

Vandercook Margaret

The Loves of Ambrose



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PART ONE

HIS FIRST WIFE

"Oh! lose the winter from thine heart, the darkness from thine eyes,
And from the low hearth-chair of dreams, my Love-o'-May, arise,
And let the maidens robe thee like a white white, lilac tree.
Oh! hear the call of Spring, fair Soul, – and wilt thou come with me?"

CHAPTER I

THE DEPARTURE

Ambrose Thompson opened his front door and looked out. It was May, the sun had just risen over Pennyroyal, and before him lay Kentucky's carnival of spring.

The boy drew a deep breath that seemed to rise and quiver over his face like a breeze coming away at the end of his long, curiously emotional nose.

"Glory, what a day!" he whispered; "seems about good enough to eat!" And then he vanished, only to reappear five minutes afterward dressed as a traveller and wearing a linen duster, a stovepipe hat, and carrying a carpet-bag.

Out in the cinder path his glance embraced the quiet street.

"Right foot, left foot" – without a change of expression the boy broke into an irrepressible jig. He was nineteen and stood six feet four in his stocking feet; the wind tilted his tall hat, showing his high forehead, his straight, straw-coloured hair, and solemn, light blue eyes; it whipped back his linen duster, disclosing his lean legs clad in tight trousers, his frock coat, and white stock. An indescribable air of adventure enveloped him. So Abraham Lincoln may have looked on some dress-occasion morning in his youth – all big bones and promises waiting for something to happen.

"I sure am going to give 'em the slip this time," Ambrose panted, stopping to readjust his costume and to take another careful survey of the neighbourhood. In his garden several lilac bushes were in their first bloom, and above his doorway an ardent, over-early honeysuckle had blossomed in the night. The young man put the honeysuckle in his buttonhole.

"I reckon," he remarked, "there ain't nothin' sweet that don't grow in Kentucky," and then with a smile whose shine radiated through his homeliness and a blush that spread to the tips of his big ears, he added: "I ain't just figurin' on the growth of flowers," and was off tiptoeing down his garden walk and stepping across his gate to avoid the creak of opening it.

This was fifty-five years ago in Kentucky, in a little village of some three or four hundred inhabitants, shut in by hills and by inclination in the southwestern part of the state; a community not to be confounded with their high-living, high-stepping blue grass neighbours, for dwellers in the "Pennyrile" were a plainer people, who perhaps drew some of their characteristics from the bittersweet, pungent "Pennyrile" grass that gave the locality its name.

As for the town itself, it rested primly in a cup-shaped hollow with three main streets. One of them, travelling farther than the rest, led in a way to the end of things for the residents of Pennyroyal as it climbed a hill at the foot of the village, set thick with hardy perennials, evergreens, and small white stones, while encircling this hill was Peter's Creek, that by and by grew up to be a river, but it had a tranquil movement, proceeding slowly on its course by reason of sharing the Pennyroyalian distaste for getting any distance from home.

Then the houses in Pennyroyal: although the beautiful open country was all about them, they crowded so close together that they seemed almost to touch elbows, and now and then one of them had appeared to shove the other back in its determination to get the best view of the street. They were mostly cottages, with no front porches, but with sloping roofs and little Gothic wooden fences, and painted white, with green outside blinds, except Ambrose's, and his had been touched with a boy's imagination, its intention being plainly rose colour.

Now in a double row along the outside wooden sidewalk this morning the linden trees were dropping fragrant yellow plumes inches deep in the ruts of the clay road, while over the chimneys whirled the last of the spring's apple blossoms. Bees buzzed among the flowers, birds chattered, flying nervously from one tree to another in an effort to be through with breakfast before the disturbing human element should get about; and hitched to a nearby post Ambrose's horse and gig were waiting.

The young man surveyed his equipage with the eyes of an idealist.

Old Liza had seen service, but her toilet had been made in the spirit of the best foot foremost; her coat had been freshly curried, her gray mane and tail carefully combed, and in her manner there was an air of emotional anticipation.

