

BARBOUR

RALPH HENRY

THE LILAC GIRL

Ralph Barbour

The Lilac Girl

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Barbour R.

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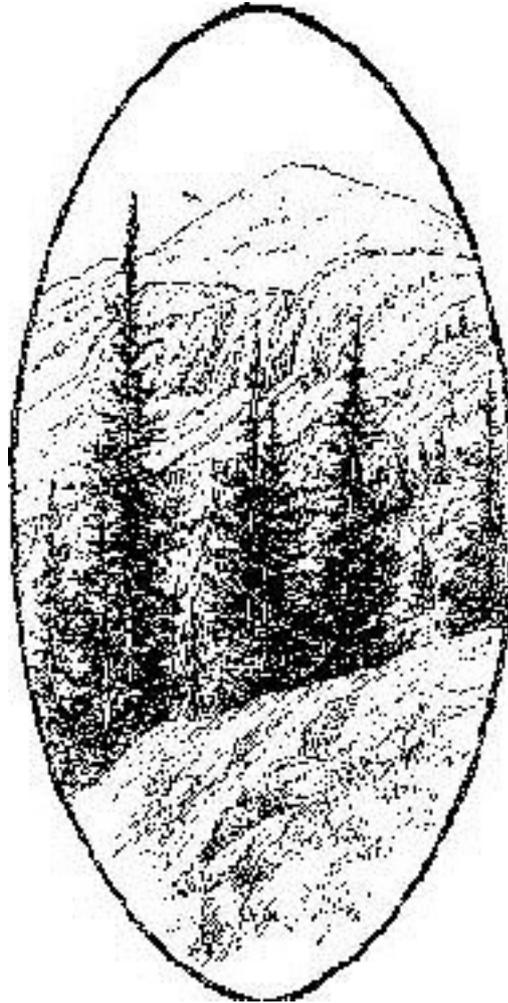
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Ralph Henry Barbour The Lilac Girl



OVER THE TIPS OF THE SPRAYS SHE SHOT A GLANCE AT WADE

I



Two men were sitting beside a camp-fire at Saddle Pass, a shallow notch in the lower end of the Sangre de Cristo Range in southern Colorado. Although it was the middle of June and summer had come to the valleys below, up here in the mountains the evenings were still chill, and the warmth of the crackling fire felt grateful to tired bodies. Daylight yet held, although it was fast deepening toward dusk. The sun had been gone some little time behind the purple grandeur of Sierra Blanca, but eastward the snowy tips of the Spanish Peaks were still flushed with the afterglow.

Nearby three ragged burros were cropping the scanty growth. Behind them the sharp elbow of the mountain ascended, scarred and furrowed and littered with rocky debris. Before them the hill sloped for a few rods and levelled into a narrow plateau, across which, eastward and westward, the railway, tired from its long twisting climb up the mountain, seemed to pause for a moment and gasp for breath before beginning its descent. Beyond the tracks a fringe of stunted trees held precarious foothold on the lower slope of a smaller peak, which reared its bare cone against the evening sky. There were no buildings at Saddle Pass save a snow-shed which began where the rails slipped downward toward the east and, dropping from sight, followed for a quarter of a mile around the long face of the mountain. It was very still up here on the Pass, so still that when the Western Slope Limited, two hours and more late at Eagle Cliff, whistled for the tunnel four miles below the sound came echoing about them startlingly clear.

"Train coming up from the west," said the elder of the two men. "Must be the Limited." The other nodded as he drained the last drop in his tin cup and looked speculatively at the battered coffee pot.

"Any more of the Arbuckle nectar, Ed?" he asked.

"Not a drop, but I can make some."

"No, I've had enough, I reckon. That's the trouble with dining late, Ed; you have too much appetite."

"We'll have to get some more grub before long," was the reply, "or it'll be appetite and nothing else with us. I can eat bacon with the next man, but I don't want to feast on it six days running. What we need, Wade, is variety."

"And plenty of it," sighed the other, stretching his tired legs and finding a new position. "The fact is, even after this banquet I feel a little hollow."

"Same here, but I figure we'd better go a little short till we get nearer town. We ought to strike Bosa Grande to-morrow night."

"Why not hop the train and go down to Aroya? We can find some real grub there."

"Couldn't get back before to-morrow afternoon. What's the good of wasting a whole day?"

"Looks to me like we'd wasted about twenty of them already, Ed."

Craig made no reply. He fished a corn-cob pipe and a little sack of tobacco from his pocket and began to fill the bowl. Wade watched for a moment in silence. Then, with a protesting groan, he rolled over until he could get at his own pipe. Craig drew an ember from the edge of the fire with calloused fingers, held it to his bowl and passed it on to Wade. Then with grunts of contentment they settled back against the sagging canvas of their tent and puffed wreaths of acrid smoke into the twilight.

The shadows were creeping up the mountain side. Overhead the wide sweep of sky began to glitter with white stars. A little chill breeze sprang up in the west and fanned the fire, sending a fairy shower of tiny lemon-yellow sparks into the air. And borne on the breeze came a hoarse pounding and drumming that grew momentarily louder and reverberated from wall to wall. The ground trembled and the grazing burros lifted their shaggy heads inquiringly.

"She's almost up," said Wade. Craig nodded and replaced his pipe between his teeth. The noise became multisonous. With the clangor of the pounding wheels came the stertorous gasping of the engines, the creak and clatter of protesting metal. The uproar filled the pass deafeningly.

"She's making hard work of it," shouted Craig.

"Probably a heavy train," Wade answered.

Then a path of pale light swept around the elbow of the mountain and the wheezing, puffing monsters reached the head of the grade. The watchers could almost hear the sighs of relief from the two big mountain-climbers as they found the level track beneath them. Their breathing grew easier, quieter as they clanged slowly across the pass a few rods below the camp. The burros, having satisfied their curiosity, went back to supper. The firemen in the cab windows raised their hands in greeting and the campers waved back. Behind the engines came a baggage and express car, then a day coach, a diner and a sleeper. Slower and slower moved the train and finally, with a rasping of brakes and the hissing of released steam, it stopped.

"What's up?" asked Wade.

"Hot-box on the diner; see it?"

"Yes, and smell it. Let's go down."

But Craig shook his head lazily, and Wade, cinching his loosened belt, limped with aching legs down the slope. The trainmen were already pulling the smouldering, evil-smelling waste from the box, and after watching a minute he loitered along the track beside the car. Several of the shades were raised and the sight of the gleaming white napery and silver brought a wistful gleam to his eyes. But there was worse to come. At the last table a belated diner was still eating. He was a large man with a double chin, under which he had tucked a corner of his napkin. He ate leisurely, but with gusto.

