

Reed Myrtle

At the Sign of the Jack O'Lantern



Myrtle Reed

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I

The End of the Honeymoon

It was certainly a queer house. Even through the blinding storm they could distinguish its eccentric outlines as they alighted from the stage. Dorothy laughed happily, heedless of the fact that her husband's umbrella was dripping down her neck. "It's a dear old place," she cried; "I love it already!"

For an instant a flash of lightning turned the peculiar windows into sheets of flame, then all was dark again. Harlan's answer was drowned by a crash of thunder and the turning of the heavy wheels on the gravelled road.

"Don't stop," shouted the driver; "I'll come up to-morrer for the money. Good luck to you – an' the Jack-o'-Lantern!"

"What did he mean?" asked Dorothy, shaking out her wet skirts, when they were safely inside the door. "Who's got a Jack-o'-Lantern?"

"You can search me," answered Harlan, concisely, fumbling for a match. "I suppose we've got it. Anyhow, we'll have a look at this sepulchral mansion presently."

His deep voice echoed and re-echoed through the empty rooms, and Dorothy laughed; a little hysterically this time. Match after match sputtered and failed. "Couldn't have got much wetter if I'd been in swimming," he grumbled. "Here goes the last one."

By the uncertain light they found a candle and Harlan drew a long breath of relief. "It would have been pleasant, wouldn't it?" he went on. "We could have sat on the stairs until morning, or broken our admirable necks in falling over strange furniture. The next thing is a fire. Wonder where my distinguished relative kept his wood?"

Lighting another candle, he went off on a tour of investigation, leaving Dorothy alone.

She could not repress a shiver as she glanced around the gloomy room. The bare loneliness of the place was accentuated by the depressing furniture, which belonged to the black walnut and haircloth period. On the marble-topped table, in the exact centre of the room, was a red plush album, flanked on one side by a hideous china vase, and on the other by a basket of wax flowers under a glass shade.

Her home-coming! How often she had dreamed of it, never for a moment guessing that it might be like this! She had fancied a little house in a suburb, or a cosy apartment in the city, and a lump came into her throat as her air castle dissolved into utter ruin. She was one of those rare, unhappy women whose natures are so finely attuned to beauty that ugliness hurts like physical pain.

She sat down on one of the slippery haircloth chairs, facing the mantel where the single candle threw its tiny light afar. Little by little the room crept into shadowy relief – the melodeon in the corner, the what-not, with its burden of incongruous ornaments, and even the easel bearing the crayon portrait of the former mistress of the house, becoming faintly visible.

Presently, from above the mantel, appeared eyes. Dorothy felt them first, then looked up affrighted. From the darkness they gleamed upon her in a way that made her heart stand still. Human undoubtedly, but not in the least friendly, they were the eyes of one who bitterly resented the presence of an intruder. The light flickered, then flamed up once more and brought into view the features that belonged with the eyes.

Dorothy would have screamed, had it not been for the lump in her throat. A step came nearer and nearer, from some distant part of the house, accompanied by a cheery, familiar whistle. Still the stern, malicious face held her spellbound, and even when Harlan came in with his load of wood, she could not turn away.

“Now,” he said, “we’ll start a fire and hang ourselves up to dry.”

“What is it?” asked Dorothy, her lips scarcely moving.

His eyes followed hers. “Uncle Ebenezer’s portrait,” he answered. “Why, Dorothy Carr! I believe you’re scared!”

“I was scared,” she admitted, reluctantly, after a brief silence, smiling a little at her own foolishness. “It’s so dark and gloomy in here, and you were gone so long – ”

Her voice trailed off into an indistinct murmur, but she still shuddered in spite of herself.

“Funny old place,” commented Harlan, kneeling on the hearth and laying kindlings, log-cabin fashion, in the fireplace. “If an architect planned it, he must have gone crazy the week before he did it.”

“Or at the time. Don’t, dear – wait a minute. Let’s light our first fire together.”

He smiled as she slipped to her knees beside him, and his hand held hers while the blazing splinter set the pine kindling aflame. Quickly the whole room was aglow with light and warmth, in cheerful contrast to the stormy tumult outside.

“Somebody said once,” observed Harlan, as they drew their chairs close to the hearth, “that four feet on a fender are sufficient for happiness.”

“Depends altogether on the feet,” rejoined Dorothy, quickly. “I wouldn’t want Uncle Ebenezer sitting here beside me – no disrespect intended to your relation, as such.”

“Poor old duck,” said Harlan, kindly. “Life was never very good to him, and Death took away the only thing he ever loved.

“Aunt Rebecca,” he continued, feeling her unspoken question. “She died suddenly, when they had been married only three or four weeks.”

“Like us,” whispered Dorothy, for the first time conscious of a tenderness toward the departed Mr. Judson, of Judson Centre.

“It was four weeks ago to-day, wasn’t it?” he mused, instinctively seeking her hand.

“I thought you’d forgotten,” she smiled back at him. “I feel like an old married woman, already.”

“You don’t look it,” he returned, gently. Few would have called her beautiful, but love brings beauty with it, and Harlan saw an exquisite loveliness in the deep, dark eyes, the brown hair that rippled and shone in the firelight, the smooth, creamy skin, and the sensitive mouth that betrayed every passing mood.

“None the less, I am,” she went on. “I’ve grown so used to seeing ‘Mrs. James Harlan Carr’ on my visiting cards that I’ve forgotten there ever was such a person as ‘Miss Dorothy Locke,’ who used to get letters, and go calling when she wasn’t too busy, and have things sent to her when she had the money to buy them.”

“I hope – ” Harlan stumbled awkwardly over the words – “I hope you’ll never be sorry.”

“I haven’t been yet,” she laughed, “and it’s four whole weeks. Come, let’s go on an exploring expedition. I’m dry both inside and out, and most terribly hungry.”

Each took a candle and Harlan led the way, in and out of unexpected doors, queer, winding passages, and lonely, untenanted rooms. Originally, the house had been simple enough in structure, but wing after wing had been added until the first design, if it could be dignified by that name, had been wholly obscured. From each room branched a series of apartments – a sitting-room, surrounded by bedrooms, each of which contained two or sometimes three beds. A combined kitchen and dining-room was in every separate wing, with an outside door.

“I wonder,” cried Dorothy, “if we’ve come to an orphan asylum!”

“Heaven knows what we’ve come to,” muttered Harlan. “You know I never was here before.”

“Did Uncle Ebenezer have a large family?”

“Only Aunt Rebecca, who died very soon, as I told you. Mother was his only sister, and I her only child, so it wasn't on our side.”

“Perhaps,” observed Dorothy, “Aunt Rebecca had relations.”

“One, two, three, four, five,” counted Harlan. “There are five sets of apartments on this side, and three on the other. Let's go upstairs.”

From the low front door a series of low windows extended across the house on each side, abundantly lighting the two front rooms, which were separated by the wide hall. A high, narrow window in the lower hall, seemingly with no purpose whatever, began far above the low door and ended abruptly at the ceiling. In the upper hall, a similar window began at the floor and extended upward no higher than Harlan's knees. As Dorothy said, “one would have to lie down to look out of it,” but it lighted the hall, which, after all, was the main thing.

In each of the two front rooms, upstairs, was a single round window, too high for one to look out of without standing on a chair, though in both rooms there was plenty of side light. One wing on each side of the house had been carried up to the second story, and the arrangement of rooms was the same as below, outside stairways leading from the kitchens to the ground.

“I never saw so many beds in my life,” cried Dorothy.

“Seems to be a perfect Bedlam,” rejoined Harlan, making a poor attempt at a joke and laughing mirthlessly. In his heart he began to doubt the wisdom of marrying on six hundred dollars, an unexplored heirloom in Judson Centre, and an overweening desire to write books.

For the first time, his temerity appeared to him in its proper colours. He had been a space writer and Dorothy the private secretary of a Personage, when they met, in the dreary basement dining-room of a New York boarding-house, and speedily fell in love. Shortly afterward, when Harlan received a letter which contained a key, and announced that Mr. Judson's house, fully furnished, had been bequeathed to his nephew, they had light-heartedly embarked upon matrimony with no fears for the future.

Two hundred dollars had been spent upon a very modest honeymoon, and the three hundred and ninety-seven dollars and twenty-three cents remaining, as Harlan had accurately calculated, seemed pitifully small. Perplexity, doubt, and foreboding were plainly written on his face, when Dorothy turned to him.

“Isn't it perfectly lovely,” she asked, “for us to have this nice, quiet place all to ourselves, where you can write your book?”

Woman-like, she had instantly touched the right chord, and the clouds vanished.

“Yes,” he cried, eagerly. “Oh, Dorothy, do you think I can really write it?”

“Write it,” she repeated; “why, you dear, funny goose, you can write a better book than anybody has ever written yet, and I know you can! By next week we'll be settled here and you can get down to work. I'll help you, too,” she added, generously. “If you'll buy me a typewriter, I can copy the whole book for you.”

“Of course I'll buy you a typewriter. We'll send for it to-morrow. How much does a nice one cost?”

“The kind I like,” she explained, “costs a hundred dollars without the stand. I don't need the stand – we can find a table somewhere that will do.”

“Two hundred and ninety-seven dollars and twenty-three cents,” breathed Harlan, unconsciously.

“No, only a hundred dollars,” corrected Dorothy. “I don't care to have it silver mounted.”

“I'd buy you a gold one if you wanted it,” stammered Harlan, in some confusion.

“Not now,” she returned, serenely. “Wait till the book is done.”

Visions of fame and fortune appeared before his troubled eyes and set his soul alight with high ambition. The candle in his hand burned unsteadily and dripped tallow, unheeded. "Come," said Dorothy, gently, "let's go downstairs again."

An open door revealed a tortuous stairway at the back of the house, descending mysteriously into cavernous gloom. "Let's go down here," she continued. "I love curly stairs."

