

ALLEN JAMES LANE

THE METTLE OF THE
PASTURE

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Содержание

PART FIRST	4
I	4
II	20
III	35
IV	53
V	76
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	77

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PART FIRST

I

She did not wish any supper and she sank forgetfully back into the stately oak chair. One of her hands lay palm upward on her white lap; in the other, which drooped over the arm of the chair, she clasped a young rose dark red amid its leaves—an inverted torch of love.

Old-fashioned glass doors behind her reached from a high ceiling to the floor; they had been thrown open and the curtains looped apart. Stone steps outside led downward to the turf in the rear of the house. This turf covered a lawn unroughened by plant or weed; but over it at majestic intervals grew clumps of gray pines and dim-blue, ever wintry firs. Beyond lawn and evergreens a flower garden bloomed; and beyond the high fence enclosing this, tree-tops and house-tops of the town could be seen; and beyond these—away in the west—the sky was naming now with the falling sun.

A few bars of dusty gold hung poised across the darkening

spaces of the supper room. Ripples of the evening air, entering through the windows, flowed over her, lifting the thick curling locks at the nape of her neck, creeping forward over her shoulders and passing along her round arms under the thin fabric of her sleeves.

They aroused her, these vanishing beams of the day, these arriving breezes of the night; they became secret invitations to escape from the house into the privacy of the garden, where she could be alone with thoughts of her great happiness now fast approaching.

A servant entered noiselessly, bringing a silver bowl of frozen cream. Beside this, at the head of the table before her grandmother, he placed scarlet strawberries gathered that morning under white dews. She availed herself of the slight interruption and rose with an apology; but even when love bade her go, love also bade her linger; she could scarce bear to be with them, but she could scarce bear to be alone. She paused at her grandmother's chair to stroke the dry bronze puffs on her temples—a unique impulse; she hesitated compassionately a moment beside her aunt, who had never married; then, passing around to the opposite side of the table, she took between her palms the sunburnt cheeks of a youth, her cousin, and buried her own tingling cheek in his hair. Instinct at that moment drew her most to him because he was young as she was young, having life and love before him as she had; only, for him love stayed far in the future; for her it came to-night.

When she had crossed the room and reached the hall, she paused and glanced back, held by the tension of cords which she dreaded to break. She felt that nothing would ever be the same again in the home of her childhood. Until marriage she would remain under its dear honored roof, and there would be no outward interruption of its familiar routine; but for her all the bonds of life would have become loosened from old ties and united in him alone whom this evening she was to choose as her lot and destiny. Under the influence of that fresh fondness, therefore, which wells up so strangely within us at the thought of parting from home and home people, even though we may not greatly care for them, she now stood gazing at the picture they formed as though she were already calling it back through the distances of memory and the changes of future years.

They, too, had shifted their positions and were looking at her with one undisguised expression of pride and love; and they smiled as she smiled radiantly back at them, waving a last adieu with her spray of rose and turning quickly in a dread of foolish tears.

"Isabel."

It was the youthful voice of her grandmother. She faced them again with a little frown of feigned impatience.

"If you are going into the garden, throw something around your shoulders."

"Thank you, grandmother; I have my lace."

Crossing the hall, she went into the front parlor, took from a

damask sofa a rare shawl of white lace and, walking to a mirror, threw it over her head, absently noting the effect in profile. She lifted this off and, breaking the rose from part of its stem, pinned that on her breast. Then, stepping aside to one of the large lofty windows, she stood there under the droop of the curtains, sunk into reverie again and looking out upon the yard and the street beyond.

Hardly a sound disturbed the twilight stillness. A lamplighter passed, torching the grim lamps. A sauntering carrier threw the evening newspaper over the gate, with his unintelligible cry. A dog-cart rumbled by, and later, a brougham; people were not yet returned from driving on the country turnpikes. Once, some belated girls clattered past on ponies. But already little children, bare-armed, bare-necked, swinging lanterns, and attended by proud young mothers, were on their way to a summer-night festival in the park. Up and down the street family groups were forming on the verandas. The red disks of cigars could be seen, and the laughter of happy women was wafted across the dividing fences and shrubbery, and vines.

Breaking again through her reverie, which seemed to envelop her, wherever she went, like a beautiful cloud, she left the window and appeared at the front door. Palms stood on each side of the granite steps, and these arched their tropical leaves far over toward her quiet feet as she passed down. Along the pavement were set huge green boxes, in which white oleanders grew, and flaming pomegranates, and crepe myrtle thickly roofed with

pink. She was used to hover about them at this hour, but she strolled past, unmindful now, the daily habit obliterated, the dumb little tie quite broken. The twisted newspaper lay white on the shadowed pavement before her eyes and she did not see that. She walked on until she reached the gate and, folding her hands about one of the brass globes surmounting the iron spikes, leaned over and probed with impatient eyes the long dusk of the street; as far as he could be seen coming she wished to see him.

It was too early. So she filled her eyes with pictures of the daylight fading over woods and fields far out in the country. But the entire flock of wistful thoughts settled at last about a large house situated on a wooded hill some miles from town. A lawn sloped upward to it from the turnpike, and there was a gravelled driveway. She unlatched the gate, approached the house, passed through the wide hall, ascended the stairs, stood at the door of his room—waiting. Why did he not come? How could he linger?

Dreamily she turned back; and following a narrow walk, passed to the rear of the house and thence across the lawn of turf toward the garden.

A shower had fallen early in the day and the grass had been cut afterwards. Afternoon sunshine had drunk the moisture, leaving the fragrance released and floating. The warmth of the cooling earth reached her foot through the sole of her slipper. On the plume of a pine, a bird was sending its last call after the bright hours, while out of the firs came the tumult of plainer kinds as they mingled for common sleep. The heavy cry of the bullbat

fell from far above, and looking up quickly for a sight of his winnowing wings under the vast purpling vault she beheld the earliest stars.

Thus, everywhere, under her feet, over her head, and beyond the reach of vision, because inhabiting that realm into which the spirit alone can send its aspiration and its prayer, was one influence, one spell: the warmth of the good wholesome earth, its breath of sweetness, its voices of peace and love and rest, the majesty of its flashing dome; and holding all these safe as in the hollow of a hand the Eternal Guardianship of the world.

As she strolled around the garden under the cloudy flush of the evening sky dressed in white, a shawl of white lace over one arm, a rose on her breast, she had the exquisiteness of a long past, during which women have been chosen in marriage for health and beauty and children and the power to charm. The very curve of her neck implied generations of mothers who had valued grace. Generations of forefathers had imparted to her walk and bearing their courage and their pride. The precision of the eyebrow, the chiselled perfection of the nostril, the loveliness of the short red lip; the well-arched feet, small, but sure of themselves; the eyes that were kind and truthful and thoughtful; the sheen of her hair, the fineness of her skin, her nobly cast figure,—all these were evidences of descent from a people, that had reached in her the purity, without having lost the vigor, of one of its highest types.

She had supposed that when he came the servant would

receive him and announce his arrival, but in a little while the sound of a step on the gravel reached her ear; she paused and listened. It was familiar, but it was unnatural—she remembered this afterwards.

She began to walk away from him, her beautiful head suddenly arched far forward, her bosom rising and falling under her clasped hands, her eyes filling with wonderful light. Then regaining composure because losing consciousness of herself in the thought of him, she turned and with divine simplicity of soul advanced to meet him.

Near the centre of the garden there was an open spot where two pathways crossed; and it was here, emerging from the shrubbery, that they came in sight of each other. Neither spoke. Neither made in advance a sign of greeting. When they were a few yards apart she paused, flushing through her whiteness; and he, dropping his hat from his hand, stepped quickly forward, gathered her hands into his and stood looking down on her in silence. He was very pale and barely controlled himself.

"Isabel!" It was all he could say.

"Rowan!" she answered at length. She spoke under her breath and stood before him with her head drooping, her eyes on the ground. Then he released her and she led the way at once out of the garden.

When they had reached the front of the house, sounds of conversation on the veranda warned them that there were guests, and without concealing their desire to be alone they passed to

a rustic bench under one of the old trees, standing between the house and the street; they were used to sitting there; they had known each other all their lives.

A long time they forced themselves to talk of common and trivial things, the one great meaning of the hour being avoided by each. Meanwhile it was growing very late. The children had long before returned drowsily home held by the hand, their lanterns dropped on the way or still clung to, torn and darkened. No groups laughed on the verandas; but gas-jets had been lighted and turned low as people undressed for bed. The guests of the family had gone. Even Isabel's grandmother had not been able further to put away sleep from her plotting brain in order to send out to them a final inquisitive thought—the last reconnoitring bee of all the In-gathered hive. Now, at length, as absolutely as he could have wished, he was alone with her and secure from interruption.

The moon had sunk so low that its rays fell in a silvery stream on her white figure; only a waving bough of the tree overhead still brushed with shadow her neck and face. As the evening waned, she had less to say to him, growing always more silent in new dignity, more mute with happiness.

He pushed himself abruptly away from her side and bending over touched his lips reverently to the back of one of her hands, as they lay on the shawl in her lap.

"Isabel," and then he hesitated.

"Yes," she answered sweetly. She paused likewise, requiring nothing more; it was enough that he should speak her name.

He changed his position and sat looking ahead. Presently he began again, choosing his words as a man might search among terrible weapons for the least deadly.

"When I wrote and asked you to marry me, I said I should come to-night and receive your answer from your own lips. If your answer had been different, I should never have spoken to you of my past. It would not have been my duty. I should not have had the right. I repeat, Isabel, that until you had confessed your love for me, I should have had no right to speak to you about my past. But now there is something you ought to be told at once."

She glanced up quickly with a rebuking smile. How could he wander so far from the happiness of moments too soon to end? What was his past to her?

He went on more guardedly.

"Ever since I have loved you, I have realized what I should have to tell you if you ever returned my love. Sometimes duty has seemed one thing, sometimes another. This is why I have waited so long—more than two years; the way was not clear. Isabel, it will never be clear. I believe now it is wrong to tell you; I believe it is wrong not to tell you. I have thought and thought—it is wrong either way. But the least wrong to you and to myself—that is what I have always tried to see, and as I understand my duty, now that you are willing to unite your life with mine, there is something you must know."