With one foot hovering above the step of his gig, Ambrose suddenly paused. The laprobe inside the carriage was quivering.

"Holy Moses!" Reaching underneath, the young man drew forth a small black and brown object whose legs and tail were five upturned points of supplication. Setting it upright on the ground, his face hardened. "Ain't I told you you couldn't come with me, Moses?" he began sternly. "Ef ever there was a crittur, human or otherwise, with a talent for bein' where it wasn't wanted, it's you! Besides, ain't I just locked you in the stable?"

The softening in his master's manner, visible in his last question, in the twitching of his eyebrows, in the slight movement of the tip of his long nose, was familiar to Moses. Casually he approached Ambrose's leg, but midway there, sensing defeat and not being an amiable beast, he planted his feet wide apart, barked as loudly as chronic hoarseness permitted, and straightway the young man humbled himself before him.

"Fer the lands sakes don't give me away," he pleaded. "I ain't never had such luck before this, getting off without being pestered." Down on his knees, he patted the stiff bristles, apologetically whispering: "Sorry not to be wishing your company, but Susan and Aunt Ca'line will look after you. Ain't nothin' on God's earth that will keep Susan Barrows from lookin' after every mortal thing she sets eyes on."

Without deigning a farewell, Moses trotted away. A ridiculous looking animal with an ancestry as mixed as any son of Adam, yet he had an enormous self-esteem. You see, though a dog, Moses possessed a self-sustaining ego, which requires no special ancestry or talents to uphold it. For there is a vanity that feeds itself, and many nobler personalities go down before it. Invariably Ambrose's did. Merely christened after the Hebrew lawmaker because of having been found amid some bulrushes, yet Moses may have felt that the name carried its anointment.

But now at last the traveller had fairly started. Swinging into his gig, he arranged his long legs in a comfortable right-angle triangle, taking a final hurried glance around him. "Move on, Liza, faster'n you can, or it's all over with me," he urged, "for things is lookin' kind of nervous."

Three times his wagon wheels had revolved in the clay road when a shutter on the house next door banged open, and like the explosion of a gun a child's voice rent the air.

"He's off! I tell you I see him. He's gettin' away unbeknownst." And a thin, brown figure hopping out of the window on the grass ran toward the street, twittering and moving its head from side to side like an excited bird. An instant later from the same opening a second pair of legs protruded – longer and thinner than the others, clad in white stockings and black cloth gaiters. Like the feelers of a beetle turned over on its back they waved in the air. And from behind a kind of barrel-shaped opening came a voice so tragic and compelling that even old Liza, stopping short, turned an inquiring eye toward the source of the disturbance.

As for Ambrose, although filled with a boy's impatience at interruption, the sight was overpowering. His reins dropped loosely, he stared, gasped, and then shook with silent laughter. Susan Barrows was living in the days of hoopskirts, and now in her effort to slide through the window had been held fast.

Nevertheless, in her time, desire has probably removed as many mountains as faith, so, notwithstanding her present difficulty, Susan's gave her power soon to set herself upright on the ground, and still with her full rigging to continue moving toward her goal like a ship with a full gale behind it.

A thin middle-aged woman, Mrs. Barrows was, of medium height and of terrific energy. The drama of her personal existence in a small town with no outside interests being always insufficient, Susan had filled in her hunger with an insatiate appetite for other people's affairs. Never could her

curiosity about her neighbours be wholly gratified, and yet, like the possessor of any other great passion, its owner did her level best to satisfy it.

Out in the road, with one hand she grasped Ambrose's coat sleeve while the other was unconsciously raised toward heaven. Two bright spots of colour burned on her high cheek bones, her bunches of black corkscrew curls trembled with eagerness, her eyes challenged.

"Tell me where you be goin' and what you be a-goin' fer, Ambrose Thompson. It ain't fair you stealin' off this way each year and nobody findin' out where or why. Seems like us bein' neighbours and me seein' to you since your ma's death, that you might leastways have put your trust in me."