"These are kinky enough to please even your refined fancy," laughed Harlan. "It reminds me of travelling in the West, where you look out of the window and see your engine on the track beside you, going the other way."

"This must be the kitchen," said Dorothy, when the stairs finally ceased. "Uncle Ebenezer appears to have had a pronounced fancy for kitchens."

"Here's another wing," added Harlan, opening the back door. "Sitting-room, bedroom, and – my soul and body! It's another kitchen!"

"Any more beds?" queried Dorothy, peering into the darkness. "We can't keep house unless we can find more beds."

"Only one more. I guess we've come down to bed rock at last."

"In other words, the cradle," she observed, pulling a little old-fashioned trundle bed out into the light.

"Oh, what a joke!" cried Harlan. "That's worth three dollars in the office of any funny paper in New York!"

"Sell it," commanded Dorothy, inspired by the prospect of wealth, "and I'll give you fifty cents for your commission."

Outside, the storm still raged and the old house shook and creaked in the blast. The rain swirled furiously against the windows, and a swift rush of hailstones beat a fierce tattoo on the roof. Built on the summit of a hill and with only a few trees near it, the Judson mansion was but poorly protected from the elements.

None the less, there was a sense of warmth and comfort inside. "Let's build a fire in the kitchen," suggested Dorothy, "and then we'll try to find something to eat."

"Which kitchen?" asked Harlan.

"Any old kitchen. The one the back stairs end in, I guess. It seems to be the principal one of the set."

Harlan brought more wood and Dorothy watched him build the fire with a sense that a god-like being was here put to base uses. Hampered in his log-cabin design by the limitations of the fire box, he handled the kindlings awkwardly, got a splinter into his thumb, said something under his breath which was not meant for his wife to hear, and powdered his linen with soot from the stove pipe. At length, however, a respectable fire was started.

"Now," he asked, "what shall I do next?"

"Wind all the clocks. I can't endure a dead clock. While you're doing it, I'll get out the remnants of our lunch and see what there is in the pantry that is still edible."

In the lunch basket which the erratic ramifications of the road leading to Judson Centre had obliged them to carry, there was still, fortunately, a supply of sandwiches and fruit. A hasty search through the nearest pantry revealed jelly, marmalade, and pickles, a box of musty crackers and a canister of tea. When Harlan came back, Dorothy had the kitchen table set for two, with a lighted candle dispensing odorous good cheer from the centre of it, and the tea kettle singing merrily over the fire.

"Seems like home, doesn't it?" he asked, pleasantly imbued with the realisation of the home-making quality in Dorothy. Certain rare women with this gift take their atmosphere with them wherever they go.

"To-morrow," he went on, "I'll go into the village and buy more things to eat."

"The ruling passion," she smiled. "It's – what's that!"

Clear and high above the sound of the storm came an imperious “Me-ow!”

“It’s a cat,” said Harlan. “You don’t suppose the poor thing is shut up anywhere, do you?”

“If it had been, we’d have found it. We’ve opened every door in the house, I’m sure. It must be outside.”

“Me-ow! Me-ow! Me-ow!” The voice was not pleading; it was rather a command, a challenge.

“Kitty, kitty, kitty,” she called. “Where are you, kitty?”

Harlan opened the outside door, and in rushed a huge black cat, with the air of one returning home after a long absence.

“Poor kitty,” said Dorothy, kindly, stooping to stroke the sable visitor, who instinctively dodged the caress, and then scratched her hand.

“The ugly brute!” she exclaimed. “Don’t touch him, Harlan.”

Throughout the meal the cat sat at a respectful distance, with his greenish yellow eyes fixed unwaveringly upon them. He was entirely black, save for a white patch under his chin, which, in the half-light, carried with it an uncanny suggestion of a shirt front. Dorothy at length became restless under the calm scrutiny.

“I don’t like him,” she said. “Put him out.”

“Thought you liked cats,” remarked Harlan, reaching for another sandwich.

“I do, but I don’t like this one. Please put him out.”

“What, in all this storm? He’ll get wet.”

“He wasn’t wet when he came in,” objected Dorothy. “He must have some warm, dry place of his own outside.”

“Come, kitty,” said Harlan, pleasantly.

“Kitty” merely blinked, and Harlan rose.

“Come, kitty.”

With the characteristic independence of cats, the visitor yawned. The conversation evidently bored him.

“Come, kitty,” said Harlan, more firmly, with a low swoop of his arm. The cat arched his back, erected an enlarged tail, and hissed threateningly. In a dignified but effective manner, he eluded all attempts to capture him, even avoiding Dorothy and her broom.

“There’s something more or less imperial about him,” she remarked, wiping her flushed cheeks, when they had finally decided not to put the cat out. “As long as he’s adopted us, we’ll have to keep him. What shall we name him?”

“Claudius Tiberius,” answered Harlan. “It suits him down to the ground.”

“His first name is certainly appropriate,” laughed Dorothy, with a rueful glance at her scratched hand. Making the best of a bad bargain, she spread an old grey shawl, nicely folded, on the floor by the stove, and requested Claudius Tiberius to recline upon it, but he persistently ignored the invitation.

“This is jolly enough,” said Harlan. “A cosy little supper in our own house, with a gale blowing outside, the tea kettle singing over the fire, and a cat purring on the hearth.”

“Have you heard Claudius purr?” asked Dorothy, idly.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t. Perhaps something is wrong with his purrer. We’ll fix him tomorrow.”

From a remote part of the house came twelve faint, silvery tones. The kitchen clock struck next, with short, quick strokes, followed immediately by a casual record of the hour from the clock on the mantel beneath Uncle Ebenezer’s portrait. Then the grandfather’s clock in the hall boomed out twelve, solemn funereal chimes. Afterward, the silence seemed acute.

“The end of the honeymoon,” said Dorothy, a little sadly, with a quick, inquiring look at her husband.

“The end of the honeymoon!” repeated Harlan, gathering her into his arms. “To-morrow, life begins!”

Several hours later, Dorothy awoke from a dreamless sleep to wonder whether life was any different from a honeymoon, and if so, how and why.

II

The Day Afterward

By the pitiless light of early morning, the house was even uglier than at night. With an irreverence essentially modern, Dorothy decided, while she was dressing, to have all the furniture taken out into the back yard, where she could look it over at her leisure. She would make a bonfire of most of it, or, better yet, have it cut into wood for the fireplace. Thus Uncle Ebenezer's cumbrous bequest might be quickly transformed into comfort.

"And," thought Dorothy, "I'll take down that hideous portrait over the mantel before I'm a day older."

But when she broached the subject to Harlan, she found him unresponsive and somewhat disinclined to interfere with the existing order of things. "We'll be here only for the Summer," he said, "so what's the use of monkeying with the furniture and burning up fifty or sixty beds? There's plenty of wood in the cellar."

"I don't like the furniture," she pouted.

"My dear," said Harlan, with patronising kindness, "as you grow older, you'll find lots of things on the planet which you don't like. Moreover, it'll be quite out of your power to cremate 'em, and it's just as well to begin adjusting yourself now."

This bit of philosophy irritated Mrs. Carr unbearably. "Do you mean to say," she demanded, with rising temper, "that you won't do as I ask you to?"

"Do you mean to say," inquired Harlan, wickedly, in exact imitation of her manner, "that you won't do as I ask you to? Four weeks ago yesterday, if I remember rightly, you promised to obey me!"

"Don't remind me of what I'm ashamed of!" flashed Dorothy. "If I'd known what a brute you were, I'd never have married you! You may be sure of that!"

Claudius Tiberius insinuated himself between Harlan's feet and rubbed against his trousers, leaving a thin film of black fur in his wake. Being fastidious about his personal appearance, Harlan kicked Claudius Tiberius vigorously, grabbed his hat and went out, slamming the door, and whistling with an exaggerated cheerfulness.

"Brute!" The word rankled deeply as he went downhill with his hands in his pockets, whistling determinedly. So Dorothy was sorry she had married him! After all he'd done for her, too. Giving up a good position in New York, taking her half-way around the world on a honeymoon, and bringing her to a magnificent country residence in a fashionable locality for the Summer!

Safely screened by the hill, he turned back to look at the "magnificent country residence," then swore softly under his breath, as, for the first time, he took in the full meaning of the eccentric architecture.

Perched high upon the hill, with intervening shrubbery carefully cut down, the Judson mansion was not one to inspire confidence in its possessor. Outwardly, it was grey and weather-worn, with the shingles dropping off in places. At the sides, the rambling wings and outside stairways, branching off into space, conveyed the impression that the house had been recently subjected to a powerful influence of the centrifugal sort. But worst of all was the front elevation, with its two round windows, its narrow, long window in the centre, and the low windows on either side of the front door – the grinning, distorted semblance of a human face.

The bare, uncurtained windows loomed up boldly in the searching sunlight, which spared nothing. The blue smoke rising from the kitchen chimney appeared strangely like a plume streaming out from the rear. Harlan noted, too, that the railing of the narrow porch extended almost entirely across the front of the house, and remembered, dimly, that they had found the steps at one side of the porch the night before. Not a single unpleasant detail was in any way hidden, and he clutched

instinctively at a tree as he realised that the supports of the railing were cunningly arranged to look like huge teeth.

“No wonder,” he said to himself “that the stage driver called it the Jack-o’-Lantern! That’s exactly what it is! Why didn’t he paint it yellow and be done with it? The old devil!” The last disrespectful allusion, of course, being meant for Uncle Ebenezer.

“Poor Dorothy,” he thought again. “I’ll burn the whole thing, and she shall put every blamed crib into the purifying flames. It’s mine, and I can do what I please with it. We’ll go away to-morrow, we’ll go – ”

Where could they go, with less than four hundred dollars? Especially when one hundred of it was promised for a typewriter? Harlan had parted with his managing editor on terms of great dignity, announcing that he had forsworn journalism and would hereafter devote himself to literature. The editor had remarked, somewhat cynically, that it was a better day for journalism than for literature, the fine, inner meaning of the retort not having been fully evident to Harlan until he was some three squares away from the office.

