

**ALLEN JAMES
LANE**

AFTERMATH

James Allen

Aftermath

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James Lane Allen
Aftermath / Part second
of «A Kentucky Cardinal»

Dedication

This to her from one who in childhood used to stand at the windows of her room and watch for the Cardinal among the snow-buried cedars.

I

I was happily at work this morning among my butterbeans—a vegetable of solid merit and of a far greater suitability to my palate than such bovine watery growths as the squash and the beet. Georgiana came to her garden window and stood watching me.

"You work those butterbeans as though you loved *them*," she said, scornfully.

"I do love them. I love all vines."

"Are you cultivating them as vines or as vegetables?"

"It makes no difference to nature."

"Do you expect me to be a vine when we are married?"

"I hope you'll not turn out a mere vegetable. How should you like to be my Virginia-creeper?"

"And what would you be?"

"Well, what would you like? A sort of honeysuckle frame?"

"Oh, anything! Only support me and give me plenty of room to bloom."

I do not always reply to Georgiana, though I always could if I chose. Whenever I remain silent about anything she changes the subject.

"Did you know that Sylvia once wrote a poem on a vegetable?"

"I did not."

"You don't speak as though you cared."

"You must know how deeply interested I am."

"Then why don't you ask to see the poem?"

"Was it on butterbeans?"

"The idea! Sylvia has better taste."

"I suppose I'd better look into this poem."

"You are not to laugh at it!"

"I shall weep."

"No; you are not to weep. Promise."

"What am I to promise?"

"That you will read it unmoved."

"I do promise—solemnly, cheerfully."

"Then come and get it."

I went over and stood under the window. Georgiana soon returned and dropped down to me a piece of writing-paper.

"Sylvia wrote it before she began to think about the boys."

"It must be a very early poem."

"It is; and this is the only copy; please don't lose it."

"Then I think you ought to take it back at once. Let me beg of you not to risk it—" But she was gone; and I turned to my arbor and sat down to read Sylvia's poem, which I found to be inscribed to "The Potato," and to run as follows:

"What on this wide earth
That is made or does by nature grow
Is more homely yet more beautiful
Than the useful Potato?"

"What would this world full of people do,
Rich and poor, high and low,
Were it not for this little-thought-of

But very necessary Potato?

"True, 'tis homely to look on,
Nothing pretty even in its blow,
But it will bear acquaintance,
This useful Potato.

"For when it is cooked and opened
It's so white and mellow,
You forget it ever was homely,
This useful Potato.

"On the whole it is a very plain plant,
Makes no conspicuous show,
But the internal appearance is lovely
Of the unostentatious Potato.

"On the land or on the sea,
Wherever we may go,
We are always glad to welcome
The sound Potato."¹

In the afternoon I was cutting stakes at the wood-pile for my butterbeans, and a bright idea struck me. During my engagement to Georgiana I cannot always be darting in and out of Mrs. Cobb's front door like a swallow through a barn. Neither can I talk freely to Georgiana—with her up at the window and me down on the ground—when I wish to breathe into her ear the things that I must utter or die. Besides, the sewing-girl whom Georgiana has engaged is nearly always there. So that as I was in the act of trimming a long slender stick, it occurred to me that I might make use of this to elevate any little notes that I might wish to write over the garden fence up to Georgiana's window.

I was greatly taken with the thought, and, dropping my hand-axe, hurried into the house and wrote a note to her at once, which I thereupon tied to the end of the pole by a short string. But as I started for the garden this arrangement looked too much like catching Georgiana with a bait. Therefore, happening to remember, I stopped at my tool-house, where I keep a little of everything, and took from a peg a fine old specimen of a goldfinch's nest. This I fastened to the end of the pole, and hiding my note in it, now felt better satisfied. No one but Georgiana herself would ever be able to tell what it was that I might wish to lift up to her at any time; and in case of its being not a note, but a plum—a berry—a peach—it would be as safe as it was unseen. This old house of a pair of goldfinches would thus become the home of our fledgling hopes: every day a new brood of vows would take flight across its rim into our bosoms.

