

Woolson Constance Fenimore

Solomon



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SOLOMON

MIDWAY in the eastern part of Ohio lies the coal country; round-topped hills there begin to show themselves in the level plain, trending back from Lake Erie; afterwards rising higher and higher, they stretch away into Pennsylvania and are dignified by the name of Alleghany Mountains. But no names have they in their Ohio birthplace, and little do the people care for them, save as storehouses for fuel. The roads lie along the slow-moving streams, and the farmers ride slowly over them in their broad-wheeled wagons, now and then passing dark holes in the bank from whence come little carts into the sunshine, and men, like *silhouettes*, walking behind them, with glow-worm lamps fastened in their hat-bands. Neither farmers nor miners glance up towards the hilltops; no doubt they consider them useless mounds, and, were it not for the coal, they would envy their neighbors of the grain-country whose broad, level fields stretch unbroken through Central Ohio; as, however, the canal-boats go away full, and long lines of coal-cars go away full, and every man's coal-shed is full, and money comes back from the great iron-mills of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Cleveland, the coal country, though unknown in a picturesque point of view, continues to grow rich and prosperous.

Yet picturesque it is, and no part more so than the valley where stands the village of the quaint German Community on the banks of the slow-moving Tuscarawas River. One October day we left the lake behind us and journeyed inland, following the water-courses and looking forward for the first glimpse of rising ground; blue are the waters of Erie on a summer day, red and golden are its autumn sunsets, but so level, so deadly level are its shores that, at times, there comes a longing for the sight of distant hills. Hence our journey. Night found us still in the 'Western Reserve.' Ohio has some queer names of her own for portions of her territory, the 'Fire Lands,' the 'Donation Grant,' the 'Salt Section,' the 'Refugee's Tract,' and the 'Western Reserve' are names well known, although not found on the maps. Two days more and we came into the coal country; near by were the 'Moravian Lands,' and at the end of the last day's ride we crossed a yellow bridge over a stream called the 'One-Leg Creek.'

'I have tried in vain to discover the origin of this name,' I said, as we leaned out of the carriage to watch the red leaves float down the slow tide.

'Create one, then. A one-legged soldier, a farmer's pretty daughter, an elopement in a flat-bottomed boat, and a home upon this stream which yields its stores of catfish for their support,' suggested Erminia.

'The original legend would be better than that if we could only find it, for real life is always better than fiction,' I answered.

'In real life we are all masked; but in fiction the author shows the faces as they are, Dora.'

'I do not believe we are all masked, Erminia. I can read my friends like a printed page.'

'O, the wonderful faith of youth!' said Erminia, retiring upon her seniority.

Presently the little church on the hill came into view through a vista in the trees. We passed the mill and its flowing race, the blacksmith's shop, the great grass meadow, and drew up in front of the quaint hotel where the trustees allowed the world's people, if uninquisitive and decorous, to remain in the Community for short periods of time, on the payment of three dollars per week for each person. This village was our favorite retreat, our little hiding-place in the hill-country; at that time it was almost as isolated as a solitary island, for the Community owned thousands of outlying acres and held no intercourse with the surrounding townships. Content with their own, unmindful of the rest of the world, these Germans grew steadily richer and richer, solving quietly the problem of

co-operative labor, while the French and Americans worked at it in vain with newspapers, orators, and even cannon to aid them. The members of the Community were no ascetic anchorites; each tiled roof covered a home with a thrifty mother and train of grave little children, the girls in short-waisted gowns, kerchiefs, and frilled caps, and the boys in tailed coats, long-flapped vests, and trousers, as soon as they were able to toddle. We liked them all, we liked the life; we liked the mountain-high beds, the coarse snowy linen, and the remarkable counterpanes; we liked the cream stewed chicken, the Käse-lab, and fresh butter, but, best of all, the hot bretzels for breakfast. And let not the hasty city imagination turn to the hard, salty, saw-dust cake in the shape of a broken-down figure eight which is served with lager-beer in saloons and gardens. The Community brezel was of a delicate flaky white in the inside, shading away into a golden-brown crust of crisp involutions, light as a feather, and flanked by little pats of fresh, unsalted butter, and a deep-blue cup wherein the coffee was hot, the cream yellow, and the sugar broken lumps from the old-fashioned loaf, now alas! obsolete.

We stayed among the simple people and played at shepherdesses and pastorellas; we adopted the hours of the birds, we went to church on Sunday and sang German chorals as old as Luther. We even played at work to the extent of helping gather apples, eating the best, and riding home on top of the loaded four-horse wains. But one day we heard of a new diversion, a sulphur-spring over the hills about two miles from the hotel on land belonging to the Community; and, obeying the fascination which earth's native medicines exercise over all earth's children, we immediately started in search of the nauseous spring. The road wound over the hill, past one of the apple-orchards, where the girls were gathering the red fruit, and then down a little declivity where the track branched off to the Community coal-mine; then a solitary stretch through the thick woods, a long hill with a curve, and at the foot a little dell with a patch of meadow, a brook, and a log-house with overhanging roof, a forlorn house unpainted and desolate. There was not even the blue door which enlivened many of the Community dwellings. 'This looks like the huts of the Black Forest,' said Erminia. 'Who would have supposed that we should find such an antique in Ohio!'