Removing her hand from his sleeve, Ambrose patted it gently before returning it to its owner. "No, ma'am, I ain't goin' to tell you no more this time than before," he replied. "And I was hopin' to get off once without remarks."

During this temporary delay the younger Susan had been industriously pecking and poking about in the lower part of their neighbour's gig. Now as the young man moved on for the second time the child's voice again rang after him.

"He's goin' courtin'; Ambrose Thompson is always runnin' after girls! It's Peachy Williams, for I seen his leg under his duster, and he's wearing his Sunday clothes!"

These last words were a triumph of evidence, but not for a moment would Ambrose look back nor appear to have heard. A humorous affection he might feel for the older Susan, but for the younger his dislike was to last for more than fifty years. Nevertheless, a little later he did turn around, and root and branch, the Susans had vanished, so that even now the news of his departure was stirring through Pennyroyal as the wind moves the leaves in a group of closely planted trees.

Something it is to know when one is beaten. Swearing a trifle and yet grinning, the boy settled himself more comfortably in his gig. "Might as well drive through town now kind of slow, and give folks a treat," he relented. "Mebbe I was shirkin' duty in tryin' to sneak off. Pennyrile ain't to say starvin' for food and clothes, but she certainly is pinin' for excitement, and who says that ain't just as bad? Seems like Christian charity for me to give this town something to talk about at least once a year."

And truly these yearly spring migrations of young Ambrose Thompson had aroused more interest and unrest in Pennyroyal than the yearly mystery of the earth's rebirth. Because, for the past five years on a certain May morning (and there never was a way of discovering just which morning he might choose) Ambrose had set out, at first on foot and later with his gig, and been away from his home eight and forty hours. Returning, he had given no clue as to where he had been.

Now like the music of a calliope the squeak of his wagon wheels awoke the village. Windows and doors flew open, heads in nightcaps and bald heads and heads with curls were thrust forth, but to their volley of questionings and accusations, Ambrose offered only the morning's greetings.

Travelling with praiseworthy slowness, he neglected no street in Pennyroyal, and, by the dozen, girls went fluttering in and out of houses, to wave farewells to the adventurer, while bolder voices called out Peachy Williams's name with every teasing inflection. One girl to whom Ambrose threw the spray of honeysuckle from his buttonhole cast it scornfully back, refusing to accept what she so plainly thought another's spoils.

Then the young man drove past Brother Bibbs, the Baptist minister, who, framed in the vestibule of his wooden church, beamed upon him with such heavenly condescension toward earthly affection that his expression of "Bless you, my children," was almost equivalent to a marriage ceremony. Next, along his route, appeared three maiden sisters, the Misses Polly. They stood in a line in their front yard, Miss Zeruiah, the literary one, *always* in advance, then Miss Narcissa, instructor in mathematics and the sciences, and last and humblest because most useful of the family trio, Miss Jane, the domestic one. Upon her Ambrose smiled with especial kindness, remembering certain heart-shaped cookies presented in early youth, which even in the form of sweet cakes held a kind of romantic suggestion. The Mistress Polly were directors of the "Polly Institute," where Ambrose and Peachy

had started their technical education at about the same time, and yet this youthful acquaintance hardly justified the present arrangement of a love motif. Nevertheless Ambrose distinctly heard the three ladies breathing in unison the name of "Peachy" as he passed them by.

Two hours later, well away from Pennyroyal, having turned off the high road to a less frequented lane, the traveller brought old Liza to her first halt. Then, drawing out a large red handkerchief, he wiped his moist brow and, removing his collar, gazed furtively about him.

The glory of his early morning face had departed; he looked older and almost haggard.

"Ain't it awful, human curiosity!" he murmured. "Reckon I was most too brave in tryin' to make things worse, and yet I never dreamed folks would think I was runnin' after Peachy Williams this trip. She – "

Lower and lower Ambrose seemed to be gradually settling down into his gig, although finding some trouble in disposing of so great a length of leg.