Much chastened in spirit, and fully ready to accept his wife’s estimate of him, he went on downhill into Judson Centre.

It was the usual small town, the post-office, grocery, meat market, and general loafing-place being combined under one roof. Near by was the blacksmith shop, and across from it was the inevitable saloon. Far up in the hills was the Judson Centre Sanitarium, a worthy institution of some years standing, where every human ailment from tuberculosis to fits was more or less successfully treated.

Upon the inmates of the sanitarium the inhabitants of Judson Centre lived, both materially and mentally. Few of them had ever been nearer to it than the back door, but tales of dark doings were widely prevalent throughout the community, and mothers were wont to frighten their young offspring into obedience with threats of the “san-tor-i-yum.”

“Now what do you reckon ails *him*?” asked the blacksmith of the stage-driver, as Harlan went into the village store.

“Wouldn’t reckon nothin’ ailed him to look at him, would you?” queried the driver, in reply.

Indeed, no one looking at Mr. Carr would have suspected him of an “ailment.” He was tall and broad-shouldered and well set up, with clear grey eyes and a rosy, smooth-shaven, boyish face which had given him the nickname of “The Cherub” all along Newspaper Row. In his bearing there was a suggestion of boundless energy, which needed only proper direction to accomplish wonders.

“You can’t never tell,” continued the driver, shifting his quid. “Now, I’ve took folks up there goin’ on ten year now, an’ some I’ve took up looked considerable more healthy than I be when I took ’em up. Comin’ back, howsumever, it was different. One young feller rode up with me in the rain one night, a-singin’ an’ a-whistlin’ to beat the band, an’ when I took him back, a month or so arterward, he had a striped nurse on one side of him an’ a doctor on t’ other, an’ was wearin’ a shawl. Couldn’t hardly set up, but he was a-tryin’ to joke just the same. ‘Hank,’ says he, when we got a little way off from the place, ‘my book of life has been edited by the librarians an’ the entire appendix removed.’ Them’s his very words. ‘An’,’ says he, ‘the time to have the appendix took out is before it does much of anythin’ to your table of contents.’

“The doctor shut him up then, an’ I didn’t hear no more, but I remembered the language, an’ arterwards, when I got a chanst, I looked in the school-teacher’s dictionary. It said as how the appendix was sunthin’ appended or added to, but I couldn’t get no more about it. I’ve hearn tell of a ‘devil child’ with a tail to it what was travellin’ with the circus one year, an’ I’ve surmised as how mebbe a tail had begun to grow on this young feller an’ it was took off.”

“You don’t say!” ejaculated the blacksmith.

By reason of his professional connection with the sanitarium, Mr. Henry Blake was, in a sense, the oracle of Judson Centre, and he enjoyed his proud distinction to the full. Ordinarily, he was taciturn, but the present hour found him in a conversational mood.

"He's married," he went on, returning to the original subject. "I took him an' his wife up to the Jack-o'-Lantern last night. Come in on the nine forty-seven from the Junction. Reckon they're goin' to stay a spell, 'cause they've got trunks – one of a reasonable size, an' 'nother that looks like a dog-house. Box, too, that's got lead in it."

"Books, maybe," suggested the blacksmith, with unexpected discernment. "Schoolteacher boarded to our house wunst an' she had most a car-load of 'em. Educated folks has to have books to keep from losin' their education."

"Don't take much stock in it myself," remarked the driver. "It spiles most folks. As soon as they get some, they begin to pine an' hanker for more. I knowed a feller wunst that begun with one book dropped on the road near the sanitarium, an' he never stopped till he was plum through college. An' a woman up there sent my darter a book wunst, an' I took it right back to her. 'My darter's got a book,' says I, 'an' she ain't a-needin' of no duplicates. Keep it,' says I, 'fer somebody that ain't got no book."

"Do you reckon," asked the blacksmith, after a long silence, "that they're goin' to live in the Jack-o'-Lantern?"

"I ain't a-sayin'," answered Mr. Blake, cautiously. "They're educated, an' there's no tellin' what educated folks is goin' to do. This young lady, now, that come up with him last night, she said it was 'a dear old place an' she loved it a'ready.' Them's her very words!"

"Do tell!"

"That's c'rrect, an' as I said before, when you're dealin' with educated folks, you're swimmin' in deep water with the shore clean out o' sight. Education was what ailed him." By a careless nod Mr. Blake indicated the Jack-o'-Lantern, which could be seen from the main thoroughfare of Judson Centre.

"I've hearn," he went on, taking a fresh bite from his morning purchase of "plug," "that he had one hull room mighty nigh plum full o' nothin' but books, an' there was always more comin' by freight an' express an' through the post-office. It's all on account o' them books that he's made the front o' his house into what it is. My wife had a paper book wunst, a-tellin' 'How to Transfer a Hopeless Exterior,' with pictures of houses in it like they be here an' more arter they'd been transferred. You bet I burnt it while she was gone to sewin' circle, an' there ain't no book come into my house since."

Mr. Blake spoke with the virtuous air of one who has protected his home from contamination. Indeed, as he had often said before, "you can't never tell what folks'll do when books gets a holt of 'em."

"Do you reckon," asked the blacksmith, "that there'll be company?"

"Company," snickered Mr. Blake, "oh, my Lord, yes! A little thing like death ain't never going to keep company away. Ain't you never hearn as how misery loves company? The more miserable you are the more company you'll have, an' vice versey, etcetery an' the same."

"Hush!" warned the blacksmith, in a harsh whisper. "He's a-comin'!"

"City feller," grumbled Mr. Blake, affecting not to see.

"Good-morning," said Harlan, pleasantly, though not without an air of condescension. "Can you tell me where I can find the stage-driver?"

"That's me," grunted Mr. Blake. "Be you wantin' anythin'?"

"Only to pay you for taking us up to the house last night, and to arrange about our trunks. Can you deliver them this afternoon?"

"I ain't a-runnin' of no livery, but I can take 'em up, if that's what you're wantin'."

"Exactly," said Harlan, "and the box, too, if you will. And the things I've just ordered at the grocery – can you bring them, too?"

Mr. Blake nodded helplessly, and the blacksmith gazed at Harlan, open-mouthed, as he started uphill. "Must sure have a ailment," he commented, "but I hear tell, Hank, that in the city they never carry nothin' round with 'em but perhaps an umbrell. Everythin' else they have 'sent.'"

"Reckon it's true enough. I took a ham wunst up to the sanitarium for a young sprig of a doctor that was too proud to carry it himself. He was goin' that way, too – walkin' up to save money – so I charged him for carryin' up the ham just what I'd have took both for. 'Pigs is high,' I told him, 'same price for one as for 'nother,' but he didn't pay no attention to it an' never raised no kick about the price. Thinkin' 'bout sunthin' else, most likely – most of 'em are."

Harlan, most assuredly, was "thinkin' 'bout sunthin' else." In fact, he was possessed by portentous uneasiness. There was well-defined doubt in his mind regarding his reception at the Jack-o'-Lantern. Dorothy's parting words had been plain – almost to the point of rudeness, he reflected, unhappily, and he was not sure that "a brute" would be allowed in her presence again.

The bare, uncurtained windows gave no sign of human occupancy. Perhaps she had left him! Then his reason came to the rescue – there was no way for her to go but downhill, and he would certainly have seen her had she taken that path.

When he entered the yard, he smelled smoke, and ran wildly into the house. A hasty search through all the rooms revealed nothing – even Dorothy had disappeared. From the kitchen window, he saw her in the back yard, poking idly through a heap of smouldering rubbish with an old broomstick.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, breathlessly, before she knew he was near her.

Dorothy turned, disguising her sudden start by a toss of her head. "Oh," she said, coolly, "it's you, is it?"

Harlan bit his lips and his eyes laughed. "I say, Dorothy," he began, awkwardly; "I was rather a beast, wasn't I?"

"Of course," she returned, in a small, unnatural voice, still poking through the ruins. "I told you so, didn't I?"

"I didn't believe you at the time," Harlan went on, eager to make amends, "but I do now."

"That's good." Mrs. Carr's tone was not at all reassuring.

There was an awkward pause, then Harlan, putting aside his obstinate pride, said the simple sentence which men of all ages have found it hardest to say – perhaps because it is the sign of utter masculine abasement. "I'm sorry, dear, will you forgive me?"

In a moment, she was in his arms. "It was partly my fault," she admitted, generously, from the depths of his coat collar. "I think there must be something in the atmosphere of the house. We never quarrelled before."

"And we never will again," answered Harlan, confidently. "What have you been burning?"

"It was a mattress," whispered Dorothy, much ashamed. "I tried to get a bed out, but it was too heavy."

"You funny, funny girl! How did you ever get a mattress out, all alone?"

"Dragged it to an upper window and dumped it," she explained, blushing, "then came down and dragged it some more. Claudius Tiberius didn't like to have me do it."

"I don't wonder," laughed Harlan. "That is," he added hastily, "he couldn't have been pleased to see you doing it all by yourself. Anybody would love to see a mattress burn."

"Shall we get some more? There are plenty."

"Let's not take all our pleasure at once," he suggested, with rare tact. "One mattress a day – how'll that do?"

"We'll have it at night," cried Dorothy, clapping her hands, "and when the mattresses are all gone, we'll do the beds and bureaus and the haircloth furniture in the parlour. Oh, I do so love a bonfire!"

Harlan's heart grew strangely tender, for it had been this underlying childishness in her that he had loved the most. She was stirring the ashes now, with as much real pleasure as though she were five instead of twenty-five.