'I am confident it was built by the M. B.'s,' I replied. 'They tramped, you know, extensively through the State, burying axes and leaving every now and then a mastodon behind them.'

'Well, if the Mound-Builders selected this site they showed good taste,' said Erminia, refusing, in her afternoon indolence, the argumentum nonsensicum with which we were accustomed to enliven our conversation. It was, indeed, a lovely spot, – the little meadow, smooth and bright as green velvet, the brook chattering over the pebbles, and the hills, gay in red and yellow foliage, rising abruptly on all sides. After some labor we swung open the great gate and entered the yard, crossed the brook on a mossy plank, and followed the path through the grass towards the lonely house. An old shepherd-dog lay at the door of a dilapidated shed, like a block-house, which had once been a stable; he did not bark, but, rising slowly, came along beside us, – a large, gaunt animal that looked at us with such melancholy eyes that Erminia stooped to pat him. Ermine had a weakness for dogs; she herself owned a wild beast of the dog kind that went by the name of the 'Emperor Trajan'; and, accompanied by this dignitary, she was accustomed to stroll up the avenues of C – , lost in maiden meditations.

We drew near the house and stepped up on the sunken piazza, but no signs of life appeared. The little loophole windows were pasted over with paper, and the plank door had no latch or handle. I knocked, but no one came. 'Apparently it is a haunted house, and that dog is the spectre,' I said, stepping back.

'Knock three times,' suggested Ermine; 'that is what they always do in ghost-stories.'

'Try it yourself. My knuckles are not cast-iron.'

Ermine picked up a stone and began tapping on the door. 'Open sesame,' she said, and it opened.

Instantly the dog slunk away to his block-house and a woman confronted us, her dull face lighting up as her eyes ran rapidly over our attire from head to foot. 'Is there a sulphur-spring here?' I asked. 'We would like to try the water.'

'Yes, it's here fast enough in the back hall. Come in, ladies; I'm right proud to see you. From the city, I suppose?'

'From C – , I answered; 'we are spending a few days in the Community.'

Our hostess led the way through the little hall, and throwing open a back door pulled up a trap in the floor, and there we saw the spring, – a shallow well set in stones, with a jar of butter cooling in its white water. She brought a cup, and we drank. 'Delicious,' said Ermine. 'The true, spoiled-egg flavor! Four cups is the minimum allowance, Dora.'

'I reckon it is good for the insides,' said the woman, standing with arms akimbo and staring at us. She was a singular creature, with large black eyes, Roman nose, and a mass of black hair tightly knotted on the top of her head, but pinched and gaunt; her yellow forehead was wrinkled with a fixed frown, and her thin lips drawn down in permanent discontent. Her dress was a shapeless linsey-woolsey gown, and home-made list slippers covered her long, lank feet 'Be that the fashion?' she asked, pointing to my short, closely fitting walking-dress.

'Yes,' I answered; 'do you like it.'

'Well, it does for you, sis, because you're so little and peaked-like, but it wouldn't do for me. The other lady, now, don't wear nothing like that; is she even with the style, too?'

'There is such a thing as being above the style, madam,' replied Ermine, bending to dip up glass number two.

'Our figgers is a good deal alike,' pursued the woman; 'I reckon that fashion ud suit me best.'

Willowy Erminia glanced at the stick-like hostess. 'You do me honor,' she said, suavely. 'I shall consider myself fortunate, madam, if you will allow me to send you patterns from C – . What are we if not well dressed?'

'You have a fine dog,' I began hastily, fearing lest the great, black eyes should penetrate the sarcasm; 'what is his name?'

'A stupid beast! He's none of mine; belongs to my man.'

'Your husband?'

'Yes, my man. He works in the coal-mine over the hill.'

'You have no children?'

'Not a brat. Glad of it, too.'

'You must be lonely,' I said, glancing around the desolate house. To my surprise suddenly the woman burst into a flood of tears, and sinking down on the floor she rocked from side to side, sobbing, and covering her face with her bony hands.

'What can be the matter with her?' I said in alarm; and, in my agitation, I dipped up some sulphur-water and held it to her lips.

'Take away the nasty smelling stuff, – I hate it!' she cried, pushing the cup angrily from her.

Ermine looked on in silence for a moment or two, then she took off her neck-tie, a bright-colored Roman scarf, and threw it across the trap into the woman's lap. 'Do me the favor to accept that trifle, madame,' she said, in her soft voice.

The woman's sobs ceased as she saw the ribbon; she fingered it with one hand in silent admiration, wiped her wet face with the skirt of her gown, and then suddenly disappeared into an adjoining room, closing the door behind her.

'Do you think she is crazy?' I whispered.

'O no; merely pensive.'

'Nonsense, Ermine! But why did you give her that ribbon?'

'To develop her æsthetic taste,' replied my cousin, finishing her last glass, and beginning to draw on her delicate gloves.

Immediately I began gulping down my neglected dose; but so vile was the odor that some time was required for the operation, and in the midst of my struggles our hostess re-appeared. She had

thrown on an old dress of plaid delaine, a faded red ribbon was tied over her head, and around her sinewed throat reposed the Roman scarf pinned with a glass brooch.