"Hot roast beef," groaned Wade, "and asparagus and little green beans! Oh Lord!"

He suddenly felt very empty, and mechanically tightened his leather belt another inch. It came over him all at once that he was frightfully hungry. For the last two days he and his partner had been travelling on short rations, and to-day they had been on the go since before sun-up. For a moment the wild idea came to him of jumping on the train and riding down to Aroya just so he could take a seat in the dining-car and eat his fill.

"They wouldn't make much out of me at a dollar a throw," he reflected, with a grin. But it wouldn't be fair to Craig, and he abandoned the idea in the next breath. He couldn't stand there any longer, though, and see that man eat. He addressed himself to the closed window before he turned away.

"I hope it chokes you," he muttered, venomously.

Some of the passengers had descended from the day coach to stretch their limbs, and with a desire to avoid them Wade walked toward the rear of the train. Daylight dies hard up here in the mountains, but at last twilight held the world, a clear, starlit twilight. Overhead the vault of heaven was hung with deep blue velvet, pricked out with a million diamonds. Up the slope the camp-fire glowed ruddily. In the west the smouldering sunset embers had cooled to ashes of dove-gray and steel, against which Sierra Blanca crouched, a grim, black giant. Wade had reached the observation platform at the end of the sleeping-car. With a tired sigh he turned toward the slope and the beckoning fire. But the sound of a closing door brought his head around and the fire no longer beckoned.

On the platform, one hand on the knob of the car door as though meditating retreat, stood the straight, slim figure of a girl. She wore a light skirt and a white waist, and a bunch of flowers drooped from her breast. Her head was uncovered and the soft brown hair waved lustrously away from a face of ivory. The eyes that looked down into his reflected the stars in their depths, the gently-parted mouth was like a vivid red rosebud in the dusk. To Wade she seemed the very Spirit of Twilight, white and slim and ethereal, and so suddenly had the apparition sprung into his vision that he was startled and bewildered. For a long moment their looks held. Then, somewhat faintly,

"Why have we stopped?" she asked.

So unreal had she looked that his heart pounded with relief when she spoke.

"There's a hot-box," he answered, in the tones of one repeating a lesson learned. His eyes devoured her face hungrily.

"Oh!" said the girl, softly. "Then—then you aren't a robber, are you?" Wade merely shook his head. "I heard noises, and then—when I opened the door—and saw you standing there—" The first alarm was yielding to curiosity. She glanced at the scarred and stained hand which grasped the brass railing, and from there to the pleasant, eager, sunburnt face under the upturned brim of the battered sombrero. "No, I see you're not that," she went on reflectively. "Are you a miner?"

"No, only a prospector. We're camped up there." He tilted his head toward the slope without moving his gaze.

"Oh," said the girl. Perhaps she found that steady, unwinking regard of his disconcerting, for she turned her head away slightly so that her eyes were hidden from him. But the soft profile of the young face stood clear against the darkening sky, and Wade gazed enraptured.

"You are looking for gold?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And—have you found it?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" There was sympathy in the voice and in the look she turned upon him, and the boy's heart sang rapturously. Perhaps weariness and hunger and the girl's radiant twilight beauty combined to make him light-headed; otherwise how account for his behavior? Or perhaps starlight as well as moonlight may affect the brain; the theory is at least plausible. Or perhaps no excuse is

needed for him save that he was twenty-three, and a Southerner! He leaned against the railing and laughed softly and exultantly.

"I've found no gold," he said, "but I don't care about that now. For I've found to-night what is a thousand times better!"

"Better than—than gold!" she faltered, trying to meet his gaze. "Why, what—"

"The girl I love!" he whispered up to her.

She gasped, and the hand on the knob began to turn slowly. Even in the twilight he could see the swift blood staining the ivory of her cheek. His eyes found hers and held them.

"What is your name?" he asked, softly, imperatively.

Oh, surely there is some quality, some magic power in mountain starlight undreamed of in our philosophy, for,

"Evelyn," whispered the girl, her wide eyes on his and a strange wonder on her face.

"Evelyn!" he echoed radiantly. "Evelyn! Evelyn what?"

"Walton," answered the girl obediently. He nodded his head and murmured the name half aloud to his memory.

"Evelyn Walton. And you live in God's country?"

"In New York." Her breath came fast and one hand crept to her breast where the flowers drooped.

"I'll remember," he said, "and some day—soon—I'll come for you. I love you, girl. Don't forget."

There was a quick, impatient blast from the engine. The wheels creaked against the rails. The train moved forward.

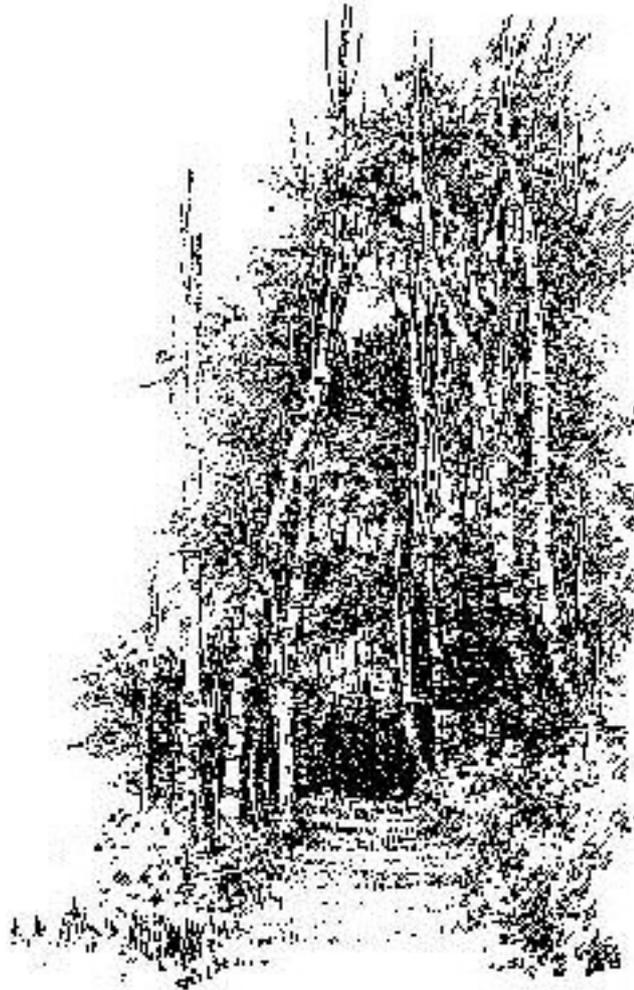
"Good night," he said. His hand reached over the railing and one of hers fell into it. For a moment it lay hidden there, warm and tremulous. Then his fingers released it and it fled to join its fellow at her breast.