As it happened, Harlan would have been saved a great deal of trouble if he had followed out her suggestion and burned all of the beds in the house except two or three, but the balance between foresight and retrospection has seldom been exact.

"Beast of a smudge you're making," he commented, choking.

"Get around to the other side, then. Why, Harlan, what's that?"

"What's what?"

She pointed to a small metal box in the midst of the ashes.

"Poem on Spring, probably, put into the corner-stone by the builder of the mattress."

"Don't be foolish," she said, with assumed severity. "Get me a pail of water."

With two sticks they lifted it into the water and waited, impatiently enough, until they were sure it was cool. Then Dorothy, asserting her right of discovery, opened it with trembling fingers.

"Why-ee!" she gasped.

Upon a bed of wet cotton lay a large brooch, made wholly of clustered diamonds, and a coral necklace, somewhat injured by the fire.

"Whose is it?" demanded Dorothy, when she recovered the faculty of speech.

"I should say," returned Harlan, after due deliberation, "that it belonged to you."

"After this," she said, slowly, her eyes wide with wonder, "we'll take everything apart before we burn it."

Harlan was turning the brooch over in his hand and roughly estimating its value at two thousand dollars. "Here's something on the back," he said. "'R. from E., March 12, 1865.'"

"Rebecca from Ebenezer," cried Dorothy. "Oh, Harlan, it's ours! Don't you remember the letter said: 'my house and all its contents to my beloved nephew, James Harlan Carr'?"

"I remember," said Harlan. But his conscience was uneasy, none the less.

III

The First Caller

As Mr. Blake had heard, there was “one hull room mighty nigh plum full o’ nothin’ but books”; a grievous waste, indeed, when one already “had a book.” It was the front room, opposite the parlour, and every door and window in it could be securely bolted from the inside. If any one desired unbroken privacy, it could be had in the library as nowhere else in the house.

The book-shelves were made of rough pine, unplanned, unpainted, and were scarcely a seemly setting for the treasure they bore. But in looking at the books, one perceived that their owner had been one who passed by the body in his eager search for the soul.

Here were no fine editions, no luxurious, costly volumes in full levant. Illuminated pages, rubricated headings, and fine illustrations were conspicuous by their absence. For the most part, the books were simply but serviceably bound in plain cloth covers. Many a paper-covered book had been bound by its purchaser in pasteboard, flimsy enough in quality, yet further strengthened by cloth at the back. Cheap, pirated editions were so many that Harlan wondered whether his uncle had not been wholly without conscience in the matter of book-buying.

Shelf after shelf stretched across the long wall, with its company of mute consolors whose master was no more. The fine flowering of the centuries, like a single precious drop of imperishable perfume, was hidden in this rude casket. The minds and hearts of the great, laid pitilessly bare, were here in this one room, shielded merely by pasteboard and cloth.

Far up in the mountains, amid snow-clad steepes and rock-bound fastnesses, one finds, perchance, a shell. It is so small a thing that it can be held in the hollow of the hand; so frail that a slight pressure of the finger will crush it to atoms, yet, held to the ear, it brings the surge and sweep of that vast, primeval ocean which, in the inconceivably remote past, covered the peak. And so, to the eye of the mind, the small brown book, with its hundred printed pages, brings back the whole story of the world.

A thin, piping voice, to which its fellows have paid no heed, after a time becomes silent, and, ceaselessly marching, the years pass on by. Yet that trembling old hand, quietly laid at last upon the turbulent heart, in the solitude of a garret has guided a pen, and the manuscript is left. Ragged, worn, blotted, spotted with candle drippings and endlessly interlined, why should these few sheets of paper be saved?

Because, as it happens, the only record of the period is there – a record so significant that fifty years can be reconstructed, as an entire language was brought to light by a triple inscription upon a single stone. Thrown like the shell upon Time’s ever-receding shore, it is, nevertheless, the means by which unborn thousands shall commune with him who wrote in his garret, see his whole life mirrored in his book, know his philosophy, and take home his truth. For by way of the printed page comes Immortality.

There was no book in the library which had not been read many times. Some were falling apart, and others had been carefully sewn together and awkwardly rebound. Still open, on a rickety table in the corner, was that ponderous volume with an extremely limited circulation: *The Publishers’ Trade List Annual*. Pencilled crosses here and there indicated books to be purchased, or at least sent on approval, to “customers known to the House.”

“Some day,” said Dorothy, “when it’s raining and we can’t go out, we’ll take down all these books, arrange them in something like order, and catalogue them.”

“How optimistic you are!” remarked Harlan. “Do you think it could be done in one day?”

“Oh, well,” returned Dorothy; “you know what I mean.”

Harlan paced restlessly back and forth, pausing now and then to look out of the window, where nothing much was to be seen except the orchard, at a little distance from the house, and Claudius Tiberius, sunning himself pleasantly upon the porch. Four weeks had been a pleasant vacation, but two weeks of comparative idleness, added to it, were too much for an active mind and body to endure. Three or four times he had tried to begin the book that was to bring fame and fortune, and as many times had failed. Hitherto Harlan's work had not been obliged to wait for inspiration, and it was not so easy as it had seemed the day he bade his managing editor farewell.

"Somebody is coming," announced Dorothy, from the window.

"Nonsense! Nobody ever comes here."

"A precedent is about to be established, then. I feel it in my bones that we're going to have company."

"Let's see." Harlan went to the window and looked over her shoulder. A little man in a huge silk hat was toiling up the hill, aided by a cane. He was bent and old, yet he moved with a certain briskness, and, as Dorothy had said, he was inevitably coming.

"Who in thunder –" began Harlan.

"Our first company," interrupted Dorothy, with her hand over his mouth. "The very first person who has called on us since we were married!"

"Except Claudius Tiberius," amended Harlan. "Isn't a cat anybody?"

"Claudius is. I beg his imperial pardon for forgetting him."

The rusty bell-wire creaked, then a timid ring came from the rear depths of the house. "You let him in," said Dorothy, "and I'll go and fix my hair."

"Am I right," queried the old gentleman, when Harlan opened the door, "in presuming that I am so fortunate as to address Mr. James Harlan Carr?"

"My name is Carr," answered Harlan, politely. "Will you come in?"

"Thank you," answered the visitor, in high staccato, oblivious of the fact that Claudius Tiberius had scooted in between his feet; "it will be my pleasure to claim your hospitality for a few brief moments.

"I had hoped," he went on, as Harlan ushered him into the parlour, "to be able to make your acquaintance before this, but my multitudinous duties –"

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a card, cut somewhat irregularly from a sheet of white cardboard, and bearing in tremulous autographic script: "Jeremiah Bradford, Counsellor at Law."

"Oh," said Harlan, "it was you who wrote me the letter. I should have hunted you up when I first came, shouldn't I?"

"Not at all," returned Mr. Bradford. "It is I who have been remiss. It is etiquette that the old residents should call first upon the newcomers. Many and varied duties in connection with the practice of my profession have hitherto –" His eyes sought the portrait over the mantel. "A most excellent likeness of your worthy uncle," he continued, irrelevantly, "a gentleman with whom, as I understand, you never had the pleasure and privilege of becoming acquainted."

"I never met Uncle Ebenezer," rejoined Harlan, "but mother told me a great deal about him and we had one or two pictures – daguerreotypes, I believe they were."

"Undoubtedly, my dear sir. This portrait was painted from his very last daguerreotype by an artist of renown. It is a wonderful likeness. He was my Colonel – I served under him in the war. It was my desire to possess a portrait of him in uniform, but he would never consent, and would not allow anyone save myself to address him as Colonel. An eccentric, but very estimable gentleman."

"I cannot understand," said Harlan, "why he should have left the house to me. I had never even seen him."

"Perhaps," smiled Mr. Bradford, enigmatically, "that was his reason, or rather, perhaps I should say, if you had known your uncle more intimately and had visited him here, or, if he had had the

privilege of knowing you – quite often, as you know, a personal acquaintance proves disappointing, though, of course, in this case – ”

The old gentleman was floundering helplessly when Harlan rescued him. “I want you to meet my wife, Mr. Bradford. If you will excuse me, I will call her.”

Left to himself, the visitor slipped back and forth uneasily upon his haircloth chair, and took occasion to observe Claudius Tiberius, who sat near by and regarded the guest unblinkingly. Hearing approaching footsteps, he took out his worn silk handkerchief, unfolded it, and wiped the cold perspiration from his legal brow. In his heart of hearts, he wished he had not come, but Dorothy's kindly greeting at once relieved him of all embarrassment.

“We have been wondering,” she said, brightly, “who would be the first to call upon us, and you have come at exactly the right time. New residents are always given two weeks, are they not, in which to get settled?”

“Quite so, my dear madam, quite so, and I trust that you are by this time fully accustomed to your changed environment. Judson Centre, while possessing few metropolitan advantages, has distinct and peculiar recommendations of an individual character which endear the locality to those residing therein.”

“I think I shall like it here,” said Dorothy. “At least I shall try to.”

“A very commendable spirit,” rejoined the old gentleman, warmly, “and rather remarkable in one so young.”

Mrs. Carr graciously acknowledged the compliment, and the guest flushed with pleasure. To perception less fine, there would have been food for unseemly mirth in his attire. Never in all her life before had Dorothy seen rough cow-hide boots, and grey striped trousers worn with a rusty and moth-eaten dress-coat in the middle of the afternoon. An immaculate expanse of shirt-front and a general air of extreme cleanliness went far toward redeeming the unfamiliar costume. The silk hat, with a bell-shaped crown and wide, rolling brim, belonged to a much earlier period, and had been brushed to look like new. Even Harlan noted that the ravelled edges of his linen had been carefully trimmed and the worn binding of the hat brim inked wherever necessary.