'Really, madam, you honor us,' said Ermine, gravely.

'Thankee, marm. It's so long since I've had on anything but that old bag, and so long since I've seen anything but them Dutch girls over to the Community, with their wooden shapes and wooden shoes, that it sorter come over me all 't onct what a miserable life I've had. You see, I ain't what I looked like; now I've dressed up a bit I feel more like telling you that I come of good Ohio stock, without a drop of Dutch blood. My father, he kep' store in Sandy, and I had everything I wanted until I must needs get crazy over Painting Sol at the Community. Father, he wouldn't hear to it, and so I ran away; Sol, he turned out good for nothing to work, and so here I am, yer see, in spite of all his pictures making me out the Queen of Sheby.'

'Is your husband an artist?' I asked.

'No, miss. He's a coal-miner, he is. But he used to like to paint me all sorts of ways. Wait, I'll show yer.' Going up the rough stairs that led into the attic, the woman came back after a moment with a number of sheets of drawing-paper which she hung up along the walls with pins for our inspection. They were all portraits of the same face, with brick-red cheeks, enormous black eyes, and a profusion of shining black hair hanging down over plump white shoulders; the costumes were various, but the faces were the same. I gazed in silence, seeing no likeness to anything earthly. Erminia took out her glasses and scanned the pictures slowly.

'Yourself, madam, I perceive' she said, much to my surprise.

'Yes, 'm, that's me,' replied our hostess, complacently. 'I never was like those yellow-haired girls over to the Community. Sol allers said my face was real rental.'

'Rental?' I repeated, inquiringly.

'Oriental, of course,' said Ermine. 'Mr. – Mr. Solomon is quite right. May I ask the names of these characters, madam?'

'Queen of Sheby, Judy, Ruth, Esthy, Po-co-hon-tus, Goddess-aliberty, Sunset, and eight Octobers, them with the grapes. Sunset's the one with the red paint behind it like clouds.'

'Truly a remarkable collection,' said Ermine. 'Does Mr. Solomon devote much time to his art?'

'No, not now. He couldn't make a cent out of it, so he's took to digging coal. He painted all them when we was first married, and he went a journey all the way to Cincinnati to sell 'em. First he was going to buy journey all the way to Cincinnati to sell 'em. First he was going to buy me a silk dress and some ear-rings, and, after that, a farm. But pretty soon home he come on a canal-boat, without a shilling, and a bringing all the pictures back with him! Well, then he tried most everything, but he never could keep to any one trade, for he'd just as lief quit work in the middle of the forenoon and go to painting; no boss 'll stand that, you know. We kep' a going down, and I had to sell the few things my father give me when he found I was married whether or no, – my chany, my feather-beds, and my nice clothes, piece by piece. I held on to the big looking' glass for four years, but at last it had to go, and then I just gave up and put on a linsey-woolsey gown. When a girl's spirit's once broke, she don't care for nothing, you know; so, when the Community offered to take Sol back as coal-digger, I just said, "Go," and we come.' Here she tried to smear the tears away with her bony hands, and gave a low groan.

'Groaning probably relieves you,' observed Ermine.

'Yes, 'm. It's kinder company like, when I'm all alone. But you see it's hard on the prettiest girl in Sandy to have to live in this lone lorn place. Why, ladies, you mightn't believe it, but I had open-work stockings, and feathers in my winter bunnets before I was married!' And the tears broke forth afresh.

'Accept my handkerchief,' said Ermine; 'it will serve your purpose better than fingers.'

The woman took the dainty cambric and surveyed it curiously, held at arm's length. 'Reg'lar thistle-down, now, ain't it?' she said; 'and smells like a locust-tree blossom.'

'Mr Solomon, then, belonged to the Community?' I asked, trying to gather up the threads of the story.

'No he didn't either; he's no Dutchman, I reckon, he's a Lake County man, born near Painesville, he is.'

'I thought you spoke as though he had been in the Community.'

'So he had; he didn't belong, but he worked for 'em since he was a boy, did middling well, in spite of the painting, until one day, when he come over to Sandy on a load of wood and seen me standing at the door. That was the end of him,' continued the woman, with an air of girlish pride; 'he couldn't work no more for thinking of me.'

'*Où la vanité va-t-elle se nicher?*' murmured Ermine, rising. 'Come, Dora, it is time to return.'

As I hastily finished my last cup of sulphur water, our hostess followed Ermine towards the door. 'Will you have your handkercher back, marm?' she said, holding it out reluctantly.

'It was a free gift, madam,' replied my cousin; 'I wish you a good afternoon.'

'Say, will yer be coming again to-morrow?' asked the woman as I took my departure.

'Very likely; good by.'

The door closed, and then, but not till then, the melancholy dog joined us and stalked behind until we had crossed the meadow and reached the gate. We passed out and turned up the hill; but looking back we saw the outline of the woman's head at the upper window, and the dog's head at the bars, both watching us out of sight.