Watching my chance during the afternoon, when the sewing-girl was not there, I rushed over and pushed the stick up to the window.

"Georgiana," I called out, "feel in the nest!"

She hurried to the window with her sewing in her arms. The nest swayed to and fro on a level with her nose.

"What is it?" she cried, drawing back with extreme distaste.

"You feel in it!" I repeated.

¹ The elder Miss Cobb was wrong in thinking this poem Sylvia's. It was extant at the time over the signature of another writer, whose authorship is not known to have been questioned. Miss Sylvia perhaps copied it out of admiration, or as a model for her own use. **J.L.A.**

"I don't wish to feel in it," she said. "Take it away!"

"There's a young dove in it," I persisted—"a young cooer."

"I don't wish any young cooers," she said, with a grimace.

Seeing that she was not of my mind, I added, pleadingly; "It's a note from me, Georgiana! This is going to be our little private post-office!" Georgiana sank back into her chair. She reappeared with the flush of apple-blossoms and her lashes wet with tears of laughter. But I do not think that she looked at me unkindly. "Our little private post-office," I persisted, confidingly.

"How many more little private things are we going to have?" she inquired, plaintively.

"I can't wait here forever," I said. "This is growing weather; I might sprout."

"A dry stick will not," said Georgiana, simply, and went back to her sewing.

I took the hint, and propped the pole against the house under the window. Later, when I took it down, my note was gone.

I have set the pole under Georgiana's window several times within the last two or three days, It looks like a little dip-net, high and dry in the air; but so far as I can see with my unaided eye, it has caught nothing so large as a gnat. It has attracted no end of attention from the birds of the neighborhood, however, who never saw a goldfinch's nest swung to the end of a leafless pole and placed where it could be so exactly reached by the human hand. In particular it has fallen under the notice of a pair of wrens, which are like women, in that they usually have some secret business behind their curiosity. The business in this case is the matter of their own nest, which they have located in a broken horse-collar in my saddle-house. At such seasons they are alert for appropriating building materials that may have been fetched to hand by other birds; and they have already abstracted a piece of candle-wick from the bottom of my post-office.

Georgiana has been chilly towards me for two days, and I think is doing her best not to freeze up altogether. I have racked my brain to know why; but I fear that my brain is not of the sort to discover what is the matter with a woman when nothing really is the matter. Moreover, as I am now engaged to Georgiana, I have thought it better that she should begin to bring her explanations to me—the steady sun that will melt all her uncertain icicles.

At last this morning she remarked, but very carelessly, "You didn't answer my note."

"What note, Georgiana?" I asked, thunderstruck.

She gave me such a look.

"Didn't you get the note I put into that—into that—" Her face grew pink with vexation and disgust.

"Did you put a note into the—into the—" I could not have spoken the word just then.

I retired to my arbor, where I sat for half an hour with my head in my hands. What could have become of Georgiana's note? A hand might have filched it; unlikely. A gust of wind have whisked it out; impossible. I debated and rejected every hypothesis to the last one. Acting upon this, I walked straight to the saddle-house, and in a dark corner peered at the nest of the wrens. A speck of white paper was visible among the sticks and shavings. I tore the nest out and shook it to pieces. How those wrens did rage! The note was so torn and mudded that I could not read it. But suppose a jay had carried it to the high crotch of some locust! I ran joyfully back to the window.

"I've found it, Georgiana!" I called out.

She appeared, looking relieved, but not exactly forgiving.

"Where!"

My tongue froze to the roof of my mouth.

"Where did you find it?" she repeated, imperiously.

"What do you want to know for?" I said, savagely.

"Let me see it!" she demanded.

My clasp on it suddenly tightened.

"Let me see it!" she repeated, with genuine fire.

"What do you want to see it for?" I said.

She turned away.

"Here it is," I said, and held it up.

She looked at it a long time, and her brows arched.

"Did the pigs get it?"