His wrinkled old face was kindly, though somewhat sad. His weak blue eyes were sheltered by an enormous pair of spectacles, which he took off and wiped continually. He was smooth-shaven and his scanty hair was as white as the driven snow. Now, as he sat in Uncle Ebenezer's parlour, he seemed utterly friendless and forlorn – a complete failure of that pitiful type which never for a moment guesses that it has failed.

“It will be my delight,” the old man was saying, his hollow cheeks faintly flushed, “to see that the elite of Judson Centre pay proper respect to you at an early date. If I were not most unfortunately a single gentleman, my wife would do herself the honour of calling upon you immediately and of tendering you some sort of hospitality approximately commensurate with your worth. As it is – ”

“As it is,” said Harlan, taking up the wandering thread of the discourse, “that particular pleasure must be on our side. We both hope that you will come often, and informally.”

“It would be a solace to me,” rejoined the old gentleman, tremulously, “to find the niece and nephew of my departed friend both congenial and companionable. He was my Colonel – I served under him in the war – and until the last, he allowed me to address him as Colonel – a privilege accorded to no one else. He very seldom left his own estate, but at his request I often spent an evening or a Sunday afternoon in his society, and after his untimely death, I feel the loss of his companionship very keenly. He was my Colonel – I – ”

“I should imagine so,” said Harlan, kindly, “though, as I have told you, I never knew him at all.”

“A much-misunderstood gentleman,” continued Mr. Bradford, carefully wiping his spectacles. “My grief is too recent, at present, to enable me to discourse freely of his many virtues, but at some future time I shall hope to make you acquainted with your benefactor. He was my Colonel, and in serving under him in the war, I had an unusual opportunity to know him as he really was. May I

ask, without intruding upon your private affairs, whether or not it is your intention to reside here permanently?”

“We have not made up our minds,” responded Harlan. “We shall stay here this Summer, anyway, as I have some work to do which can be done only in a quiet place.”

“Quiet!” muttered the old gentleman, “quiet place! If I might venture to suggest, I should think you would find any other season more agreeable for prolonged mental effort. In Summer there are distractions – ”

“Yes,” put in Dorothy, “in Summer, one wants to be outdoors, and I am going to keep chickens and a cow, but my husband hopes to have his book finished by September.”

“His book!” repeated Mr. Bradford, in genuine astonishment. “Am I actually addressing an author?”

He beamed upon Harlan in a way which that modest youth found positively disconcerting.

“A would-be author only,” laughed Harlan, the colour mounting to his temples. “I’ve done newspaper work heretofore, and now I’m going to try something else.”

“My dear sir,” said Mr. Bradford, rising, “I must really beg the privilege of clasping your hand. It is a great honour for Judson Centre to have an author residing in its midst!”

Taking pity upon Harlan, Dorothy hastened to change the subject. “We hope it may be,” she observed, lightly, “and I wonder, Mr. Bradford, if you could not give me some good advice?”

“I shall be delighted, my dear madam. Any knowledge I may possess is trebly at your service, for the sake of the distinguished author whose wife you have the honour to be, for the sake of your departed relative, who was my friend, my Colonel, and last, but not least, for your own sake.”

“It is only about a maid,” said Dorothy.

“A – my dear madam, I beg your pardon?”

“A maid,” repeated Dorothy; “a servant.”

“Oh! A hired girl, or more accurately, in the parlance of Judson Centre, the help. Do I understand that it is your desire to become an employer of help?”

“It is,” answered Dorothy, somewhat awed by the solemnity of his tone, “if help is to be found. I thought you might know where I could get some one.”

“If I might be permitted to suggest,” replied Mr. Bradford, after due deliberation, “I should unhesitatingly recommend Mrs. Sarah Smithers, who did for your uncle during the entire period of his residence here and whose privilege it was to close his eyes in his last sleep. She is at present without prospect of a situation, and I believe would be very ready to accept a new position, especially so desirable a position as this, in your service.”

“Thank you. Could you – could you send her to me?”

“I shall do so, most assuredly, providing she is willing to come, and should she chance not to be agreeably disposed toward so pleasing a project, it will be my happiness to endeavour to persuade her.” Drawing out a memorandum book and a pencil, the old gentleman made an entry upon a fresh page. “The multitudinous duties in connection with the practice of my profession,” he began – “there, my dear madam, it is already attended to, since it is placed quite out of my power to forget.”

“I am greatly obliged,” said Dorothy.

“And now,” continued the visitor, “I must go. I fear I have already outstayed the limitation of a formal visit, such as the first should be, and it is not my desire to intrude upon an author’s time. Moreover, my own duties, slight and unimportant as they are in comparison, must ultimately press upon my attention.”

“Come again,” said Harlan, kindly, following him to the door.

“It will be my great pleasure,” rejoined the guest, “not only on your own account, but because your personality reminds me of that of my departed friend. You favour him considerably, more particularly in the eyes, if I may be permitted to allude to details. I think I told you, did I not, that he was my Colonel and I was privileged to serve under him in the war? My – oh, I walked, did I not? I

remember that it was my intention to come in a carriage, as being more suitable to a formal visit, but Mr. Blake had other engagements for his vehicle. Dear sir and madam, I bid you good afternoon.”

So saying, he went downhill, briskly enough, yet stumbling where the way was rough. They watched him until the bobbing, bell-shaped crown of the ancient head-gear was completely out of sight.

“What a dear old man!” said Dorothy. “He’s lonely and we must have him come up often.”

“Do you think,” asked Harlan, “that I look like Uncle Ebenezer?”

“Indeed you don’t!” cried Dorothy, “and that reminds me. I want to take that picture down.”

“To burn it?” inquired Harlan, slyly.

“No, I wouldn’t burn it,” answered Dorothy, somewhat spitefully, “but there’s no law against putting it in the attic, is there?”

“Not that I know of. Can we reach it from a chair?”

Together they mounted one of the haircloth monuments, slipping, as Dorothy said, until it was like walking on ice.

“Now then,” said Harlan, gaily, “come on down, Uncle! You’re about to be moved into the attic!”

The picture lunged forward, almost before they had touched it, the heavy gilt frame bruising Dorothy’s cheek badly. In catching it, Harlan turned it completely around, then gave a low whistle of astonishment.

Pasted securely to the back was a fearsome skull and cross-bones, made on wrapping paper with a brush and India ink. Below it, in great capitals, was the warning inscription: “LET MY PICTURE ALONE!”

“What shall we do with it?” asked Harlan, endeavouring to laugh, though, as he afterward admitted, he “felt creepy.” “Shall I take it up to the attic?”

“No,” answered Dorothy, in a small, unnatural voice, “leave it where it is.”

While Harlan was putting it back, Dorothy, trembling from head to foot, crept around to the back of the easel which bore Aunt Rebecca’s portrait. She was not at all surprised to find, on the back of it, a notice to this effect: “ANYONE DARING TO MOVE MRS. JUDSON’S PICTURE WILL BE HAUNTED FOR LIFE BY US BOTH.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Dorothy, somewhat viciously, when Harlan had joined her. “What kind of a woman do you suppose she could have been, to marry him? I’ll bet she’s glad she’s dead!”

Dorothy was still wiping blood from her face and might not have been wholly unprejudiced. Aunt Rebecca was a gentle, sweet-faced woman, if her portrait told the truth, possessed of all the virtues save self-assertion and dominated by habitual, unselfish kindness to others. She could not have been discourteous even to Claudius Tiberius, who at this moment was seated in state upon the sofa and purring industriously.

IV Finances

"I've ordered the typewriter," said Dorothy, brightly, "and some nice new note-paper, and a seal. I've just been reading about making virtue out of necessity, so I've ordered 'At the Sign of the Jack-o'-Lantern' put on our stationery, in gold, and a yellow pumpkin on the envelope flap, just above the seal. And I want you to make a funny sign-board to flap from a pole, the way they did in 'Rudder Grange.' If you could make a wooden Jack-o'-Lantern, we could have a candle inside it at night, and then the sign would be just like the house. We can get the paint and things down in the village. Won't it be cute? We're farmers, now, so we'll have to pretend we like it."

Harlan repressed an exclamation, which could not have been wholly inspired by pleasure.

"What's the matter?" asked Dorothy, easily. "Don't you like the design for the note-paper? If you don't, you won't have to use it. Nobody's going to make you write letters on paper you don't like, so cheer up."

"It isn't the paper," answered Harlan, miserably; "it's the typewriter." Up to the present moment, sustained by a false, but none the less determined pride, he had refrained from taking his wife into his confidence regarding his finances. With characteristic masculine short-sightedness, he had failed to perceive that every moment of delay made matters worse.

"Might I inquire," asked Mrs. Carr, coolly, "what is wrong with the typewriter?"

"Nothing at all," sighed Harlan, "except that we can't afford it." The whole bitter truth was out, now, and he turned away wretchedly, ashamed to meet her eyes.

It seemed ages before she spoke. Then she said, in smooth, icy tones: "What was your object in offering to get it for me?"

"I spoke impulsively," explained Harlan, forgetting that he had never suggested buying a typewriter. "I didn't stop to think. I'm sorry," he concluded, lamely.

"I suppose you spoke impulsively," snapped Dorothy, "when you asked me to marry you. You're sorry for that, too, aren't you?"

"Dorothy!"

"You're not the only one who's sorry," she rejoined, her cheeks flushed and her eyes blazing. "I had no idea what an expense I was going to be!"

"Dorothy!" cried Harlan, angrily; "you didn't think I was a millionaire, did you? Were you under the impression that I was an active branch of the United States Mint?"

"No," she answered, huskily; "I merely thought I was marrying a gentleman instead of a loafer, and I beg your pardon for the mistake!" She slammed the door on the last word, and he heard her light feet pattering swiftly down the hall, little guessing that she was trying to gain the shelter of her own room before giving way to a tempest of sobs.