In the evening there came a cold wind down from the north, and the parlor, with its primitive ventilators, square openings in the side of the house, grew chilly. So a great fire of soft coal was built in the broad Franklin stove, and before its blaze we made good cheer, nor needed the one candle which flickered on the table behind us. Cider fresh from the mill, carded ginger-bread, and new cheese crowned the scene, and during the evening came a band of singers, the young people of the Community, and sang for us the song of the Lorelei, accompanied by home-made violins and flageolets. At length we were left alone, the candle had burned out, the house door was barred, and the peaceful Community was asleep; still we two sat together with our feet upon the hearth, looking down into the glowing coals.

'Ich weisz nicht was soll es bedeuten
Dasz ich so traurig bin,'

I said, repeating the opening lines of the Lorelei; 'I feel absolutely blue to-night.'

'The memory of the sulphur-woman,' suggested Ermine.

'Sulphur-woman! What a name!'

'Entirely appropriate, in my opinion.'

'Poor thing! How she longed with a great longing for the finery of her youth in Sandy.'

'I suppose from those barbarous pictures that she was originally in the flesh,' mused Ermine; 'at present she is but a bony outline.'

'Such as she is, however, she has had her romance,' I answered. 'She is quite sure that there was one to love her; then let come what may, she has had her day.'

'Misquoting Tennyson on such a subject!' said Ermine, with disdain.

'A man's a man for all that and a woman's a woman too,' I retorted. 'You are blind, cousin, blinded with pride. That woman has had her tragedy, as real and bitter as any that can come to us.'

'What have you to say for the poor man, then!' exclaimed Ermine, rousing to the contest. 'If there is a tragedy at the sulphur-house, it belongs to the sulphur-man, not to the sulphur-woman.'

'He is not a sulphur-man, he is a coal-man; keep to your bearings, Ermine.'

'I tell you,' pursued my cousin, earnestly, 'that I pitied that unknown man with inward tears all the while I sat by that trap door. Depend upon it, he had his dream, his ideal; and this country girl

with her great eyes and wealth of hair represented the beautiful to his hungry soul. He gave his whole life and hope into her hands, and woke to find his goddess a common wooden image.'

'Waste sympathy upon a coal-miner!' I said, imitating my cousin's former tone.

'If any one is blind, it is you,' she answered, with gleaming eyes. 'That man's whole history stood revealed in the selfish complainings of that creature. He had been in the Community from boyhood, therefore of course he had no chance to learn life, to see its art-treasures. He has been shipwrecked, poor soul; hopelessly shipwrecked.'

'She too, Ermine.'

'She!'

'Yes. If he loved pictures, she loved her chany and her feather-beds, not to speak of the big looking-glass. No doubt she had other lovers, and might have lived in a red brick farmhouse with ten unopened front windows and a blistered front door. The wives of men of genius are always to be pitied; they do not soar into the crowd of feminine admirers who circle round the husband, and they are therefore called 'grubs,' 'worms of the earth,' 'drudges,' and other sweet titles.'

'Nonsense,' said Ermine, tumbling the arched coals into chaos with the poker; 'it's after midnight, let us go up stairs.' I knew very well that my beautiful cousin enjoyed the society of several poets, painters, musicians, and others of that ilk, without concerning herself about their stay-at-home wives.

The next day the winds were out in battle array, howling over the Strasburg hill, raging up and down the river, and whirling the colored leaves wildly along the lovely road to the One-Leg Creek. Evidently there could be no rambling in the painted woods that day, so we went over to old Fritz's shop, played on his home-made piano, inspected the woolly horse who turned his crank patiently in an underground den, and set in motion all the curious little images which the carpenter's deft fingers had wrought. Fritz belonged to the Community, and knew nothing of the outside world; he had a taste for mechanism, which showed itself in many labor-saving devices, and with it all he was the roundest, kindest little man, with bright eyes like a canary-bird.

'Do you know Solomon the coal-miner?' asked Ermine, in her correct, well-learned German.

'Sol Bangs? Yes, I know him,' replied Fritz in his Württemberg dialect.

'What kind of a man is he?'

'Good for nothing,' replied Fritz, placidly.

'Why?'

'Wrong here'; tapping his forehead.

'Do you know his wife?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'What kind of a woman is she?'

'Too much tongue. Women must not talk much.'

'Old Fritz touched us both there,' I said, as we ran back laughing to the hotel through the blustering wind. 'In his opinion, I suppose, we have the popular verdict of the township upon our two *protégés*, the sulphur-woman and her husband.'

The next day opened calm, hazy, and warm, the perfection of Indian summer; the breezy hill was outlined in purple, and the trees glowed in rich colors. In the afternoon we started for the sulphur-spring without shawls or wraps, for the heat was almost oppressive; we loitered on the way through the still woods, gathering the tinted leaves, and wondering why no poet has yet arisen to celebrate in fit words the glories of the American autumn. At last we reached the turn whence the lonely house came into view, and at the bars we saw the dog awaiting us.

'Evidently the sulphur-woman does not like that melancholy animal,' I said, as we applied our united strength to the gate.

'Did you ever know a woman of limited mind who liked a large dog?' replied Ermine. 'Occasionally such a woman will fancy a small cur; but to appreciate a large, noble dog requires a large, noble mind.'

'Nonsense with your dogs and minds,' I said, laughing, 'Wonderful! There is a curtain.'

It was true. The paper had been removed from one of the windows, and in its place hung some white drapery, probably part of a sheet rigged as a curtain.