He added the last words as though he had reached a difficult position and were announcing his purpose to hold it. But he

paused gloomily again.

She had scarcely heard him through wonderment that he could so change at such a moment. Her happiness began to falter and darken like departing sunbeams. She remained for a space uncertain of herself, knowing neither what was needed nor what was best; then she spoke with resolute deprecation:

"Why discuss with me your past life? Have I not known you always?"

These were not the words of girlhood. She spoke from the emotions of womanhood, beginning to-night in the plighting of her troth.

"You have trusted me too much, Isabel."

Repulsed a second time, she now fixed her large eyes upon him with surprise. The next moment she had crossed lightly once more the widening chasm.

"Rowan," she said more gravely and with slight reproach, "I have not waited so long and then not known the man whom I have chosen."

"Ah," he cried, with a gesture of distress.

Thus they sat: she silent with new thoughts; he speechless with his old ones. Again she was the first to speak. More deeply moved by the sight of his increasing excitement, she took one of his hands into both of hers, pressing it with a delicate tenderness.

"What is it that troubles you, Rowan? Tell me! It is my duty to listen. I have the right to know."

He shrank from what he had never heard in her voice before

—disappointment in him. And it was neither girlhood nor womanhood which had spoken now: it was comradeship which is possible to girlhood and to womanhood through wifedom alone: she was taking their future for granted. He caught her hand and lifted it again and again to his lips; then he turned away from her.

Thus shut out from him again, she sat looking out into the night.

But in a woman's complete love of a man there is something deeper than girlhood or womanhood or wifedom: it is the maternal—that dependence on his strength when he is well and strong, that passion of protection and defence when he is frail or stricken. Into her mood and feeling toward him even the maternal had forced its way. She would have found some expression for it but he anticipated her.

"I am thinking of you, of my duty to you, of your happiness."

She realized at last some terrible hidden import in all that he had been trying to confess. A shrouded mysterious Shape of Evil was suddenly disclosed as already standing on the threshold of the House of Life which they were about to enter together. The night being warm, she had not used her shawl. Now she threw it over her head and gathered the weblike folds tightly under her throat as though she were growing cold. The next instant, with a swift movement, she tore it from her head and pushed herself as far as possible away from him out into the moonlight; and she sat there looking at him, wild with distrust and fear.

He caught sight of her face.

"Oh, I am doing wrong," he cried miserably. "I must not tell you this!"

He sprang up and hurried over to the pavement and began to walk to and fro. He walked to and fro a long time; and after waiting for him to return, she came quickly and stood in his path. But when he drew near her he put out his hand.

"I cannot!" he repeated, shaking his head and turning away.

Still she waited, and when he approached and was turning away again, she stepped forward and laid on his arm her quivering finger-tips.

"You must," she said. "You *shall* tell me!" and if there was anger in her voice, if there was anguish in it, there was the authority likewise of holy and sovereign rights. But he thrust her all but rudely away, and going to the lower end of the pavement, walked there backward and forward with his hat pulled low over his eyes—walked slowly, always more slowly. Twice he laid his hand on the gate as though he would have passed out. At last he stopped and looked back to where she waited in the light, her face set immovably, commandingly, toward him. Then he came back and stood before her.

The moon, now sinking low, shone full on his face, pale, sad, very quiet; and into his eyes, mournful as she had never known any eyes to be. He had taken off his hat and held it in his hand, and a light wind blew his thick hair about his forehead and temples. She, looking at him with senses preternaturally aroused, afterwards remembered all this.

Before he began to speak he saw rush over her face a look of final entreaty that he would not strike her too cruel a blow. This, when he had ceased speaking, was succeeded by the expression of one who has received a shock beyond all imagination. Thus they stood looking into each other's eyes; then she shrank back and started toward the house.

He sprang after her.

"You are leaving me!" he cried horribly.

She walked straight on, neither quickening nor slackening her pace nor swerving, although his body began unsteadily to intercept hers.

He kept beside her.

"Don't! Isabel!" he prayed out of his agony. "Don't leave me like this—!"

She walked on and reached the steps of the veranda. Crying out in his longing he threw his arms around her and held her close.

"You must not! You shall not! Do you know what you are doing, Isabel?"

She made not the least reply, not the least effort to extricate herself. But she closed her eyes and shuddered and twisted her body away from him as a bird of the air bends its neck and head as far as possible from a repulsive captor; and like the heart of such a bird, he could feel the throbbing of her heart.

Her mute submission to his violence stung him: he let her go. She spread out her arms as though in a rising flight of her nature

and the shawl, tossed backward from her shoulders, fell to the ground: it was as if she cast off the garment he had touched. Then she went quickly up the steps. Before she could reach the door he confronted her again; he pressed his back against it. She stretched out her hand and rang the bell. He stepped aside very quickly—proudly. She entered, closing and locking noiselessly the door that no sound might reach the servant she had summoned. As she did so she heard him try the knob and call to her in an undertone of last reproach and last entreaty:

"Isabel!—Isabel!—Isabel!"

Hurrying through the hall, she ran silently up the stairs to her room and shut herself in.

Her first feeling was joy that she was there safe from him and from every one else for the night. Her instant need was to be alone. It was this feeling also that caused her to go on tiptoe around the room and draw down the blinds, as though the glimmering windows were large eyes peering at her with intrusive wounding stare. Then taking her position close to a front window, she listened. He was walking slowly backward and forward on the pavement reluctantly, doubtfully; finally he passed through the gate. As it clanged heavily behind him, Isabel pressed her hands convulsively to her heart as though it also had gates which had closed, never to reopen.

Then she lighted the gas-jets beside the bureau and when she caught sight of herself the thought came how unchanged she looked. She stood there, just as she had stood before going

down to supper, nowhere a sign of all the deep displacement and destruction that had gone on within.

But she said to herself that what he had told her would reveal itself in time. It would lie in the first furrows deepening down her cheeks; it would be the earliest frost of years upon her hair.

A long while she sat on the edge of the couch in the middle of the room under the brilliant gaslight, her hands forgotten in her lap, her brows arched high, her eyes on the floor. Then her head beginning to ache, a new sensation for her, she thought she should bind a wet handkerchief to it as she had often done for her aunt; but the water which the maid had placed in the room had become warm. She must go down to the ewer in the hall. As she did so, she recollected her shawl.

It was lying on the wet grass where it had fallen. There was a half-framed accusing thought that he might have gone for it; but she put the thought away; the time had passed for courtesies from him. When she stooped for the shawl, an owl flew viciously at her, snapping its bill close to her face and stirring the air with its wings. Unnerved, she ran back into the porch, but stopped there ashamed and looking kindly toward the tree in which it made its home.

An old vine of darkest green had wreathed itself about the pillars of the veranda on that side; and it was at a frame-like opening in the massive foliage of this that the upper part of her pure white figure now stood revealed in the last low, silvery, mystical light. The sinking of the moon was like a great death on

the horizon, leaving the pall of darkness, the void of infinite loss.

She hung upon this far spectacle of nature with sad intensity, figuring from it some counterpart of the tragedy taking place within her own mind.

II

Isabel slept soundly, the regular habit of healthy years being too firmly entrenched to give way at once. Meanwhile deep changes were wrought out in her.

When we fall asleep, we do not lay aside the thoughts of the day, as the hand its physical work; nor upon awakening return to the activity of these as it to the renewal of its toil, finding them undisturbed. Our most piercing insight yields no deeper conception of life than that of perpetual building and unbuilding; and during what we call our rest, it is often most active in executing its inscrutable will. All along the dark chimneys of the brain, clinging like myriads of swallows deep-buried and slumbrous in quiet and in soot, are the countless thoughts which lately winged the wide heaven of conscious day. Alike through dreaming and through dreamless hours Life moves among these, handling and considering each of the unredeemable multitude; and when morning light strikes the dark chimneys again and they rush forth, some that entered young have matured; some of the old have become infirm; many of which have dropped in singly issue as companies; and young broods flutter forth, unaccountable nestlings of a night, which were not in yesterday's blue at all. Then there are the missing—those that went in with the rest at nightfall but were struck from the walls forever. So all are altered, for while we have slept we have still been subject to

that on-moving energy of the world which incessantly renews us yet transmutes us—double mystery of our permanence and our change.

It was thus that nature dealt with Isabel on this night: hours of swift difficult transition from her former life to that upon which she was now to enter. She fell asleep overwhelmed amid the ruins of the old; she awoke already engaged with the duties of the new. At sundown she was a girl who had never confessed her love; at sunrise she was a woman who had discarded the man she had just accepted. Rising at once and dressing with despatch, she entered upon preparations for completing her spiritual separation from Rowan in every material way.

The books he had lent her—these she made ready to return this morning. Other things, also, trifles in themselves but until now so freighted with significance. Then his letters and notes, how many, how many they were! Thus ever about her rooms she moved on this mournful occupation until the last thing had been disposed of as either to be sent back or to be destroyed.

And then while Isabel waited for breakfast to be announced, always she was realizing how familiar seemed Rowan's terrible confession, already lying far from her across the fields of memory—with a path worn deep between it and herself as though she had been traversing the distance for years; so old can sorrow grow during a little sleep. When she went down they were seated as she had left them the evening before, grandmother, aunt, cousin; and they looked up with the same pride and

fondness. But affection has so different a quality in the morning. Then the full soundless rides which come in at nightfall have receded; and in their stead is the glittering beach with thin waves that give no rest to the ear or to the shore—thin noisy edge of the deeps of the soul.

This fresh morning mood now ruled them; no such wholesome relief had come to her. So that their laughter and high spirits jarred upon her strangely. She had said to herself upon leaving them the evening before that never again could they be the same to her or she the same to them. But then she had expected to return isolated by incommunicable happiness; now she had returned isolated by incommunicable grief. Nevertheless she glided into her seat with feigned cheerfulness, taking a natural part in their conversation; and she rose at last, smiling with the rest.

But she immediately quitted the house, eager to be out of doors surrounded by things that she loved but that could not observe her or question her in return—alone with things that know not evil.