"Good night—dear," he said again. "Remember!"

Then he dropped from the step. There was a long piercing wail of the whistle that was smothered as the engine entered the snow-shed. The girl on the platform stood motionless a moment. Then one of her hands dropped from her breast, and with it came a faded spray of purple lilac. She stepped quickly to the rail and tossed it back into the twilight. Wade sprang forward, snatched it from the track and pressed it to his lips. When the last car dipped into the mouth of the snow-shed he was still standing there, gazing after, his hat in hand, a straight, lithe figure against the starlit sky.



II



Well down in the southeastern corner of New Hampshire, some twenty miles inland from the sea, lies Eden Village. Whether the first settlers added the word Village to differentiate it from the garden of the same name I can't say. Perhaps when the place first found a name, over two hundred years ago, it was Eden, plain and simple. Existence there proving conclusively the dissimilarity between it and the original Eden, the New England conscience made itself heard in Town Meeting, and insisted on the addition of the qualifying word Village, lest they appear to be practising deception toward the world at large. But this is only a theory. True it is, however, that while Stepping and Tottingham and Little Maynard and all the other settlements around are content to exist without explanatory suffixes, Eden maintains and is everywhere accorded the right to be known as Eden Village. Even as far away as Redding, a good eight miles distant, where you leave the Boston train, Eden's prerogative is known and respected.

Wade Herrick discovered this when, five years after our first glimpse of him, he stepped from the express at Redding, and, bag in hand, crossed the station platform and addressed himself to a wise-looking, freckle-faced youth of fourteen occupying the front seat of a rickety carryall.

"How far is it to Eden, son?" asked Wade.

"You mean Eden Village?" responded the boy, leisurely.

"I suppose so. Are there two Edens around here?"

"Nope; just Eden Village."

"Well, where is that, how far is it, and how do I get there?"

"About eight miles," answered the boy. "I kin take you there."

Wade viewed the discouraged-looking, flea-bitten gray horse dubiously. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Have you ever driven that horse eight miles in one day?"

"Well, I guess! There ain't a better horse in town than he is."

"How long will it take?"

"Oh, about an hour; hour an' a half; two hours—"

"Hold on! That's enough. This isn't exactly a sight-seeing expedition, son. We'll compromise on an hour and a half; what do you say?"

The boy examined the prospective passenger silently. Then he looked at the horse. Then he cocked an eye at the sun. Finally he nodded his head.

"All right," he said. Wade deposited his satchel in the carriage and referred to an address written on the back of a letter.

"Now, where does Mr. Rufus Lightener do business?"

"Over there at the bank."

"Good. And where can I get something to eat?"

"Stand up or sit down?"

"Well, preferably 'sit down.'"

"Railroad Hotel. Back there about a block. Dinner, fifty cents."

"I certainly am glad I found you," said Wade. "I don't know what I'd have done in this great city without your assistance. Now you take me over to the bank. After that we'll pay a visit to the hotel. You'd better get something to eat yourself while I'm partaking of that half-dollar banquet."

An hour later the journey began. Wade, fairly comfortable on the back seat of the carryall, smoked his after-dinner pipe. The month was June, there had been recent rains and the winding, dipping country road presented new beauties to the eyes at every stage. Wade, fresh from the mountains of Colorado, revelled in the softer and gentler loveliness about him. The lush, level meadow, the soft contour of the distant hills, the ever-present murmur and sparkle of running water delighted him even while they brought homesick memories of his own native Virginia. It was a relief to get away from the towering mountains, the eternal blue of unclouded skies, the parched, arid miles of unclothed mesa, the clang and rattle of ore cars and the incessant grinding of quartz mills. Yes, it was decidedly pleasant to have a whole summer—if he wanted it—in which to go where he liked, do what he liked. One might do much worse, he reflected, than find some such spot as this and idle to one's heart's content. There would be trout, as like as not, in that stony brook back there; sunfish, probably, in that lazy stream crossing the open meadow yonder. It would be jolly to try one's luck on a day like this; jolly to lie back on the green bank with a rod beside one and watch the big white clouds sail across the wide blue of the sky. It would seem almost like being a boy again!

Presently, when, after passing through the sleepy village of Tottingham, the road crossed a shallow stream, Wade bade the boy drive through it.

"Don't have to," replied unimaginative fourteen. "There's a bridge."

"I know there is," answered Wade, "but my doctor has forbidden bridges. Drive through the water. I want to hear it gurgle against the wheels."

He closed his eyes, expectantly content, and so did not see the alarmed look which the boy shot at him. The horse splashed gingerly into the stream, the wheels grated musically over the little stones, and the water lapped and gurgled about the spokes. Wade leaned back with closed eyes and nodded approvingly. "Just the same," he murmured. "It might be the ford below Major Dabney's. This is surely God's own country again."

Further on they rattled through the quiet streets of East Tottingham, a typical New England village built around a square, elm-shaded common. It was all as Ed had described it; the white church with its tall spire lost behind the high branches, the Town Hall guarded by an ancient black cannon,

the white houses, the green blinds, the lilac hedges, the toppling hitching-post before each gate. Tottingham Center succeeded East Tottingham and they eventually reached Eden Village twenty minutes behind schedule.

It was difficult to say where country left off and village began, but after passing the second modest white residence Wade believed he could safely consider himself within the corporate limits. Before him stretched a wide road lined with elms. So closely were they planted that their far-reaching branches formed a veritable roof overhead, through which at this time of day the sunlight barely trickled. They were sturdy trees, many of them larger in the trunk than any hogs-head, and doubtless some of them were almost as old as the village itself. The cool green-shadowed road circled slightly, so that as they travelled along it the vista always terminated in a wall of green, flecked at intervals with a gleam of white where the sun-bathed front of some house peeked through. Wade viewed the quaint old place with interest, for here Ed had lived when a boy, and many a story of Eden Village had Wade listened to.

The houses were set, usually, close to the street, with sometimes a wooden fence, sometimes a hedge of lilacs before them. But more often yard and sidewalk fraternized. Flowers were not numerous; undoubtedly the elms threw too much shade to allow of successful floriculture. But there were lilacs still in bloom, lavender and white, and their perfume stirred memories. The houses in Eden Village were not crowded; for the first quarter of a mile they passed hardly more than a dozen. After that, although they became more neighborly, each held itself well aloof. Then came a small church with a disproportionately tall spire, a watering trough, the Town Hall, and "Prout's Store, Zenas Prout 2nd, Proprietor." Here the gray sidled up to the ancient hitching-post. The boy tossed the reins over the dashboard and jumped out. "You don't need to hold him," he said reassuringly. Presently he was back. "It's further up the street," he announced. "But he says there ain't anybody livin' there an' the house is locked up."