Before we reached the piazza the door opened, and our hostess appeared. 'Glad to see yer, ladies,' she said. 'Walk right in this way to the keeping room.'

The dog went away to his block-house, and we followed the woman into a room on the right of the hall; there were three rooms, beside the attic above. An Old-World German stove of brick-work occupied a large portion of the space, and over it hung a few tins, and a clock whose pendulum swung outside; a table, a settle, and some stools completed the furniture; but on the plastered walls were two rude brackets, one holding a cup and saucer of figured china, and the other surmounted by a large bunch of autumn leaves, so beautiful in themselves and so exquisitely arranged that we crossed the room to admire them.

'Sol fixed 'em, he did,' said the sulphur-woman; 'he seen me setting things to rights, and he would do it. I told him they was trash, but he made me promise to leave 'em alone in case you should call again.'

'Madam Bangs, they would adorn a palace,' said Ermine, severely.

'The cup is pretty too,' I observed, seeing the woman's eyes turn that way.

'It's the last of my chany' she answered, with pathos in her voice, – 'the very last piece.'

As we took our places on the settle we noticed the brave attire of our hostess. The delaine was there; but how altered! Flounces it had, skimped, but still flounces, and at the top was a collar of crochet cotton reaching nearly to the shoulders; the hair, too, was braided in imitation of Ermine's sunny coronet, and the Roman scarf did duty as a belt around the large flat waist.

'You see she tries to improve,' I whispered, as Mrs. Bangs went into the hall to get some sulphur-water for us.

'Vanity,' answered Ermine.

We drank our dose slowly, and our hostess talked on and on. Even I, her champion, began to weary of her complainings. 'How dark it is!' said Ermine at last, rising and drawing aside the curtain. 'See, Dora, a storm is close upon us.'

We hurried to the door, but one look at the black cloud was enough to convince us that we could not reach the Community hotel before it would break, and somewhat drearily we returned to the keeping-room, which grew darker and darker, until our hostess was obliged to light a candle. 'Reckon you'll have to stay all night; I'd like to have you ladies,' she said. 'The Community ain't got nothing covered to send after you, except the old king's coach, and I misdoubt they won't let that out in such a storm, steps and all. When it begins to rain in this valley, it do rain, I can tell you; and from the way it's begun, 't won't stop 'fore morning. You just let me send the Roarer over to the mine, he'll tell Sol; Sol can tell the Community folks, so they'll know where you be.'

I looked somewhat aghast at this proposal, but Ermine listened to the rain upon the roof a moment, and then quietly accepted; she remembered the long hills of tenacious red clay and her kid boots were dear to her.

'The Roarer, I presume, is some faithful kobold who bears your message to and from the mine,' she said, making herself as comfortable as the wooden settle would allow.

The sulphur-woman stared. 'Roaarer's Sol's old dog,' she answered, opening the door; perhaps one of you will write a bit of a note for him to carry in his basket, – Roarer, Roarer!'

The melancholy dog came slowly in, and stood still while she tied a small covered basket around his neck.

Ermine took a leaf from her tablets and wrote a line or two with the gold pencil attached to her watch-chain.

'Well now, you do have everything handy, I do declare,' said the woman, admiringly.

I glanced at the paper.

'MR. SOLOMON BANGS: My cousin Theodora Wentworth and myself have accepted the hospitality of your house for the night. Will you be so good as to send tidings of our safety to the Community, and oblige,

ERMINIA STUART.'

The Roarer started obediently out into the rain-storm with his little basket; he did not run, but walked slowly, as if the storm was nothing compared to his settled melancholy.

'What a note to send to a coal-miner!' I said, during a momentary absence of our hostess.

'Never fear; it will be appreciated,' replied Ermine.

'What is this king's carriage of which you spoke?' I asked, during the next hour's conversation.

'O, when they first come over from Germany, they had a sort of a king; he knew more than the rest, and he lived in that big brick house with dormel-winders and a cuperler, that stands next the garden. The carriage was hisn, and it had steps to let down, and curtains and all; they don't use it much now he's dead. They're a queer set anyhow! The women look like meal-sacks. After Sol seen me, he couldn't abide to look at 'em.'

Soon after six we heard the great gate creak.

'That's Sol,' said the woman, 'and now of course Roarer'll come in and track all over my floor.' The hall door opened and a shadow passed into the opposite room, two shadows, – a man and a dog.

'He's going to wash himself now,' continued the wife; 'he's always washing himself, just like a horse.'

'New fact in natural history, Dora love,' observed Ermine.

After some moments the miner appeared, – a tall, stooping figure with high forehead, large blue eyes, and long thin yellow hair; there was a singularly lifeless expression in his face, and a far-off look in his eyes. He gazed about the room in an absent way, as though he scarcely saw us. Behind him stalked the Roarer, wagging his tail slowly from side to side.

'Now, then, dont yer see the ladies, Sol? Where's yer manners?' said his wife, sharply.

'Ah, – yes, – good evening,' he said, vaguely. Then his wandering eyes fell upon Ermine's beautiful face, and fixed themselves there with strange intentness.

'You received my note, Mr. Bangs?' said my cousin in her soft voice.