Happy are they who can drown all pain, sorrow, and disappointment in a copious flood of tears. In an hour, at the most, Dorothy would be her sunny self again, penitent, and wholly ashamed of her undignified outburst. By to-morrow she would have forgotten it, but Harlan, made of sterner clay, would remember it for days.

"Loafer!" The cruel word seemed written accusingly on every wall of the room. In a sudden flash of insight he perceived the truth of it – and it hurt.

"Two months," bethought; "two months of besotted idleness. And I used to chase news from the Battery to the Bronx every day from eight to six! Murders, smallpox, East Side scraps, and Tammany Hall. Why in the hereafter can't they have a fire at the sanitarium, or something that I can wire in?"

“The Temple of Healing,” as Dorothy had christened it in a happier moment, stood on a distant hill, all but hidden now by trees and shrubbery. A column of smoke curled lazily upward against the blue, but there was no immediate prospect of a fire of the “news” variety.

Harlan stood at the window for a long time, deeply troubled. The call of the city dinned relentlessly into his ears. Oh, for an hour in the midst of it, with the rumble and roar and clatter of ceaseless traffic, the hurrying, heedless throng rushing in every direction, the glare of the sun on the many-windowed cliffs, the fever of the struggle in his veins!

And yet – was two months so long, when a fellow was just married, and hadn’t had more than a day at a time off for six years? Since the “cub reporter” was first “licked into shape” in the office of *The Thunderer*, there had been plenty of work for him, year in and year out.

“I wonder,” he mused, “if the old man would take me back on my job?”

“I can see ’em in the office now,” went on Harlan, mentally, “when I go back and tell ’em I want my place again. The old man will look up and say: ‘The hell you do! Thought you’d accepted a position on the literary circuit as manager of the nine muses! Better run along and look after ’em before they join the union.’

“And the exchange man will yell at me not to slam the door as I go out, and I’ll be pointed out to the newest kid as a horrible example of misdirected ambition. Brinkman will say: ‘Sonny, there’s a bloke that got too good for his job and now he’s come back, willing to edit *The Mother’s Corner*.’

“It’d be about the same in the other offices, too,” he thought. “‘Sorry, nothing to-day, but there might be next month. Drop in again sometime after six weeks or so and meanwhile I’ll let you know if anything turns up. Yes, I can remember your address. Don’t slam the door as you go out. Most people seem to have been born in a barn.’

“Besides,” he continued to himself, fiercely, “what is there in it? They’ll take your youth, all your strength and energy, and give you a measly living in exchange. They’ll fill you with excitement till you’re never good for anything else, any more than a cavalry horse is fitted to pull a vegetable wagon. Then, when you’re old, they’ve got no use for you!”

Before his mental vision, in pitiful array, came that unhappy procession of hacks that files, day in and day out, along Newspaper Row, drawn by every instinct to the arena that holds nothing for them but a meagre, uncertain pittance, dwindling slowly to charity.

“That’s where I’d be at the last of it,” muttered Harlan, savagely, “with even the cubs offering me the price of a drink to get out. And Dorothy – good God! Where would Dorothy be?”

He clenched his fists and marched up and down the room in utter despair. “Why,” he breathed, “why wasn’t I taught to do something honest, instead of being cursed with this itch to write? A carpenter, a bricklayer, a stone-mason, – any one of ’em has a better chance than I!”

And yet, even then, Harlan saw clearly that save where some vast cathedral reared its unnumbered spires, the mason and the bricklayer were without significance; that even the builders were remembered only because of the great uses to which their buildings were put. “That, too, through print,” he murmured. “It all comes down to the printed page at last.”

On a table, near by, was a sheaf of rough copy paper, and six or eight carefully sharpened pencils – the dull, meaningless stone waiting for the flint that should strike it into flame. Day after day the table had stood by the window, without result, save in Harlan’s uneasy conscience.

“I’m only a tramp,” he said, aloud, “and I’ve known it, all along.”

He sat down by the table and took up a pencil, but no words came. Remorsefully, he wrote to an acquaintance – a man who had a book published every year and filled in the intervening time with magazine work and newspaper specials. He sealed the letter and addressed it idly, then tossed it aside purposelessly.

“Loafer!” The memory of it stung him like a lash, and, completely overwhelmed with shame, he hid his face in his hands.

Suddenly, a pair of soft arms stole around his neck, a childish, tear-wet cheek was pressed close to his, and a sweet voice whispered, tenderly: "Dear, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry I can't live another minute unless you tell me you forgive me!"

"Am I really a loafer?" asked Harlan, half an hour later.

"Indeed you're not," answered Dorothy, her trustful eyes looking straight into his; "you're absolutely the most adorable boy in the whole world, and it's me that knows it!"

"As long as you know it," returned Harlan, seriously, "I don't care a hang what other people think."

"Now, tell me," continued Dorothy, "how near are we to being broke?"

Obediently, Harlan turned his pockets inside out and piled his worldly wealth on the table.

"Three hundred and seventy-four dollars and sixteen cents," she said, when she had finished counting. "Why, we're almost rich, and a little while ago you tried to make me think we were poor!"

"It's all I have, Dorothy – every blooming cent, except one dollar in the savings bank. Sort of a nest egg I had left," he explained.

"Wait a minute," she said, reaching down into her collar and drawing up a loop of worn ribbon. "Straight front corset," she observed, flushing, "makes a nice pocket for almost everything." She drew up a chamois-skin bag, of an unprepossessing mouse colour, and emptied out a roll of bills. "Two hundred and twelve dollars," she said, proudly, "and eighty-three cents and four postage stamps in my purse.

"I saved it," she continued, hastily, "for an emergency, and I wanted some silk stockings and a French embroidered corset and some handmade lingerie worse than you can ever know. Wasn't I a brave, heroic, noble woman?"

"Indeed you were," he cried, "but, Dorothy, you know I can't touch your money!"

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because – because – because it isn't right. Do you think I'm cad enough to live on a woman's earnings?"

"Harlan," said Dorothy, kindly, "don't be a fool. You'll take my whole heart and soul and life – all that I have been and all that I'm going to be – and be glad to get it, and now you're balking at ten cents that I happened to have in my stocking when I took the fatal step."

"Dear heart, don't. It's different – tremendously different. Can't you see that it is?"

"Do you mean that I'm not worth as much as two hundred and twelve dollars and eighty-three cents and four postage stamps?"

"Darling, you're worth more than all the rest of the world put together. Don't talk to me like that. But I can't touch your money, truly, dear, I can't; so don't ask me."

"Idiot," cried Dorothy, with tears raining down her face, "don't you know I'd go with you if you had to grind an organ in the street, and collect the money for you in a tin cup till we got enough for a monkey? What kind of a dinky little silver-plated wedding present do you think I am, anyway? You –"

The rest of it was sobbed out, incoherently enough, on his hitherto immaculate shirt-front. "You don't mind," she whispered, "if I cry down your neck, do you?"

"If you're going to cry," he answered, his voice trembling, "this is the one place for you to do it, but I don't want you to cry."

"I won't, then," she said, wiping her eyes on a wet and crumpled handkerchief. In a time astonishingly brief to one hitherto unfamiliar with the lachrymal function, her sobs had ceased.

"You've made me cry nearly a quart since morning," she went on, with assumed severity, "and I hope you'll behave so well from now on that I'll never have to do it again. Look here."

She led him to the window, where a pair of robins were building a nest in the boughs of a maple close by. "Do you see those birds?" she demanded, pointing at them with a dimpled, rosy forefinger.

"Yes, what of it?"

"Well, they're married, aren't they?"

"I hope they are," laughed Harlan, "or at least engaged."

"Who's bringing the straw and feathers for the nest?" she asked.

"Both, apparently," he replied, unwillingly.

"Why isn't she rocking herself on a bough, and keeping her nails nice, and fixing her feathers in the latest style, or perhaps going off to some fool bird club while he builds the nest by himself?"

"Don't know."

"Nor anybody else," she continued, with much satisfaction. "Now, if she happened to have two hundred and twelve feathers, of the proper size and shape to go into that nest, do you suppose he'd refuse to touch them, and make her cry because she brought them to him?"

"Probably he wouldn't," admitted Harlan.

There was a long silence, then Dorothy edged up closer to him. "Do you suppose," she queried, "that Mr. Robin thinks more of his wife than you do of yours?"

"Indeed he doesn't!"

"And still, he's letting her help him."

"But –"

"Now, listen, Harlan. We've got a house, with more than enough furniture to make it comfortable, though it's not the kind of furniture either of us particularly like. Instead of buying a typewriter, we'll rent one for three or four dollars a month until we have enough money to buy one. And I'm going to have a cow and some chickens and a garden, and I'm going to sell milk and butter and cream and fresh eggs and vegetables and chickens and fruit to the sanitarium, and –"

"The sanitarium people must have plenty of those things."

"But not the kind I'm going to raise, nor put up as I'm going to put it up, and we'll be raising most of our own living besides. You can write when you feel like it, and be helping me when you don't feel like it, and before we know it, we'll be rich. Oh, Harlan, I feel like Eve all alone in the Garden with Adam!"

The prospect fired his imagination, for, in common with most men, a chicken-ranch had appealed strongly to Harlan ever since he could remember.

"Well," he began, slowly, in the tone which was always a signal of surrender.

"Won't it be lovely," she cried ecstatically, "to have our own bossy cow mooing in the barn, and our own chickens for Sunday dinner, and our own milk, and butter, and cream? And I'll drive the vegetable waggon and you can take the things in –"

"I guess not," interrupted Harlan, firmly. "If you're going to do that sort of thing, you'll have people to do the work when I can't help you. The idea of my wife driving a vegetable cart!"

"All right," answered Dorothy, submissively, wise enough to let small points settle themselves and have her own way in things that really mattered. "I've not forgotten that I promised to obey you."

A gratified smile spread over Harlan's smooth, boyish face, and, half-fearfully, she reached into her sleeve for a handkerchief which she had hitherto carefully concealed.