These were the last days of May. The rush of Summer had already carried it far northward over the boundaries of Spring, and on this Sunday morning it filled the grounds of Isabel's home with early warmth. Quickened by the heat, summoned by the blue, drenched with showers and dews, all things which have been made repositories of the great presence of Life were engaged in realizing the utmost that it meant to them.

It was in the midst of this splendor of light and air, fragrance, colors, shapes, movements, melodies and joys that Isabel, the loftiest receptacle of life among them all, soon sat in a secluded spot, motionless and listless with her unstanched and desperate wound. Everything seemed happy but herself; the very brilliancy of the day only deepened the shadow under which she brooded. As she had slipped away from the house, she would soon have escaped from the garden had there been any further retreat.

It was not necessary long to wait for one. Borne across the brown roofs and red chimneys of the town and exploding in the crystal air above her head like balls of mellow music, came the sounds of the first church bells, the bells of Christ Church.

They had never conveyed other meaning to her than that proclaimed by the town clock: they sounded the hour. She had been too untroubled during her young life to understand their aged argument and invitation.

Held In the arms of her father, when a babe, she had been duly christened. His death had occurred soon afterwards, then her mother's. Under the nurture of a grandmother to whom religion was a convenience and social form, she had received the strictest ceremonial but in no wise any spiritual training. The first conscious awakening of this beautiful unearthly sense had not taken place until the night of her confirmation—a wet April evening when the early green of the earth was bowed to the ground, and the lilies-of-the-valley in the yard had chilled her fingers as she had plucked them (chosen flower of her

consecration); she and they but rising alike into their higher lives out of the same mysterious Mother.

That night she had knelt among the others at the chancel and the bishop who had been a friend of her father's, having approached her in the long line of young and old, had laid his hands the more softly for his memories upon her brow with the impersonal prayer:

"Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace, that she may continue thine forever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until she come unto thy Everlasting Kingdom."

For days afterwards a steady radiance seemed to Isabel to rest upon her wherever she went, shed straight from Eternity. She had avoided her grandmother, secluded herself from the closest companions, been very thoughtful.

Years had elapsed since. But no experience of the soul is ever wasted or effaceable; and as the sound of the bells now reached her across the garden, they reawoke the spiritual impulses which had stirred within her at confirmation. First heard whispering then, the sacred annunciation now more eloquently urged that in her church, the hour of real need being come, she would find refuge, help, more than earthly counsellor.

She returned unobserved to the house and after quick simple preparation, was on her way.

When she slipped shrinkingly into her pew, scarce any one had arrived. Several women in mourning were there and two or three aged men. It is the sorrowful and the old who head the

human host in its march toward Paradise: Youth and Happiness loiter far behind and are satisfied with the earth. Isabel looked around with a poignant realization of the broken company over into which she had so swiftly crossed.

She had never before been in the church when it was empty. How hushed and solemn it waited in its noonday twilight—the Divine already there, faithful keeper of the ancient compact; the human not yet arrived. Here indeed was the refuge she had craved; here the wounded eye of the soul could open unhurt and unafraid; and she sank to her knees with a quick prayer of the heart, scarce of the lips, for Isabel knew nothing about prayer in her own words—that she might have peace of mind during these guarded hours: there would be so much time afterwards in which to remember—so many years in which to remember!

How still it was! At first she started at every sound: the barely audible opening and shutting of a pew door by some careful hand; the grating of wheels on the cobblestones outside as a carriage was driven to the entrance; the love-calls of sparrows building in the climbing oak around the Gothic windows.

Soon, however, her ear became sealed to all outward disturbance. She had fled to the church, driven by many young impulses, but among them was the keen hope that her new Sorrow, which had begun to follow her everywhere since she awoke, would wait outside when she entered those doors: so dark a spirit would surely not stalk behind her into the very splendor of the Spotless. But as she now let her eyes wander down the

isle to the chancel railing where she had knelt at confirmation, where bridal couples knelt in receiving the benediction, Isabel felt that this new Care faced her from there as from its appointed shrine; she even fancied that in effect it addressed to her a solemn warning:

"Isabel, think not to escape me in this place! It is here that Rowan must seem to you most unworthy and most false; to have wronged you most cruelly. For it was here, at this altar, that you had expected to kneel beside him and be blessed in your marriage. In years to come, sitting where you now sit, you may live to see him kneel here with another, making her his wife. But for you, Isabel, this spot must ever mean the renunciation of marriage, the bier of love. Then do not think to escape me here, me, who am Remembrance."

And Isabel, as though a command had been laid upon her, with her eyes fixed on the altar over which the lights of the stained glass windows were joyously playing, gave herself up to memories of all the innocent years that she had known Rowan and of the blind years that she had loved him.

She was not herself aware that marriage was the only sacrament of religion that had ever possessed interest for her. Recollection told her no story of how even as a child she had liked to go to the crowded church with other children and watch the procession of the brides—all mysterious under their white veils, and following one and another so closely during springs and autumns that in truth they were almost a procession. Or with

what excitement she had watched each walk out, leaning on the arm of the man she had chosen and henceforth to be called his in all things to the end while the loud crash of the wedding march closed their separate pasts with a single melody.

But there were mothers in the church who, attracted by the child's expression, would say to each other a little sadly perhaps, that love and marriage were destined to be the one overshadowing or overshadowing experience in life to this most human and poetic soul.

After she had learned of Rowan's love for her and had begun to return his love, the altar had thenceforth become the more personal symbol of their destined happiness. Every marriage that she witnessed bound her more sacredly to him. Only a few months before this, at the wedding of the Osborns—Kate being her closest friend, and George Osborn being Rowan's—he and she had been the only attendants; and she knew how many persons in the church were thinking that they might be the next to plight their vows; with crimsoning cheeks she had thought it herself.

Now there returned before Isabel's eyes the once radiant procession of the brides—but how changed! And bitter questioning she addressed to each! Had any such confession been made to any one of them—either before marriage or afterwards—by the man she had loved? Was it for some such reason that one had been content to fold her hands over her breast before the birth of her child? Was this why another lived on, sad young

wife, motherless? Was this why in the town there were women who refused to marry at all? So does a little knowledge of evil move backward and darken for us even the bright years in which it had no place.

The congregation were assembling rapidly. Among those who passed further down were several of the girls of Isabel's set. How fresh and sweet they looked as they drifted gracefully down the aisles this summer morning! How light-hearted! How far away from her in her new wretchedness! Some, after they were seated, glanced back with a smile. She avoided their eyes.

A little later the Osborns entered, the bride and groom of a few months before. Their pew was immediately in front of hers. Kate wore mourning for her mother. As she seated herself, she lifted her veil halfway, turned and slipped a hand over the pew into Isabel's. The tremulous pressure of the fingers spoke of present trouble; and as Isabel returned it with a quick response of her own, a tear fell from the hidden eyes.

The young groom's eyes were also red and swollen, but for other reasons; and he sat in the opposite end of the pew as far as possible from his wife's side. When she a few moments later leaned toward him with timidity and hesitation, offering him an open prayer-book, he took it coldly and laid it between them on the cushion. Isabel shuddered: her new knowledge of evil so cruelly opened her eyes to the full understanding of so much.

Little time was left for sympathy with Kate. Nearer the pulpit was another pew from which her thoughts had never been

wholly withdrawn. She had watched it with the fascination of abhorrence; and once, feeling that she could not bear to see him come in with his mother and younger brother, she had started to leave the church. But just then her grandmother had bustled richly in, followed by her aunt; and more powerful with Isabel already than any other feeling was the wish to bury her secret—Rowan's secret—in the deepest vault of consciousness, to seal it up forever from the knowledge of the world.

The next moment what she so dreaded took place. He walked quietly down the aisle as usual, opened the pew for his mother and brother with the same courtesy, and the three bent their heads together in prayer.

"Grandmother," she whispered quickly, "will you let me pass! I am not very well, I think I shall go home."

Her grandmother, not heeding and with her eyes fixed upon the same pew, whispered in return;

"The Merediths are here," and continued her satisfying scrutiny of persons seated around.

Isabel herself had no sooner suffered the words to escape than she regretted them. Resolved to control herself from this time on, she unclasped her prayer-book, found the appointed reading, and directed her thoughts to the service soon to begin.

It was part of the confession of David that reached her, sounding across how many centuries. Wrung from him who had been a young man himself and knew what a young man is. With time enough afterwards to think of this as soldier, priest, prophet,

care-worn king, and fallible judge over men—with time enough to think of what his days of nature had been when he tended sheep grazing the pastures of Bethlehem or abided solitary with the flock by night, lowly despised work, under the herded stars. Thus converting a young man's memories into an older man's remorse.

As she began to read, the first outcry gripped and cramped her heart like physical pain; where all her life she had been repeating mere words, she now with eyes tragically opened discerned forbidden meanings:

"Thou art about my path and about my bed . . . the darkness is no darkness to thee. . . . Thine eyes did see my substance being yet imperfect . . . look well if there be any wickedness in me; and lead me in the way everlasting . . . haste thee unto me . . . when I cry unto thee. O let not my heart be inclined to an evil thing."

She was startled by a general movement throughout the congregation.

The minister had advanced to the reading desk and begun to read:

"I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

Ages stretched their human wastes between these words of the New Testament and those other words of the Old; but the parable of Christ really finished the prayer of David: in each there was the same young prodigal—the ever-falling youth of humanity.

Another moment and the whole congregation knelt and began the confession. Isabel also from long custom sank upon her knees and started to repeat the words, "We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep." Then she stopped. She declined to make that confession with Rowan or to join in any service that he shared and appropriated.

The Commandments now remained and for the first time she shrank from them as being so awful and so near. All our lives we placidly say over to ourselves that man is mortal; but not until death knocks at the threshold and enters do we realize the terrors of our mortality. All our lives we repeat with dull indifference that man is erring; but only when the soul most loved and trusted has gone astray, do we begin to realize the tragedy of human imperfection. So Isabel had been used to go through the service, with bowed head murmuring at each response, "*Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.*"

But the laws themselves had been no more to her than pious archaic statements, as far removed as the cherubim, the candlesticks and the cedar of Solomon's temple. If her thoughts had been forced to the subject, she would have perhaps admitted the necessity of these rules for men and women ages ago. Some one of them might have meant much to a girl in those dim days: to Rebecca pondering who knows what temptation at the well; to Ruth tempted who knows how in the corn and thinking of Boaz and the barn; to Judith plotting in the camp; to Jephtha's daughter out on the wailing mountains.