'Yes, surely. You are Erminia,' replied the man, still standing in the centre of the room with fixed eyes. The Roarer laid himself down behind his master, and his tail still wagging, sounded upon the floor with a regular tap.

'Now then, Sol, since you've come home, perhaps you'll entertain the ladies while I get supper,' quoth Mrs. Bangs; and forthwith began a clatter of pans.

The man passed his long hand abstractedly over his forehead. 'Eh,' he said with long-drawn utterance, – 'eh-h? Yes, my rose of Sharon, certainly, certainly.'

'Then why don't you do it!' said the woman, lighting the fire in the brick stove.

'And what will the ladies please to do?' he answered, his eyes going back to Ermine.

'We will look over your pictures, sir,' said my cousin, rising; 'they are in the upper room, I believe.'

A great flush rose in the painter's thin cheeks. 'Will you,' he said eagerly, – 'will you? Come!'

'It's a broken-down old hole, ladies; Sol will never let me sweep it out. Reckon you'll be more comfortable here,' said Mrs. Bangs, with her arms in the flour.

'No, no, my lily of the valley. The ladies will come with me; they will not scorn the poor room.'

'A studio is always interesting,' said Ermine, sweeping up the rough stairs behind Solomon's candle. The dog followed us, and laid himself down on an old mat, as though well accustomed to the place. 'Eh-h, boy, you came bravely through the storm with the lady's note.' said his master, beginning to light candle after candle. 'See him laugh!'

'Can a dog laugh?'

'Certainly; look at him now. What is that but a grin of happy contentment? Don't the Bible say, "grin like a dog"?'

'You seem much attached to the Roarer.'

'Tuscarora, lady, Tuscarora. Yes, I love him well. He has been with me through all, he has watched the making of all my pictures; he always lies there when I paint.'

By this time a dozen candles were burning on shelves and brackets, and we could see all parts of the attic studio. It was but a poor place, unfloored in the corners where the roof slanted down, and having no ceiling but the dark beams and thatch; hung upon the walls were the pictures we had seen, and many others, all crude and high colored, and all representing the same face, – the sulphur-woman in her youth, the poor artist's only ideal. He showed us these one by one, handling them tenderly, and telling us, in his quaint language, all they symbolized. 'This is Ruth, and denoteth the power of hope,' he said. 'Behold Judith, the queen of revenge. And this dear one is Rachel, for whom Jacob served seven years, and they seemed unto him but a day, so well he loved her.' The light shone on his pale face, and we noticed the far-off look in his eyes, and the long, tapering fingers coming out from the hard-worked broad palm. To me it was a melancholy scene, the poor artist with his daubs and the dreary attic.

But Ermine seemed eagerly interested; she looked at the staring pictures, listened to the explanations, and at last she said gently, 'Let me show you something of perspective, and the part that shadows play in a pictured face. Have you any crayons?'

No; the man had only his coarse paints and lumps of charcoal; taking a piece of the coal in her delicate hand, my cousin began to work upon a sheet of drawing-paper attached to the rough easel. Solomon watched her intently, as she explained and demonstrated some of the rules of drawing, the lights and shades, and the manner of representing the different features and curves. All his pictures were full faces, flat and unshaded; Ermine showed him the power of the profile and the three-quarter view. I grew weary of watching them, and pressing my face against the little window gazed out into the night; steadily the rain came down and the hills shut us in like a well. I thought of our home in C – , and its bright lights, warmth, company, and life. Why should we come masquerading out among the Ohio hills at this late season? And then I remembered that it was because Ermine would come; she liked such expeditions, and from childhood I had always followed her lead. '*Dux nascitur*, etc., etc.' Turning away from the gloomy night, I looked towards the easel again; Solomon's cheeks were deeply flushed, and his eyes shone like stars. The lesson went on, the merely mechanical hand explaining its art to the ignorant fingers of genius. Ermine had taken lessons all her life, but she had never produced an original picture, only copies.

At last the lesson was interrupted by a voice from below, 'Sol, Sol, supper's ready!' No one stirred until, feeling some sympathy for the amount of work which my ears told me had been going on below, I woke up the two enthusiasts and took them away from the easel down stairs into the keeping-room, where a loaded table and a scarlet hostess bore witness to the truth of my surmise. Strange things we ate that night, dishes unheard of in towns, but not unpalatable. Ermine had the one china cup for her corn-coffee; her grand air always secured her such favors. Tuscarora was there and ate of the best, now and then laying his shaggy head on the table, and, as his master said, 'smiling at us'; evidently the evening was his gala time. It was nearly nine when the feast was ended, and I immediately proposed retiring to bed, for, having but little art enthusiasm, I dreaded a vigil in that dreary attic. Solomon looked disappointed, but I ruthlessly carried off Ermine to the opposite room, which we afterwards suspected was the apartment of our hosts, freshened and set in order in our honor. The

sound of the rain on the piazza roof lulled us soon to sleep, in spite of the strange surroundings; but more than once I woke and wondered where I was, suddenly remembering the lonely house in its lonely valley with a shiver of discomfort. The next morning we woke at our usual hour, but some time after the miner's departure; breakfast was awaiting us in the keeping-room, and our hostess said that an ox-team from the Community would come for us before nine. She seemed sorry to part with us, and refused any remuneration for our stay; but none the less did we promise ourselves to send some dresses and even ornaments from C – , to feed that poor, starving love of finery. As we rode away in the ox-cart, the Roarer looked wistfully after us through the bars; but his melancholy mood was upon him again, and he had not the heart even to wag his tail.