"I've got the key," answered Wade. "Go ahead."

They went on along the leafy nave. Now and then a road or grass-grown lane started off from the main highway and wandered back toward the meadow-lands. Presently the street straightened out, the elms presented thinner ranks, houses stood farther apart. Then the street divided to enclose a narrow strip of common adorned with a flagpole greatly in need of a new coat of white paint. The elms dwindled away and an occasional maple dotted the common with shade. The driver guided the patient gray to the left and, near the centre of the common, drew up in front of a little white house, which, like the picket fence in front of it, the flagstaff on the common, and so many other things in Eden Village, seemed to be patiently awaiting the painter.

Inside the fence, thrusting its branches out between the pickets, ran a head-high hedge of lilac bushes, so that, unless you stood directly in front of the gate, all you saw of the first story were the tops of the front door and the close-shuttered windows. Between house and hedge there was the remains of a tiny formal garden. Rows of box, winter-killed in spots, circled and angled about grass-grown spaces which had once been flower-beds. The dozen feet of path from gate to steps was paved with crumbling red bricks, moss-stained and weed-embroidered. The front door had side-lights hidden by narrow, green blinds and a fan-light above. Wade drew forth the key entrusted to him by the agent and tried to fit it to the lock. But although he struggled with it for several moments it refused stubbornly to have anything to do with the keyhole.

"There's a side door around there," advised the boy from the carryall. "Maybe it's the key to it."

"Maybe it is the key to it," responded Wade, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. He pushed his way past the drooping branches of an overgrown syringa, tripped over a box-bush, and passed around the left of the house, following the remains of a path which led him to a door in an ell. Back here there were gnarled apple and pear and cherry trees, a tropical clump of rhubarb, and traces of what had evidently been at one time a kitchen garden. Old-fashioned perennials blossomed here

and there; lupins and Sweet Williams and other sturdy things which had resisted the encroachment of the grass. The key fitted readily, scraped back, and the narrow door swung inward.

Gloom and mustiness were his first reward, but as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he saw that he was in the kitchen. There was the sink with a hand-pump on one side and a drain-board on the other. Here a table, spread with figured yellow oil-cloth; a range, chairs, corner-cupboard, a silent, staring clock. His steps beat lonesomely on the floor. A door, reached by a single step, led to the front of the house. He pushed it open and groped his way up and in, across to the nearest window. When the blinds were thrust aside he found himself confronted by a long mahogany sideboard whose top still held an array of Sheffield platters, covered dishes, candlesticks. Save for the dust which lay heavily on every surface and eddied across the sunlight, there was nothing to suggest desertion. Wade could fancy that the owner had stepped out of doors for the moment or had gone upstairs. He found himself listening for the sound of footsteps overhead or on the staircase or in the darkened hall. But the only sounds were faint sighs and crepitations doubtless attributable to the air from the open windows stirring through the long-closed house, but which Wade, letting his fancy stray, chose to believe came from the Ghosts of Things Past. He pictured them out there in the hall, peering through the crevice of the half-open door at the intruder with little, sad, troubled faces. He could almost hear them whispering amongst themselves. He felt a little shiver go over him, and threw back his shoulders and laughed softly at his foolishness.

But the feeling that he was an intruder, a trespasser, remained with him as he passed from room to room, throwing open windows and blinds, and now and then sneezing as the impalpable dust tickled his nostrils. In the sitting-room, as in every other apartment, everything looked as though the occupant had passed out of the room but a moment before. Wade's face grew grave and tender as he looked about him. On the sewing machine a shallow basket held sewing materials and a few pairs of coarse woollen stockings, neatly rolled. The poker was laid straight along the ledge of the big "base-burner" in the corner. A table with a green cloth stood in front of a window and bore a few magazines dated almost ten years before. A set of walnut book-shelves held a few sober-clad volumes, Bulfinch's "Age of Fable," "Webster's Dictionary," Parker's "Aids to English Composition," Horace's "Odes" in Latin, "The Singer's Own Book," "Henry Esmond" and "Vanity Fair," "A Chance Acquaintance," two cook-books, a number of yellow-covered "Farmer's Almanacs," and "A Guide to the City of Boston." A sewing-stand supported a huge family Bible. The walls were papered in brown and a brown ingrain carpet covered the floor. There was a couch under the side window and a few upholstered chairs were scattered about. Now that the windows were open and the warm sunlight was streaming in, it was a cosy, shabby, homey little room.

Wade opened the door into the hall. Perhaps the Ghosts of Things Past scampered up the winding stairway; at least, they were not to be seen. He found the front-door key in the lock and turned the bolt. When the door swung inward a little thrill touched him. For the first time in his life he was standing on his own doorsill, looking down his own front path and through his own front gate!

In every man's nature there is the desire for home-owning. It may lie dormant for many years, but sooner or later it will stir and call. Wade heard its voice now, and his heart warmed to it. Fortune had brought him the power to choose his home where he would, and build an abode far finer than this little cottage. And yet this place, which had come to him unexpectedly and through sorrow, seemed suddenly to lay a claim upon him. It was such a pathetic, down-at-heels, likable little house! It seemed to Wade as though it were saying to him: "I'm yours now. Don't turn your back on me. I've been so very, very lonesome for so many years! But now you've come, and you've opened my doors and windows and given me the beautiful sunlight again, and I shall be very happy. Stay with me and love me."

In the carryall the boy was leaning back with his feet on the dasher and whistling softly through his teeth. The gray was nibbling sleepily at the decrepit hitching-post. Wade glanced at his watch, and looked again in surprise. It was later than he had thought. If he meant to get out of Redding that night

it was time he thought of starting back. But after a moment of hesitation he turned from the door and went on with his explorations. In the parlor there was light enough from the front door to show him the long formal room with its white marble centre-table adorned with a few gilt-topped books and a spindly lamp, the square piano, the stiff-looking chairs and rockers, the few pictures against the faded gold paper, the white mantel, set with shells and vases and a few photographs, the quaint curving-backed sofa between the side windows. He closed the door again and turned down the hall.

The stairway was narrow and winding, with a mahogany rail set upon white spindles. It was uncarpeted and his feet sounded eerily on the steps. On the floor above doors opened to left and right. The first led into what had evidently been used as a spare bedroom. It was uncarpeted and but scantily furnished. The door of the opposite room was closed. Wade opened it reverently and unconsciously tiptoed to the window. When the sunlight was streaming in he turned and surveyed the apartment with a catch of his breath. It had been Her room. He had never seen her, yet he had heard Ed speak of her so much that it seemed that he must have known her. He tried not to think of the days when, lying there on the old four-post bed with the knowledge of approaching death for company, she had waited and waited for her son to come back to her. Ed had never forgiven himself that, reflected Wade. He had been off in Wyoming at the time, and when he had returned the two telegrams lay one upon the other with a month's dust over them, the one apprising him of his mother's illness and asking him to hurry home, the other tersely announcing her death. Well, she knew all about it now, reflected Wade. Ed had told her long before this.