"The wrens. It was merely a change of post-office."

"I'd as well write the next one to them," she said, "since they get the letters."

Georgiana was well aware that she slipped the note into the nest when they were looking and I was not; but women—*all* women—now and then hold a man responsible for what they have done themselves. Sylvia, for instance. She grew peevish with me the other day because my garden failed to furnish the particular flowers that would have assuaged her whim. And yet for days Sylvia has been helping herself with such lack of stint that the poor clipped and mangled bushes look at me as I pass sympathetically by them, and say, "If you don't keep her away, we'd as well be weeds!"

The truth is that Sylvia's rampant session in school, involving the passage of the Greatest Common Divisor—far more dreadful than the passage of the Beresina—her blue rosettes at the recent Commencement, and the prospect of a long vacation, together with further miscellany appertaining to her age and sex, have strung the chords of her sentimental being up to the highest pitch. Feeling herself to be naturally a good instrument and now perfectly in tune, Sylvia requires that she shall be continually played upon—if not by one person, then by another. Nature overloads a tendency in order to make it carry straight along its course against the interference of other tendencies; and she will sometimes provide a girl with a great many young men at the start, in order that she may be sure of one husband in the end. The precautionary swarm in Sylvia's case seems multitudinous enough to supply her with successive husbands to the end of her days and in the teeth of all known estimates of mortality. How unlike Georgiana!

I think of Georgiana as the single peach on a tree in a season when they are rarest. Not a very large peach, and scarcely yet yielding a blush to the sun, although its long summer heat is on the wane; growing high in the air at the end of a bough and clustered about by its shining leaves. But what beauty, purity, freshness! You must hunt to find it and climb to reach it; but when you get it, you get it all—there is not a trace left for another. But Sylvia! I am afraid Sylvia is like a big bunch of grapes that hangs low above a public pathway: each passer-by reaches up and takes a grape.

I caught some one taking a grape the other evening—a sort of green grape. Sylvia has been sending bouquets to the gosling who was her escort on the evening of her Commencement—him of the duck trousers and webbed feet. On one occasion I have observed her walking along the borders of my garden in his company and have overheard her telling him that *he* could come in and get flowers whenever he wished. I wish I might catch him once.

To cap the climax, after twilight on the evening in question, I strolled out to my arbor for a quiet hour with thoughts of Georgiana. Whom should I surprise in there but Sylvia and the gosling! deep in the shadow of the vines. He had his arm around her and was kissing her.

"Upon my honor!" I said; and striding over to him I thrust my hand under his coattails, gripped him by the seat of his ducks, dragged him head downward to the front fence and dropped him out into the street.

"Let me catch *you* in here kissing anybody again!" I said.

He had bit me viciously on one of my calves—which are sizable—as I had dragged him along; so that, I had been forced to stoop down and twist him loose by screwing the end of his spongy nose. I met him on the street early the next morning, and it wore the hue of a wild plum in its ripeness. I tapped it.

"Only three persons know of your misbehavior last night," I said. "If you ever breathe it to a soul that you soiled that child by your touch, the next time I get hold of you it will not be your nose: it will be your neck!"

My mortification at Sylvia's laxness was so keen that I should have forborne returning to the arbor had I not felt assured that she must have escaped to the house through modesty and sheer shame. But she had not budged.

"I blush for you, Sylvia!" I exclaimed. "I know all about that fellow! He shouldn't kiss—my old cat!"

"I don't see what *you* have to do with it!" said Sylvia, placidly. "And I have waited to tell you that I hope you will never interrupt me again when I am engaged in entertaining a young gentleman."

"Sylvia, my dear child!" I said, gravely, sitting down beside her.

"How old are you?"

"I am of the proper age to manage my own affairs," said Sylvia, "with the assistance of my immediate family."

"Well, I don't think you are," I replied. "And since your brother is at West Point, there is one thing that I am going to take the liberty of telling you, which the other members of your family may not fully understand. If you were younger, Sylvia, you might do a good deal of this and not be hurt by it; or you might not be hurt by it if you were a good deal older; but at your age it is terrible; in time it will affect your character."