Finally he sighed: "Kind of wish I had brought old Moses along fer comp'ny." For the boy was feeling that need for companionship that comes after all mental strain. "But then Moses ain't like dogs; he's so bothersome he's most human – always either wantin' you to do something fer him or to set up and take notice of what he is doin'."

Relapsing into silence after this, which was soon followed by a more usual and serene state of mind, the young man shortly after took out from his duster pocket a withered russet apple left over from the winter store, and thoughtfully sunk his teeth in it. Then gradually his tranquillity deepened, increased by the recollection of his having just passed through the fire of the enemy and escaped. Behind him lay the village of Pennyroyal, suspicious yet still unsatisfied, and before him the open, empty, springtime road. At will Liza was cropping wayside grass: the traveller's hands had let slip the reins, and sometimes his eyes wandered to the far-off blue horizon and sometimes dwelt on the closer beauty of the roadsides, where elderberry, sumach and Virginia creeper were tangled in thick hedges, and where young grapevines hung like silver-green garlands under their fine coating of May dust.

In a Kentucky landscape, to those who comprehend it, there is ever a sense of generous growth, of nature's yielding herself gladly to life's eternal purpose. Now dimly this country boy began to understand the motive in the new beauties and new fragrances of each returning spring.

Again the eagerness of the dawn overtook him; and stiffening, he picked up his reins, starting off again, when, turning in from an elbow up the road, Ambrose beheld the one person whom above all others his desire had been to escape.

The figure was occupying the entire seat of a buggy, but was driving along apparently so lost in thought as to seem oblivious of anything or anybody in his vicinity.

"Morning, Ambrose," Doctor Webb began, however, as he appeared directly alongside the other gig, and yet there was nothing either in his tone or manner to suggest that he thought it unusual for a young man to be turning his back upon his natural field of labour at this hour of the morning to drive off in exactly the opposite direction.

"Morning," Ambrose returned, warily attempting to creep past without further conversation. For if the doctor should open the broadside of his humour the secret of his journey might yet be wrested from him. Nevertheless, although the older man had stopped his horse too deliberately to be ignored, he showed no present desire to ask questions. Indeed, the usual smile had disappeared from his kind face, and his deeply lined eyes appeared anxious and worried. Just such a look Ambrose had seen while the doctor sat watching by the bedside of a critically ill patient.

"What troubles you, doctor?" he inquired.

In answer the man leaned across from his buggy, taking one of Ambrose's lean hands in his, and, unaccustomed to a touch with such magnetic power in it, a kind of electric thrill passed through the susceptible boy.

"It's you I've been troubling about lately, my son," Doctor Webb answered, "and now it seems as if Providence had just sent you along for me to speak to this morning. I've brought you out of

children's diseases, chicken pox, measles and the like, but I've been seein' symptoms in you lately that have made me powerful uneasy, 'cause in this trouble it ain't in my power to help you through."

Ambrose's tongue was thickening, and his Adam's apple moving convulsively. "Is the disease so serious, then?" he whispered, feeling a hitherto unsuspected though general weakness creeping over him.

The doctor bowed his great head until his double, treble chin rested upon his shirt bosom, concealing his face from view. "Sometimes it's fatal, my boy," he returned, appearing so moved that his big voice sounded hoarse and unnatural. "It's true there's some that gets over it, but nobody ain't ever *quite* the same afterward."

Ambrose was trying to keep his knees from knocking together. "How have I showed symptoms of the disease?" he asked.

And Doctor Webb's whole body rocked slowly back and forth. "My son, you're showin' 'em uncommon bad this mornin'. I could notice 'em soon as I was ridin' up toward you; your colour is a-comin' an' a-goin', your eyes is shinin' unnatural bright, your heart is a-thumpin' too quick." And here he sighed, so that Ambrose braced his lean shoulders for the worst, although his lips were dry.

"Tell me quick, doctor; ef I kin bear it, what is it ails me?"

"Puppy love," the doctor shouted, and then giving his old horse an unexpected cut with his clean willow switch, off he drove, shaking with laughter.