It was a pleasant little room with its sloping ceilings and cheerful pink paper. The bed was neatly spread with a patchwork quilt, and the blankets and counterpane were folded and piled upon the foot. The old mahogany bureau was just as she had left it, doubtless. The little, knick-knacks still stood upon the brackets, and in the worsted-worked pincushion a gold brooch was sticking.

He closed the window and returned to the floor below. A door under the stairway led from the hall to the kitchen. He crossed the latter and passed out into the yard. Back of the house the ground sloped slightly to a distant stone wall, which apparently marked the limit there of Wade's domain. At one time there had been a fence between the orchard and the meadow beyond, but now only an occasional crumbling post remained. Trees had grown up here and there in the meadow, a few young maples, a patch of locusts, and some straggling sumacs. Birds sang in the trees, and once, when he listened, Wade thought he could hear the tinkling of a brook.

Toward the centre of the village his ground ran only to a matter of ten or twelve yards from the kitchen door. There was just room for the little garden between house and fence. On that side his nearest neighbor was distant the width of several untenanted lots. On the other side, however, there was more space. There were some shade-trees here, and around one of them, an ancient elm, ran a wooden seat, much carved and lettered. The boundary here was a continuation of the lilac hedge which fronted the street, and in it was an arched gate leading to the next yard. But from the gate all Wade could discern was the end of a white house and a corner of a brick chimney some forty yards distant; trees and shrubbery hid more of his neighbor's estate.

Wade returned to the front of the house, hands in his pockets, a tune on his lips. He had taken his valise from the back of the carryall before the driver, who was half asleep, discovered his presence. He blinked and dropped his feet from the dashboard.

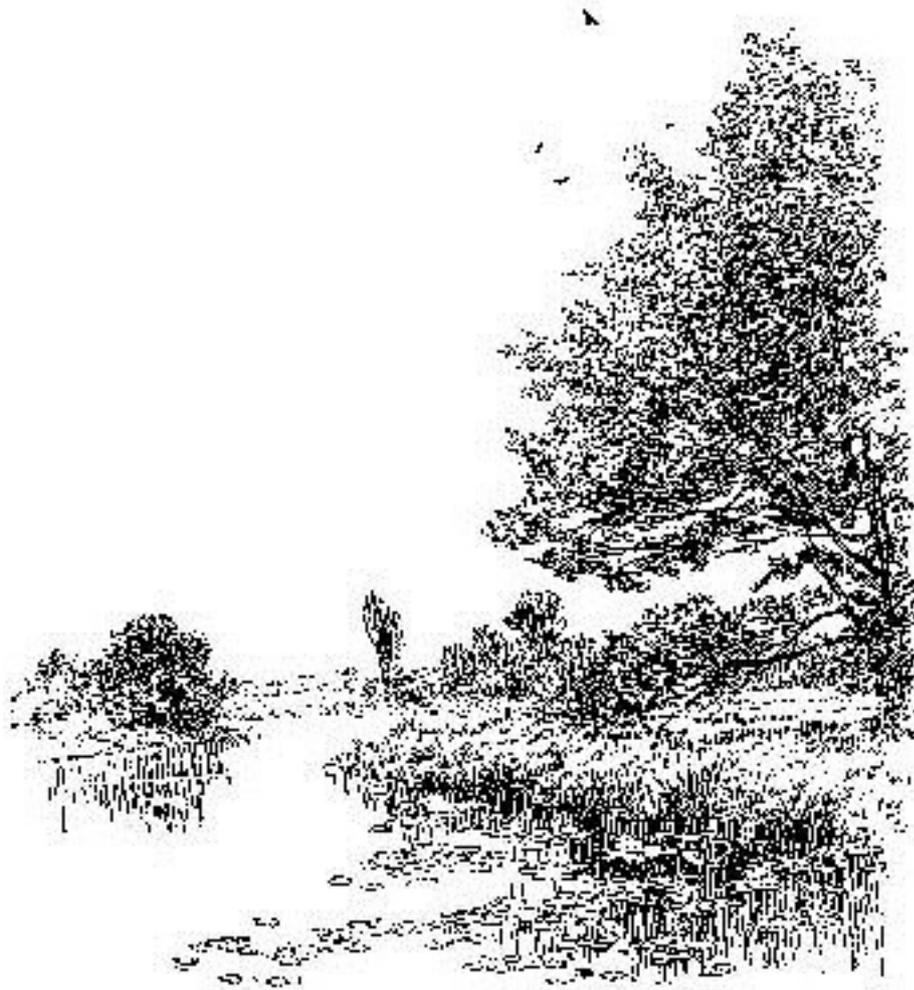
"You all ready?" he asked.

Wade shook his head.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "I'm going to stay awhile."



III



That was a stirring afternoon in Eden Village. Wade's advent was like the dropping of a stone into the centre of a quiet pool. Prout's Store was the centre of the pool, and it was there that the splash and upheaval occurred, and from there the waves of commotion circled and spread to the farthest margins. By supper time it was known from one length of Main Street to the other that the Craig place was tenanted again. As to who the tenant was rumor was vague and indefinite. But before bedtime even that point was definitely settled, Zenas Prout 2nd having kept the store open a full half-hour later than usual to accommodate delayed seekers after knowledge.

It was a rather stirring afternoon for Wade, too. First there was a visit to the store in the carryall for the purchase of supplies. Mr. Prout, who combined the duties of merchant with those of postmaster and express agent, was filling out a requisition for postal supplies when Wade entered. Poking his pen behind his ear, he stepped out from behind the narrow screen of lock-boxes and greeted the visitor.

"Afternoon, sir. You found the house all right?"

"Yes, thanks." Wade drew forth a pencil and tore off a piece of wrapping paper.

"Sort of out of repairs, of course, seem' it ain't been lived in for most ten years, not since Mrs. Craig died. Was you considerin' purchasin', sir?"

"Er—no." Wade was writing rapidly on the brown paper. "The fact is, Mr. Prout, I own the Craig house now."

"You don't say?" exclaimed the store-keeper in genuine surprise. "You ain't—surely you ain't Ed Craig?"

"No, my name's Herrick. Ed was a good friend of mine. We were partners in a mining enterprise in Colorado. Ed died almost a year ago now; typhoid."