"How old must I be?" said Sylvia, wickedly.

"Well, in your case," I replied, warmly, a little nettled by her tone, "you'd better abstain altogether."

"And in your case?" said Sylvia.

"You never mind my case!" I retorted.

"But I do mind it when I suffer by it," said Sylvia. "I do mind it if it's going to affect my character!"

"You know very well, Sylvia," I replied, "that I never kissed you but three times, and then as a brother."

"I do not wish any one but my brother to kiss me in that way," said Sylvia, with a pout of contempt.

It seemed to me that this was a fitting time to guide Sylvia's powers of discrimination as to the way she should act with indifferent men—and as to the way that different men would try to act with her.

I had been talking to her in a low tone I do not know how long. Her ill-nature had quickly vanished; she was, in her way, provoking, charming. I was sitting close to her. The moonlight played upon her daring, wilful face through the leaves of the grape-vines. It was unpremeditated; my nature was, most probably, unstrung at the instant by ungratified longings for Georgiana; but suddenly I bent down and kissed her.

Instantly both Sylvia and I started from the seat. How long Georgiana had been standing in the entrance to the arbor I do not know. She may that instant have come. But there she was, dressed in white—pure, majestic, with the moon shining behind her, and shedding about her the radiance of a heavenly veil.

"Come, Sylvia," she said, with perfect sweetness; and, bidding me good-night with the same gentlewoman's calm, she placed her arm about the child's waist, and the two sisters passed slowly and silently out of my garden.

At that moment, if I could have squeezed myself into the little screech-owl perched in a corner of the arbor, I would gladly have crept into the hollow of an oak and closed my eyes. Still, how was I to foresee what I should do? A man's conversation may be his own; his conduct may vibrate with the extinct movements of his ancestors.

Georgiana's behavior then was merely the forerunner of larger marvels. For next morning I wrote a futile drastic treatise on Woman's inability to understand Man and Man's inability to understand Himself, and set it under her window. It made such a roll of paper that the goldfinch's nest

looked as though it were distent with a sort of misshapen ostrich egg. All day I waited with a heart as silent as a great clock run down; my system of philosophy swung dead in the air. To my tortured vision as I eyed it secretly from my porch, it took on the semblance of one of Sylvia's poetical potatoes, and I found myself urging in its behalf Sylvia's fondest epithets: "how homely, yet how beautiful," "little thought of, but very necessary," "unostentatious, but of lovely internal appearance."

Towards sunset I took it sadly down. On top of the nest lay Georgiana's old scarlet emery-bag stuck full of her needles! She had divined what all the writing meant and would not have it. Instead she sent me this emblem not only of her forgiveness but of her surrender. When a man expects a woman to scold him and she does not, he either gets to be a little afraid of her morally or he wants to take her in his arms. Henceforth, if Georgiana were removed to another planet, I would rather worship her there simply as my evening or morning star than coexist with any earthly woman. One thought besets me: did she realize that perhaps she herself was the cause of my misdemeanors with Sylvia? Has she the penetration to discover that when a woman is engaged to a man she cannot deny him all things except at her own peril?

This proof of her high-mindedness and the enchanting glimpses of her face that she has vouchsafed me since, goaded me yesterday morning to despatch a reckless note: "Will you come to the arbor for a little while tonight? I have never dared ask this before, but you know how I have desired it. It is so much more private there. Write on the back of this paper one word, 'Yes.' There is a pencil in the nest."

The shutters were nearly closed, but I caught sight of the curve of a shoulder and the movement of a busy hand. As I pushed the note up I said:

"Read it at once. I am waiting."

A hand came out and took in the note, then the pencil; then note and pencil were put back. On the former was written, "Yes."

I think I must have done a dozen things in five minutes, and then I started aimlessly off to town. On the way I met Georgiana.

"Good God, Georgiana!" I exclaimed. "You *here!*"

"Where else?" said she. "And why not?"