But to-day, sitting in an Episcopal church in the closing years of the nineteenth century, holding a copy of those old laws, and thinking of Rowan as the breaker of the greatest of them, Isabel for the first time awoke to realization of how close they are still—those voices from the far land of Shinar; how all the men and women around her in that church still waged their moral battles over those few texts of righteousness; how the sad and sublime wandering caravans of the whole race forever pitch their nightly tents beneath that same mountain of command.

Thick and low sounded the response of the worshippers. She could hear her grandmother's sonorous voice, a mingling of worldly triumph and indifference; her aunt's plaintive and aggrieved. She could hear Kate's needy and wounded. In imagination she could hear his proud, noble mother's; his younger brother's. Against the sound of his responses she closed all hearing; and there low on her knees, in the ear of Heaven itself, she recorded against him her unforgiveness and her dismissal forever.

An organ melody followed, thrillingly sweet; and borne outward on it the beseeching of the All-Merciful:

"Art thou weary, art thou languid,
Art thou sore distressed?
Come to me!' saith one; 'and, coming,
Be at rest!'"

It was this hymn that brought her in a passion to her feet.

With whatsoever other feelings she had sought the church, it was at least with the hope that it had a message for her. She had indeed listened to a personal message, but it was a message delivered to the wrong person; for at every stage of the worship she, the innocent, had been forgotten and slighted; Rowan, the guilty, had been considered and comforted. David had his like in mind and besought pardon for him; the prophet of old knew of a case like his and blessed him; the apostle centuries afterward looked on and did not condemn; Christ himself had in a way told the multitude the same story that Rowan had told her,—counselling forgiveness. The very hymns of the church were on Rowan's side—every one gone in search of the wanderer. For on this day Religion, universal mother of needy souls and a minister of all comforts, was in the mood to deal only with youth and human frailty.

She rebelled. It was like commanding her to dishonor a woman's strongest and purest instincts. It called upon her to sympathize with the evil that had blighted her life. And Rowan himself!—in her anger and suffering she could think of him in no other way than as enjoying this immortal chorus of anxiety on his account; as hearing it all with complacency and self-approval. It had to her distorted imagination the effect of offering a reward to him for having sinned; he would have received no such attention had he remained innocent.

With one act of complete revulsion she spurned it all: the moral casuistry that beguiled him, the church that cloaked him;

spurned psalm and prophet and apostle, Christ and parable and song.

"Grandmother," she whispered, "I shall not wait for the sermon."

A moment later she issued from the church doors and took her way slowly homeward through the deserted streets, under the lonely blue of the unanswering sky.

III

The Conyers homestead was situated in a quiet street on the southern edge of the town. All the houses in that block had been built by people of English descent near the close of the eighteenth or at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Each was set apart from each by lawns, yards and gardens, and further screened by shrubs and vines in accordance with old English custom. Where they grew had once been the heart of a wilderness; and above each house stood a few old forest trees, indifferent guardsmen of the camping generations.

The architects had given to the buildings good strong characters; the family living in each for a hundred years or more had long since imparted reputation. Out of the windows girlish brides had looked on reddening springs and whitening winters until they had become silver-haired grandmothers themselves; then had looked no more; and succeeding eyes had watched the swift pageants of the earth, and the swifter pageants of mortal hope and passion. Out of the front doors, sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons had gone away to the cotton and sugar and rice plantations of the South, to new farm lands of the West, to the professions in cities of the North. The mirrors within held long vistas of wavering forms and vanishing faces; against the walls of the rooms had beaten unremembered tides of strong and of gentle voices. In the parlors what scenes of lights and music,

sheen of satins, flashing of gems; in the dining rooms what feastings as in hale England, with all the robust humors of the warm land, of the warm heart.

Near the middle of the block and shaded by forest trees, stood with its heirlooms and treasures the home of Isabel's grandmother. Known to be heiress to this though rich in her own right was Isabel herself, that grandmother's idol, the only one of its beautiful women remaining yet to be married; and to celebrate with magnificence in this house Isabel's marriage to Rowan Meredith had long been planned by the grandmother as the last scene of her own splendid social drama: having achieved that, she felt she should be willing to retire from the stage—and to play only behind the curtain.

It was the middle of the afternoon of the same Sunday. In the parlors extending along the eastern side of the house there was a single sound: the audible but healthful breathing of a sleeper lying on a sofa in the coolest corner. It was Isabel's grandmother nearing the end of her customary nap.

Sometimes there are households in which two members suggest the single canvas of a mediaeval painter, depicting scenes that represent a higher and a lower world: above may be peaks, clouds, sublimity, the Transfiguration; underneath, the pursuits and passions of local worldly life—some story of loaves and fishes and of a being possessed by a devil. Isabel and her grandmother were related as parts of some such painting: the grandmother was the bottom of the canvas.

In a little while she awoke and uncoiling her figure, rolled softly over on her back and stretched like some drowsy feline of the jungle; then sitting up with lithe grace she looked down at the print of her head on the pillow and deftly smoothed it out. The action was characteristic: she was careful to hide the traces of her behavior, and the habit was so strong that it extended to things innocent as slumber. Letting her hands drop to the sofa, she yawned and shook her head from side to side with that short laugh by which we express amusement at our own comfort and well-being.

Beside the sofa, toe by toe and heel by heel, sat her slippers—the pads of this leopardess of the parlors. She peered over and worked her nimble feet into these. On a little table at the end of the sofa lay her glasses, her fan, and a small bell. She passed her fingers along her temples in search of small disorders in the scant tufts of her hair, put on her glasses, and took the fan. Then she glided across the room to one of the front windows, sat down and raised the blind a few inches in order to peep out: so the well-fed, well-fanged leopardess with lowered head gazes idly through her green leaves.

It was very hot. With her nostrils close to the opening in the shutters, she inhaled the heated air of the yard of drying grass. On the white window-sill just outside, a bronze wasp was whirling excitedly, that cautious stinger which never arrives until summer is sure. The oleanders in the big green tubs looked wilted though abundantly watered that morning.

She shot a furtive glance at the doors and windows of the houses across the street. All were closed; and she formed her own pictures of how people inside were sleeping, lounging, idly reading until evening coolness should invite them again to the verandas and the streets.

No one passed but gay strolling negroes. She was seventy years old, but her interest in life was insatiable; and it was in part, perhaps, the secret of her amazing vitality and youthfulness that her surroundings never bored her; she derived instant pleasure from the nearest spectacle, always exercising her powers humorously upon the world, never upon herself. For lack of other entertainment she now fell upon these vulnerable figures, and began to criticise and to laugh at them: she did not have to descend far to reach this level. Her undimmed eyes swept everything—walk, imitative manners, imitative dress.

Suddenly she withdrew her face from the blinds; young Meredith had entered the gate and was coming up the pavement. If anything could greatly have increased her happiness at this moment it would have been the sight of him. He had been with Isabel until late the night before; he had attended morning service and afterward gone home with his mother and brother (she had watched the carriage as it rolled away down the street); he had returned at this unusual hour. Such eagerness had her approval; and coupling it with Isabel's demeanor upon leaving the table the previous evening, never before so radiant with love, she felt that she had ground for believing the final ambition of her life near

its fulfilment.

As he advanced, the worldly passions other nature—the jungle passions—she had no others—saluted him with enthusiasm. His head and neck and bearing, stature and figure, family and family history, house and lands—she inventoried them all once more and discovered no lack. When he had rung the bell, she leaned back; in her chair and eavesdropped with sparkling eyes.

"Is Miss Conyers at home?"

The maid replied apologetically:

"She wished to be excused to-day, Mr. Meredith."

A short silence followed. Then he spoke as a man long conscious of a peculiar footing:

"Will you tell her Mr. Meredith would like to see her," and without waiting to be invited he walked into the library across the hall.

She heard the maid go upstairs with hesitating step.

Some time passed before she came down. She brought a note and handed it to him, saying with some embarrassment:

"She asked me to give you this note, Mr. Meredith."

Listening with sudden tenseness of attention, Mrs. Conyers heard him draw the sheet from the envelope and a moment later crush it.

She placed her eyes against the shutters and watched him as he walked away; then she leaned back in her chair, thoughtful and surprised. What was the meaning of this? The events of the day were rapidly reviewed: that Isabel had not spoken with her

after breakfast; that she had gone to service at an unusual hour and had left the church before the sermon; that she had effaced herself at dinner and at once thereafter had gone up to her rooms, where she still remained.

Returning to the sofa she lay down, having first rung her bell. When the maid appeared, she rubbed her eyelids and sat sleepily up as though just awakened: she remembered that she had eavesdropped, and the maid must be persuaded that she had not. Guilt is a bad logician.

"Where is your Miss Isabel?"

"She is in her room, Miss Henrietta."

"Go up and tell her that I say come down into the parlors: it is cooler down here. And ask her whether she'd like some sherbet. And bring me some—bring it before you go."

A few moments later the maid reentered with the sherbet. She lifted the cut-glass dish from the silver waiter with soft purrings of the palate, and began to attack the minute snow mountain around the base and up the sides with eager jabs and stabs, depositing the spoonfuls upon a tongue as fresh as a child's. Momentarily she forgot even her annoyance; food instantly absorbed and placated her as it does the carnivora.

The maid reentered.

"She says she doesn't wish any sherbet, Miss Henrietta."

"Did she say she would come down?"

"She did not say, Miss Henrietta."

"Go back and tell her I'd like to see her: ask her to come

down into the parlors." Then she hurried back to the sherbet. She wanted her granddaughter, but she wanted that first.

Her thoughts ascended meantime to Isabel in the room above. She finished the sherbet. She waited. Impatience darkened to uneasiness and anger. Still she waited; and her finger nails began to scratch audibly at the mahogany of her chair and a light to burn in the tawny eyes.

