leaves into another pile at a little distance, and after a moment I followed him and stood with my back against a high brick vault.

"Is there any way, Uncle Methusalah, that you can grow up befo' yo' time?" I asked.

"Dar 'tis agin'!" exclaimed the old negro, but he added kindly enough, "Dey tell me you kin do hit by stretchin', chile, but I ain' never seed hit wid my eyes, en w'at I ain' seed wid my eyes I ain' set much sto' by."

His scepticism, however, honest as it was, did not prevent my seizing upon the faint hope he offered, and I had just begun to stretch myself violently against the vault, when a voice speaking at my back brought my heels suddenly to the safe earth again.

"Boy," said the voice, "do you want a dog?"

Turning quickly I found myself face to face with the princess of the enchanted garden. She wore a fresh white coat and a furry white cap and a pair of red shoes that danced up and down. In her hand she carried a dirty twine string, the other end of which was tied about the neck of a miserable grey and white mongrel puppy.

"Do you want a dog, boy?" she repeated, as proudly as if she offered a canine prize.

The puppy was ugly, ill-bred, and dirty, but not an instant did I hesitate in the response I made.

"Yes, I want a dog," I answered as gravely as she had spoken.

She held out the string and my fist closed tightly over it. "I found him in the gutter," she explained, "and I gave him a plate of bread and milk because he is so young. Grandmama wouldn't let me keep him, as I have three others. I think it was very cruel of grandmama."

"I may keep him," I responded, "I ain't got any grandmama. I'll let him sleep in my bed."

"You must give him a bath first," she said, "and put him by the fire to dry. They wouldn't let me bring him into our house, but yours is such a little one that it will hardly matter."

At this my pride dropped low. "You live in the great big house with the high wall around the garden," I returned wistfully.

She nodded, drawing back a step or two with a quaint little air of dignity, and twisting a tassel on her coat in and out of her fingers, which were encased in white crocheted mittens. The only touch of colour about her was made by her small red shoes.

"I haven't lived there long, and I remember where we came from – way – away from here, over yonder across the river." She lifted her hand and pointed across the brick vault to the distant blue on the opposite shore of the James. "I liked it over there because it was the country and we lived by ourselves, mamma and I. She taught me to knit and I knitted a whole shawl – as big as that – for grandmama. Then papa came and took us away, but now he has gone and left us again, and I am glad. I hope he will never come back because he is so very bad and I don't like him. Mamma likes him, but I don't."

"May I play with you in your garden?" I asked when she had finished; "I'd like to play with you an' I know ever so many nice ways to play that I made up out of my head."

She looked at me gravely and, I thought, regretfully.

"You can't because you're common," she answered. "It's a great pity. I don't really mind it myself," she added gently, seeing my downcast face, "I'd just every bit as lief play with you as not – a little bit – but grandmama wouldn't –"

"But I don't want to play with your grandmama," I returned, on the point of tears.

"Well, you might come sometimes – not very often," she said at last, with a sympathetic touch on my sleeve, "an' you must come to the side gate where grandmama won't see you. I'll let you in an' mamma will not mind. But you mustn't come often," she concluded in a sterner tone, "only once or twice, so that there won't be any danger of my growin' like you. It would hurt grandmama dreadfully if I were ever to grow like you."

She paused a moment, and then began dancing up and down in her red shoes over the coloured leaves. "I'd like to play – play – play all the time!" she sang, whirling, a vivid little figure, around, the crumbling vault.

The next minute she caught up the puppy in her arms and hugged him passionately before she turned away.

"His name is Samuel!" she called back over her shoulder as she ran out of the churchyard.

When she had gone down the short flight of steps and into the wide street, I tucked Samuel under my arm, and lugged him, not without inward misgivings, into the kitchen, where my mother stood at the ironing-board, with one foot on the rocker of Jessie's cradle.

"Ma," I began in a faltering and yet stubborn voice, "I've got a pup."

My mother's foot left the rocker, and she turned squarely on me, with a smoking iron half poised above the garment she had just sprinkled on the board.

"Whar did he come from?" she demanded, and moistened the iron with the thumb of her free hand.

"I got him in the churchyard. His name is Samuel."

For a moment she stared at the two of us in a stony silence. Then her face twitched as if with pain, the perplexed and anxious look appeared in her eyes, and her mouth relaxed.

"Wall, he's ugly enough to be named Satan," she said, "but I reckon if you want to you may put him in a box in the back yard. Give him that cold sheep's liver in the safe and then you come straight in and comb yo' head. It looks for all the world like a tousled straw stack."

All the afternoon I sat in our little sitting-room, and faithful to my promise, shammed sickness, while Samuel lay in his box in the back yard and howled.

"I'll have that dog taken up the first thing in the mornin'," declared my mother furiously, as she cleared the supper table.

"I reckon he's lonely out thar, Susan," urged my father, observing my trembling mouth, and eager, as usual, to put a pacific face on the moment.

"Lonely, indeed! I'm lonely in here, but I don't set up a howlin'. Thar're mighty few folks, be they dogs or humans, that get all the company they want in life."

Once I crept out into the darkness, and hugging Samuel around his dirty stomach besought him, with tears, to endure his lot in silence; but though he licked my face rapturously at the time, I had no sooner entered the house than his voice was lifted anew.

"To think of po' Mrs. Cudlip havin' to mourn in all that noise," commented my mother, as I undressed and got into my trundle-bed.

My pillow was quite moist before I went to sleep, while my mother's loud threats against Samuel sounded from the other side of the room with each separate garment that she laid on the chair at the foot of her bed. In sheer desperation at last I pulled the cover over my ears in an effort to shut out her thin, querulous tones. At the instant I felt that I was wicked enough to wish that I had been born without any mother, and I asked myself how *she* would like it if I raised as great a fuss about baby Jessie's crying as she did about Samuel's – who didn't make one-half the noise.

Here the light went out, and I fell asleep, to awaken an hour or two later because of the candle flash in my eyes. In the centre of the room my mother was standing in her grey dressing-gown, with a shawl over her head and the rapturously wriggling body of Samuel in her arms. Too amazed to utter an exclamation, I watched her silently while she made a bed with an old flannel petticoat before the waning fire. Then I saw her bend over and pat the head of the puppy with her knotted hand before she crept noiselessly back to bed.

At this day I see her figure as distinctly as I saw it that instant by the candle flame – her soiled grey wrapper clutched over her flat bosom; her sallow, sharp-featured face, with bluish hollows in the temples over which her sparse hair strayed in locks; her thin, stooping shoulders under the knitted shawl; her sad, flint-coloured eyes, holding always that anxious look as if she were trying to remember some important thing which she had half forgotten.

So she appeared to my startled gaze for a single minute. Then the light went out, she faded into the darkness, and I fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH I PLAY IN THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

For the next two years, when my mother sent me on errands to McKenney's grocery store, or for a pitcher of milk to old Mrs. Triffit's, who kept a fascinating green parrot hanging under an arbour of musk cluster roses, it was my habit to run five or six blocks out of my way, and measure my growing height against the wall of the enchanted garden. On the worn bricks, unless they have crumbled away, there may still be seen the scratches from my penknife, by which I tried to persuade myself that each rapidly passing week marked a visible increase in my stature. Though I was a big boy for my age, the top of my straw-coloured hair reached barely halfway up the spiked wall; and standing on my tiptoes my hands still came far below the grim iron teeth at the top. Yet I continued to measure myself, week by week, against the barrier, until at last the zigzag scratches from my knife began to cover the bricks.

It was on a warm morning in spring during my ninth year, that, while I stood vigorously scraping the wall over my head, I heard a voice speaking in indignant tones at my back.

"You bad boy, what are you doing?" it said.

Wheeling about, I stood again face to face with the little girl of the red shoes and the dancing feet. Except for her shoes she was dressed all in white just as I had last seen her, and this time, I saw with disgust, she held a whining and sickly kitten clasped to her breast.

"I know you are doing something you ought not to," she repeated, "what is it?"

"Nothink," I responded, and stared at her red shoes like one possessed.

"Then why were you crawling so close along the wall to keep me from seeing you?"

"I wa'nt."

"You wa'nt what?"

"I wa'nt crawlin' along the wall; I was just tryin' to look in," I answered defiantly.

An old negro "mammy," in a snowy kerchief and apron, appeared suddenly around the corner near which we stood, and made a grab at the child's shoulder.

"You jes let 'im alont, honey, en he ain' gwine hu't you," she said.

"He won't hurt me anyway," replied the little girl, as if I were a suspicious strange dog, "I'm not afraid of him."

Then she made a step forward and held the whining grey kitten toward me.

"Don't you want a cat, boy?" she asked, in a coaxing tone.

My hands flew to my back, and the only reason I did not retreat before her determined advance was that I could hardly retreat into a brick wall.

"I've just found it in the alley a minute ago," she explained. "It's very little. I'd like to keep it, only I've got six already."

"I don't like cats," I replied stubbornly, shaking my head. "I saw Peter Finn's dog kill one. He shook it by the neck till it was dead. I'm goin' to train my dog to kill 'em, too."

Raising herself on the toes of her red shoes, she bent upon me a look so scorching that it might have burned a passage straight through me into the bricks.

"I knew you were a horrid bad boy. You looked it!" she cried.

At this I saw in my imagination the closed gate of the enchanted garden, and my budding sportsman's proclivities withered in the white blaze of her wrath.

"I don't reckon I'll train him to catch 'em by the back of thar necks," I hastened to add.

At this she turned toward me again, her whole vivid little face with its red mouth and arched black eyebrows inspired by a solemn purpose.

"If you'll promise never, never to kill a cat, I'll let you come into the garden – for a minute," she said.

I hesitated for an instant, dazzled by the prospect and yet bargaining for better terms. "Will you let me walk under the arbours and down all the box-bordered paths?"

She nodded. "Just once," she responded gravely.

"An' may I play under the trees on the terrace where you built yo' houses of moss and stones?"

"For a little while. But I can't play with you because – because you don't look clean."

My heart sank like lead to my waist line, and I looked down ashamed at my dirty hands.

"I – I'd rather play with you," I faltered.

"Fur de Lawd's sake, honey, come in en let dat ar gutter limb alont," exclaimed the old negress, wagging her turbaned head.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," said her charge, after a deep moment; "I'll let you play with me for a little while if you'll take the cat."

"But I ain't got any use for it," I stammered.

"Take it home for a pet. Grandmama won't let any more come on the place. She's very cruel is grandmama, isn't she, mammy?"

"Go way, chile, dar ain' nobody dat 'ould want all dem ar critters," rejoined the old negress.

"I do," said the little girl, and sighed softly.

"I'll take it home with me," I began desperately at last, "if you'll let me play with you the whole evening."

"And take you into the house?"

"An' take me into the house," I repeated doggedly.

Her glance brushed me from head to foot, while I writhed under it, "I wonder why you don't wash your face," she observed in her cool, impersonal manner.

I fell back a step and stared defiantly at the ground.

"I ain't got any water," I answered, driven to bay.

"I think if you'd wash it ever so hard and brush your hair flat on your head, you'd look very nice – for a boy," she remarked. "I like your eyes because they're blue, and I have a dog with blue eyes exactly like yours. Did you ever see a blue-eyed dog? He's a collie. But your hair stands always on end and it's the colour of straw."

"It growed that way," I returned. "You can't get it to be flat. Ma has tried."

"I bet I could," she rejoined, and caught at the old woman's hand. "This is my mammy an' her name is Euphronasia, an' she's got blue eyes an' golden hair," she cried, beginning to dance up and down in her red shoes.

"Gawd erlive, lamb, I'se ez black ez a crow's foot," protested the old woman, at which the dance of the red shoes changed into a stamp of anger.