"I thought I just saw you at the window—" And then my awful soul within me said: "H-sh-sh-sh! Not a word of this to a human being!"

After supper last night I called old Jack and Dilsy into the garden, and led them around it, giving orders; thence to the arbor, where I bade them sit down.

In the year of 1805 Mr. Jefferson, as president of the Philosophical Society, ordered excavations to be made at Big Bone Lick in Kentucky for the skeletons of extinct animals. My father, who was interested in antiquities, had had much correspondence with Mr. Jefferson in regard to earlier discoveries at that spot; and when this expedition was undertaken he formed one of the explorers. Jack, his servant, at that time a strapping young fellow, had been taken along as one of the negroes who were to do the digging.

The wonders then unearthed have always been the greenest spot in old Jack's memory; so that they have been growing larger ever since. Whenever I wish to hear him discourse with the dogmatic bluster of a sage who had original information as to geological times, I set Jack to talking about the bones of the Mastodon-Maximus, the name of which he gets from me, with a puzzled shake of his head, about regularly once a year. It is my private opinion that old Jack believes Big Bone Lick to have been the place where the Ark settled, and these to have been the bones of animals that had been swept out by Noah on landing.

Last night I had merely to ask him whether he credited the story of an old traveller that he had once used some ribs found there for his tent-poles and a tooth for his hominy beater; whereupon Dilsy, foreseeing what was coming, excused herself on the plea of sudden rheumatism and went to bed, as I wished she should.

The hinges on the little private gate under Georgiana's window I keep rusty; this enables me to note when any one enters my garden. By-and-by I heard the hinges softly creak, whereupon I feigned not to believe what Jack was telling me; whereupon he fell into an harangue of such affectionate and sustained vehemence that when the hinges creaked again I was never able to determine. Was ever such usage made before of an antediluvian monster?

To-day the sewing-girl thrust out spiteful faces at me several times.

She is the one that helped Georgiana last year when she was making her wedding-clothes to marry the West Point cousin. God keep him safely in the distance, or guide him firmly to the van of war! How does a woman feel when she is making her wedding-clothes for the second time and for another man? I know very well how the other man feels. Upon my urging Georgiana to marry me at once—nature does not recognize engagements; they are a device of civilization—she protested:

"But I must get ready! Think of the sewing!"

"Oh, bother!" I grumbled. "Where are all those clothes that you made last year?"

How was I to suppose that Georgiana must have everything made over as part of her feeling for me? I would not decree it otherwise; yet I question whether this delicacy may not impose reciprocal obligations, and remove from my life certain elements of abiding comfort. What if it should engender a prejudice against my own time-worn acquaintances—the familiars of my fireside? It might be justifiable sagacity in me to keep them locked up for the first year or so after Georgiana and I become a diune being; and, upon the whole, she should never know what may have been the premarital shortcomings of my wardrobe as respects things unseen. No matter how well a bachelor may appear dressed, there is no telling what he conceals upon his person. I feel sure that the retrospective discovery of a ravelling would somehow displease Georgiana as a feature of our courtship. Nature is very stringent here, very guarded, truly universal. Invariably the young men of my day grow lavish in the use of unguents when they are preparing for natural selection; and I flatter myself that even my own garments—in their superficial aspects at least, and during my long pursuit of Georgiana—have not been very far from somewhat slightly ingratiating.

This pursuit is now drawing to a close. It is nearly the last of June. She has given me her word that she will marry me early in September. Two months for her to get the bridal feathers ready; two for me to prepare the nest.

II

I have forgotten nature. I barely know that July, now nearly gone, has passed, sifted with sweetness and ablaze with light. Time has swept on, the world run round; but I have stood motionless, abiding the hour of my marriage as a tree the season of its leaves. For all that it looks so calm, within goes on a tremendous surging of sap against its moments of efflorescence.