In the room overhead Isabel's thoughts all this time were descending to her grandmother. Before the message was delivered it had been her intention to go down. Once she had even reached the head of the staircase; but then had faltered and shrunk back. When the message came, it rendered her less inclined to risk the interview. Coming at such an hour, that message was suspicious. She, moreover, naturally had learned to dread her grandmother's words when they looked most innocent. Thus she, too, waited—lacking the resolution to descend.

As she walked homeward from church she realized that she must take steps at once to discard Rowan as the duty of her social position. And here tangible perplexities instantly wove themselves across her path. Conscience had promptly arraigned him at the altar of religion. It was easy to condemn him there. And no one had the right to question that arraignment and that condemnation. But public severance of all relations with him in her social world—how should she accomplish that and withhold her justification?

Her own kindred would wish to understand the reason. The

branches of these scattered far and near were prominent each in its sphere, and all were intimately bound together by the one passion of clannish allegiance to the family past. She knew that Rowan's attentions had continued so long and had been so marked, that her grandmother had accepted marriage between them as a foregone conclusion, and in letters had disseminated these prophecies through the family connection. Other letters had even come back to Isabel, containing evidence only too plain that Rowan had been discussed and accepted in domestic councils. Against all inward protests of delicacy, she had been forced to receive congratulations that in this marriage she would preserve the traditions of the family by bringing into it a man of good blood and of unspotted name; the two idols of all the far separated hearthstones.

To the pride of all these relatives she added her own pride—the highest. She was the last of the women in the direct line yet unwedded, and she was sensitive that her choice should not in honor and in worth fall short of the alliances that had preceded hers. Involved in this sense of pride she felt that she owed a duty to the generations who had borne her family name in this country and to the still earlier generations who had given it distinction in England—land of her womanly ideals. To discard now without a word of explanation the man whose suit she had long been understood to favor would create wide disappointment and provoke keen question.

Further difficulties confronted her from Rowan's side. His

own family and kindred were people strong and not to be trifled with, proud and conservative like her own. Corresponding resentments would be aroused among them, questions would be asked that had no answers. She felt that her life in its most private and sacred relation would be publicly arraigned and have open judgment passed upon it by conflicting interests and passions—and that the mystery which contained her justification must also forever conceal it.

Nevertheless Rowan must be discarded; she must act quickly and for the best.

On the very threshold one painful necessity faced her: the reserve of years must be laid aside and her grandmother admitted to confidence in her plans. Anything that she might do could not escape those watchful eyes long since grown impatient. Moreover despite differences of character, she and her grandmother had always lived together, and they must now stand together before their world in regard to this step.

"Did you wish to see me about anything, grandmother?"

Mrs. Conyers had not heard Isabel's quiet entrance. She was at the window still: she turned softly in her chair and looked across the darkened room to where Isabel sat facing her—a barely discernible white figure.

From any other member other family she would roughly have demanded the explanation she desired. She was the mother of strong men (they were living far from her now), and even in his manhood no one of them had ever crossed her will without

bearing away the scars of her anger, and always of her revenge. But before this grandchild, whom she had reared from infancy, she felt the brute cowardice which is often the only tribute that a debased nature can pay to the incorruptible. Her love must have its basis in some abject emotion: it took its origin from fear.

An unforeseen incident, occurring when Isabel was yet a child and all but daily putting forth new growths of nature, rendered very clear even then the developing antagonism and prospective relationship of these two characters. In a company of ladies the grandmother, drawing the conversation to herself, remarked with a suggestive laugh that as there were no men present she would tell a certain story. "Grandmother," interposed Isabel, vaguely startled, "please do not say anything that you would not say before a man;" and for an instant, amid the hush, the child and the woman looked at each other like two repellent intelligences, accidentally meeting out of the heavens and the pit.

This had been the first of a long series of antagonism and recoils, and as the child had matured, the purity and loftiness of her nature had by this very contact grown chilled toward austerity. Thus nature lends a gradual protective hardening to a tender surface during abrasion with a coarser thing. It left Isabel more reserved with her grandmother than with any one else of all the persons who entered into her life.

For this reason Mrs. Conyers now foresaw that this interview would be specially difficult. She had never enjoyed Isabel's confidence in regard to her love affairs—and the girl had had her

share of these; every attempt to gain it had been met by rebuffs so courteous but decisive that they had always wounded her pride and sometimes had lashed her to secret fury.

"Did you wish to see me about anything, grandmother?"

The reply came very quickly: "I wanted to know whether you were well."

"I am perfectly well. Why did you think of asking?"

"You did not seem well in church."

"I had forgotten. I was not well in church."

Mrs. Conyers bent over and drew a chair in front of her own. She wished to watch Isabel's face. She had been a close student of women's faces—and of many men's.

"Sit here. There is a breeze through the window."

"Thank you. I'd rather sit here."

Another pause ensued.

"Did you ever know the last of May to be so hot?"

"I cannot remember now."

"Can you imagine any one calling on such an afternoon?"

There was no reply.

"I am glad no one has been here. While I was asleep I thought I heard the bell."

There was no reply.

"You were wise not to stay for the sermon." Mrs. Conyers' voice trembled with anger as she passed on and on, seeking a penetrable point for conversation. "I do not believe in using the church to teach young men that they should blame their fathers

for their own misdeeds. If I have done any good in this world, I do not expect my father and mother to be rewarded for it in the next; if I have done wrong, I do not expect my children to be punished. I shall claim the reward and I shall stand the punishment, and that is the end of it. Teaching young men to blame their parents because they are prodigals is nonsense, and injurious nonsense. I hope you do not imagine," she said, with a stroke of characteristic coarseness, "that you get any of your faults from me."

"I have never held you responsible, grandmother."

Mrs. Conyers could wait no longer.

"Isabel," she asked sharply, "why did you not see Rowan when he called a few minutes ago?"

"Grandmother, you know that I do not answer such questions."

How often in years gone by such had been Isabel's answer! The grandmother awaited it now. To her surprise Isabel after some moments of hesitation replied without resentment:

"I did not wish to see him."

There was a momentary pause; then this unexpected weakness was met with a blow.

"You were eager enough to see him last night."

"I can only hope," murmured Isabel aloud though wholly to herself, "that I did not make this plain to him."

"But what has happened since?"

Nothing was said for a while. The two women had been unable to see each other clearly. A moment later Isabel crossed the room quickly and taking the chair in front of her grandmother,

searched that treacherous face imploringly for something better in it than she had ever seen there. Could she trust the untrustworthy? Would falseness itself for once be true?

"Grandmother," she said, and her voice betrayed how she shrank from her own words, "before you sent for me I was about to come down. I wished to speak with you about a very delicate matter, a very serious matter. You have often reproached me for not taking you into my confidence. I am going to give you my confidence now."

At any other moment the distrust and indignity contained in the tone of this avowal would not have escaped Mrs. Conyers. But surprise riveted her attention. Isabel gave her no time further:

"A thing has occurred in regard to which we must act together for our own sakes—on account of the servants in the house—on account of our friends, so that there may be no gossip, no scandal."

Nothing at times so startles us as our own words. As the girl uttered the word "scandal," she rose frightened as though it faced her and began to walk excitedly backward and forward. Scandal had never touched her life. She had never talked scandal; had never thought scandal. Dwelling under the same roof with it as the master passion of a life and forced to encounter it in so many repulsive ways, she had needed little virtue to regard it with abhorrence.

Now she perceived that it might be perilously near herself. When all questions were asked and no reasons were given, would

not the seeds of gossip fly and sprout and bear their kinds about her path: and the truth could never be told. She must walk on through the years, possibly misjudged, giving no sign.

After a while she returned to her seat.

"You must promise me one thing," she said with white and trembling lips. "I give you my confidence as far as I can; beyond that I will not go. And you shall not ask. You are not to try to find out from me or any one else more than I tell you. You must give me your word of honor!"

She bent forward and looked her grandmother wretchedly in the eyes.

Mrs. Conyers pushed her chair back as though a hand had struck her rudely in the face.

"Isabel," she cried, "do you forget to whom you are speaking?"

"Ah, grandmother," exclaimed Isabel, reckless of her words by reason of suffering, "it is too late for us to be sensitive about our characters."

Mrs. Conyers rose with insulted pride: "Do not come to me with your confidence until you can give it."

Isabel recrossed the room and sank into the seat she had quitted.

Mrs. Conyers remained standing a moment and furtively resumed hers.

Whatever her failings had been—one might well say her crimes—Isabel had always treated her from the level of her own high nature. But Mrs. Conyers had accepted this dutiful

demeanor of the years as a tribute to her own virtues. Now that Isabel, the one person whose respect she most desired, had openly avowed deep distrust of her, the shock was as real as anything life could have dealt.

She glanced narrowly at Isabel: the girl had forgotten her.

Mrs. Conyers could shift as the wind shifts; and one of her characteristic resources in life had been to conquer by feigning defeat: she often scaled her mountains by seeming to take a path which led to the valleys. She now crossed over and sat down with a peace-making laugh. She attempted to take Isabel's hand, but it was quickly withdrawn. Fearing that this movement indicated a receding confidence Mrs. Conyers ignored the rebuff and pressed her inquiry in a new, entirely practical, and pleasant tone:

"What is the meaning of all this, Isabel?"

Isabel turned upon her again a silent, searching, wretched look of appeal.

Mrs. Conyers realized that it could not be ignored: "You know that I promise anything. What did I ever refuse you?"

Isabel sat up but still remained silent. Mrs. Conyers noted the indecision and shrugged her shoulders with a careless dismissal of the whole subject:

"Let us drop the subject, then. Do you think it will rain?"

"Grandmother, Rowan must not come here any more." Isabel stopped abruptly. "That is all."

... "I merely wanted you to understand this at once. We must

not invite him here any more."

... "If we meet him at the houses of our friends, we must do what we can not to be discourteous to them if he is their guest."

... "If we meet Rowan alone anywhere, we must let him know that he is not on the list of our acquaintances any longer. That is all."

Isabel wrung her hands.

Mrs. Conyers had more than one of the traits of the jungle: she knew when to lie silent and how to wait. She waited longer now, but Isabel had relapsed into her own thoughts. For her the interview was at an end; to Mrs. Conyers it was beginning. Isabel's words and manner had revealed a situation far more serious than she had believed to exist. A sense of personal slights and wounds gave way to apprehension. The need of the moment was not passion and resentment, but tact and coolness and apparent unconcern.