"You aren't! – You aren't! You've got blue eyes an' golden hair!" screamed the child. "I won't let you say you haven't, – I won't let anybody say you haven't!"

It took a few minutes to pacify her, during which the old negress perjured herself to the extent of declaring on her word of honour that she *had* blue eyes and golden hair; and when the temper of her "lamb" was appeased, we turned the corner, approached the front of the house, and ascended the bright bow of steps. As we entered the wide hall, my heart thumped so violently that I hurriedly buttoned my coat lest the little girl should hear the sound and turn indignantly to accuse, me of disturbing the peace. Then as the front door closed softly behind us, I stood blinking nervously in the dim green light which entered through the row of columns at the rear, beyond which I saw the curving stairway and the two miniature yew trees at its foot. There was a strange musty smell about the house – a smell that brings to me now, when I find it in old and unlighted buildings, the memory of the high ceiling, the shining floor over which I moved so cautiously, and the long melancholy rows of moth-eaten stags' heads upon the wall.

A door at the far end was half open, and inside the room there were two ladies – one of them very little and old and shrivelled, and the other a pretty, brown-haired, pliant creature, whom I recognised

instantly as our visitor of that stormy October evening more than two years ago. She was reading aloud when we entered, in a voice which sounded so soft and pious that I wondered if I ought to fold my hands and bow my head as I had been taught to do in the infant Sunday-school.

"Be careful not to mush your words, Sarah; the habit is growing upon you," remarked the elder lady in a sharp, imperative tone.

"Shall I read it over, mother? I will try to speak more distinctly," returned the other submissively, and she began again a long paragraph which, I gathered vaguely, related to that outward humility which is the becoming and appropriate garment for a race of miserable sinners.

"That is better," commented the old lady, in an utterly ungrateful manner, "though you have never succeeded in properly rolling your r's. There, that will do for to-day, we will continue the sermon upon Humility to-morrow."

She was so little and thin and wrinkled that it was a mystery to me, as I looked at her, how she managed to express so much authority through so small a medium. The chair in which she sat seemed almost to swallow her in its high arms of faded green leather; and out of her wide, gathered skirt of brocade, her body rose very erect, like one of my mother's black-headed bonnet pins out of her draped pincushion. On her head there was a cap of lace trimmed gayly with purple ribbons, and beneath this festive adornment, a fringe of false curls, still brown and lustrous, lent a ghastly coquetry to her mummied features. In the square of sunshine, between the gauze curtains at the window, a green parrot, in a wire cage, was scolding viciously while it pecked at a bit of sponge-cake from its mistress's hand. At the time I was too badly frightened to notice the wonderful space and richness of the room, with its carved rosewood bookcases, and its dim portraits of beruffled cavaliers and gravely smiling ladies.

"Sally," said the old lady, turning upon me a piercing glance which was like the flash of steel in the sunlight, "is that a boy?"

Going over to the armchair, the little girl stood holding the kitten behind her, while she kissed her grandmother's cheek.

"What is it, Sally, dear?" asked the younger woman, closing her book with a sigh.

"It's a boy, mamma," answered the child.

At this the old lady stiffened on her velvet cushions. "I thought I had told you, Sally," she remarked icily, "that there is nothing that I object to so much as a boy. Dogs and cats I have tolerated in silence, but since I have been in this house no boy has set foot inside the doors."

"I am sure, dear mamma, that Sally did not mean to disobey you," murmured the younger woman, almost in tears.

"Yes, I did, mamma," answered the child, gravely, "I meant to disobey her. But he has such nice blue eyes," she went on eagerly, her lips glowing as she talked until they matched the bright red of her dancing shoes; "an' he's goin' to take a kitten home for a pet, an' he says the reason he doesn't wash his face is because he hasn't any water."

"Is it possible," enquired the old lady in the manner of her pecking parrot, "that he does not wash his face?"

My pride could bear it no longer, and opening my mouth I spoke in a loud, high voice.

"If you please, ma'am, I wash my face every day," I said, "and all over every Saturday night."

She was still feeding the parrot with a bit of cake, and as I spoke, she turned toward me and waved one of her wiry little hands, which reminded me of a bird's claw, under its ruffle of yellowed lace.

"Bring him here, Sally, and let me see him," she directed, as if I had been some newly entrapped savage beast.

Catching me by the arm, Sally obediently led me to the armchair, where I stood awkward and trembling, with my hands clutching the flaps of my breeches' pockets, and my eyes on the ground.

For a long pause the old lady surveyed me critically with her merciless eyes. Then, "Give him a piece of cake, Sally," she remarked, when the examination was over.

Sally's mother had come up softly behind me while I writhed under the piercing gaze, and bending over she encircled my shoulders with her protecting arms.

"He's a dear little fellow, with such pretty blue eyes," she said.

As she spoke I looked up for the first time, and my glance met my reflection in a long, gold-framed mirror hanging between the windows. The "pretty blue eyes" I saw, but I saw also the straw-coloured hair, the broad nose sprinkled with freckles, and the sturdy legs disguised by the shapeless breeches, which my mother had cut out of a discarded dolman she had once worn to funerals. It was a figure which might have raised a laugh in the ill-disposed, but the women before me carried kind hearts in their bosoms, and even grandmama's chilling scrutiny ended in nothing worse than a present of cake.

"May I play with him just a little while, grandmama?" begged Sally, and when the old lady nodded permission, we joined hands and went through the open window out upon the sunny porch.

On that spring morning the colours of the garden were all clear white and purple, for at the foot of the curving stairway, and on the upper terrace, bunches of lilacs bloomed high above the small spring flowers that bordered the walk. Beneath the fluted columns a single great snowball bush appeared to float like a cloud in the warm wind. As we went together down the winding path to the box maze which was sprinkled with tender green, a squirrel, darting out of one of the latticed arbours, stopped motionless in the walk and sat looking up at us with a pair of bright, suspicious eyes.

"I reckon I could make him skeet, if I wanted to," I remarked, embarrassed rather than malevolent.

Her glance dwelt on me thoughtfully for a moment, while she stood there, kicking a pebble with the toe of a red shoe.

"An' I reckon I could make *you* skeet, if I wanted to," she replied with composure.

Since the parade of mere masculinity had failed to impress her, I resorted to subtler measures, and kneeling among the small spring flowers which powdered the lower terrace, I began laboriously erecting a palace of moss and stones.

"I make one every evening, but when the ghosts come out and walk up an' down, they scatter them," observed Sally, hanging attentively upon the work.

"Are there ghosts here really an' have you seen 'em?" I asked.

Stretching out her hand, she swept it in a circle over the growing palace. "They are all around here – everywhere," she answered. "I saw them one night when I was running away from my father. Mamma and I hid in that big box bush down there, an' the ghosts came and walked all about us. Do you have to run away from your father, too?"

For an instant I hesitated; then my pride triumphed magnificently over my truthfulness. "I ran clear out to the hill an' all the way down it," I rejoined.

"Is his face red and awful?"

"As red as – as an apple."

"An apple ain't awful."

"But he is. I wish you could see him."

"Would he kill you if he caught you?"

"He – he'd eat me," I panted.

She sighed gravely. "I wonder if all fathers are like that?" she said. "Anyway, I don't believe yours is as bad as mine."

"I'd like to know why he ain't?" I protested indignantly.

Her lips quivered and went upward at the corners with a trick of expression which I found irresistible even then.

"It's a pity that it's time for you to go home," she observed politely.

"I reckon I can stay a little while longer," I returned.

She shook her head, but I had already gone back to the unfinished palace, and as the work progressed, she forgot her hint of dismissal in watching the fairy towers. We were still absorbed in the building when her mother came down the curving stairway and into the maze of box.

"It's time for you to run home now, pretty blue eyes," she said in her soft girlish way. Then catching our hands in hers, she turned with a merry laugh, and ran with us up the terraced walk.

"Is your mamma as beautiful as mine?" asked Sally, when we came to a breathless stop.

"She's as beautiful as – as a wax doll," I replied stoutly.

"That's right," laughed the lady, stooping to kiss me. "You're a dear boy. Tell your mother I said so."

She went slowly up the steps as she spoke, and when I looked back a moment later, I saw her smiling down on me between two great columns, with the snowball bush floating in the warm wind beneath her and the swallows flying low in the sunshine over her head.

I had opened the side gate, when I felt a soft, furry touch on my hand, and Sally thrust the forgotten kitten into my arms.

"Be good to her," she said pleadingly. "Her name's Florabella."

Resisting a dastardly impulse to forswear my bargain, I tucked the mewling kitten under my coat, where it clawed me unobserved by any jeering boy in the street. Passing Mrs. Cudlip's house on my way home, I noticed at once that the window stood invitingly open, and yielding with a quaking heart to temptation, I leaned inside the vacant room, and dropped Florabella in the centre of the old lady's easy chair. Then, fearful of capture, I darted along the pavement and flung myself breathlessly across our doorstep.

A group of neighbours was gathered in the centre of our little sitting-room, and among them I recognised the flushed, perspiring face of Mrs. Cudlip herself. As I entered, the women fell slightly apart, and I saw that they regarded me with startled, compassionate glances. A queer, strong smell of drugs was in the air, and near the kitchen door my father was standing with a frightened and sheepish look on his face, as if he had been thrust suddenly into a prominence from which he shrank back abashed.

"Where's ma?" I asked, and my voice sounded loud and unnatural in my own ears.

One of the women – a large, motherly person, whom I remembered without recognising, crossed the room with a heavy step and took me into her arms. At this day I can feel the deep yielding expanse of her bosom, when pushing her from me, I looked round and repeated my question in a louder tone.

"Where's ma?"

"She was took of a sudden, dear," replied the woman, still straining me to her. "It came over her while she was standin' at the stove, an' befo' anybody could reach her, she dropped right down an' was gone."

She released me as she finished, and walking straight through the kitchen and the consoling neighbours, I opened the back door, and closing it after me, sat down on the single step. I can't remember that I shed a tear or that I suffered, but I can still see as plainly as if it were yesterday, the clothes-line stretching across the little yard and the fluttering, half-dried garments along it. There was a striped shirt of my father's, a faded blue one of mine, a pink slip of baby Jessy's, and a patched blue and white gingham apron I had seen only that morning tied at my mother's waist. Between the high board fence, above the sunken bricks of the yard, they danced as gayly as if she who had hung them there was not lying dead in the house. Samuel, trotting from a sunny corner, crept close to my side, with his warm tongue licking my hand, and so I sat for an hour watching the flutter of the blue, the pink, and the striped shirts on the clothes-line.

"There ain't nobody to iron 'em now," I said suddenly to Samuel, and then I wept.