After which I pray that, not as a tree, but as a man, I may have a little peace. When Georgiana confessed her love, I had supposed this confession to mark the end of her elusiveness. When later on she presented to me the symbol of a heart pierced with needles, I had taken it for granted that thenceforth she would settle down into something like a state of prenuptial domestication, growing less like a swift and more like a hen. But there is nothing gallinaceous about my Georgiana. I took possession of her vow and the emery-ball, not of her; the privilege was merely given to plant my flag-staff on the uncertain edge of an unknown land. In war it sometimes becomes necessary to devastate a whole country in order to control a single point: I should be pleased to learn what portion of the earth's surface I am required to subdue ere I shall hold one little citadel.

As for me, Georgiana requires that I shall be a good deal like an old rock jutting out of the quiet earth: never ruffled, never changing either on the surface or at heart, bearing whatever falls upon me, be it frost or sun, and warranted to waste away only by a sort of impersonal disintegration at the rate of half an inch to the thousand years. Meantime she exacts for herself the privilege of dwelling near as the delighted cave of the winds. The part of wisdom in me then is not to heed each sallying gust, but to capture the cave and drive the winds away.

For I know in whom I have believed; I know that this myriad caprice is but the deepening of excitement on the verge of captivity; I know that on ahead lie the regions of perpetual calm—my Islands of the Blest.

Georgiana does not play upon the pianoforte; or, as Mrs. Walters would declare, she does not perform upon the instrument. Sylvia does; she performs, she executes. There are times when she will execute a piece called "The Last Hope" until the neighbors are filled with despair and ready to stretch their heads on the block to any more merciful executioner. Nor does Georgiana sing to company in the parlor. That is Sylvia's gift; and upon the whole it was this unmitigated practice in the bosom—and in the ears—of her family that enabled Sylvia to shine with such vocal effulgence in the procession on the last Fourth of July and devote a pair of unflagging lungs to the service of her country.

But Georgiana I have never known to sing except at her sewing and alone, as the way of women often is. During a walk across the summer fields my foot has sometimes paused at the brink of a silvery runlet, and I have followed it backward in search of the spring. It may lead to the edge of a dark wood; thence inward deeper and deeper; disappearing at last in a nook of coolness and shadow, green leaves and mystery. The overheard rill of Georgiana's voice issues from inner depths of being that no human soul has ever visited, or perhaps will ever visit. What would I not give to thread my way, bidden and alone, to that far region of uncaptured loveliness?

Of late some of the overhead lullabies have touched me inexpressibly. They beat upon my ear like the musical reveries of future mother hood—they betoken in Georgiana's maidenhood the dreaming unrest of the maternal.

One morning not long ago, with a sort of pitiful gayety, her song ran in the wise of saying how we should gather our rose-buds while we may. The warning could not have been addressed to me; I shall gather mine while I may—the unrifled rose of Georgiana's life, body and spirit.

Naturally she and I have avoided the subject of the Cardinal. But to the tragedy of his death was joined one circumstance of such coarse and brutal unconcern that it had left me not only remorseful but resentful. As we sat together the other evening, after one of those silences that fall unregarded between us, I could no longer forbear to face an understanding.

"Georgiana," I said, "do you know what became of the redbird?"

Unwittingly the color of reproach must have lain upon my words, for she answered quickly with yet more in hers,

"I had it buried!"

It was my turn to be surprised.

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure. I told them where to bury it; I showed them the very spot—under the cedar. They told me they had. Why?"

I thought it better that she should learn the truth.

"You know we can't trust our negroes. They disobeyed you. They lied to you; they never buried it. They threw it on the ash-pile. The pigs tore it to pieces; I saw them; they were rooting at it and tearing it to pieces."

She had clasped her hands, and turned towards me in acute distress. After a while, with her face aside, she said, slowly,

"And you have believed that I knew of this—that I permitted it?"

"I have believed nothing. I have waited to understand."

A few minutes later she said, as if to herself,

"Many a person would have been only too glad to believe it, and to blame me." Then folding her hands over one of mine, she said, with tears in her eyes:

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