"Puppy love!" Twice Ambrose repeated the words in a stupid fashion, and then his laughter rang out until it sounded like an echo of the older man's heavier roar. "Durn it," he said to himself, "ef that ain't just another way of sayin' 'Peachy'!"

When finally the traveller entered the shelter of a certain group of low hills near the Kentucky river, it was well past the middle of the afternoon, and there in a hollow he fed and watered his horse and then lay down behind a tree.

CHAPTER II

THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE

In the mean time, however, Mrs. Barrows and her offspring had not been idle. Indeed, no sooner had they become convinced that no information could be had out of Ambrose than they both set off at once hurrying across back lots, the younger preceding her mother like an outrider, thrusting her head and her news into every open door.

Within a few minutes the mother and daughter had arrived together at a small house set midway in the next street, and there, without even pausing to knock, Mrs. Barrows, pulling at a side door, entered a dining-room. Seated at a breakfast table were six girls and one young man, and immediately the six pairs of inquiring feminine eyes were upraised toward Susan, although the solitary male continued the eating of three large fried eggs in spite of the fact that his appearance plainly indicated a bilious temperament.

"Miner Hobbs, he's gone!" said Susan. "Got off most without my seein' him, though I ain't had a good night's rest come this month of May!"

Obviously this information should have been regarded as interesting, and yet, except for a curt nod, Miner apparently had not heard. From earliest boyhood notwithstanding that two more unlike fellow creatures could not be imagined, he and Ambrose Thompson had been closest friends. For while Ambrose was long and fair, Miner was considerably below medium height and dark, with one gloomy, indestructible curl rising above his already furrowed brow. Alike only in both being orphans, Ambrose was untroubled by other ties, while Miner was guardian to six beautiful blond sisters, all exceeding him in size and tranquillity. The drygoods firm of Hobbs & Thompson had been opened up in Pennyroyal a year before, so that to-day Ambrose's unexplained disappearance was not only a failure in personal confidence but a downright business backsliding.

By and by, Miner arose. Still his fit of abstraction appeared too deep to have been pierced from the outside, and yet, sliding past Mrs. Barrows, he attempted to get out of the door. However, his visitor sprang upon him.

"You're sneakin' off to try to catch up with Ambrose," she announced triumphantly. "Well, the Lord knows I ain't one to want to hinder you. But I'm thinkin' you won't succeed, for Ambrose Thompson will lead all of us that aims to keep up with him a powerful long journey before ever we are through with him."

Notwithstanding, in the following of his partner Miner Hobbs fully understood that one must proceed warily; therefore he did not attempt starting until after Ambrose was well out of town, and then he rode slowly along on horseback, never coming into the range of the other traveller's vision, but trying to keep his wheel tracks in evidence, and now and then making inquiries of wayfarers. So that about an hour after Ambrose's entrance into the woods his friend came to the same place and there sought the thicket in which he believed him to have hidden himself.

Face downward Ambrose was lying on the soft earth; but if he felt surprise or anger at hearing the sound of a horse's hoofs, and later a human footfall, he made no sign. Flopping over he merely called, "Hello," keeping his eyes fixed upon the line of hills on the opposite bank of the river. His fishing-pole, fastened to a bush near by, was extended over the water, but Ambrose's only visible occupation was the chewing of a blade of "pennyrile" grass.

In contrast, Miner Hobbs appeared fatigued and harassed.

"I got to find out why you come off to yourself every year, Ambrose," he began angrily. "I know you're doin' somethin' you're ashamed of or you wouldn't be hidin'."

"Wherefore?" smiled the other boy. "Look here, Miner, we're friends, have been since the first hour we met, yet I can't see as that gives you the right to know my business. Friends has got their

places, and in my opinion a man can tell his friend just what he wants him to know, no more, and no less, and the friend ain't the privilege to spy out a single other thing."