As we were sitting in the hotel parlor, in front of our soft-coal fire in the evening of the following day, and discussing whether or no we should return to the city within the week, the old landlord entered without his broad-brimmed hat, – an unusual attention, since he was a trustee and a man of note in the Community, and removed his hat for no one or nothing; we even suspected that he slept in it.

'You know Zolomon Barngs,' he said, slowly.

'Yes,' we answered.

'Well, he's dead. Kilt in de mine.' And putting on the hat, removed, we now saw, in respect for death, he left the room suddenly as he had entered it. As it happened, we had been discussing the couple, I, as usual, contending for the wife, and Ermine, as usual, advocating the cause of the husband.

'Let us go out there immediately to see her, poor woman!' I said, rising.

'Yes, poor man, we will go to him!' said Ermine.

'But the man is dead, cousin.'

'Then he shall at least have one kind friendly glance before he is carried to his grave,' answered Ermine quietly.

In a short time we set out in the darkness, and dearly did we have to pay for the night-ride; no one could understand the motive of our going, but money was money, and we could pay for all peculiarities. It was a dark night, and the ride seemed endless as the oxen moved slowly on through the red-clay mire. At last we reached the turn and saw the little lonely house with its upper room brightly lighted.

'He is in the studio,' said Ermine; and so it proved. He was not dead, but dying; not maimed but poisoned by the gas of the mine, and rescued too late for recovery. They had placed him upon the floor on a couch of blankets and the dull-eyed Community doctor stood at his side. 'No good, no good,' he said; 'he must die.' And then, hearing of the returning cart, he left us, and we could hear the tramp of the oxen over the little bridge, on their way back to the village.

The dying man's head lay upon his wife's breast, and her arms supported him; she did not speak, but gazed at us with a dumb agony in her large eyes. Ermine knelt down and took the lifeless hand streaked with coal-dust in both her own. 'Solomon,' she said, in her soft, clear voice, 'do you know me?'

The closed eyes opened slowly, and fixed themselves upon her face a moment: then they turned towards the window, as if seeking something.

'It's the picter he means,' said the wife. 'He sat up most all last night a doing it.'

I lighted all the candles, and Ermine brought forward the easel; upon it stood a sketch in charcoal wonderful to behold, – the same face, the face of the faded wife, but so noble in its idealized beauty that it might have been a portrait of her glorified face in Paradise. It was a profile, with the eyes upturned, – a mere outline, but grand in conception and expression. I gazed in silent astonishment.

Ermine said, 'Yes, I knew you could do it, Solomon. It is perfect of its kind.' The shadow of a smile stole over the pallid face, and then the husband's fading gaze turned upward to meet the wild, dark eyes of the wife.

'It's you, Dorcas,' he murmured; 'that's how you looked to me, but I never could get it right before.' She bent over him, and silently we watched the coming of the shadow of death; he spoke only once, 'My rose of Sharon – ' And then in a moment he was gone, the poor artist was dead.

Wild, wild was the grief of the ungoverned heart left behind; she was like a mad-woman, and our united strength was needed to keep her from injuring herself in her frenzy. I was frightened, but Ermine's strong little hands and lithe arms kept her down until, exhausted, she lay motionless near her dead husband. Then we carried her down stairs and I watched by the bedside, while my cousin went back to the studio. She was absent some time, and then she came back to keep the vigil with me through the long, still night. At dawn the woman woke, and her face looked aged in the gray light. She was quiet, and took without a word the food we had prepared awkwardly enough, in the keeping-room.

'I must go to him, I must go to him.' she murmured, as we led her back.

'Yes,' said Ermine, 'but first let me make you tidy. He loved to see you neat.' And with deft, gentle touch she dressed the poor creature, arranging the heavy hair so artistically that, for the first time, I saw what she might have been, and understood the husband's dream.

'What is that?' I said, as a peculiar sound startled us.

'It's Roarer. He was tied up last night, but I suppose he's gnawed the rope,' said the woman. I opened the hall door, and in stalked the great dog, smelling his way directly up the stairs.

'O, he must not go!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, let him go, he loved his master,' said Ermine; 'we will go too.' So silently we all went up into the chamber of death.

The pictures had been taken down from the walls, but the wonderful sketch remained on the easel, which had been moved to the head of the couch where Solomon lay. His long, light hair was smooth, his face peacefully quiet, and on his breast lay the beautiful bunch of autumn leaves which he had arranged in our honor. It was a striking picture, – the noble face of the sketch above, and the dead face of the artist below. It brought to my mind a design I had once seen, where Fame with her laurels came at last to the door of the poor artist and gently knocked; but he had died the night before!

The dog lay at his master's feet, nor stirred until Solomon was carried out to his grave.

The Community buried the miner in one corner of the lonely little meadow. No service had they and no mound was raised to mark the spot, for such was their custom; but in the early spring we went down again into the valley, and placed a block of granite over the grave. It bore the inscription: —

SOLOMON

He will finish his work in heaven

Strange as it may seem, the wife pined for her artist husband. We found her in the Community trying to work, but so aged and bent that we hardly knew her. Her large eyes had lost their peevish discontent, and a great sadness had taken the place.