"I want to know! Well, well! So Ed Craig's gone, has he? I remember him when he was 'bout so high. Used to come down here an' I'd set him up on the counter right where you be now, Mr. Herring, and give him a stick of candy. I recollect he always wanted the kind with the pink stripes on it. An' he's dead, you say? We often wondered what had become of Ed. Folks thought it kind of queer he didn't come home the time his mother died."

"He was away and didn't learn of her illness until it was too late," said Wade. "He felt mighty badly about that, Mr. Prout, and I wish you'd let the people here know how it happened. Not that it matters much to Ed now, but he was the best friend I ever had, and I don't want folks who used to know him to think he deliberately stayed away that time."

"That's so, sir. An' I'm glad to hear the truth of it. Ed didn't seem to me when I knew him the sort of feller to do a thing like that. Folks'll be glad to know about it, Mr. Herring."

"Herrick, please. Now just look over that list and check off what you can let me have, will you? I'm going to stay awhile, and so I will have to get in a few provisions."

Mr. Prout ran his eye down the list dubiously, checking now and then. When he laid it down and pushed it across the counter his tone was apologetic.

"Ain't a great deal there I can sell you, Mr. Herrick. I'm kind of out of some things. I guess I can get most of 'em for you, though, if you ain't got to have 'em right away."

Wade looked at the slip.

"You put up what you've got," he said, "and I'll send over to Tottingham Center for the rest."

"Don't believe you'll get 'em all there," commented Mr. Prout. "Things like bacon in jars an' canned mushrooms there ain't much call for around here."

But Wade was busy revising his list, and made no comment. Presently he went out and despatched the boy to the Center. When he returned to the store Mr. Prout was weighing out sugar.

"So you come into the Craig place, Mr. Herrick. I suppose you bought it."

"No, Ed left it to me in his will. Wanted me to come on here and have a look at it and see that it was all right. He was very fond of that place. So I came. And—well, it's a pleasant place, Mr. Prout, and it's a pretty country you have around here, and so I reckon I'll stay awhile and camp out in the cottage."

"Going to do your own cooking?" asked Mr. Prout.

"Have to, I reckon. It won't be the first time, though."

"Guess you wouldn't have any trouble findin' some one to come in an' do for you, if you wanted they should," said Mr. Prout. "There's my gal, now. She's only fifteen, but she's capable an' can cook pretty tolerable well. Course you know your business best, Mr. Herrick, but—"

"Send her over in the morning," said Wade, promptly. "Is there a mail out of here to-night?"

"Five o'clock."

"Then let me have a sheet of paper and a stamped envelope, if you please. I'll write down to Boston and have them send my trunk up."

He met but few persons on his way back to the cottage, but many a curious gaze followed him from behind curtained windows, and, since the ripples had not yet widened, he left many excited discussions in his wake. Back in the cottage he threw off coat and vest, lighted his pipe and set to work. First of all, up went the parlor windows and shades. But a dubious examination of that apartment was sufficient. If he should ever really live here the parlor could be made habitable, but for the present its demands were too many. He closed the windows again and abandoned the room to its musty solitude. From the spare room upstairs he brought bed and bedding and placed it in the sitting room. It required some ingenuity to convert the latter apartment into a bedroom, but the difficulty

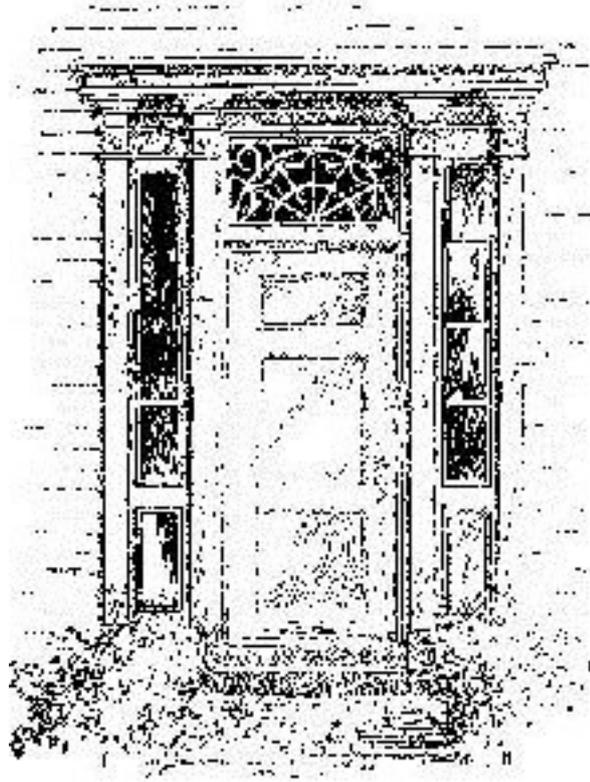
was at last solved by relegating the sewing machine to the parlor and moving the couch. When the bed was made Wade went out to the kitchen and looked over the situation there. Closet and cupboard displayed more dishes and utensils than he would have known what to do with. He tried the pump and after a moment's vigorous work was rewarded with a rushing stream of ice-cold water that tasted pure and fresh. Then he looked for fuel. The lean-to shed, built behind the kitchen, was locked, and, after a fruitless search for the key, he pried off the hasp with a screw-driver. The shed held the accumulated rubbish of many years, but Wade didn't examine it. Fuel was what he wanted and he found plenty of it. There was a pile of old shingles and several feet of maple and hickory neatly stowed against the back wall. Near at hand was a chopping-block, the axe still leaning against it. There was a saw-horse, too, and a saw hung above it on a nail. But there was no wood cut in stove size, and so Wade swung the door wide open to let in light, and set to work with the saw and axe. It felt good to get his muscles into play again and he was soon whistling merrily. Fifteen minutes later he was building a fire in the kitchen stove. It was too early for supper, but the iron kettle looked very lonely without any steam curling from its impertinent spout. After he had solved the secrets of the perplexing drafts, and ascertained by the simple expedient of placing a sooty finger in it that the water was really getting warm, he washed his hands at the sink and returned to the sitting-room to don vest and coat. He had done that and was ruminantly filling his pipe when something drew his gaze to one of the side windows. The pipe fell to the floor and the tobacco trailed across the carpet.

For a moment, for just the tiny space of time which it took his heart to charge madly up into his throat, turn over and race back again, the open casement framed the shoulders and face of a woman. There were greens and blues in the background, and sunlight everywhere, and a blue shadow fell athwart the sill. The picture glared with light and color, but for that brief fragment of time Wade's eyes, half-blinded by the dazzlement, looked into the woman's. His widened with wonder and dawning recognition; hers—but the vision passed. The frame was empty again.