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH I START IN LIFE

With my mother's death all that was homelike and comfortable passed from our little house. For three days after the funeral the neglected clothes still hung on the line in the back yard, but on the fourth morning a slatternly girl, with red hair and arms, came from the grocery store at the corner, and gathered them in. My little sister was put to nurse with Mrs. Cudlip next door, and when, at the end of the week, President went off to work somewhere in a mining town in West Virginia, my father and I were left alone, except for the spasmodic appearances of the red-haired slattern. Gradually the dust began to settle and thicken on the dried cat-tails in the china vases upon the mantel; the "prize" red geranium dropped its blossoms and withered upon the sill; the soaking dish-cloths lay in a sloppy pile on the kitchen floor; and the vegetable rinds were left carelessly to rot in the bucket beside the sink. The old neatness and order had departed before the garments my mother had washed were returned again to the tub, and day after day I saw my father shake his head dismally over the soggy bread and the underdone beef. Whether or not he ever realised that it was my mother's hand that had kept him above the surface of life, I shall never know; but when that strong grasp was relaxed, he went hopelessly, irretrievably, and unresistingly under. In the beginning there was merely a general wildness and disorder in his appearance, – first one button, then two, then three dropped from his coat. After that his linen was changed less often, his hair allowed to spread more stiffly above his forehead, and the old ashes from his pipe dislodged less frequently from the creases in his striped shirt. At the end of three months I noticed a new fact about him – a penetrating odour of alcohol which belonged to the very air he breathed. His mind grew slower and seemed at last almost to stop; his blue eyes became heavier and glazed at times; and presently he fell into the habit of going out in the evenings, and not returning until I had cried myself to sleep, under my tattered quilt, with Samuel hugged close in my arms. Sometimes the red-haired girl would stop after her work for a few friendly words, proving that a slovenly exterior is by no means incompatible with a kindly heart; but as a usual thing I was left alone, after the boys had gone home from their play in the street, to amuse myself and Samuel as I could through the long evening hours. Sometimes I brought in an apple or a handful of chestnuts given me by one of the neighbours and roasted them before the remnants of fire in the stove. Once or twice I opened my mother's closet and took down her clothes – her best bombazine dress, her black cashmere mantle trimmed with bugles, her long rustling crape veil, folded neatly beneath her bonnet in the tall bandbox – and half in grief, half in curiosity, I invaded those sacred precincts where my hands had never dared penetrate while she was alive. My great loss, from which probably in more cheerful surroundings I should have recovered in a few weeks, was renewed in me every evening by my loneliness and by the dumb sympathy of Samuel, who would stand wagging his tail for an hour at the sight of the cloak or the bonnet that she had worn. Like my father I grew more unkempt and ragged every day I lived. I ceased to wash myself, because there was nobody to make me. My buttons dropped off one by one and nobody scolded. I dared no longer go near the gate of the enchanted garden, fearing that if the little girl were to catch sight of me, she would call me "dirty," and run away in disgust. Occasionally my father would clap me upon the shoulder at breakfast, enquire how I was getting along, and give me a rusty copper to spend. But for the greater part of the time, I believe, he was hardly aware of my existence; the vacant, flushed look was almost always in his face when we met, and he stayed out so late in the evening that it was not often his stumbling footsteps aroused me when he came upstairs to bed.

So accustomed had I become to my lonely hours by the kitchen stove, with Samuel curled up at my feet, that when one night, about six months after my mother's death, I heard the unexpected sound of my father's tread on the pavement outside, I turned almost with a feeling of terror, and

waited breathlessly for his unsteady hand on the door. It came after a minute, followed immediately by his entrance into the kitchen, and to my amazement I saw presently that he was accompanied by a strange woman, whom I recognised at a glance as one of those examples of her sex that my mother had been used to classify sweepingly as "females." She was plump and jaunty, with yellow hair that hung in tight ringlets down to her neck, and pink cheeks that looked as if they might "come off" if they were thoroughly scrubbed. There was about her a spring, a bounce, an animation that impressed me, in spite of my inherited moral sense, as decidedly elegant.

My father's eyes looked more vacant and his face fuller than ever. "Benjy," he began at once in a husky voice, while his companion released his arm in order to put her ringlets to rights, "I've brought you a new mother."

At this the female's hands fell from her hair, and she looked round in horror. "What boy is that, Thomas?" she demanded, poised there in all her flashing brightness like a figure of polished brass.

"That boy," replied my father, as if at a loss exactly how to account for me, "that boy is Ben Starr – otherwise Benjy – otherwise –"

He would have gone on forever, I think, in his eagerness to explain me away, if the woman had not jerked him up with a peremptory question: "How did he come here?" she enquired.

Since nothing but the naked truth would avail him now, he uttered it at last in an eloquent monosyllable – "Born."

"But you told me there was not a chick or a child," she exclaimed in a rage.

For a moment he hesitated; then opening his mouth slowly, he gave voice to the single witticism of his life.

"That was befo' I married you, dearie," he said.

"Well, how am I to know," demanded the female, "that you haven't got a parcel of others hidden away?"

"Thar's one, the littlest, put out to nurse next do', an' another, the biggest, gone to work in the West," he returned in his amiable, childish manner.

After my unfortunate introduction, however, the addition of a greater and a lesser appeared to impress her but little. She looked scornfully about the disorderly room, took off her big, florid bonnet, and began arranging her hair before the three-cornered mottled mirror on the wall. Then wheeling round in a temper, her eyes fell on Samuel, sitting dejectedly on his tail by my mother's old blue and white gingham apron.

"What is that?" she fired straight into my father's face.

"That," he responded, offering his unnecessary information as if it were a piece of flattery, "air the dawg, Sukey."

"Whose dawg?"

Goaded into defiance by this attack on my only friend, I spoke in a shrill voice from the corner into which I had retreated. "Mine," I said.

"Wall, I'll tell you what!" exclaimed the female, charging suddenly upon me, "if I've got to put up with a chance o' kids, I don't reckon I've got to be plagued with critters, too. Shoo, suh! get out!"

Seizing my mother's broom, she advanced resolutely to the attack, and an instant later, to my loud distress and to Samuel's unspeakable horror, she had whisked him across the kitchen and through the back door out into the yard.

"Steady, Sukey, steady," remarked my father caressingly, much as he might have spoken to a favourite but unruly heifer. For an instant he looked a little crestfallen, I saw with pleasure, but as soon as Samuel was outside and the door had closed, he resumed immediately his usual expression of foolish good humour. It was impossible, I think, for him to retain an idea in his mind after the object of it had been removed from his sight. While I was still drying my eyes on my frayed coat sleeve, I watched him with resentment begin a series of playful lunges at the neck of the female, which she

received with a sulky and forbidding air. Stealing away the next minute, I softly opened the back door and joined the outcast Samuel, where he sat whining upon the step.

The night was very dark, but beyond the looming chimneys a lonely star winked at me through the thick covering of clouds. I was a sturdy boy for my age, sound in body, and inwardly not given to sentiment or softness of any kind; but as I sat there on the doorstep, I felt a lump rise in my throat at the thought that Samuel and I were two small outcast animals in the midst of a shivering world. I remembered that when my mother was alive I had never let her kiss me except when she paid me by a copper or a slice of bread laid thickly with blackberry jam; and I told myself desperately that if she could only come back now, I would let her do it for nothing! She might even whip me because I'd torn my trousers on the back fence, and I thought I should hardly feel it. I recalled her last birthday, when I had gone down to the market with five cents of my own to buy her some green gage plums, of which she was very fond, and how on the way up the hill, being tempted, I had eaten them all myself. At the time I had stifled my remorse with the assurance that she would far rather I should have the plums than eat them herself, but this was cold comfort to me to-night while I regretted my selfishness. If I had only saved her half, as I had meant to do if the hill had not been quite so long and so steep.

Samuel snuggled closer to me and we both shivered, for the night was fresh. The house had grown quiet inside; my father and his new wife had evidently left the kitchen and gone upstairs. As I sat there I realised suddenly, with a pang, that I could never go inside the door again; and rising to my feet, I struck a match and fumbled for a piece of chalk in my pocket. Then standing before the door I wrote in large letters across the panel: —

"Dear Pa

I have gone to work

Your Aff. son,

Ben Starr."

The blue flame of the match flickered an instant along the words; then it went out, and with Samuel at my heels, I crept through the back gate and down the alley to the next street, which led to the ragged brow of the hill. Ahead of me, as I turned off into Main Street, the scattered lights of the city showed like blurred patches upon the darkness. Gradually, while I went rapidly downhill, I saw the patches change into a nebulous cloud, and the cloud resolve itself presently into straight rows of lamps. Few people were in the streets at that hour, and when I reached the dim building of the Old Market, I found it cold and deserted, except for a stray cur or two that snarled at Samuel from a heap of trodden straw under a covered wagon. Despite the fact that I was for all immediate purposes as homeless as the snarling curs, I was not without the quickened pulses which attend any situation that a boy may turn to an adventure. A high heart for desperate circumstances has never failed me, and it bore me company that night when I came back again with aching feet to the Old Market, and lay down, holding Samuel tight, on a pile of straw.

In a little while I awoke because Samuel was barking, and sitting up in the straw I saw a dim shape huddled beside me, which I made out, after a few startled blinks, to be the bent figure of a woman wrapped in a black shawl with fringed ends, which were pulled over her head and knotted under her chin. From the penetrating odour I had learned to associate with my father, I judged that she

had been lately drinking, and the tumbled state of my coat convinced me that she had been frustrated by Samuel in a base design to rifle my pockets. Yet she appeared so miserable as she sat there rocking from side to side and crying to herself, that I began all at once to feel very sorry. It seemed to hurt her to cry and yet I saw that the more it hurt her the more she cried.

"If I were you," I suggested politely, "I'd go home right away."

"Home?" repeated the woman, with a hiccough, "what's home?"

"The place you live in."

"Lor, honey, I don't live in no place. I jest walks."

"But what do you do when you get tired?"

"I walks some mo'."

"An' don't you ever leave off?"

"Only when it's dark like this an' thar's no folks about."

"But what do folks say to you when they see you walkin'?"

"Say to me," she threw back her head and broke into a drunken laugh, "why, they say to me: 'Step lively!'"

She crawled closer, peering at me greedily under the pale glimmer of the street lamp.

"Why, you're a darlin' of a boy," she said, "an' such pretty blue eyes!" Then she rose to her feet and stood swaying unsteadily above me, while Samuel broke out into angry barks. "Shall I tell you a secret because of yo' blue eyes?" she asked. "It's this – whatever you do in this world, you step lively about it. I've done a heap of lookin' an' I've seen the ones who get on are the ones who step the liveliest. It ain't no matter where you're goin', it ain't no matter who's befo' you, if you want to get there first, step lively!"

She went out, taking her awful secret with her, and turning over I fell asleep again on my pile of straw. "If ever I have a dollar I'll give it to her so she may stop walkin'," was my last conscious thought.

My next awakening was a very different one, for the light was streaming into the market, and a cheerful red face was shining down, like a rising sun, over a wheelbarrow of vegetables.

"Don't you think it's about time all honest folk were out of bed, sonny?" enquired a voice.

"I ain't been here mo'n an hour," I retorted, resenting the imputation of slothfulness with a spirit that was not unworthy of my mother.

The open length of the market, I saw now, was beginning to present a busy, almost a festive, air. Stalls were already laden with fruit and vegetables, and farmers' wagons covered with canvas, and driven by sunburnt countrymen, had drawn up to the sidewalk. Rising hurriedly to my feet, I began rubbing my eyes, for I had been dreaming of the fragrance of bacon in our little kitchen.

"Now I'd be up an' off to home, if I were you, sonny," observed the marketman, planting his wheelbarrow of vegetables on the brick floor, and beginning to wipe off the stall. "The sooner you take yo' whippin', the sooner you'll set easy again."

"There ain't anybody to whip me," I replied dolefully, staring at the sign over his head, on which was painted in large letters – "John Chitling. Fish, Oysters (in season). Vegetables. Fruits."

Stopping midway in his preparations, he turned on me his great beaming face, so like the rising sun that looked over his shoulder, while I watched his big jean apron swell with the panting breaths that drew from his stomach.

"Here's a boy that says he ain't got nobody to whip him!" he exclaimed to his neighbours in the surrounding stalls, – a poultryman, covered with feathers, a fish vender, bearing a string of mackerel in either hand, and a butcher, with his sleeves rolled up and a blood-stained apron about his waist.

"I al'ays knew you were thick-headed, John Chitling," remarked the fish dealer, with contempt, "but I never believed you were such a plum fool as not to know a tramp when you seed him."

"You ain't got but eleven of yo' own," observed the butcher, with a snicker; "I reckon you'd better take him along to round out the full dozen."