"But you're doin' somethin' sinful or you would 'a' told me," Miner repeated doggedly, and then, although uninvited, he sat down on the ground close by, commencing to smooth out the Hyperion curl over his brow which his dejection and the heat of his trip had considerably tightened.

"Then we'll let it go at that," drawled Ambrose.

And for the next five minutes both boys sulked, Miner gnawing savagely at his plug of tobacco, Ambrose still chewing on the blade of "pennyrile" grass.

There were no informing signs about the place, so Miner decided that the truant must now merely be resting on his journey.

"You hadn't a right to run off from business," Miner spluttered next. Having made up his mind not to make this accusation, the little man was surprised upon hearing it explode of its own strength.

However, Ambrose, instead of appearing disturbed, attempted to arrange himself more comfortably on the grass, but finding this impossible, his voice suggested richer repose.

"Miner, ain't it ever come to you that the Lord has given human bein's time for more than one thing?" he queried, resting his chin upon his hand. "I hold with work myself most always, but now and then there comes a time, maybe it's just a short time, that is meant for something else, something that belongs to you and is intended for you to do same as your work. Maybe it's restin' and maybe it ain't."

But at this the little man rose up on his feet. "As you've made up your mind you are not goin' to tell me, Ambrose, what is the use of talkin' so much? I suppose you're sure you are not goin' to tell me?"

His companion bowed his head.

"All right then, it ain't necessary," Miner rejoined. "I know what 'tis. There ain't but one thing that could ever come between you and me and that's – a girl. If it ain't Peachy Williams that has lured you from home, then it's some one else. I've been expectin' this to happen a long time, and I've been tryin' to prepare myself for this day," – here Miner choked, and coughed in order to conceal his emotion – "but I've always said to myself: Ambrose's easy, but he's open, and he'll surely tell me in time to get a brace. Of course I know, Ambrose, that you've been plumb crazy about girls since the Lord knows when, and been sendin' mottoes and valentines since you were able to talk, but I didn't think you would reach the marryin' stage fer quite a spell. Still I can see for myself that this spring trip looks like business. It passes my knowledge," – Miner relented – "but it's you. Seems as if I couldn't bear havin' females worritin' me save those my parents and the Lord put on me to the last day I live, but you, Ambrose, you ain't never had petticoat sense and never will. Good-bye." And there was unutterable scorn in Miner's last words, as he moved away, mingled with the affection he was to feel for no living thing save Ambrose. When with head bowed, he was unconsciously treading underfoot the flowers that sprinkled his path, a fishing-pole and line deftly circled through the air caught its hook in his coat sleeve.

The one boy struggled, while the other jerked, and then a rich voice drawled: "Please come back, old man, for if you really want to know why I've run off to myself each spring for these past five years so it clean hurts you not to know, I reckon I've got to tell you."

Then Miner returned and sat down again. His friend's behaviour was now even more puzzling than before, for although Ambrose was close by, his eyes had a faraway look in them, his eyebrows were twitching, his slender nostrils quivering, and indeed, he had the appearance of a man having strayed off some great distance by himself.

"Swear you'll never give me away, Miner," he began, and holding up one of his big hands in the sunlight – his hands which were the truly beautiful thing about him – he made a mystic sign to which his companion swore.

"You won't understand when I do tell you," he hedged, "but I've been comin' away off to myself every spring since I was a boy on account of the 'Second Song of Solomon.'"

And at this Miner groaned, shutting his near-sighted eyes. "Lord, he's the chap that had a thousand wives!"

Then back to earth came Ambrose, his blue eyes swimming in mists of laughter and his shouts waking all the echoes in the hills.

"Wives!" he cried, rolling his long body over and over in the grass, and kicking out his legs in sheer ecstasy, "Miner Hobbs, if ever you git an idea fixed in your head, earthquakes won't shake it. Wives, is it? Why, I ain't given Peachy Williams a thought of my own accord since I started on this trip, nor any other girl, for that matter, so I can't for the land sakes see why I have been havin' her poked at me so continual! 'Course there wouldn't be sense in me denyin' that I have a hankerin' for girls; flesh and blood, 'ceptin' yours, Miner Hobbs, cannot deny the kind we raise in Kentucky. However, they ain't been on my mind this trip. Old King Solomon done a lot of things besides havin' a thousand wives – they was his recreation. He builded a temple and founded a nation and wrote pretty nigh the greatest poetry heard in these parts."