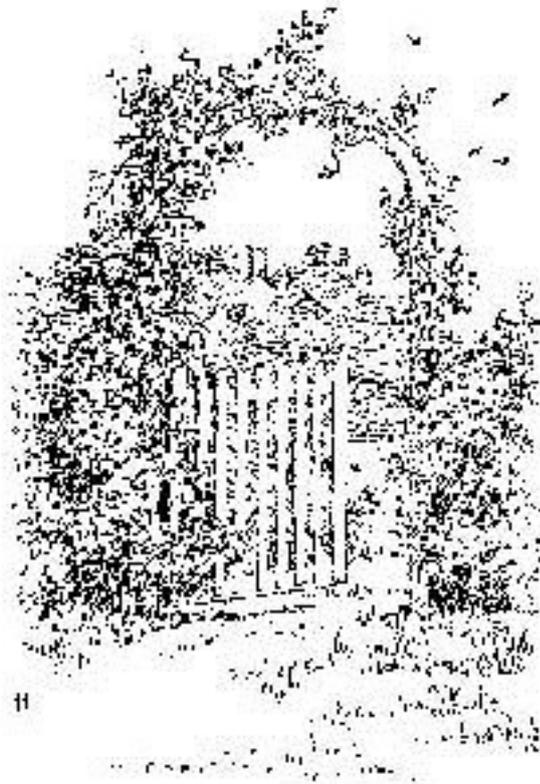
Wade passed a hand over his eyes, blinked and asked himself startledly what it meant. Had he dreamed? He gazed dazedly from the fallen pipe to the empty window. The sunlight dazzled and hurt, and he closed his eyes for an instant. And in that instant another vision came.... It was twilight on Saddle Pass.... Two starlit eyes looked wonderingly down into his. The mouth beneath was like a crimson bud with parted petals.... A slim, warm hand was in his and his heart danced on his lips.... The slender form lessened and softened in the tender darkness and became only a pale blur far down the track, and he was standing alone under the cold white stars, with a spray of lilac against his mouth.

He opened his eyes with a shiver. It was uncanny. All that had been five years ago, five years filled to the brim with work and struggle and final attainment, all making for forgetfulness. The thing was utterly absurd and impossible! His senses had tricked him! The light had blinded his eyes and imagination had done the rest! And yet—

He strode to the window and looked out. The garden was empty and still. Only, under the window, at the edge of the path, lay a spray of purple lilac.



IV



"Eh? Yes? What is it?"

Wade sat up in bed and stared stupidly about him. In Heaven's name where was he? And what was the noise that had awakened him? There it was again!

Rat, tat, tat, tat!

Was he still asleep? What was this room? The stove looked dimly familiar, and there were his clothes over the back of a green rep rocker. But where—Then memory routed sleep and he sank back onto the pillow with a sigh of relief. It was all right. He remembered now. He was in his own cottage in Eden Village, he had had a fine long sleep and felt ready for—

Rat, tat, tat, tat—TAT!

"Hello! What is it? Who is it? Why in thunder don't you—"

"Please, sir, it's me."

The reply came faintly through the dining room. Some one was knocking at the kitchen door. The apologetic tones sounded feminine, however, and Wade was in no costume to receive lady visitors. He looked desperately around for his dressing-gown and remembered that it was in his trunk and that his trunk still reposed in the porter's room of a Boston hotel.

"Who—who is 'me'?" he called.

"Zephania."

Zephania! Who in thunder was Zephania?

"I'm very sorry, Miss Zephania, but I'm not dressed yet. If you wouldn't mind calling again in, say, half an hour—"

"Please, sir, I'll wait."

"Oh, well—er—was there something you wanted?"

"Please, sir, I've come to do for you."

To do for him! Wade clasped his knees with his arms and frowned perplexedly at the big stove. It was distinctly threatening. He wondered how she intended to accomplish her awful purpose. Perhaps she had stopped in the woodshed and secured the axe. To do for him! Then he laughed and sprang out of bed. It was Zenas Prout's girl, and she had come to get his breakfast.

"Zephania!" he called.

"Yes, sir?" It sounded as though she were sitting on the back doorstep.

"The door is unlocked. Come in. You'll find things to eat on the table and things to cook with in the closets. I'll be dressed in a few minutes."

He heard the door open as he closed his own portal, and in a moment a stove-lid fell clanging to the floor. After that Zephania's presence in the house was never for a moment in doubt. Rattle-bang went the poker, clicketty-click went the shaker, and triumphant over all rose Zephania's shrill young voice:

"O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land,
As on thy highest mount I stand;
I look away across the sea,
Where mansions are prepared for me."

"She has a cheerful presence," muttered Wade. "I wonder if she does that all the time."

But Zephania's vocal efforts were forgotten for the moment in the annoying discovery that he had neglected to provide washing accommodations. He had intended using the kitchen sink for ablutions, but with Zephania in possession of that apartment it was out of the question. It was evident that if he meant to wash in the kitchen he would have to get up earlier. What time of day was it, anyhow? He looked at his watch and whistled.

"Twenty minutes of seven!" he ejaculated. "This won't do. I guess I'd better get my own breakfasts. If there's one thing a chap wants to do in vacation it's sleep late."

He raised the shades and flung open the front windows. On the lilac hedge a bird was poised singing his heart out. Wade watched him in admiration and wondered what kind of a bird he was. To Wade a bird was a bird as long as it was neither a buzzard nor a crow.

"You're not a buzzard," he told the songster, "nor a crow. You have a gray breast and brown body and a black cap on your head. Wonder who you are. Guess you're a sparrow. I believe I'll get a book telling about birds. They're interesting little devils. Look at him put his head back! Just as though he meant to crack things wide open. By Jove! I have it! Your name's Zephania!"

A baker's cart ambled by beyond the hedge, the driver leaning around the corner of the vehicle to regard the cottage curiously. Out on the common a bay horse, his halter-rope dragging under his feet, cropped the lush grass.

"You're happy," murmured Wade. "The bird's happy. Zephania's happy. This must be a happy village." He pondered a moment, gazing contentedly about the cosy sunlit room. Then, "And I'm happy myself," he added with conviction. And to prove it he began to whistle merrily while he finished dressing. Presently there was a knock on the dining-room door.

"Yes?" responded Wade.

"Please, sir, what will you have for breakfast?" Being by this time decently dressed, Wade opened the door.

"Hello!" he said.

"Good morning," answered Zephania.

If he had not been informed that her age was fifteen Wade would have supposed Zephania's years to be not over a baker's dozen. She was a round-faced, smiling-visaged, black-haired, black-eyed, ruddy-cheeked little mite who simply oozed cheerfulness and energy. She wore a shapeless pink cotton dress which reached almost to her ankles, and over that a blue-checked apron which nearly

trailed on the floor. Her sleeves were rolled elbow-high and one little thin hand clutched a dish-cloth as a badge of office. Wade stared dubiously at Zephania and Zephania smiled brightly back.