"That's not all," she smiled. "Look!"

"Twenty-three dollars," he said. "Why, where did you get that?"

"It was in my dresser. There was a false bottom in one of the small drawers, and I took it out and found this."

"What in –" began Harlan.

"It's a present to us from Uncle Ebenezer," she cried, her eyes sparkling and her face aglow. "It's for a coop and chickens," she continued, executing an intricate dance step. "Oh, Harlan, aren't you awfully glad we came?"

Seeing her pleasure he could not help being glad, but afterward, when he was alone, he began to wonder whether they had not inadvertently moved into a bank.

"Might be worse places," he reflected, "for the poor and deserving to move into. Diamonds and money – what next?"

V

Mrs. Smithers

The chickens were clucking peacefully in their corner of Uncle Ebenezer's dooryard, and the newly acquired bossy cow mooed unhappily in her improvised stable. Harlan had christened the cow "Maud" because she insisted upon going into the garden, and though Dorothy had vigorously protested against putting Tennyson to such base uses, the name still held, out of sheer appropriateness.

Harlan was engaged in that pleasant pastime known as "pottering." The instinct to drive nails, put up shelves, and to improve generally his local habitation is as firmly seated in the masculine nature as housewifely characteristics are ingrained in the feminine soul. Never before having had a home of his own, Harlan was enjoying it to the full.

Early hours had been the rule at the Jack-o'-Lantern ever since the feathered sultan with his tribe of voluble wives had taken up his abode on the hilltop. Indeed, as Harlan said, they were obliged to sleep when the chickens did – if they slept at all. So it was not yet seven one morning when Dorothy went in from the chicken coop, singing softly to herself, and intent upon the particular hammer her husband wanted, never expecting to find Her in the kitchen.

"I – I beg your pardon?" she stammered, inquiringly.

A gaunt, aged, and preternaturally solemn female, swathed in crape, bent slightly forward in her chair, without making an effort to rise, and reached forth a black-gloved hand tightly grasping a letter, which was tremulously addressed to "Mrs. J. H. Carr."

"My dear Madam," Dorothy read.

"The multitudinous duties in connection with the practice of my profession have unfortunately prevented me, until the present hour, from interviewing Mrs. Sarah Smithers in regard to your requirements. While she is naturally unwilling to commit herself entirely without a more definite idea of what is expected of her, she is none the less kindly disposed. May I hope, my dear madam, that at the first opportunity you will apprise me of ensuing events in this connection, and that in any event I may still faithfully serve you?"

"With kindest personal remembrances and my polite salutations to the distinguished author whose wife you have the honour to be, I am, my dear madam,

"Yr. most respectful and obedient servant,

"Jeremiah Bradford.

"Oh," said Dorothy, "you're Sarah. I had almost given you up."

"Begging your parding, Miss," rejoined Mrs. Smithers in a chilly tone of reproof, "but I take it it's better for us to begin callin' each other by our proper names. If we should get friendly, there'd be ample time to change. Your uncle, God rest 'is soul, allers called me 'Mis' Smithers."

Somewhat startled at first, Mrs. Carr quickly recovered her equanimity. "Very well, Mrs. Smithers," she returned, lightly, reflecting that when in Rome one must follow Roman customs; "Do you understand all branches of general housework?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be makin' no attempts in that direction," replied Mrs. Smithers, harshly. "I doesn't allow nobody to do wot I does no better than wot I does it."

Dorothy smiled, for this was distinctly encouraging, from at least one point of view.

"You wear a cap, I suppose?"

"Yes, mum, for dustin'. When I goes out I puts on my bonnet."

"Can you do plain cooking?" inquired Dorothy, hastily, perceiving that she was treading upon dangerous ground.

“Yes, mum. The more plain it is the better all around. Your uncle was never one to fill hisself with fancy dishes days and walk the floor with 'em nights, that's wot 'e wasn't.”

“What wages do you have, Sa – Mrs. Smithers?”

“I worked for your uncle for a dollar and a half a week, bein' as we'd knowed each other so long, and on account of 'im bein' easy to get along with and never makin' no trouble, but I wouldn't work for no woman for less 'n two dollars.”

“That is satisfactory to me,” returned Dorothy, trying to be dignified. “I daresay we shall get on all right. Can you stay now?”

“If you've finished,” said Mrs. Smithers, ignoring the question, “there's a few things I'd like to ask. 'Ow did you get that bruise on your face?”

“I – I ran into something,” answered Dorothy, unwillingly, and taken quite by surprise.

“Wot was it,” demanded Mrs. Smithers. “Your 'usband's fist?”

“No,” replied Mrs. Carr, sternly, “it was a piece of furniture.”

“I've never knowed furniture,” observed Mrs. Smithers, doubtfully, “to get up and 'it people in the face wot wasn't doin' nothink to it. If you disturb a rockin'-chair at night w'en it's restin' quiet, you'll get your ankle 'it, but I've never knowed no furniture to 'it people under the eye unless it 'ad been threw, that's wot I ain't.

“I mind me of my youngest sister,” Mrs. Smithers went on, her keen eyes uncomfortably fixed upon Dorothy. “'Er 'usband was one of these 'ere masterful men, 'e was, same as wot yours is, and w'en 'er didn't please 'im, 'e 'd 'it 'er somethink orful. Many's the time I've gone there and found 'er with 'er poor face all cut up and the crockery broke bad. 'I dropped a cup' 'er'd say to me, 'and the pieces flew up and 'it me in the face.' 'Er face looked like a crazy quilt from 'aving dropped so many cups, and wunst, without thinkin' wot I might be doin' of, I gave 'er a chiny tea set for 'er Christmas present.

“Wen I went to see 'er again, the tea set was all broke and 'er 'ad court plaster all over 'er face. The pieces must 'ave flew more 'n common from the tea set, cause 'er 'usband's 'ed was laid open somethink frightful and they'd 'ad in the doctor to take a seam in it. From that time on I never 'eard of no more cups bein' dropped and 'er face looked quite human and peaceful like w'en 'e died. God rest 'is soul, 'e ain't a-breakin' no tea sets now by accident nor a-purpose neither. I was never one to interfere between man and wife, Miss Carr, but I want you to tell your 'usband that should 'e undertake to 'it me, 'e'll get a bucket of 'ot tea throwed in 'is face.”

“It's not at all likely,” answered Dorothy, biting her lip, “that such a thing will happen.” She was swayed by two contradictory impulses – one to scream with laughter, the other to throw something at Mrs. Smithers.

“E's been at peace now six months come Tuesday,” continued Mrs. Smithers, “and on account of 'is 'avin' broke the tea set, I don't feel no call to wear mourning for 'im more 'n a year, though folks thinks as 'ow it brands me as 'eartless for takin' it off inside of two. Sakes alive, wot's that?” she cried, drawing her sable skirts more closely about her as a dark shadow darted across the kitchen.

“It's only the cat,” answered Dorothy, reassuringly. “Come here, Claudius.”

Mrs. Smithers repressed an exclamation of horror as Claudius, purring pleasantly, came out into the sunlight, brandishing his plumed tail, and sat down on the edge of Dorothy's skirt, blinking his green eyes at the intruder.

“E's the very cat,” said Mrs. Smithers, hoarsely, “wot your uncle killed the week afore 'e died!”

“Before who died?” asked Dorothy, a chill creeping into her blood.

“Your uncle,” whispered Mrs. Smithers, her eyes still fixed upon Claudius Tiberius. “E killed that very cat, 'e did, 'cause 'e couldn't never abide 'im, and now 'e's come back!”

“Nonsense!” cried Dorothy, trying to be severe. “If he killed the cat, it couldn't come back – you must know that.”

“I don't know w'y not, Miss. Anyhow, 'e killed the cat, that's wot 'e did, and I saw 'is dead body, and even buried 'im, on account of your uncle not bein' able to abide cats, and 'ere 'e is. Somebody

's dug 'im up, and 'e 's come to life again, thinkin' to 'aunt your uncle, and your uncle 'as follered 'im, that's wot 'e 'as, and there bein' nobody 'ere to 'aunt but us, 'e's a 'auntin' us and a-doin' it 'ard."

"Mrs. Smithers," said Dorothy, rising, "I desire to hear no more of this nonsense. The cat happens to be somewhat similar to the dead one, that's all."

"Begging your parding, Miss, for askin', but did you bring that there cat with you from the city?"

Affecting not to hear, Dorothy went out, followed by Claudius Tiberius, who appeared anything but ghostly.

"I knowed it," muttered Mrs. Smithers, gloomily, to herself. "'E was 'ere w'en 'er come, and 'e's the same cat. 'E's come back to 'aunt us, that's wot 'e 'as!"

"Harlan," said Dorothy, half-way between smiles and tears, "she's come."

Harlan dropped his saw and took up his hammer. "Who's come?" he asked. "From your tone, it might be Mrs. Satan, or somebody else from the infernal regions."

"You're not far out of the way," rejoined Dorothy. "It's Sa – Mrs. Smithers."

"Oh, our maid of all work?"

"I don't know what she's made of," giggled Dorothy, hysterically. "She looks like a tombstone dressed in deep mourning, and carries with her the atmosphere of a graveyard. We have to call her 'Mrs. Smithers,' if we don't want her to call us by our first names, and she has two dollars a week. She says Claudius is a cat that uncle killed the week before he died, and she thinks you hit me and gave me this bruise on my cheek."

"The old lizard," said Harlan, indignantly. "She sha'n't stay!"

"Now don't be cross," interrupted Dorothy. "It's all in the family, for your uncle hit me, as you well know. Besides, we can't expect all the virtues for two dollars a week and I'm tired almost to death from trying to do the housework in this big house and take care of the chickens, too. We'll get on with her as best we can until we see a chance to do better."