'Seems like I couldn't get on without Sol,' she said, sitting with us in the hotel parlor after work-hours. 'I kinder miss his voice and all them names he used to call me; he got 'em out of the Bible, so they must have been good, you know. He always thought everything I did was right, and he thought no end of my good looks, too; I suppose I've lost 'em all now. He was mighty fond of me; nobody in all the world cares a straw for me now. Even Roarer wouldn't stay with me, for all I petted him; he kep' a going out to that meader and a lying by Sol, until, one day, we found him there dead. He just died of sheer loneliness, I reckon. I sha'n't have to stop long I know, because I keep a dreaming of Sol, and he always looks at me like he did when I first knew him. He was a beautiful boy when I first saw him on that load of wood coming into Sandy. Well, ladies, I must go. Thank you kindly

for all you've done for me. And say, Miss Stuart, when I die you shall have that coal pictur; no one else 'ud vally it so much.'

Three months after, while we were at the sea-shore, Ermine received a long tin case, directed in a peculiar handwriting; it had been forwarded from C – , and contained the sketch and a note from the Community.

'E. STUART: The woman Dorcas Bangs died this day. She will be put away by the side of her husband, Solomon Bangs. She left the enclosed picture, which we hereby send, and which please acknowledge by return of mail.

'JACOB BOLL, Trustee.'

I unfolded the wrappings and looked at the sketch; 'It is indeed striking,' I said. 'She must have been beautiful once, poor woman!'

'Let us hope that at least she is beautiful now, for her husband's sake poor man!' replied Ermine. Even then we could not give up our preferences.

WILHELMINA

'AND so, Mina, you will not marry the baker?'

'No: I waits for Gustav.'

'How long is it since you have seen him?'

'Three year; it was a three-year regi-mènt.'

'Then he will soon be home?'

'I not know' answered the girl, with a wistful look in her dark eyes, as if asking information from the superior being who sat in the skiff, – a being from the outside world where newspapers, the modern Tree of Knowledge, were not forbidden.

'Perhaps he will re-enlist, and stay three years longer,' I said.

'Ah, lady, – six year! It breaks the heart,' answered Wilhelmina.

She was the gardener's daughter, a member of the Community of German Separatists who live secluded in one of Ohio's rich valleys, separated by their own broad acres and orchard-covered hills from the busy world outside; down the valley flows the tranquil Tuscarawas on its way to the Muskingum, its slow tide rolling through the fertile bottom-lands between stone dikes, and utilized to the utmost extent of carefulness by the thrifty brothers, now working a saw-mill on the bank, now sending a tributary to the flour-mill across the canal, and now branching off in a sparkling race across the valley to turn wheels for two or three factories, watering the great grass meadow on the way. We were floating on this river in a skiff named by myself *Der Fliegende Holländer*, much to the slow wonder of the Zoarites, who did not understand how a Dutchman could, nor why he should, fly. Wilhelmina sat before me, her oars trailing in the water. She showed a Nubian head above her white kerchief: large-lidded soft brown eyes, heavy braids of dark hair, creamy skin with, purple tints in the lips and brown shadows under the eyes, and a far off expression which even the steady monotonous toil of Community life had not been able to efface. She wore the blue dress and white kerchief of the society, the quaint little calico bonnet lying beside her; she was a small maiden; her slender form swayed in the stiff, short-waisted gown, her feet slipped about in the broad shoes, and her hands, roughened and browned with garden-work, were yet narrow and graceful. From the first we felt sure she was grafted, and not a shoot from the Community stalk. But we could learn nothing of her origin; the Zoarites are not communicative; they fill each day with twelve good hours of labor, and look neither forward nor back. 'She is a daughter,' said the old gardener in answer to our questions. 'Adopted?' I suggested; but he vouchsafed no answer. I liked the little daughter's dreamy face, but she was pale and undeveloped, like a Southern flower growing in Northern soil; the rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired Rosines, Salomes, and Dorotys, with their broad shoulders and ponderous tread, thought this brown changeling ugly, and pitied her in their slow, good-natured way.

'It breaks the heart,' said Wilhelmina again, softly, as if to herself.

I repented me of my thoughtlessness. 'In any case he can come back for a few days,' I hastened to say. 'What regiment was it?'

'The One Hundred and Seventh, lady.'

I had a Cleveland paper in my basket, and taking it out I glanced over the war-news column, carelessly, as one who does not expect to find what he seeks. But chance was with us and gave this item: 'The One Hundred and Seventh Regiment, O. V. I., is expected home next week. The men will be paid off at Camp Chase.'

'Ah!' said Wilhelmina, catching her breath with a half-sob under her tightly drawn kerchief – 'ah, mein Gustav!'

'Yes, you will soon see him,' I answered, bending forward to take the rough little hand in mine; for I was a romantic wife, and my heart went out to all lovers. But the girl did not notice my words

or my touch; silently she sat, absorbed in her own emotion, her eyes fixed on the hilltops far away, as though she saw the regiment marching home through the blue June sky.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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