"If I've got eleven there ain't one of 'em that wa'nt welcome," responded John, his slow temper rising, "an' I reckon what the Lord sends he's willing to provide for."

"Oh, I reckon he is," sneered the fish dealer, who appeared to be of an unpleasant disposition, "so long as you ain't over-particular about the quality of the provision."

"Well, he don't provide us with yo' fish, anyway," retorted John; and I was watching excitedly for the coming blows when the butcher, who had been looking over me as reflectively as if I had been a spring lamb brought to slaughter, intervened with a peaceable suggestion that he should take me into his service.

"I'm on the lookout for a bright boy in my business," he observed.

But the sight of blood on his rolled-up shirt sleeves produced in me that strange sickness I had inherited from my mother, who used to pay an old coloured market man to come up and wring the necks of her chickens; and when the question was put to me if I'd like to be trained up for a butcher, I drew back and stood ready for instant flight in case they should attempt' to decide my future by present force.

"I'd rather work for you," I said, looking straight at John Chitling, for it occurred to me that if I were made to murder anything I'd rather it would be oysters.

"Ha! ha! he knows by the look of you, you're needin' one to make up the dozen," exclaimed the butcher.

"Well, I declar he does seem to have taken a regular fancy," acknowledged John, flattered by my decision. "I don't want any real hands now, sonny, but if you'd like to tote the marketing around with Solomon, I reckon I can let you have a square meal or so along with the others."

"What'll yo' old woman say to it, John?" enquired the poultryman, with a loud guffaw, "when you send her a new one of yo' own providin'?"

John Chitling was busily arranging a pile of turnips with what he doubtless thought was an artistic eye for colour, and the facetiousness of the poultryman reacted harmlessly from his thick head.

"You needn't worry about my wife, for she ain't worryin'," he rejoined, and the shine seemed to gather like moisture on his round red face under his shock of curling red hair. "She takes what comes an' leaves the Lord to do the tendin'."

At this a shout went up which I did not understand, until I came to know later that an impression existed in the neighbourhood that the Chitlings had left entirely too much of the bringing up of their eleven children in the hands of Providence, who in turn had left them quite as complacently to the care of the gutter.

"I don't know but what too much trust in the Lord don't work as badly as too little," observed the fish dealer, while John went on placidly arranging his turnips and carrots. "What appears to me to be best religion for a working-man is to hold a kind of middle strip between faith and downright disbelievin'. Let yo' soul trust to the Lord's lookin' arter you, but never let yo' hands get so much as an inklin' that you're a-trustin'. Yes, the safest way is to believe in the Lord on Sunday, an' on Monday to go to work as if you wa'nt quite so sartain-sure."

A long finger of sunshine stretched from beyond the chimneys across the street, and pointed straight to the vegetables on John Chitling's counter, until the onions glistened like silver balls, and the turnips and carrots sent out flashes of dull red and bright orange.

"I'll let you overhaul a barrel of apples, sonny," said the big man to me; "have you got a sharp eye for specks?"

When I replied that I thought I had, he pointed to a barrel from which the top had been recently knocked. "They're to be sorted in piles, according to size," he explained, and added, "For such is the contrariness of human nature that there are some folks as can't see the apple for the speck, an' others that would a long ways rather have the speck than the apple. I've one old gentleman for a customer who can't enjoy eatin' a pippin unless he can find one with a spot that won't keep till to-morrow."

Kneeling down on the bricks, as he directed, I sorted the yellow apples until, growing presently faint from hunger, I began to gaze longingly, I suppose, at the string of fish hanging above my head.

"Maybe you'd like to run across an' get a bite of somethin' befo' you go on," suggested John, reading my glances.

But I only shook my head, in spite of my gnawing stomach, and went on doggedly with my sorting, impelled by an inherent determination to do with the best of me whatever I undertook to do at all. To the possession of this trait, I can see now in looking back, I have owed any success or achievement that has been mine – neither to brains nor to chance, but simply to that instinct to hold fast which was bred in my bone and structure. For the lack of this quality I have seen men with greater intellects, with far quicker wits than mine, go down in the struggle. Brilliancy I have not, nor any particular outward advantage, except that of size and muscle; but when I was once in the race, I could never see to right or to left of me, only straight ahead to the goal.

Overhead the sun had risen slowly higher, until the open spaces and the brick arches were flooded with light. If I had turned I should have seen the gay vegetable stalls blooming like garden beds down the dim length of the building. The voices of the market men floated toward me, now quarrelling, now laughing, now raised to shout at a careless negro or a prowling dog. I heard the sounds, and I smelt the strong smell of fish from the gleaming strings of perch and mackerel hanging across the way. But through it all I did not look up and I did not turn. My first piece of work was done with the high determination to do it well, and it has been my conviction from that morning that if I had slighted that barrel of apples, I should have failed inevitably in my career.

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING CARROTS

When I had finished my work, I rose from my knees and stood waiting for John Chitling's directions.

"Run along to the next street," he said kindly, "an' you can tell my house, I reckon, by the number of children in the gutter. It's the house with the most children befo' it. You'll find my wife cookin', likely enough, in the kitchen, an' all you've got to say is that I told you to tell her that you were hungry. She won't ax you many questions, – that ain't her way, – but she'll jest set to work an' feed you."

Reassured by this description, I whistled to Samuel, and crossed the narrow street, crowded with farmers' wagons and empty wheelbarrows, to a row of dingy houses, with darkened basements, which began at the corner. By the number of ragged and unwashed children playing among the old tin cans in the gutter before the second doorway, I concluded that this was the home of John Chitling; and I was about to enter the close, dimly lighted passage, when a chorus of piercing screams from the small Chitlings outside, brought before me a large, slovenly woman, with slipshod shoes, and a row of curl papers above her forehead. When she reached the doorway, a small crowd had already gathered upon the pavement, and I beheld a half-naked urchin of a year or thereabouts, dangled, head downwards, by the hand of a passing milkman.

"The baby's gone an' swallowed a cent, ma," shrieked a half-dozen treble voices.

"Well, the Lord be praised that it wa'n't a quarter!" exclaimed Mrs. Chitling, with a cheerful piety, which impressed me hardly less than did the placid face with which she gazed upon the howling baby. "There, there, it ain't near so bad as it might have been. Don't scream so, Tommy, a cent won't choke him an' a quarter might have."

"But it was *my cent*, an' I ain't got a quarter!" roared Tommy, still unconsoled.

"Well, I'll give you a quarter when my ship comes in," responded his mother, at which the grief of the small financier began gradually to subside.

"I had it right in my hand," he sniffled, with his knuckles at his eyes, "an' I jest put it into the baby's mouth for keepin'."

By this time Mrs. Chitling had received the baby into her arms, and turning with an unruffled manner, she bore him into the house, where she stopped his mouth with a spoonful of blackberry jam. As she replaced the jar on the shelf she looked down, and for the first time became aware of my presence.

"He ain't swallowed anything of yours, has he?" she enquired. "If he has you'll have to put the complaint in writing because the neighbours are al'ays comin' to me for the things that are inside of him. I've never been able to shake anything out of him," she added placidly, "except one of Mrs. Haskin's bugle beads."

She delivered this with such perfect amiability that I was emboldened to say in my politest manner, "If you please, ma'am, Mr. Chitling told me I was to say that he said that I was hungry."

"So the baby really ain't took anything of yours?" she asked, relieved. "Well, I al'ays said he didn't do half the damage they accused him of."

As I possessed nothing except the clothes in which I stood, and even that elastic urchin could hardly have accommodated these, I hastened to assure her that I was the bearer of no complaint. This appeared to win her entirely, and her large motherly face beamed upon me beneath the aureole of curl papers that radiated from her forehead. With a single movement she cleared a space on the disorderly kitchen table and slapped down a plate, with a piece missing, as if the baby had taken a bite out of it.

"To think of yo' goin' hungry at yo' age an' without a mother," she said, opening a safe, and whipping several slices of bacon and a couple of eggs into a skillet. "Why, it would make me turn in my grave if I thought of one of my eleven wantin' a bite of meat an' not havin' it."

As she switched about in her cheerful, slovenly way, I saw that her skirt had sagged at the back into what appeared to be an habitual gap, and from beneath it there showed a black calico petticoat of a dingy shade. But when a little later she sat me at the table, with Samuel's breakfast on the floor beside me, I forgot her slatternly dress, her halo of curl papers, and her slipshod shoes, while I plied my fork and my fingers under the motherly effulgence of her smile. Tied into a high chair in one corner, the baby sat bolt upright, with his thumb in his mouth, deriving apparently the greatest enjoyment from watching my appetite; and before I had finished, the ten cheerful children trooped in and gathered about me. "Give him another cake, ma!" "It's my turn to help him next, ma!" "I'll pour out his coffee for him!" "Oh, ma, let me feed the dog," rose in a jubilant chorus of shrieks.

"An' he ain't got any mother!" roared Tommy suddenly, and burst into tears.

A sob lodged in my throat, but before the choking sound of it reached my ears, I felt myself enfolded in Mrs. Chitling's embrace. As I looked up at her from this haven of refuge, it seemed to me that her curl papers were transfigured into a halo, and that her face shone with a heavenly beauty.

I was given a bed in the attic, with the six younger Chitlings, and two days later, when my father tracked me to my hiding-place, I hid under the dark staircase in the hall, and heard my protector deliver an eloquent invective on the subject of stepmothers. It was the one occasion in my long acquaintance with her when I saw her fairly roused out of her amiable inertia. Albemarle, the baby, had spilled bacon gravy over her dress that very morning, and I had heard her console him immediately with the assurance that there was "a plenty more in the dish." But possessed though she was with that peculiar insight which discerns in every misfortune a hidden blessing, in stepmothers, I found, and in stepmothers alone, she could discern nothing except sermons.

"To think of yo' havin' the brazen impudence to come here arter the harm you've done that po' defenceless darling boy," she said, with a noble dignity which obscured somehow her slovenly figure and her dirty kitchen. Peering out from under the staircase, I could see that my father stood quite humbly before her, twirling his hatbrim nervously in his hands.

"I ax you to believe, mum, what is the gospel truth," he replied, "that I wa'nt meanin' any harm to Benjy."

"Not meanin' any harm an' you brought him a stepmother befo' six months was up?" she cried. "Well, that ain't *my* way of lookin' at it, for I've a mother's heart and it takes a mother's heart to stand the tricks of children," she added, glancing down at the gravy stains on her bosom, "an' it ain't to be supposed – is it? – that a stepmother should have a mother's heart? It ain't natur – is it? – I put it to you, that any man or woman should be born with a natchel taste for screamin' an' kickin' an' bein' splashed with gravy, an' the only thing that's goin' to cultivate them tastes in anybody is bringin' ten or eleven of 'em into the world. Lord, suh, I wa'nt born with the love of dirt an' fussin' any mo' than you. It just comes along o' motherhood like so much else. Now it stands to reason that you ain't goin' to enjoy the trouble a child makes unless that child is your own. Why, what did my baby do this mornin' when he was learnin' to walk, but catch holt of the dish an' bring all the gravy down over me. Is thar any livin' soul, I ax you plainly, expected to see the cuteness in a thing like that except a mother? An' what I say is that unless you can see the cuteness in a child instead of the badness, you ain't got no business to bring 'em up – no, not even if you are the President himself! – "

Just here I distinctly heard my father murmur in his humble voice something about having named an infant after the office and not the man. But so brief was the pause in Mrs. Chitling's flow of remonstrance that his interjection was overwhelmed almost before it was uttered. Her very slovenliness, expressing as it did what she had given up rather than what she was, served in a measure to increase the solemn majesty with which she spoke; and I gathered easily that my father's small wits were vanquished by the first charge of her impassioned rhetoric.