"Look here, my child," said Wade, "how old are you, anyway?"

"Fifteen in March, sir."

"Next March?"

"No, sir, last."

"You don't look it."

"No, sir, folks say I'm small for my age," agreed Zephania, cheerfully.

"I agree with them. Do you think you're strong enough to do the work here?"

"Oh, yes, sir. This is a very easy house to look after."

"Well," said Wade, hesitatingly, "you can have a try at it, but it seems to me you're too young to be doing housework."

"I've always done it," replied Zephania, beamingly. "What'll you have for breakfast, sir?"

"Coffee—can you make coffee?"

"Yes, sir, three ways."

"Well, one way will do," said Wade, hurriedly. "And you'll find some eggs there, I believe, and some bread. You might fry the eggs and toast the bread. I guess that will do for this morning."

"Yes, sir, thank you," answered Zephania, politely. "Wouldn't you rather have the eggs poached?"

"Er—why, yes, if you can do it."

"I can cook eggs eleven ways," said Zephania, proudly. "Are you going to eat breakfast in here or in there?" She nodded past Wade at the sitting-room.

"Well, what do you think?"

"It's sunnier in there, sir. I could just clear the end of that table. There's a fine big tray, sir."

"An excellent idea," replied Wade. "I place myself—and my house—in your hands, Zephania."

"Thank you, sir," said Zephania.

Breakfast was prepared that morning to the strains of "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." Wade went out to the kitchen presently to wash hands and face at the sink and dry them on a roller towel, which Zephania whisked before him as if by magic. Watching her for a minute or two dispelled all doubts as to her ability. The way in which she broke the eggs and slipped them into the boiling water was a revelation of dexterity. And all the while she sang on uninterruptedly, joyously, like the gray-breast on the hedge. Wade went out into the garden and breathed in deep breaths of the cool, moist air. The grass and the shrubs were heavy with dew and the morning world was redolent of the perfume exhaled from moist earth and growing things. In the neglected orchard the birds were chattering and piping, and from a nearby field came the excited cawing of crows. It was corn-planting time.

Wade ate his breakfast by the open window. He didn't know in which of the three ways Zephania had prepared his coffee, but it was excellent, and even the condensed milk couldn't spoil it. The eggs were snowy cushions of delight on golden tablets of toast, and the butter was hued like old ivory. Zephania objected to condensed milk, however, and suggested that she be allowed to bring a quart of "real milk" with her when she came in the mornings.

"Of course, you won't need a whole quart, unless you drink it, but, if you like cream in your coffee, it'll be a great deal heavier from a quart than from a pint. We get six cents for milk."

"By all means, let us have a quart," replied Wade, recklessly. "Such good coffee as this, Zephania, deserves the best cream to be had." Zephania blushed with pleasure and beamed down upon him radiantly.

"And maybe, sir, you'd like me to make you some bread?"

"I would. I was about to broach the subject," was the mendacious answer. "Could you do it?"

"Yes, indeed. Why, when they had the church fair over to The Center last winter I sent four loaves, and Mrs. Whitely, that's the minister's wife, sir, said it was just as good as any there."

"I want to know!" said Wade, unconsciously falling into local idiom.

"Yes, sir. I can make two kinds of bread. I'll make the milk bread first, though, and let you try that. Most folks likes milk bread the best. Shall I set some to-night?"

"Set some? Oh, yes, please do."

While she was removing the tray Zephania asked: "Which room would you like to have me clean first, sir?"

"Well, I suppose we ought to clean the whole place up, hadn't we?"



"OH, NO, SIR," REPLIED ZEPHANIA, WITH A SHOCKED, PITYING EXPRESSION

"Oh, yes, sir! Everything's just covered with dust. I never did see such a dirty house. Houses do get that way, though, if they're shut up for a long time. Maybe I'd just better begin at the top and work down?"

"That seems sensible," said Wade. "You could just sort of sweep the dirt down the front stairs and right out of the front door, couldn't you?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied Zephania, with a shocked, pitying expression. "I'd never do that. I'd clean each room separately, sir; sweep and wash up the floors and around the mop-board and—"

"Whatever way you think best," interrupted Wade. "I leave it all to you, Zephania, and I'm sure it will be done beautifully."

"Thank you, sir. Mother says I'm a real smart cleaner. Shall I get some more flowers in this vase, sir? This piece of lilac's dreadfully wilted."

"No, Zephania, just let that remain, please. The fact, is, that—that's a rather particular piece of lilac; something out of the common."

"Out of the common?" echoed Zephania, in faint surprise, surveying as much of the common as she could see through the window. "You don't mean our common?"

"No," answered Wade, gravely, "not our common. That piece of lilac, Zephania, is a clue; at least, I think it is. Do you know what a clue is?"

"Yes, sir. It's something you find that puts you on the trail of the murderer." Zephania eyed the lilac interestedly.

"Well, something of that sort. Only in this case there isn't any murderer."

"A thief?" asked Zephania, eagerly and hopefully.

"Not even a thief," laughed Wade. "Just—just somebody I want very much to find. I suppose, Zephania, you know about every one in the village, don't you?"

"Pretty nearly, I guess."

"Good. Now suppose you tell me something about my neighbors. Every one ought to know about his neighbors, eh?"

"Yes, sir. After you've been here some time, though, you'll know all about them."

"Yes, but the trouble is I don't want to wait that long. Now, for instance, who lives over there on my left; the square white house with the drab blinds?"

"Miss Cousins, sir. She's a maiden lady and has a great deal of money. They say she owns some of the railroad. She plays the organ in church, and—"

"Youngish, is she, with sort of wavy brown hair and—"

"No, sir," Zephania tittered, "Miss Cousins is kind of old and has real gray hair."

"Really? On my other side, then, who's my neighbor there? Or haven't I one?"

"Oh, yes, sir," answered Zephania, eagerly. "That's the Walton house, and that's—"

"The—*what*?" asked Wade, sitting up very suddenly in the green rep rocker.

"The Walton house, sir."

"Oh! Hum! And—er—who lives there, Zephania?"

"Miss Walton and Miss Mullett."

"What's this Miss—Miss Walton like? Is she rather stout with quite black hair, Zephania?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Herring! I guess you saw Mrs. Sampson, the dressmaker. She lives over there across the common, in the little yellowish house with the vines; see?"

"Yes, yes, I see. That's where Miss Sampson lives, eh? Well, well! But we were speaking about Miss Walton, weren't we?"

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