"What is the meaning of this, Isabel?" She spoke in a tone of frank and cordial interest as though the way were clear at last for the establishment of complete confidence between them.

"Grandmother, did you not give me your word?" said Isabel, sternly. Mrs. Conyers grew indignant: "But remember in what a light you place me! I did not expect you to require me to be unreasonable and unjust. Do you really wish me to be kept in the dark in a matter like this? Must I refuse to speak to Rowan and have no reason? Close the house to him and not know why? Cut him in public without his having offended me? If he should ask

why I treat him in this way, what am I to tell him?"

"He will never ask," said Isabel with mournful abstraction.

"But tell *me* why you wish me to act so strangely."

"Believe that I have reasons."

"But ought I not to know what these reasons are if I must act upon them as though they were my own?"

Isabel saw the stirrings of a mind that brushed away honor as an obstacle and that was not to be quieted until it had been satisfied. She sank back into her chair, saying very simply with deep disappointment and with deeper sorrow:

"Ah, I might have known!"

Mrs. Conyers pressed forward with gathering determination:

"What happened last night?"

"I might have known that it was of no use," repeated Isabel.

Mrs. Conyers waited several moments and then suddenly changing her course feigned the dismissal of the whole subject: "I shall pay no attention to this. I shall continue to treat Rowan as I have always treated him."

Isabel started up: "Grandmother, if you do, you will regret it."

Her voice rang clear with hidden meaning and with hidden warning.

It fell upon the ear of the other with threatening import. For her there seemed to be in it indeed the ruin of a cherished plan, the loss of years of hope and waiting. Before such a possibility tact and coolness and apparent unconcern were swept away by passion, brutal and unreckoning: "Do you mean that you have

refused Rowan? Or have you found out at last that he has no intention of marrying you—has never had any?"

Isabel rose: "Excuse me," she said proudly and turned away. She reached the door and pausing there put out one of her hands against the lintel as if with weakness and raised the other to her forehead as though with bewilderment and indecision.

Then she came unsteadily back, sank upon her knees, and hid her face in her grandmother's lap, murmuring through her fingers: "I have been rude to you, grandmother! Forgive me! I do not know what I have been saying. But any little trouble between us is nothing, nothing! And do as I beg you—let this be sacred and secret! And leave everything to me!"

She crept closer and lifting her face looked up into her grandmother's. She shrank back shuddering from what she saw there, burying her face in her hands; then rising she hurried from the room, Mrs. Conyers sat motionless.

Was it true then that the desire and the work of years for this marriage had come to nothing? And was it true that this grandchild, for whom she had planned and plotted, did not even respect her and could tell her so to her face?

Those insulting words rang in her ears still: "*You must give me your word of honor . . . it is too late to be sensitive about our characters.*"

She sat perfectly still: and in the parlors there might have been heard at intervals the scratching of her sharp finger nails against the wood of the chair.

IV

The hot day ended. Toward sunset a thunder-shower drenched the earth, and the night had begun cool and refreshing.

Mrs. Conyers was sitting on the front veranda, waiting for her regular Sunday evening visitor. She was no longer the self-revealed woman of the afternoon, but seemingly an affable, harmless old lady of the night on the boundary of her social world. She was dressed with unfailing: elegance—and her taste lavished itself especially on black silk and the richest lace. The shade of heliotrope satin harmonized with the yellowish folds of her hair. Her small, warm, unwrinkled hands were without rings, being too delicately beautiful. In one she held a tiny fan, white and soft like the wing of a moth; on her lap lay a handkerchief as light as smoke or a web of gossamer.

She rocked softly. She unfolded and folded the night-moth fan softly. She touched the handkerchief to her rosy youthful lips softly. The south wind blew in her face softly. Everything about her was softness, all her movements were delicate and refined. Even the early soft beauty of her figure was not yet lost. (When a girl of nineteen, she had measured herself by the proportions of the ideal Venus; and the ordeal had left her with a girdle of golden reflections.)

But if some limner had been told the whole truth of what she was and been requested to imagine a fitting body for such a soul,

he would never have painted Mrs. Conyers as she looked. Nature is not frank in her characterizations, lest we remain infants in discernment. She allows foul to appear fair, and bids us become educated in the hardy virtues of insight and prudence. Education as yet had advanced but little; and the deepest students in the botany of women have been able to describe so few kinds that no man, walking through the perfumed enchanted wood, knows at what moment he may step upon or take hold of some unknown deadly variety.

As the moments passed, she stopped rocking and peered toward the front gate under the lamp-post, saying to herself:

"He is late."

At last the gate was gently opened and gently shut.

"Ah," she cried, leaning back in her chair smiling and satisfied. Then she sat up rigid. A change passed over her such as comes over a bird of prey when it draws its feathers in flat against its body to lessen friction in the swoop. She unconsciously closed the little fan, the little handkerchief disappeared somewhere.

As the gate had opened and closed, on the bricks of the pavement was heard only the tap of his stout walking-stick; for he was gouty and wore loose low shoes of the softest calfskin, and these made no noise except the slurring sound of slippers.

Once he stopped, and planting his cane far out in the grass, reached stiffly over and with undisguised ejaculations of discomfort snipped off a piece of heliotrope in one of the tubs of oleander. He shook away the raindrops and drew it through

his buttonhole, and she could hear his low "Ah! ah! ah!" as he thrust his nose down into it.

"There's nothing like it," he said aloud as though he had consenting listeners, "it outsmells creation."

He stopped at another tub of flowers where a humming-bird moth was gathering honey and jabbed his stick sharply at it, taking care that the stick did not reach perilously near.

"Get away, sir," he said; "you've had enough, sir. Get away, sir."

Having reached a gravel walk that diverged from the pavement, he turned off and went over to a rose-bush and walked around tapping the roses on their heads as he counted them—cloth-of-gold roses. "Very well done," he said, "a large family—a good sign."

Thus he loitered along his way with leisure to enjoy all the chance trifles that gladdened it; for he was one of the old who return at the end of life to the simple innocent things that pleased them as children.

She had risen and advanced to the edge of the veranda.

"Did you come to see me or did you come to see my flowers?" she called out charmingly.

"I came to see the flowers, madam," he called back. "Most of all, the century plant: how is she?"

She laughed delightedly: "Still harping on my age, I see."

"Still harping, but harping your praises. Century plants are not necessarily old: they are all young at the beginning! I merely

meant you'd be blooming at a hundred."

"You are a sly old fox," she retorted with a spirit. "You give a woman a dig on her age and then try to make her think it a compliment."

"I gave myself a dig that time: the remark had to be excavated," he said aloud but as though confidentially to himself. Open disrespect marked his speech and manner with her always; and sooner or later she exacted full punishment.

Meantime he had reached the steps. There he stopped and taking off his straw hat looked up and shook it reproachfully at the heavens.

"What a night, what a night!" he exclaimed. "And what an injustice to a man wading up to his knees in life's winters."

"How do you do," she said impatiently, always finding it hard to put up with his lingerings and delays. "Are you coming in?"

"Thank you, I believe I am. But no, wait. I'll not come in until I have made a speech. It never occurred to me before and it will never again. It's now or never.

"The life of man should last a single year. He should have one spring for birth and childhood, for play and growth, for the ending of his dreams and the beginning of his love. One summer for strife and toil and passion. One autumn in which to gather the fruits of his deeds and to live upon them, be they sweet or bitter. One winter in which to come to an end and wrap himself with resignation in the snows of nature. Thus he should never know the pain of seeing spring return when there was nothing within

himself to bud or be sown. Summer would never rage and he have no conflicts nor passions. Autumn would not pass and he with idle hands neither give nor gather. And winter should not end without extinguishing his tormenting fires, and leaving him the peace of eternal cold."

"Really," she cried, "I have never heard anything as fine as that since I used to write compositions at boarding-school."

"It may be part of one of mine!" he replied. "We forget ourselves, you know, and then we think we are original."

"Second childhood," she suggested. "Are you really coming in?"

"I am, madam," he replied. "And guided by your suggestion, I come as a second child."

When he had reached the top step, he laid his hat and cane on the porch and took her hands in his—pressing them abstemiously.

"Excuse me if I do not press harder," he said, lowering his voice as though he fancied they might be overheard. "I know you are sensitive in these little matters; but while I dislike to appear lukewarm, really, you know it is too late to be ardent," and he looked at her ardently.

She twisted her fingers out of his with coy shame.

"What an old fox," she repeated gayly.

"Well, you know what goes with the fox—the foxess, or the foxina."

She had placed his chair not quite beside hers yet designedly

near, where the light of the chandelier in the hall would fall out upon him and passers could see that he was there: she liked to have him appear devoted. For his part he was too little devoted to care whether he sat far or near, in front or behind. As the light streamed out upon him, it illumined his noble head of soft, silvery hair, which fell over his ears and forehead, forgotten and disordered, like a romping boy's. His complexion was ruddy—too ruddy with high living; his clean-shaven face beautiful with candor, gayety, and sweetness; and his eyes, the eyes of a kind heart—saddened. He had on a big loose shirt collar such as men wore in Thackeray's time and a snow-white lawn tie. In the bosom of his broad-pleated shirt, made glossy with paraffin starch, there was set an old-fashioned cluster-diamond stud—so enormous that it looked like a large family of young diamonds in a golden nest.

As he took his seat, he planted his big gold-headed ebony cane between his knees, put his hat on the head of his cane, gave it a twirl, and looking over sidewise at her, smiled with an equal mixture of real liking and settled abhorrence.

For a good many years these two had been—not friends: she was incapable of so true a passion; he was too capable to misapply it so unerringly. Their association had assumed the character of one of those belated intimacies, which sometimes spring up in the lives of aged men and women when each wants companionship but has been left companionless.

Time was when he could not have believed that any tie

whatsoever would ever exist between them. Her first husband had been his first law partner; and from what he had been forced to observe concerning his partner's fireside wretchedness during his few years of married life, he had learned to fear and to hate her. With his quick temper and honest way he made no pretence of hiding his feeling—declined her invitations—cut her openly in society—and said why. When his partner died, not killed indeed but broken-spirited, he spoke his mind on the subject more publicly and plainly still.