"I thank you kindly, mum, it is all jest as you say," he replied, with the submissiveness of utter defeat, "but, you see, a man has got to give a thought to his washin'. It stands to reason – don't it?" – he concluded with a flash of direct inspiration, "that thar ain't any way to get a woman to wash free for you except to marry her."

The logic of this appeared to impress even Mrs. Chitling, for she hesitated an instant before replying, and when she finally spoke, I thought her tone had lost something of its decision.

"An' to make it worse you took a yaller-headed one an' they're the kind that gad," she retorted feebly.

My father shook his head, while a stubborn expression settled on his sheepish features.

"Thar's the cookin' an' the washin' for her to think of," he said. "I ain't got any use for a woman that ain't satisfied with the pleasures of home."

"The moral kind are, Mr. Starr," rejoined Mrs. Chitling, who had relapsed into a condition of placid indolence. "An' as far as I am concerned since the first of my eleven came, I've never wanted to put on my bonnet an' set foot outside that do'. My kitchen is my kingdom," she added, with dignity, "an' for my part, I ain't got any use for those women who are everlastingly standin' up for thar rights. What does a woman want with rights, I say, when she can enjoy all the virtues? What does she want to be standin' up for anyway as long as she can set?"

"Thar's no doubt that it is true, mum," rejoined my father; and when he took his leave a few minutes afterwards, their relations appeared to have become extremely friendly, – not to say confidential. For an instant I trembled in my hiding-place, half expecting to be delivered into his hands. But he departed at last without discovering me, and I emerged from the darkness and stood before Mrs. Chitling, who had begun absent-mindedly to take down her curl papers.

"Most likely it ain't his fault arter all," she observed, for her judgment of him had already become a part of the general softness and pliability of her criticism of life; "he seems to be a nice sensible body with proper ideas about women. I like a man that knows a woman's place, an' I like a woman that knows it, too. Yo' ma was a decent, sober, hard-workin' person, wa'nt she, Benjy?"

I replied that she was always in her kitchen and generally in her washtub, except when she went to funerals.

"Well, I ain't any moral objection to a funeral now an' then, or some other sober kind of entertainment," returned Mrs. Chitling, removing her curl papers in order to put on fresh ones, "but what I say is that the woman who wants pleasure outside her do' ain't the woman that she ought to be, that's all. What can she have, I ax, any mo' than she's got? Ain't she got everything already that the men don't want? Ain't sweetness an' virtue, an' patience an' long suffering an' childbearin' enough for her without her impudently standin' up in the face of men an' axin' for mo'? Had she rather have a vote than the respect of men, an' ain't the respect of men enough to fill any honest female's life?"

In the beginning of her discourse, she had turned aside to slap a portion of cornmeal into a cracked yellow bowl, and after pouring a little water out of a broken dipper, she began whipping the dough with a long, irregular stroke that scattered a shower of fine drops at every revolution of her hand. Two of the children had got into a fight over a basin of apple parings, and she left her yellow bowl and separated them with a hand that bestowed a patch of wet meal on the hair of one and on the face of another. Not once did she hasten her preparations or relinquish the cheerful serenity which endowed her large, loose figure with a kind of majesty.

The next day I started in as general assistant and market boy to John Chitling, and when I was not sorting over ripe vegetables or barrels of apples fresh from the orchard, I was toiling up the long hill, with a split basket, containing somebody's marketing, on my arm. By degrees I learned the names of John Chitling's patrons, the separate ways to their houses, which always seemed divided by absurd distances, and the faces of the negro cooks who met me at the kitchen steps and relieved me of my burden. In the beginning I was accompanied on my rounds by a fat, smudge-nosed youth some six or eight years my senior, who smoked vile tobacco and enlivened the way by villainous abuses of

John Chitling and the universe. For the first months, I fear, my outlook upon the customers I served was largely coloured by his narratives, but when at last he dropped off and went on a new job at the butcher's, I arrived gradually at a more correct, and certainly a more charitable, point of view. By the end of the winter I had ceased to believe that John Chitling was a skinflint and his customers all vipers.

In the bright soft weather of that spring the city opened into a bloom of faint pink and white, which comes back to me like a delicate fragrance. The old gardens are gone now, with their honeysuckle arbours, their cleanly swept walks, bordered by rows of miniature box, their deep, odorous bowers of microphylla and musk cluster roses. Yet I can look back still through the gauzy shadows of elms and sycamores; I can hear still the rich, singing call of the negro drivers, as the covered wagons from country farms passed sleepily through the hot sunshine which fell between the arching trees; and I can smell again the air steeped in a fragrance that is less that of flowers than of the subtle atmosphere of an unforgettable youth. To-day the city is the same city no longer, nor is the man who writes this the market boy who toiled up the long hill in the blossoming spring, with the seeds of the future quickening in brain and heart.

The morning that I remember best is the one on which I carried the day's marketing to an old grey house, with beds of wallflowers growing close against the stuccoed bricks, and a shrub that flowered bright yellow glancing through the tall gate at the rear. I had passed the wallflowers as was my custom, and entering the gate at the back, had delivered my basket at the kitchen door, when, as I turned to retrace my steps, I was detained by the scolding voice of the pink-turbaned negro cook.

"Hi! if you ain' clean furgit de car'ots!" she cried.

Now the carrots had been placed in the basket, as I had seen with my own eyes, by the hands of John Chitling himself, and I had been cautioned at the time not to drop them out in my ascent of the steep hill. There was a lady in the grey house, he had informed me, who was supposed to subsist upon carrots alone, and who was in consequence extremely particular as to their size and flavour.

"Are you sure they ain't among the vegetables?" I asked. "I saw them put in myself."

"Huh! en you seed 'em fall out, too, I lay!" rejoined the negress, protruding her thick red lips as she turned the basket upside down with an indignant blow.

"If they're lost, I'll go back and bring others," I said, thinking disconsolately of the hill.

"En you 'ould be back hyer agin in time fur supper," retorted the outraged divinity. "Wat you reckon Miss Mitty wants wid car'ots fur 'er supper? Dey is hern, dey ain' mine, but ef'n dey 'us mine I'd lamn you twel you couldn't see ter set. Hit's bad enough ter hev ter live erlong in de same worl' wid de slue-footed po' white trash widout hevin' dem a-s snatchin' de car'ots outer yo' ve'y mouf."

My temper, never of the mildest, was stung quickly to a retort, and I was about to order her to hold her tongue and return me my basket, when the door into the house opened and shut, and the little girl of the enchanted garden appeared in the flesh before me.

"I want the plum cake you promised me, Aunt Mirabella," she cried; "and oh! I hope you've stuffed it full of plums!" Then her glance fell upon me and I saw her thick black eyebrows arch merrily over her sparkling grey eyes. "It's my boy! My dear common boy!" she exclaimed, with a rush toward me. For the first time I noticed then that she was dressed in mourning, and that her black clothes intensified the dark brightness of her look. "Oh, I *am* glad to see you," she added, seizing my hand.

I gazed up at her, wounded rather than pleased. "I shan't be a common boy always," I answered.

"Do you mind my calling you one? If you do, I won't," she said, and without waiting a minute, "What are you doing here? I thought you lived over on Church Hill."

"I don't now. Ma died and I ran away."

"My mother died, too," she returned softly, "and then grandmama."

For a moment there was a pause. Then I said with a kind of stubborn pride, "I ran away."

The sadness passed from her and she turned on me in a glow of animation. "Oh, I should just love dearly to run away!" she exclaimed.

"You couldn't. You're a girl."

"I could, too, if I chose."

"Then why don't you choose?"

"Because of Aunt Mitty and Aunt Matoaca. They haven't anybody but me."

"I left my father," I replied proudly, "and I didn't care one single bit. That's the trouble with girls. They're always caring."

"Well, I'm not caring for you," she retorted with crushing effect, shaking back the soft cloud of hair on her shoulders.

"Boys don't care," I rejoined with indifference, taking up my market basket.

She detained me with a glance. "There's one thing they care about – dreadfully," she said.

"No, there ain't."

Without replying in words she went over to the stove, and standing on tiptoe, gingerly removed a hot plum cake, small and round and shaped like a muffin, from the smoking oven.

"I reckon they care about plum cake," she remarked tauntingly, and as she held it toward me it smelt divinely.

But my pride was in arms, for I remembered the cup of milk she had refused disdainfully more than three years ago in our little kitchen.

"No, they don't," I replied with a stoicism that might have added lustre to a nobler cause.

In my heart I was hoping that she would drop the cake into my basket in spite of my protest, not only sparing my pride by an act of magnanimity, but allowing me at the same time the felicity of munching the plums on my way back to the Old Market. But the next moment, to my surprise and indignation, she took a generous bite of the very dainty she had offered me, making, while she ate it, provoking faces of a rapturous enjoyment.

I was lingering in the doorway with a scornful yet fascinated gaze on the diminishing cake, when the pink-turbaned cook, who had gone out to empty a basin of pea shells, entered and resumed her querulous abuse.

"De bes' thing you kin do is ter clear out," she said, "you en yo' car'ots. He ain' fit'n fur you ter tu'n yo' eyes on, honey," she added to the child, "en I don' reckon yo' ma would let yo' wipe yo' foot on 'im ef'n she 'uz alive. Yes'm, Miss Mitty, I'se a-comin'!"

Her voice rose high in response to a call from the house, but before she could leave the kitchen, the door behind the little girl opened, and a lady said reprovingly: —

"Sally, Sally, haven't I told you to keep away from the kitchen?"

"Oh, Aunt Mitty, I had to come for my plum cake," pleaded Sally, "and Aunt Matoaca said that I might."

An elderly lady, all soft black and old yellow lace, stood in the doorway. Then before she could answer a second one appeared at her side, and I had a vision of two slender maidenly figures, who reminded me, meek heads, drooping faces, and creamy lace caps, of the wallflowers in the border outside blooming in a patch of sunshine close against the old grey house. At first there seemed to me to be no visible difference between them, but after a minute, I saw that the second one was gentler and smaller, with a softer smile and a more shrinking manner.

"It was my fault, Sister Mitty," she said, "I told Sally that she might come after her plum cake."

Her voice was so low and mild that I was amazed the next instant to hear the taller lady respond.

"Of course, Sister Matoaca, you were at liberty to do as you thought right, but I cannot conceal from you that I consider a person of your dangerous views an unsafe guardian for a young girl."

She advanced a step into the kitchen, and as Miss Matoaca followed her she replied in an abashed and faltering voice: —

"I am sorry, Sister Mitty, that we do not agree in our principles. There is nothing else that I will not sacrifice to you, but when a question of principle is concerned, however painful it is to me, I must be firm."

At this, while I was wondering what terrible thing a principle could possibly turn out to be, I saw Miss Mitty draw herself up until she fairly towered like a marble column about the shrinking figure in front of her.

"But such principles, Sister Matoaca!" she exclaimed.

A flush rose to the clear brown surface of the little lady's cheek, and more than ever, I thought, she resembled one of the wallflowers in the border outside. Her head, with its shiny parting of soft chestnut hair, was lifted with a mild, yet spirited gesture, and I saw the delicate lace at her throat and wrists tremble as if a faint wind had passed.

"Remember, sister, that my ancestors as well as yours fought against oppression in three wars," she said in her sweet low voice that had, to my ears, the sound of a silver bell, "and it has become my painful duty, after long deliberation with my conscience, to inform you – I consider that taxation without representation is tyranny."

"Sally, go into the house," commanded Miss Mitty, "I cannot permit you to hear such dangerous sentiments expressed."

"Let me go, Sister Mitty," said Miss Matoaca, for the flash of spirit had left her as wan and drooping as a blighted flower; "I will go myself," and turning meekly, she left the kitchen, while Sally took a second cake from the oven and came over to where I stood.