"Wise little woman," responded Harlan, admiringly. "Can she milk the cow?"

"I don't know – I'll go in and ask her."

"Excuse me, Miss," began Mrs. Smithers, before Dorothy had a chance to speak, "but am I to 'ave my old rooms?"

"Which rooms were they?"

"These 'ere, back of the kitchen. My own settin' room and bedroom and kitchen and pantry and my own private door outside. Your uncle was allers a great hand for bein' private and insistin' on other folks keepin' private, that 's wot 'e was, but God rest 'is soul, it didn't do the poor old gent much good."

"Certainly," said Dorothy, "take your old rooms. And can you milk a cow?"

Mrs. Smithers sighed. "I ain't never 'ad it put on me, Miss," she said, with the air of a martyr trying to make himself comfortable up against the stake, "not as a regler thing, I ain't, but wotever I'm asked to do in the line of duty whiles I'm dwellin' in this sufferin' and dyin' world, I aims to do the best wot I can, w'ether it's milkin' a cow, drownin' kittens, or buryin' a cat wot can't stay buried."

"We have breakfast about half-past seven," went on Dorothy, quickly; "luncheon at noon and dinner at six."

"Wot at six?" demanded Mrs. Smithers, pricking up her ears.

"Dinner! Dinner at six."

"Lord preserve us," said Mrs. Smithers, half to herself. "Your uncle allers 'ad 'is dinner at one o'clock, sharp, and 'e wouldn't like it to 'ave such scandalous goin's on in 'is own 'ouse."

"You're working for me," Dorothy reminded her sharply, "and not for my uncle."

There was a long silence, during which Mrs. Smithers peered curiously at her young mistress over her steel-bowed spectacles. "I'm not so sure as you," she said. "On account of the cat 'avin come back from 'is grave, it wouldn't surprise me none to see your uncle settin' 'ere at any time in 'is shroud, and a-askin' to 'ave mush and milk for 'is supper, the which 'e was so powerful fond of that I was more 'n 'alf minded at the last minute to put some of it in 's coffin."

“Mrs. Smithers,” said Dorothy, severely, “I do not want to hear any more about dead people, or resurrected cats, or anything of that nature. What’s gone is gone, and there’s no use in continually referring to it.”

At this significant moment, Claudius Tiberius paraded somewhat ostentatiously through the kitchen and went outdoors.

“You see, Miss?” asked Mrs. Smithers, with ill-concealed satisfaction. “Wot’s gone ain’t always gone for long, that’s wot it ain’t.”

Dorothy retreated, followed by a sepulchral laugh which grated on her nerves. “Upon my word, dear,” she said to Harlan, “I don’t know how we’re going to stand having that woman in the house. She makes me feel as if I were an undertaker, a grave digger, and a cemetery, all rolled into one.”

“You’re too imaginative,” said Harlan, tenderly, stroking her soft cheek. He had not yet seen Mrs. Smithers.

“Perhaps,” Dorothy admitted, “when she gets that pyramid of crape off her head, she’ll seem more nearly human. Do you suppose she expects to wear it in the house all the time?”

“Miss Carr!”

The gaunt black shadow appeared in the doorway of the kitchen and the high, harsh voice shrilled imperiously across the yard.

“I’m coming,” answered Dorothy, submissively, for in the tone there was that which instinctively impels obedience. “What is it?” she asked, when she entered the kitchen.

“Nothink. I only wants to know wot it is you’re layin’ out to ’ave for your – luncheon, if that’s wot you call it.”

“Poached eggs on toast, last night’s cold potatoes warmed over, hot biscuits, jam, and tea.”

Mrs. Smithers’s articulate response resembled a cluck more closely than anything else.

“You can make biscuits, can’t you?” went on Dorothy, hastily.

“I ’ave,” responded Mrs. Smithers, dryly. “Begging your parding, Miss, but is that there feller sawin’ wood out by the chicken coop your ’usband?”

“The gentleman in the yard,” said Dorothy, icily, “is Mr. Carr.”

“Be n’t you married to ’im?” cried Mrs. Smithers, dropping a fork. “I understood as ’ow you was, else I wouldn’t ’ave come. I was never one to –”

“I most assuredly *am* married to him,” answered Dorothy, with due emphasis on the verb.

“Oh! ’E’s the build of my youngest sister’s poor dead ’usband; the one wot broke the tea set wot I give ’er over ’er poor ’ed. ’E can ’it powerful ’ard, can’t ’e?”

Quite beyond speech, Dorothy went outdoors again, her head held high and a dangerous light in her eyes. To-morrow, or next week at the latest, should witness the forced departure of Mrs. Smithers. Mrs. Carr realised that the woman did not intend to be impertinent, and that the social forms of Judson Centre were not those of New York. Still, some things were unbearable.

The luncheon that was set before them, however, went far toward atonement. With the best intentions in the world, Dorothy’s cooking nearly always went wide of the mark, and Harlan welcomed the change with unmistakable pleasure.

“I say, Dorothy,” he whispered, as they rose from the table; “get on with her if you can. Anybody who can make such biscuits as these will go out of the house only over my dead body.”

The latter part of the speech was unfortunate. “My surroundings are so extremely cheerful,” remarked Dorothy, “that I’ve decided to spend the afternoon in the library reading Poe. I’ve always wanted to do it and I don’t believe I’ll ever feel any creepier than I do this blessed minute.”

In spite of his laughing protest, she went into the library, locked the door, and curled up in Uncle Ebenezer’s easy chair with a well-thumbed volume of Poe, finding a two-dollar bill used in one place as a book mark. She read for some time, then took down another book, which opened of itself at “The Gold Bug.”

The pages were thickly strewn with marginal comments in the fine, small, shaky hand she had learned to associate with Uncle Ebenezer. The paragraph about the skull, in the tree above the treasure, had evidently filled the last reader with unprecedented admiration, for on the margin was written twice, in ink: “A very, very pretty idea.”

She laughed aloud, for her thoughts since morning had been persistently directed toward things not of this world. “I’m glad I’m not superstitious,” she thought, then jumped almost out of her chair at the sound of an ominous crash in the kitchen.

“I won’t go,” she thought, settling back into her place. “I’ll let that old monument alone just as much as I can.”

Upon the whole, it was just as well, for the “old monument” was on her bony knees, with her head and shoulders quite lost in the secret depths of the kitchen range. “I wonder,” she was muttering, “where ’e could ’ave put it. It would ’ave been just like that old skinflint to ’ave ’id it in the stove!”

VI

The Coming of Elaine

There is no state of mental wretchedness akin to that which precedes the writing of a book. Harlan was moody and despairing, chiefly because he could not understand what it all meant. Something hung over him like a black cloud, completely obscuring his usual sunny cheerfulness.

He burned with the desire to achieve, yet from the depths of his soul came only emptiness. Vague, purposeless aspirations, like disembodied spirits, haunted him by night and by day. Before his inner vision came unfamiliar scenes, detached fragments of conversation, the atmosphere, the feeling of an old romance, then, by a swift change, darkness from which there seemed no possible escape.

A woman with golden hair, mounted upon a white horse, gay with scarlet and silver trappings – surely her name was Elaine? And the company of gallant knights who followed her as she set forth upon her quest – who were they, and from whence did they hail? The fool of the court, with his bauble and his cracked, meaningless laughter, danced in and out of the picture with impish glee. Behind it all was the sunset, such a sunset as was never seen on land or sea. Ribbons of splendid colour streamed from the horizon to the zenith and set the shields of the knights aglow with shimmering flame. Clashing cymbals sounded from afar, then, clear and high, a bugle call, the winding silvery notes growing fainter and fainter till they were lost in the purple silence of the hills. Elaine turned, smiling – was not her name Elaine? And then —

Darkness fell and the picture was utterly wiped out. Harlan turned away with a sigh.

To take the dead, dry bones of words, the tiny black things that march in set spaces across the page; to set each where it inevitably belongs – truly, it seems simple enough. But from the vast range of our written speech to select those which fittingly clothe the thought is quite another matter, and presupposes the thought. Even then, by necessity, the outcome is uncertain.

Within the mind of the writer, the Book lives and breathes; a child of the brain, yearning for birth. At a white heat, after long waiting, the words come – merely a commentary, an index, a marginal note of that within. Reading afterward the written words, the fine invisible links, the colour and the music, are treacherously supplied by the imagination, which is at once the best friend and the worst enemy. How is one to know that only a small part of it has been written, that the best of it, far past writing, lingers still unborn?

Long afterward, when the original picture has faded as though it had never been, one may read his printed work, and wonder, in abject self-abasement, by what miracle it was ever printed. He has trusted to some unknown psychology which strongly savours of the Black Art to reproduce in the minds of his readers the picture which was in his, and from which these fragmentary, marginal notes were traced. Only the words, the dead, meaningless words, stripped of all the fancy which once made them fair, to make for the thousands the wild, delirious bliss that the writer knew! To write with the tears falling upon the page, and afterward to read, in some particularly poignant and searching review, that “the book fails to convince!” Happy is he whose written pages reproduce but faintly the glow from whence they came. For “whoso with blood and tears would dig Art out of his soul, may lavish his golden prime in pursuit of emptiness, or, striking treasure, find only fairy gold, so that when his eyes are purged of the spell of morning, he sees his hands are full of withered leaves.”

A meadow-lark, rising from a distant field, dropped golden notes into the still, sunlit air, then vanished into the blue spaces beyond. A bough of apple bloom, its starry petals anchored only by invisible cobwebs, softly shook white fragrance into the grass. Then, like a vision straight from the golden city with the walls of pearl, came Elaine, the beautiful, her blue eyes laughing, and her scarlet lips parted in a smile.

Harlan's heart sang within him. His trembling hands grasped feverishly at the sheaf of copy-paper which had waited for this, week in and week out. The pencil was ready to his hand, and the words fairly wrote themselves:

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