She brewed the poison of revenge and waited.

A year or two later when his engagement was announced her opportunity came. In a single day it was done—so quietly, so perfectly, that no one knew by whom. Scandal was set running—Scandal, which no pursuing messengers of truth and justice can ever overtake and drag backward along its path. His engagement was broken; she whom he was to wed in time married one of his friends; and for years his own life all but went to pieces.

Time is naught, existence a span. One evening when she was old Mrs. Conyers, and he old Judge Morris, she sixty and he sixty-five, they met at an evening party. In all those years he had never spoken to her, nurturing his original dislike and rather suspecting that it was she who had so ruined him. But on this night there had been a great supper and with him a great supper was a great weakness: there had been wine, and wine was not a weakness at all, but a glass merely made him more than happy, more than kind. Soon after supper therefore he was strolling

through the emptied rooms in a rather lonesome way, his face like a red moon in a fog, beseeching only that it might shed its rays impartially on any approachable darkness.

Men with wives and children can well afford to turn hard cold faces to the outside world: the warmth and tenderness of which they are capable they can exercise within their own restricted enclosures. No doubt some of them consciously enjoy the contrast in their two selves—the one as seen abroad and the other as understood at home. But a wifeless, childless man—wandering at large on the heart's bleak common—has much the same reason to smile on all that he has to smile on any: there is no domestic enclosure for him: his affections must embrace humanity.

As he strolled through the rooms, then, in his appealing way, seeking whom he could attach himself to, he came upon her seated in a doorway connecting two rooms. She sat alone on a short sofa, possibly by design, her train so arranged that he must step over it if he advanced—the only being in the world that he hated. In the embarrassment of turning his back upon her or of trampling her train, he hesitated; smiling with lowered eyelids she motioned him to a seat by her side.

"What a vivacious, agreeable old woman," he soliloquized with enthusiasm as he was driven home that night, sitting in the middle of the carriage cushions with one arm swung impartially through the strap on each side. "And she has invited me to Sunday evening supper. Me!—after all these years—in that house! I'll

not go."

But he went.

"I'll not go again," he declared as he reached home that night and thought it over. "She is a bad woman."

But the following Sunday evening he reached for his hat and cane: "I must go somewhere," he complained resentfully. "The saints of my generation are enjoying the saint's rest. Nobody is left but a few long-lived sinners, of whom I am a great part. They are the best I can find, and I suppose they are the best I deserve."

Those who live long miss many. Without exception his former associates at the bar had been summoned to appear before the Judge who accepts no bribe.

The ablest of the middle-aged lawyers often hurried over to consult him in difficult cases. All of them could occasionally listen while he, praiser of a bygone time, recalled the great period of practice when he was the favorite criminal lawyer of the first families, defending their sons against the commonwealth which he always insisted was the greater criminal. The young men about town knew him and were ready to chat with him on street corners—but never very long at a time. In his old law offices he could spend part of every day, guiding or guying his nephew Barbee, who had just begun to practice. But when all his social resources were reckoned, his days contained great voids and his nights were lonelier still. The society of women remained a necessity of his life; and the only woman in town, always bright, always full of ideas, and always glad to see him (the main difficulty) was Mrs.

Conyers.

So that for years now he had been going regularly on Sunday evenings. He kept up apologies to his conscience regularly also; but it must have become clear that his conscience was not a fire to make him boil; it was merely a few coals to keep him bubbling.

In this acceptance of her at the end of life there was of course mournful evidence of his own deterioration. During the years between being a young man and being an old one he had so far descended toward her level, that upon renewing acquaintance with her he actually thought that she had improved.

Youth with its white-flaming ideals is the great separator; by middle age most of us have become so shaken down, on life's rough road, to a certain equality of bearing and forbearing, that miscellaneous comradeship becomes easy and rather comforting; while extremely aged people are as compatible and as miserable as disabled old eagles, grouped with a few inches of each other's beaks and claws on the sleek perches of a cage.

This evening therefore, as he took his seat and looked across at her, so richly dressed, so youthful, soft, and rosy, he all but thanked heaven out loud that she was at home.

"Madam," he cried, "you are a wonderful and bewitching old lady"—it was on the tip of his tongue to say "beldam."

"I know it," she replied briskly, "have you been so long in finding it out?"

"It is a fresh discovery every time I come."

"Then you forget me in the meanwhile."

"I never forget you unless I am thinking of Miss Isabel. How is she?"

"Not well."

"Then I'm not well! No one is well! Everybody must suffer if she is suffering. The universe sympathizes."

"She is not ill. She is in trouble."

"But she must not be in trouble! She has done nothing to be in trouble about. Who troubles her? What troubles her?"

"She will not tell."

"Ah!" he cried, checking himself gravely and dropping the subject.

She noted the decisive change of tone: it was not by this direct route that she would be able to enter his confidence.

"What did you think of the sermon this morning?"

"The sermon on the prodigal? Well, it is too late for such sermons to be levelled at me; and I never listen to those aimed at other people."

"At what other people do you suppose this one could have been directed?" She asked the question most carelessly, lifting her imponderable handkerchief and letting it drop into her lap as a sign of how little her interest weighed.

"It is not my duty to judge."

"We cannot help our thoughts, you know."

"I think we can, madam; and I also think we can hold our tongues," and he laughed at her very good-naturedly. "Sometimes we can even help to hold other people's—if they are

long."

"Oh, what a rude speech to a lady!" she exclaimed gallantly. "Did you see the Osborns at church? And did you notice him? What an unhappy marriage! He is breaking Kate's heart. And to think that his character—or the lack of it—should have been discovered only when it was too late! How can you men so cloak yourselves before marriage? Why not tell women the truth then instead of leaving them to find it out afterward? Are he and Rowan as good friends as ever?" The question was asked with the air of guilelessness.

"I know nothing about that," he replied dryly. "I never knew Rowan to drop his friends because they had failings: it would break up all friendships, I imagine."

"Well, I cannot help *my* thoughts, and I think George Osborn was the prodigal aimed at in the sermon. Everybody thought so."

"How does she know what everybody thought?" commented the Judge to himself. He tapped the porch nervously with his cane, sniffed his heliotrope and said irrelevantly:

"Ah me, what a beautiful night! What a beautiful night!"

The implied rebuff provoked her. Irritation winged a venomous little shaft:

"At least no woman has ever held *you* responsible for her unhappiness."

"You are quite right, madam," he replied, "the only irreproachable husband in this world is the man who has no wife."

"By the way," she continued, "in all these years you have not told me why you never married. Come now, confess!"

How well she knew! How often as she had driven through the streets and observed him sitting alone in the door of his office or walking aimlessly about, she had leaned back and laughed.

"Madam," he replied, for he did not like the question, "neither have you ever told me why you married three times. Come now, confess."

It would soon be time for him to leave; and still she had not gained her point.

"Rowan was here this afternoon," she remarked carelessly. He was sitting so that the light fell sidewise on his face. She noted how alert it became, but he said nothing.

"Isabel refused to see him."

He wheeled round and faced her with pain and surprise.

"Refused to see him!"

"She has told me since that she never intends to see him."

"Never intends to see Rowan again!" he repeated the incredible words, "not see Rowan again!"

"She says we are to drop him from the list of our acquaintances."

"Ah!" he cried with impetuous sadness, "they must not quarrel!"

They *must* not!"

"But they *have* quarrelled," she replied, revealing her own anxiety. "Now they must be reconciled. That is why I come to

you. I am Isabel's guardian; you were Rowan's. Each of us wishes this marriage. Isabel loves Rowan. I know that; therefore it is not her fault. Therefore it is Rowan's fault. Therefore he has said something or he has done something to offend her deeply. Therefore if you do not know what this is, you must find out. And you must come and tell me. May I depend upon you?"

He had become grave. At length he said: "I shall go straight to Rowan and ask him."

"No!" she cried, laying her hand heavily on his arm, "Isabel bound me to secrecy. She does not wish this to be known."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, angry at being entrapped into a broken confidence, "then Miss Isabel binds me also: I shall honor her wish," and he rose.

She kept her seat but yawned so that he might notice it. "You are not going?"

"Yes, I am going. I have stayed too long already. Good night! Good night!" He spoke curtly over his shoulders as he hurried down the steps.

She had forgotten him before he reached the street, having no need just then to keep him longer in mind. She had threshed out the one grain of wheat, the single compact little truth, that she wanted. This was the certainty that Judge Morris, who was the old family lawyer of the Merediths, and had been Rowan's guardian, and had indeed known him intimately from childhood, was in ignorance of any reason for the present trouble; otherwise he would not have said that he should go to Rowan and ask the

explanation. She knew him to be incapable of duplicity; in truth she rather despised him because he had never cultivated a taste for the delights and resources of hypocrisy.

Her next step must be to talk at once with the other person vitally interested—Rowan's mother. She felt no especial admiration for that grave, earnest, and rather sombre lady; but neither did she feel admiration for her sterling knife and fork: still she made them serviceable for the ulterior ends of being.

Her plan then embraced a visit to Mrs. Meredith in the morning with the view of discovering whether she was aware of the estrangement, and if aware whether she would in any unintentional way throw light upon the cause of it. Moreover—and this was kept clearly in view—there would be the chance of meeting Rowan himself, whom she also determined to see as soon as possible: she might find him at home, or she might encounter him on the road or riding over his farm. But this visit must be made without Isabel's knowledge. It must further be made to appear incidental to Mrs. Meredith herself—or to Rowan. She arranged therefore with that tortuous and superfluous calculation of which hypocrisy is such a master—and mistress—that she would at breakfast, in Isabel's presence, order the carriage, and announce her intention of going out to the farm of Ambrose Webb. Ambrose Webb was a close neighbor of the Merediths. He owned a small estate, most of which was good grass-land that was usually rented for pasture. She had for years kept her cows there when dry. This arrangement furnished

her the opportunity for more trips to the farm than interest in her dairy warranted; it made her Mrs. Meredith's most frequent incidental visitor.

Having thus determined upon her immediate course for the prompt unravelling of this mysterious matter, she dismissed it from her mind, passed into her bedroom and was soon asleep: a smile played over the sweet old face.