"I'll just put this into your basket anyway," she remarked, "even if you don't care about it."

"Come, child," urged Miss Mitty, waiting, "but give the boy his cake first."

The cake was put into my hands, not into the basket, and I took a large, delicious mouthful of it while I went by the meek wallflowers standing in a row, like prim maiden ladies, against the old grey house.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH I MOUNT THE FIRST RUNG OF THE LADDER

As I passed through the gate and turned down Franklin Street under a great sycamore that grew midway of the pavement, I vowed passionately in my heart that I would remain "a common boy" no longer. With the plum cake in my hand, and the delicious taste of it in my mouth, I placed my basket on the ground and leaned against the silvery body of the tree, with my eyes on Samuel, sitting very erect, with his paws held up, his tail wagging, and his expectant gaze on my face.

"What can we do about it, Samuel? How can we begin? Are we common to the bone, I wonder? and how are we going to change?"

But Samuel's thoughts were on the last bit of cake, and when I gave it to him, he stopped begging like a wise dog that has what he wanted, and lay down on the sidewalk with his eyes closed and his nose between his outstretched paws.

A gentle wind stirred overhead, and I smelt the sharp sweet fragrance of the sycamore, which cast a delicate lace-work of shadows on the crooked brick pavement. Not only the great sycamore and myself and Samuel, but the whole blossoming city appeared to me in a dream; and as I glanced down the quiet street, over which the large, slow shadows moved to and fro, I saw through a mist the blurred grey-green foliage in the Capitol Square. In the ground the seeds of the new South, which was in truth but the resurrected spirit of the old, still germinated in darkness. But the air, though I did not know it, was already full of the promise of the industrial awakening, the constructive impulse, the recovered energy, that was yet to be, and in which I, leaning there a barefooted market boy, was to have my part.

An aged negress, in a red bandanna turban, with a pipe in her mouth, stopped to rest in the shadow of the sycamore, placing her basket, full of onions and tomatoes, on the pavement beside my empty one.

"Do you know who lives in that grey house, Mammy?" I asked.

Twisting the stem of her pipe to the corner of her mouth, she sat nodding at me, while the wind fluttered the wisps of grizzled hair escaping from beneath her red and yellow head-dress.

"Go 'way, chile, whar you done come f'om?" she demanded suspiciously. "Ain't you ever hyern er Marse Bland? He riz me."

I shook my head, sufficiently humbled by my plebeian ignorance.

"Are the two old ladies his daughters?"

"Wat you call Miss Mitty en Miss Matoaca ole fur? Dey ain' ole," she responded indignantly. "I use'n ter b'long ter Marse Bland befo' de war, en I kin recollect de day dat e'vy one er dem wuz born. Dey's all daid now cep'n Miss Mitty en Miss Matoaca, en Marse Bland he's daid, too."

"Then who is the little girl? Where did she come from?"

There was a dandelion blooming in a tuft of grass between the loosened bricks of the pavement, and I imprisoned it in my bare toes while I waited impatiently for her answer.

"Dat's Miss Sary's chile. She ran away wid Marse Harry Mickleborough, in Marse Bland's lifetime, en he 'ouldn't lay eyes on her f'om dat day ter his deaf. Miss Mitty en Miss Matoaca dey ain' ole, but Miss Sary she want nuttin' mo'n a chile w'en she went off."

"But why did her father never see her again?"

"Dat was 'long er Marse Mickleborough, boy, but I ain' gwine inter de ens en de outs er dat. Hit mought er been becaze er Marse Mickleborough's fiddle, but I ain' sayin' dat hit wuz er dat hit wuzn't. Dar's some folks dat cyarn' stan' de squeak er a fiddle, en he sutney did fiddle a mont'ous lot. He usen ter beat Miss Sary, too, I hyern tell, jes es you mought hev prognosticate er a fiddlin' man; but she ain' never come home twel atter her pa wuz daid en buried over yonder in Hollywood. Den

w'en de will wuz read Marse Bland had lef ev'y las' cent clean away f'om her en de chile. Atter Miss Mitty en Miss Matoaca die de hull pa'cel er hit's er gwine ter some no 'count hospital whar dey take live folks ter pieces en den put 'em tergedder agin."

"You mean the little girl won't get a blessed cent?" I asked, and my toes pinched the head of the dandelion until it dropped from its stem.

"Ain't I done tole you how 'tis?" demanded the negress in exasperation, rising from her seat on the curbing, "en wat mek you keep on axin' over wat I done tole you?"

She went off muttering to herself, while she clenched the stem of her corncob pipe between her toothless gums; and picking up my basket and whistling to Samuel, I walked slowly downhill, with the problem of the future working excitedly in my brain.

"A market boy is obliged to be a common boy," I thought, and immediately: "Then I will not be a market boy any longer."

So hopeless the next instant did my present condition of abject ignorance appear to me, that I found myself regretting that I had not asked advice of the aged negress who had rested beside me in the shadow of the sycamore. I wondered if she would consider the selling of newspapers a less degrading employment than the hawking of vegetables, and with the thought, I saw stretching before me, in all its alluring brightness, that royal road of success which leads from the castle of dreams. One instant I resolved to start life as a fruit vender on the train, and the next I was wildly imagining myself the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad, with a jingling bunch of seals and a gold-headed stick. When at last I reached the Old Market I found that the gayety had departed from it, and it appeared slovenly and disgusting to my awakened eyes. The fruit and vegetables, so fresh and inviting in the early morning, were now stale and wilted; a swarm of flies hung like a black cloud around the joint suspended before the stall of Perkins, the butcher; and as I passed the stand of the fish dealer, the odour of decaying fish entered my nostrils. Was it the same place I had left only a few hours before, or what sudden change in myself had revealed to me the grim ugliness of its aspect? "He's a common boy," the little girl had said of me almost four years ago, and I felt now, as I had felt then, the sting of a whip on my bare flesh at her words. Come what might I would cease to be "a common boy" from that hour.

In the afternoon I bought an armful of "The Evening Planet," and wandered up Franklin Street on a venture, crying the papers aloud with an agreeable assurance that I had deserted huckstering to enter journalism. As I passed the garden of the old grey house my voice rang out shrilly, yet with a quavering note in it, "Eve-ning Pla-net!" and almost before the sound had passed under the sycamores, the gate in the wall opened cautiously and one of the ladies called to me timidly with her face pressed to the crack. The two sisters were so much alike that it was a minute before I discovered the one who spoke to be Miss Matoaca.

"Will you please let me have a paper," she said apologetically, "we do not take it. There is no gentleman in the house. I – I am interested in the marriages and deaths," she added, in a louder tone as if some one were standing close to her beyond the garden gate.

As I gave her the paper she stretched out her hand, under its yellowed lace ruffle, and dropped the money into my palm.

"I shall be obliged to you if you will call out every day when you pass here," she remarked, after a minute; "I am almost always in the garden at this hour."

I promised her that I should certainly remember, and she was about to draw inside the garden with a gentle, flower-like motion of her head, when a gentleman, with a gold-headed walking-stick in his hand, lunged suddenly round the smaller sycamore at the corner, and entrapped her between the wall and the gate before she had time to retreat.

"So I've caught you at it, eh, Miss Matoaca!" he exclaimed, shaking a pudgy forefinger into her face, with an air of playful gallantry. "Buying newspapers!"

Poor Miss Matoaca, fluttering like a leaf before this onslaught of chivalry, could only drop her bright brown eyes to the ground and flush a delicate pink, which the General must have admired.

"They – they are excellent to keep away moths!" she stammered.

The sly and merry look, which I discovered afterwards to be his invincible weapon with the ladies, appeared instantly in his watery grey eyes.

"And you don't even glance at the political headlines? Ah, confess, Miss Matoaca."

He was very stout, very red in the face, very round in the stomach, very roguish in the eyes, yet I realised even then that some twenty years before – when the results of his sportive masculinity had not become visible in his appearance – he must have been handsome enough to have melted even Miss Matoaca's heart. Like a faint lingering beam of autumn sunshine, this comeliness, this blithe and unforgettable charm of youth, still hovered about his heavy and plethoric figure. Across his expansive front there stretched a massive gold chain of a unique pattern, and from this chain, I saw now, there hung a jingling and fascinating bunch of seals. The gentleman I might have forgotten, but that bunch of seals had occupied for three long years a particular corner of my memory; and in the instant that my eyes fell upon it, I saw again the ragged hill covered with pokeberry, yarrow, and stunted sumach, the anchored vessel outlined against the rosy sunset, and the panting stranger, who had stopped to rest with his hand on my shoulder. I remembered suddenly that I wanted to become the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad.

He stood there now in all his redundant flesh before me, his large mottled cheeks inflated with laughter, his full red lips pursed into a gay and mocking expression. To me he personified success, happiness, achievement – the other shining extreme from my own obscurity and commonness; but the effect upon poor little Miss Matoaca was quite the opposite, I judged the next minute, from the one that he had intended. I watched her fragile shoulders straighten and a glow rather than a flash of spirit pass into her uplifted face.

"With your record, General Bolingbroke," she said, in a quavering yet courageous voice, "you may refuse your approval, but not your respect, to a matter of principle."

The roguish twinkle, which was still so charming, appealed like the lost spirit of youth in the General's eyes.

"Ah, Miss Matoaca," he rejoined, in his most gallant manner, "principles do not apply to ladies!"

At this Miss Matoaca drew herself up almost haughtily, and I felt as I looked at her that only her sex had kept her from becoming a general herself.

"It is very painful to me to disagree with the gentlemen I know," she said, "but when it is a matter of conviction I feel that even the respect of gentlemen should be sacrificed. My sister Mitty considers me quite indelicate, but I cannot conceal from you that – " her voice broke and dropped, but rose again instantly with a clear, silvery sound, "I consider that taxation without representation is tyranny."

A virgin martyr refusing to sacrifice a dove to Venus might have uttered her costly heresy in such a voice and with such a look; but the General met it suavely with a flourish of his wide-brimmed hat and a blandishing smile. He was one of those gentlemen of the old school, I came to know later, to whom it was an inherent impossibility to appear without affectation in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. A high liver, and a good fellow every inch of him, he could be natural, racy, charming, and without vanity, when in the midst of men; but let so much as the rustle of a petticoat sound on the pavement, and he would begin to strut and plume himself as instinctively as the cock in the barnyard.

"But what would you do with a vote, my dear Miss Matoaca," he protested airily. "Put it into a pie?"

His witticism, which he hardly seemed aware of until it was uttered, afforded him the next instant an enjoyment so hilarious that I saw his waist shake like a bowl of jelly between the flapping folds of his alpaca coat. While he stood there with his large white cravat twisted awry by the swelling

of his crimson neck, and his legs, in a pair of duck trousers, planted very far apart on the sidewalk, he presented the aspect of a man who felt himself to be a graduate in the experimental science of what he probably would have called "the sex." When I heard him frequently alluded to afterwards as "a gay old bird," I wondered that I had not fitted the phrase to him as he fixed his swimming, parrot-like eyes on the flushed face of Miss Matoaca.

"If that's all the use you'd make of it, I think we might safely trust it to you," he observed with a flattering glance. "A woman who can make your mince pies, dear lady, need not worry about her rights."

"How is George, General?" asked Miss Matoaca, with an air of gentle, offended dignity. "I heard he had come to live with you since his mother's death."

"So he has, the rascal," responded the General, "and a nephew under twelve years of age is a severe strain on the habits of an elderly bachelor."

The corners of Miss Matoaca's mouth grew suddenly prim.

"I suppose you could hardly close the door on your sister's orphan son," she observed, in a severer tone than I had yet heard her use.

He sighed, and the sigh appeared to pass in the form of a tremor through his white-trousered legs.

"Ah, that's it," he rejoined. "You ladies ought to be thankful that you haven't our responsibilities. No, no, thank you, I won't come in. My respects to Miss Mitty and to yourself."

The gate closed softly as if after a love tryst, Miss Matoaca disappeared into the garden, and the General's expression changed from its jocose and smiling flattery to a look of genuine annoyance.

"No, I don't want a paper, boy!" he exclaimed.

With a wave of his gold-headed cane in my direction, he would have passed on his way, but at his first step, happily for me, his toe struck against a loosened brick, and the pain of the shock caused him to bend over and begin rubbing his gouty foot, with an exclamation that sounded suspiciously like an oath. Where was the roguish humour now in the small watery grey eyes? The gout, not "the sex," had him ignominiously by the heel.

"If you please, General, do you remember me?" I enquired timidly.

Still clasping his foot, he turned a crimson glare upon me. "Damnation! – I mean Good Lord, have mercy on my toe, why should I remember you?"

"It was on Church Hill almost four years ago, you promised," I suggested as a gentle spur to his memory.

"And you expect me to remember what I promised four years ago?" he rejoined with a sly twinkle. "Why, bless my soul, you're worse than a woman."

"You asked me, sir, if I wanted to grow up and be President," I returned, not without resentment. Releasing his ankle abruptly, he stood up and slapped his thigh.

"Great Jehosaphat! If you ain't the little chap who was content to be nothing less than God Almighty!" he exclaimed. "I've told that story a hundred times if I've told it once."

"Then perhaps you'll help me a little, sir," I suggested.

"Help you to become God Almighty?" he chuckled.

"No, sir, help me to be the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad."

"Then you'll be satisfied with the lesser office, eh?"

"I shall, sir, if – if there isn't anything better."

Again he slapped his thigh and again he chuckled. "But I've got one boy already. I don't want another," he protested. "Good Lord, one is bad enough when he's not your own."

Whether or not he really supposed that I was a serious applicant for adoption, I cannot say, but his face put on immediately an harassed and suffering look.

"Have you ever had a twinge of gout, boy?" he enquired.

"No, sir."

"Then you're lucky – damned lucky. When you go to bed to-night you get down on your knees and thank the Lord that you've never had a twinge of gout. You can even eat a strawberry without feeling it, I reckon?"

I replied humbly that I certainly could if I ever got the chance.

"And yet you ain't satisfied – you're asking to be president of a damned railroad – a boy who can eat a strawberry without feeling it!"

He moved on, limping slightly, and like a small persistent devil of temptation, I kept at his elbow.

"Isn't there anything that you can do for me, sir?" I asked, at the point of tears.

"Do for you? Bless my soul, boy, if I had your joints I shouldn't want anything that anybody could do for me. Can't you walk, hop, skip, jump, all you want to?"

This was so manifestly unfair that I retorted stubbornly, "But I don't want to."

He glanced down on me with a flicker of his still charming smile.

"Well, you would if you were president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic and had looked into the evening paper," he said.

"Are you president of it still, sir?"

"Eh? eh? You'll be wanting to push me out of my job next, I suppose?"

"I'd like to have it when you are dead, sir," I replied.

But this instead of gratifying the General appeared plainly to annoy him. "There now, you'd better run along and sell your papers," he remarked irritably. "If I give you a dime, will you quit bothering me?"

"I'd rather you'd give me a start, sir, as you promised."

"Good Lord! There you are again! Do you know the meaning of n-u-i-s-a-n-c-e, boy?"

"No, sir."

"Well, ask your teacher the next time you go to school."

"I don't go to school. I work."

"You work, eh? Well, look here, let's see. What do you want of me?"

"I thought you might tell me how to begin. I don't want to stay common."

For a moment his attention seemed fixed on a gold pencil which he had taken from his waistcoat pocket. Then opening his card-case he scribbled a line on a card and handed it to me. "If you choose you may take that to Bob Brackett at the Old Dominion Tobacco Works, on Twenty-fifth Street, near the river," he said, not unkindly. "If he happens to want a boy, he may give you a job; but remember, I don't promise you that he will want one, – and if he does, it isn't likely he'd make you president on the spot," he concluded, with a chuckle.

Waving a gesture of dismissal he started off at a hobble; then catching the eye of a lady in a passing carriage, he straightened himself, bowed with a gallant flourish of his wide-brimmed hat, and went on with a look of agony but a jaunty pace. As I turned, a minute later, to discover who could have wrought this startling change in the behaviour of the General, an open surrey, the bottom filled with a pink cloud of wild azaleas, stopped at the curbing before the grey house, and the faces of Miss Mitty and Sally shone upon me over the blossoms. The child was coloured like a flower from the sun and wind, and there was a soft dewy look about her flushed cheeks, and her very full red lips. At the corner of her mouth, near her square little chin, a tiny white scar showed like a dimple, giving to her lower lip when she laughed an expression of charming archness. I remember these things now – at the moment there was no room for them in my whirling thoughts.

"Oh!" cried the little girl in a burst of happiness, "there's my boy!"

The next minute she had leaped out of the carriage and was bounding across the pavement. Her arms were filled with azalea, and loosened petals fluttered like a swarm of pink and white moths around her.

"What are you doing, boy?" she asked. "Where is your basket?"

"It's at the market. I'm selling papers."

"Come, Sally," commanded Miss Mitty, stepping out of the surrey with the rest of the flowers.

"You must not stop in the street to talk to people you don't know."

"But I do know him, Aunt Mitty, he brings our marketing."

"Well, come in anyway. You are breaking the flowers."

The strong, heady perfume filled my nostrils, though when I remember it now it changes to the scent of wallflowers, which clings always about my memory of the old grey house, with its delicate lace curtains draped back from the small square window-panes as if a face looked out on the crooked pavement.

"Please, Aunt Mitty, let me buy a paper," begged the child.

"A paper, Sally! What on earth would you do with a paper?"

"Couldn't I roll up my hair in it, Auntie?"

"You don't roll up your hair in newspapers. Here, come in. I can't wait any longer."

Lingering an instant, Sally leaned toward me over the pink cloud of azalea. "I'd just love to play with you and Samuel," she said with the sparkling animation I remembered from our first meeting, "but dear Aunt Mitty has so much pride, you know."

She bent still lower, gave Samuel an impassioned hug with her free arm, and then turning quickly away ran up the short flight of steps and disappeared into the house. The next instant the door closed sharply after her, and only the small rosy petals fluttering in the wind were left to prove to me that I was really awake and it was not a dream.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH MY EDUCATION BEGINS

There was no lingering at kitchen doorways with scolding white-turbaned cooks next morning, for as soon as I had delivered the marketing, I returned the basket to John Chitling, and set out down Twenty-fifth Street in the direction of the river. As I went on, a dry, pungent odour seemed to escape from the pavement beneath and invade the air. The earth was drenched with it, the crumbling bricks, the negro hovels, the few sickly ailantus trees, exuded the sharp scent, and even the wind brought stray wafts, as from a giant's pipe, when it blew in gusts up from the river-bottom. Overhead the sky appeared to hang flat and low as if seen through a thin brown veil, and the ancient warehouses, sloping toward the river, rose like sombre prisons out of the murky air. It was still before the introduction of modern machinery into the factories, and as I approached the rotting wooden steps which led into the largest building, loose leaves of tobacco, scattered in the unloading, rustled with a sharp, crackling noise under my feet.

Inside, a clerk on a high stool, with a massive ledger before him, looked up at my entrance, and stuck his pen behind his ear with a sigh of relief.

"A gentleman told me you might want a boy, sir," I began.

He got down from his stool, and sauntering across the room, took a long drink from a bucket of water that stood by the door.

"What gentleman?" he enquired, as he flirted a few drops on the steps outside, and returned the tin dipper to the rusty nail over the bucket.

I drew out the card, which I had kept carefully wrapped in a piece of brown paper in my trousers' pocket. When I handed it to him, he looked at it with a low whistle and stood twirling it in his fingers.

"The gentleman owns about nine-tenths of the business," he remarked for my information. Then turning his head he called over his shoulder to some one hidden behind the massive ledgers on the desk. "I say, Bob, here's a boy the General's sent along. What'll you do with him?"

Bob, a big, blowzy man, who appeared to be upon terms of intimacy with every clerk in the office, came leisurely out into the room, and looked me over with what I felt to be a shrewd and yet not unkindly glance. "It's the second he's sent down in two weeks," he observed, "but this one seems sprightly enough. What's your name, boy?"

"Ben Starr."

"Well, Ben, what're you good for?"

"Most anything, sir."

"Most anything, eh? Well, come along, and I'll put you at 'most anything.'"

He spoke in a pleasant, jovial tone, which made me adore him on the spot; and as he led me across a dark hall and up a sagging flight of steps, he enquired good-humouredly how I had met General Bolingbroke and why he had given me his card.

"He's a great man, is the General!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "When you met him, my boy, you met the biggest man in the South to-day."

Immediately the crimson face, the white-trousered legs, the round stomach, and even the gouty toe, were surrounded in my imagination with a romantic halo. "What's he done to make him so big?" I asked.

"Done? Why, he's done everything. He's opened the South, he's restored trade, he's made an honest fortune out of the carpet-baggers. It's something to own nine-tenths of the Old Dominion Tobacco Works, and to be vice-president of the Bonfield Trust Company, but it's a long sight better to be president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad. If you happen to know of a bigger job than that, I wish you'd point it out."

I couldn't point it out, and so I told him, at which he gave a friendly guffaw and led the way in silence up the sagging staircase. At that moment all that had been mere formless ambition in my mind was concentrated into a single burning desire; and I swore to myself, as I followed Bob, the manager, up the dark staircase to the leaf department, that I, too, would become before I died the biggest man in the South and the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad. The idea which was to possess me utterly for thirty years dropped into my brain and took root on that morning in the heavy atmosphere of the Old Dominion Tobacco Works. From that hour I walked not aimlessly, but toward a definite end. I might start in life, I told myself, with a market basket, but I would start also with the resolution that out of the market basket the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad should arise. The vow was still on my lips when the large sliding door on the landing swung open, and we entered an immense barnlike room, in which three or four hundred negroes were at work stemming tobacco.

At first the stagnant fumes of the dry leaf mingling with the odours of so many tightly packed bodies, caused me to turn suddenly dizzy, and the rows of shining black faces swam before my eyes in a blur with the brilliantly dyed turbans of the women. Then I gritted my teeth fiercely, the mist cleared, and I listened undisturbed to the melancholy chant which accompanied the rhythmic movements of the lithe brown fingers.