The Judge walked slowly across the town in the moonlight.

It was his rule to get home to his rooms by ten o'clock; and people living on the several streets leading that way were used to hearing him come tapping along before that hour. If they sat in their doorways and the night was dark, they gave him a pleasant greeting through the darkness; if there was a moon or if he could be seen under a lamp post, they added smiles. No one loved him supremely, but every one liked him a little—on the whole, a stable state for a man. For his part he accosted every one that he could see in a bright cheery way and with a quick inquiring glance as though every heart had its trouble and needed just a little kindness. He was reasonably sure that the old had their troubles already and that the children would have theirs some day; so that it was merely the difference between sympathizing with the present and sympathizing with the future. As he careened along night after night, then, friendly little gusts of salutation blew the desolate drifting figure over the homeward course.

His rooms were near the heart of the town, In a shady street well filled with law offices: these were of red brick with green

shutters—green when not white with dust. The fire department was in the same block, though he himself did not need to be safeguarded from conflagrations: the fires which had always troubled him could not have been reached with ladder and hose. There were two or three livery stables also, the chairs of which he patronized liberally, but not the vehicles. And there was a grocery, where he sometimes bought crystallized citron and Brazil nuts, a curious kind of condiment of his own devising: a pound of citron to a pound of nuts, if all were sound. He used to keep little brown paper bags of these locked in his drawer with legal papers and munched them sometimes while preparing murder cases.

At the upper corner of the block, opposite each other, were a saloon and the jail, two establishments which contributed little to each other's support, though well inclined to do so. The law offices seemed of old to have started in a compact procession for the jail, but at a certain point to have paused with the understanding that none should seek undue advantage by greater proximity. Issuing from this street at one end and turning to the left, you came to the courthouse—the bar of chancery; issuing from it at the other end and turning to the right, you came to the hotel—the bar of corn. The lawyers were usually solicitors at large and impartial practitioners at each bar. In the court room they sometimes tried to prove an alibi for their clients; at the hotel they often succeeded in proving one for themselves.

These law offices were raised a foot or two above the level of

the street. The front rooms could be used for clients who were so important that they should be seen; the back rooms were for such as brought business, but not necessarily fame. Driving through this street, the wives of the lawyers could lean forward in their carriages and if their husbands were busy, they could smile and bow; if their husbands were idle, they could look straight ahead.

He passed under the shadow of the old court-house where in his prime he had fought his legal battles against the commonwealth. He had been a great lawyer and he knew it (if he had married he might have been Chief Justice). Then he turned the corner and entered the street of jurisprudence and the gaol. About midway he reached the staircase opening from the sidewalk; to his rooms above.

He was not poor and he could have lived richly had he wished. But when a man does not marry there are so many other things that he never espouses; and he was not wedded to luxury. As he lighted the chandelier over the centre-table in his sitting room, the light revealed an establishment every article of which, if it had no virtues, at least possessed habits: certainly everything had its own way. He put his hat and cane on the table, not caring to go back to the hatrack in his little hall, and seated himself in his olive morocco chair. As he did so, everything in the room—the chairs, the curtains, the rugs, the card-table, the punch-bowl, the other walking-sticks, and the rubbers and umbrellas—seemed to say in an affectionate chorus: "Well, now that you are in safe for the night, we feel relieved. So good night and pleasant dreams to

you, for we are going to sleep;" and to sleep they went.

The gas alone flared up and said, "I'll stay up with him."

He drew out and wiped his glasses and reached for the local Sunday paper, his Sunday evening Bible. He had read it in the morning, but he always gleaned at night: he met so many of his friends by reading their advertisements. But to-night he spread it across his knees and turning to the table lifted the top of a box of cigars, an orderly responsive family; the paper slipped to the floor and lay forgotten behind his heels.

He leaned back in the chair with his cigar in his mouth and his eyes directed toward the opposite wall, where in an oval frame hung the life-size portrait of an old bulldog. The eyes were blue and watery and as full of suffering as a seats; from the extremity of the lower jaw a tooth stood up like a shoemaker's peg; and over the entire face was stamped the majesty, the patience, and the manly woes of a nature that had lived deeply and too long. The Judge's eyes rested on this comrade face.

The events of the day had left him troubled. Any sermon on the prodigal always touches men; even if it does not prick their memories, it can always stir their imaginations. Whenever he heard one, his mind went back to the years when she who afterwards became Rowan's mother had cast him off, so settling life for him. For after that experience he had put away the thought of marriage. "To be so treated once is enough," he had said sternly and proudly. True, in after years she had come back to him as far as friendship could bring her back, since she was then

the wife of another; but every year of knowing her thus had only served to deepen the sense of his loss. He had long since fallen into the habit of thinking this over of Sunday evenings before going to bed, and as the end of life closed in upon him, he dwelt upon it more and more.

These familiar thoughts swarmed back to-night, but with them were mingled new depressing ones. Nothing now perhaps could have caused him such distress as the thought that Rowan and Isabel would never marry. All the love that he had any right to pour into any life, he had always poured with passionate and useless yearnings into Rowan's—son, of the only woman he had ever loved—the boy that should have been his own.

There came an interruption. A light quick step was heard mounting the stairs. A latch key was impatiently inserted in the hall door. A bamboo cane was dropped loudly into the holder of the hat-rack; a soft hat was thrown down carelessly somewhere—it sounded like a wet mop flung into a corner; and there entered a young man straight, slender, keen-faced, with red hair, a freckled skin, large thin red ears, and a strong red mouth. As he stepped forward into the light, he paused, parting the haircut of his eyes and blinking.

"Good evening, uncle," he said in a shrill key.

"Well, sir."

Barbee looked the Judge carefully over; he took the Judge's hat and cane from the table and hung them in the hall; he walked over and picked up the newspaper from between the Judge's legs

and placed it at his elbow; he set the ash tray near the edge of the table within easy reach of the cigar. Then he threw himself into a chair across the room, lighted a cigarette, blew the smoke toward the ceiling like the steam of a little whistle signalling to stop work.

"Well, uncle," he said in a tone in which a lawyer might announce to his partner the settlement of a long-disputed point, "Marguerite is in love with me!"

The Judge smoked on, his eyes resting on the wall.

"Yes, sir; in love with me. The truth had to come out sometime, and it came out to-night. And now the joy of life is gone for me! As soon as a woman falls in love with a man, his peace is at an end. But I am determined that it shall not interfere with my practice."

"What practice?"

"The practice of my profession, sir! The profession of yourself and of the great men of the past: such places have to be filled."

"Filled, but not filled with the same thing."

"You should have seen the other hapless wretches there to-night! Pining for a smile! Moths begging the candle to scorch them! And the candle was as cold as the north star and as distant."

Barbee rose and took a turn across the room and returning to his chair stood before it.

"If Marguerite had only waited, had concealed herself a little longer! Why did she not keep me in doubt until I had won some great case! Think of a scene like this: a crowded court

room some afternoon; people outside the doors and windows craning their necks to see and hear me; the judge nervous and excited; the members of the bar beside themselves with jealousy as I arise and confront the criminal and jury. Marguerite is seated just behind the jury; I know why she chose that seat. she wished to study me to the best advantage. I try to catch her eye; she will not look at me. For three hours my eloquence storms. The judge acknowledges to a tear, the jurors reach for their handkerchiefs, the people in the court room sob like the skies of autumn. As I finish, the accused arises and addresses the court: 'May it please your honor, in the face of such a masterly prosecution, I can no longer pretend to be innocent. Sir (addressing me), I congratulate you upon your magnificent service to the commonwealth. Gentlemen of the jury, you need not retire to bring in any verdict: I bring it in myself, I am guilty, and my only wish is to be hanged. I suggest that you have it done at once in order that nothing may mar the success of this occasion!' That night Marguerite sends for me: that would have been the time for declaration! I have a notion that if I can extricate myself without wounding this poor little innocent, to forswear matrimony and march on to fame."

"March on to bed."

"Marguerite is going to give a ball, uncle, a brilliant ball merely to celebrate this irrepressible efflux and panorama of her emotions. Watch me at that ball, uncle! Mark the rising Romeo of the firm when Marguerite, the youthful Juliet of this town—"

A hand waved him quietly toward his bedroom.

"Well, good night, sir, good night. When the lark sings at heaven's gate I'll greet thee, uncle. My poor Marguerite!—Good night, uncle, good night."

He was only nineteen.

The Judge returned to his thoughts.

He must have thought a long time: the clock not far away struck twelve. He took off his glasses, putting them negligently on the edge of the ash tray which tipped over beneath their weight and fell to the floor: he picked up his glasses, but let the ashes lie. Then he stooped down to take off his shoes, not without sounds of bodily discomfort.

Aroused by these sounds or for other reasons not to be discovered, there emerged from under a table on which was piled "The Lives of the Chief Justices" a bulldog, cylindrical and rigid with years. Having reached a decorous position before the Judge, by the slow action of the necessary machinery he lowered the posterior end of the cylinder to the floor and watched him.

"Well, did I get them off about right?"

The dog with a private glance of sympathy up into the Judge's face returned to his black goatskin rug under the Chief Justices; and the Judge, turning off the burners in the chandelier and striking a match, groped his way in his sock feet to his bedroom—to the bed with its one pillow.

V

Out in the country next morning it was not yet break of dawn. The stars, thickly flung about, were flashing low and yellow as at midnight, but on the horizon the great change had begun. Not with colors of rose or pearl but as the mysterious foreknowledge of the morning, when a vast swift herald rushes up from the east and sweeps onward across high space, bidding the earth be in readiness for the drama of the sun.

The land, heavy with life, lay wrapped in silence, steeped in rest. Not a bird in wet hedge or evergreen had drawn nimble head from nimble wing. In meadow and pasture fold and herd had sunk down satisfied. A black brook brawling through a distant wood sounded loud in the stillness. Under the forest trees around the home of the Merediths only drops of dew might have been heard splashing downward from leaf to leaf. In the house all slept. The mind, wakefullest of happy or of suffering things, had lost consciousness of joy and care save as these had been crowded down into the chamber which lies beneath our sleep, whence they made themselves audible through the thin flooring as the noise of dreams.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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