At either end of the room, which covered the entire length and breadth of the building, the windows were shut fast, and on the outside, close against the greenish panes, innumerable flies swarmed like a black curtain. Before the long troughs stretching waist high from wall to wall, hundreds of negroes stood ceaselessly stripping the dry leaves from the stems; and above the soft golden brown piles of tobacco, the blur of colour separated into distinct and vivid splashes of red, blue, and orange. Back and forth in the obscurity these brilliantly coloured turbans nodded like savage flowers amid a crowd of black faces, in which the eyes alone, very large, wide open, and with gleaming white circles around the pupils, appeared to me to be really alive and human. They were singing as we entered, and the sound did not stop while the manager crossed the floor and paused for an instant beside the nearest worker, a brawny, coal-black negro, with a red shirt open at his throat, on which I saw a strange, jagged scar, running from ear to chest, like the enigmatical symbol of some savage rite I could not understand. Without turning his head at the manager's approach, he picked up a great leaf and stripped it from the stem at a single stroke, while his tremendous bass voice rolled like the music of an organ over the deep piles of tobacco before which he stood. Above this rich volume of sound fluted the piercing thin sopranos of the women, piping higher, higher, until the ancient hymn resolved itself into something that was neither human nor animal, but so elemental, so primeval, that it was like a voice imprisoned in the soil – a dumb and inarticulate music, rooted deep, and without consciousness, in the passionate earth. Over the mass of dark faces, as they rocked back and forth, I saw light shadows tremble, as faint and swift as the shadows of passing clouds, while here and there a bright red or yellow head-dress rose slightly higher than its neighbours, and floated above the rippling mass like a flower on a stream. And it seemed to me as I stood there, half terrified by the close, hot smells and the savage colours, that something within me stirred and awakened like a secret that I had carried shut up in myself since birth. The music grew louder in my ears, as if I, too, were a part of it, and for the first time I heard clearly the words: —

"Christ totes de young lambs in his bosom, bosom,
Christ totes de young lambs in his bosom, bosom,
Christ totes de young lambs in his bosom, bosom,
Fa-ther, de ye-ar-ur Ju-bi-le-e!"

Bob, the manager, picked up a leaf from the nearest trough, examined it carefully, and tossed it aside. The great black negro turned his head slowly toward him, the jagged scar standing out like a cord above the open collar of his red shirt.

"Christ leads de ole sheep by still watah, watah,
Christ leads de ole sheep by still watah, watah,
Christ leads de ole sheep by still watah, watah,
Fa-ther, de ye-ar-ur Ju-bi-le-e!"

"If I were to leave you here an hour what would you do, Ben?" asked the manager suddenly, speaking close to my ear.

I thought for a moment. "Learn to stem tobacco quick'en they do," I replied at last.

"What have you found out since you came in?"

"That you must strip the leaf off clean and throw it into the big trough that slides it downstairs somewhere."

A smile crossed his face. "If I give you a job it won't be much more than running up and down stairs with messages," he said; "that's what a nigger can't do." He hesitated an instant; "but that's the way I began," he added kindly, "under General Bolingbroke."

I looked up quickly, "And was it the way *he* began?"

"Oh, well, hardly. He belongs to one of the old families, you know. His father was a great planter and he started on top."

My crestfallen look must have moved his pity, I think, for he said as he turned away and we walked down the long room, "It ain't the start that makes the man, youngster, but the man that makes the start."

The doors swung together behind us, and we descended the dark staircase, with the piercing soprano voices fluting in our ears.

"Christ leads de ole sheep by still watah, watah,
Christ leads de ole sheep by still watah, watah."

That afternoon I went home, full of hope, to my attic in the Old Market quarter. Then as the weeks went on, and I took my place gradually as a small laborious worker in the buzzing hive of human industry, whatever romance had attached itself to the tobacco factory, scattered and vanished in the hard, dry atmosphere of the reality. My part was to run errands up and down the dark staircase for the manager of the leaf department, or to stand for hours on hot days in the stagnant air, amid the reeking smells of the big room, where the army of "stemmers" rocked ceaselessly back and forth to the sound of their savage music. In all those weary weeks I had passed General Bolingbroke but once, and by the blank look on his great perspiring face, I saw that my hero had forgotten utterly the incident of my existence. Yet as I turned on the curbing and looked after him, while he ploughed, wiping his forehead, up the long hill, under the leaves of mulberry and catalpa trees, I felt instinctively that my future triumphs would be in a measure the overthrow of the things for which he and his generation had stood. The manager's casual phrase "the old families," had bred in me a secret resentment, for I knew in my heart that the genial aristocracy, represented by the president of the Great South Midland and Atlantic Railroad, was in reality the enemy, and not the friend, of such as I.

The long, hot summer unfolded slowly while I trudged to the factory in the blinding mornings and back again to the Old Market at the suffocating hour of sunset. Over the doors of the negro hovels luxuriant gourd vines hung in festoons of large fan-shaped leaves, and above the high plank fences at the back, gaudy sunflowers nodded their heads to me as I went wearily by. The richer quarter of the city had blossomed into a fragrant bower, but I saw only the squalid surroundings of the Old Market, with its covered wagons, its overripe melons, its prowling dogs hunting in refuse heaps, and beyond this the crooked street, which led to the tobacco factory and then sagged slowly down to the river-bottom. Sometimes I would lean from my little window at night into the stifling atmosphere,

where the humming of a mosquito, or the whirring of a moth, made the only noise, and think of the enchanted garden lying desolate and lovely under the soft shining of the stars. Were the ghosts moving up and down the terraces in the mazes of scented box, I wondered? Then the garden would fade far away from me into a cool, still distance, while I knelt with my head in my hands, panting for breath in the motionless air. Outside the shadow of the Old Market lay over all, stretching sombre and black to where I crouched, a lonely, half-naked child at my attic window. And so at last, bathed in sweat, I would fall asleep, to awaken at dawn when the covered wagons passed through the streets below, and the cry of "Wa-ter-mil-lion! Wa-ter-mil-lion!" rang in the silence. Then the sun would rise slowly, the day begin, and Mrs. Chitling's cheerful bustle would start anew. Tired, sleepless, despairing, I would set off to work at last, while the Great South Midland Railroad receded farther and farther into the dim province of inaccessible things.

After a long August day, when the factory had shut down while it was yet afternoon, I crept up to Church Hill, and looked again over the spiked wall into the enchanted garden. It was deserted and seemed very sad, I thought, for its only tenants appeared to be the swallows that flew, with short cries, in and out of the white columns. On the front door a large sign hung, reading "For Sale"; and turning away with a sinking heart, I went on to Mrs. Cudlip's in the hope of catching a glimpse of baby Jessy, whom I had not seen since I ran away. She was playing on the sidewalk, a pretty, golden-haired little girl, with the melting blue eyes of my father; and when she caught sight of me, she gave a gurgling cry and ran straight to me out of the arms of President, who, I saw to my surprise, was standing in the doorway of our old home. He was taller than my father now, with the same kind, sheepish face, and the awkward movements as of an overgrown boy.

"Wall, if it ain't Benjy!" he exclaimed, his slow wits paralysed by my unexpected appearance. "If it ain't Benjy!"

Turning aside he spat a wad of tobacco into the gutter, and then coming toward me, seized both my hands and wrung them in his big fists with a grip that hurt.

"You're comin' along now, ain't you, Benjy?" he inquired proudly.

"Tith my Pethedent," lisped baby Jessy at his knees, and he stooped from his great height and lifted her in his arms with the gentleness of a woman.

"What about an eddication, Benjy boy?" he asked over the golden curls.

"I can't get an education and work, too," I answered, "and I've got to work. How's pa?"

"He's taken an awful fondness to the bottle," replied President, with a sly wink, "an' if thar's a thing on earth that can fill a man's thoughts till it crowds out everything else in it, it's the bottle. But speakin' of an eddication, you see I never had one either, an' I tell you, when you don't have it, you miss it every blessed minute of yo' life. Whenever I see a man step on ahead of me in the race, I say to myself, 'Thar goes an eddication. It's the eddication in him that's a-movin' an' not the man.' You mark my words, Benjy, I've stood stock still an' seen 'em stridin' on that didn't have one bloomin' thing inside of 'em except an eddication."

"But how am I to get it, President?" I asked dolefully. "I've got to work."

"Get it out of books, Benjy. It's in 'em if you only have the patience to stick at 'em till you get it out. I never had on o'count of my eyes and my slowness, but you're young an' peart an' you don't get confused by the printed letters."

Diving into his bulging pockets, he took out a big leather purse, from which he extracted a dollar and handed it to me. "Let that go toward an eddication," he said, adding: "If you can get it out of books I'll send you a dollar toward it every week I live. That's a kind of starter, anyway, ain't it?"

I replied that I thought it was, and carefully twisted the money into the torn lining of my pocket.

"I'm goin' back to West Virginy to-night," he resumed. "Arter I've seen you an' the little sister thar ain't any use my hangin' on out of work."

"Have you got a good place, President?"

"As good as can be expected for a plain man without an eddication," he responded sadly, and a half hour later, when I said good-by to him, with a sob, he came to the brow of the hill, with little Jessy clinging to his hand, and called after me solemnly, "Remember, Benjy boy, what you want is an eddication!"

So impressed was I by the earnestness of this advice, that as I went back down the dreary hill, with its musty second-hand clothes' shops, its noisy barrooms, and its general aspect of decay and poverty, I felt that my surroundings smothered me because I lacked the peculiar virtue which enabled a man to overcome the adverse circumstances in which he was born. The hot August day was drawing to its end, and the stagnant air in which I moved seemed burdened with sweat until it had become a tangible thing. The gourd vines were hanging limp now over the negro hovels, as if the weight of the yellow globes dragged them to the earth; and in the small square yards at the back, the wilted sunflowers seemed trying to hide their scorched faces from the last gaze of a too ardent lover. Whole families had swarmed out into the streets, and from time to time I stepped over a negro urchin, who lay flat on his stomach, drinking the juice of an overripe watermelon out of the rind. Above the dirt and squalor the street cries still rang out from covered wagons which crawled ceaselessly back and forth from the country to the Old Market. "Wa-ter-mil-lion. Wa-ter-mil-l-i-o-n! Hyer's yo' Wa-ter-mil-lion fresh f'om de vi-ne!" And as I shut my eyes against the dirt, and my nostrils against the odours, I saw always in my imagination the enchanted garden, with its cool sweet magnolias and laburnums, and its great white columns from which the swallows flew, with short cries, toward the sunset.

A white shopkeeper and a mulatto woman had got into a quarrel on the pavement, and turning away to avoid them, I stumbled by accident into the open door of a second-hand shop, where the proprietor sat on an old cooking-stove drinking a glass of beer. As I started back my frightened glance lit on a heap of dusty volumes in one corner, and in reply to a question, which I put the next instant in a trembling voice, I was informed that I might have the whole pile for fifty cents, provided I'd clear them out on the spot. The bargain was no sooner clinched than I gathered the books in my arms and staggered under their weight in the direction of Mrs. Chitling's. Even for a grown man they would have made a big armful, and when at last I toiled up to my attic, and dropped on my knees by the open window, I was shaking from head to foot with exhaustion. The dust was thick on my hands and arms, and as I turned them over eagerly by the red light of the sunset, the worm-eaten bindings left queer greenish stains on my fingers. Among a number of loose magazines called *The Farmer's Friend*, I found an illustrated, rather handsome copy of "Pilgrim's Progress," presented, as an inscription on the flyleaf testified, to one Jeremiah Wakefield as a reward for deportment; the entire eight volumes of "Sir Charles Grandison"; a complete Johnson's Dictionary, with the binding missing; and Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" in faded crimson morocco. When I had dusted them carefully on an old shirt, and arranged them on the three-cornered shelf at the head of my cot, I felt, with a glow of satisfaction, that the foundations of that education to which President had contributed were already laid in my brain. If the secret of the future had been imprisoned in those mouldy books, I could hardly have attacked them with greater earnestness; and there was probably no accident in my life which directed so powerfully my fortunes as the one that sent me stumbling into that second-hand shop on that afternoon in mid-August. I can imagine what I should have been if I had never had the help of a friend in my career, but when I try to think of myself as unaided by Johnson's Dictionary, or by "Sir Charles Grandison," whose prosiest speeches I committed joyfully to memory, my fancy stumbles in vain in the attempt. For five drudging years those books were my constant companions, my one resource, and to conceive of myself without them is to conceive of another and an entirely different man. If there was harm in any of them, which I doubt, it was clothed to appeal to an older and a less ignorant imagination than mine; and from the elaborate treatises on love melancholy in Burton's "Anatomy," I extracted merely the fine aromatic flavour of his quotations.

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