Here the speaker commenced pulling at the damp earth to hide his embarrassment, and then made a pretence of examining the soil that came up in his hand.

"It's the 'Second Song of Solomon' I'm meanin', Miner, and I've already told you you ain't goin' to comprehend me when I do explain," he continued patiently, "but bein's as it's you, I reckon I've got to try. It's that song about spring. Ever since I was a little boy and first heard it, why it began a-callin' me to get away for a little space to myself to try and kind of hear things grow. It's a disappointin' reason for me sneakin' off, ain't it, and foolish? I wish I had been doin' somethin' with more snap to it, just to gratify Pennyroyal. But at first, you see, I didn't mean nothin' in particular by not tellin', knowin' that folks would think my real reason outlandish, but by and by when the town got so all-fired curious and kept sayin' I was up to different sorts of mischief, I just thought I'd keep 'em guessin'." Now the long face was quivering in its eagerness to make things clear. "Why, it seems to me from the time that the first green tips come peepin' up between the stubble in the winter fields I kin hear that Solomon Song a-beatin' and a-beatin' in my ears. 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds has come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.'"

But poor Miner was making a cup for his ear with his hand. "But turtles ain't voices, Ambrose, that anybody knows of," he murmured dimly; "it's frogs we hear croakin' along the river bank."

And this time Ambrose laughed to himself. "It's croaks you're always hearin', old fellow, ain't it?" he whispered affectionately. And then – "I reckon it makes no difference to me whether it's a frog or a turtle, a bird or even a tree toad. It's the song of life, I'm listenin' for, Miner."

CHAPTER III

PEACHY

Nevertheless, in spite of Ambrose's intentionally truthful declaration to Miner, for the rest of that afternoon and evening he was never wholly able to get free from the thought of Peachy. However, he did not then stir from his first shelter in the woods, finding endless refreshment in the beauty of the Kentucky river landscape, nor did he surrender himself readily to the lure of the feminine; but poor Ambrose was a victim of the strange force that lies embodied within a universal idea.

A bird appearing on the branch of a tree above his head and bending over, peeped into his face twittering: "Pe-che, Pe-che," as impudently as any small Susan; then, catching his eye, with a little mocking courtesy, flew away. A robin hopping on the grass near the boy's side, pecked at the crumbs left over from his luncheon; her full breast, her air of concentrated domesticity somehow recalled the image of his latest affection – Peachy, the youthful mistress of the Red Farm.

Now in setting out on this spring pilgrimage nothing had been farther from the traveller's intention than any dallying with his familiar weakness. Girls – why, the years behind Ambrose Thompson blossomed with them; never could he recall a season since his extremest boyhood when he had not been enchantingly in love. But actually there was little reason why Peachy Williams should be thrust upon him more than another save that he was growing older and had been devoting some time to her of late. Besides which, she was comely.

Toward nightfall the bird songs became such intimate revelations of love that several times the listener put his fingers into his ears in his effort to fight their suggestions away. And yet it was not until next morning that his decision actually broke.

And then it was not so much a matter of emotion. But he had had an uncomfortable night of fitful dreaming and awakened with yesterday's spiritual elation gone and with an intense desire for human companionship.

Rising first on one elbow, Ambrose made a remark which has probably been considered by the greater portion of the male creation. "I wonder now," he asked himself, "ef bein' looked after and made over ain't sometimes better'n bein' free?"

A very little while after this the boy cooked his own breakfast, with extremely poor results, and then making as pleasing a toilet as his reflection in the river permitted, immediately set out in the direction of the Red Farm. And no longer did Ambrose's face show signs of struggle: his air had now become one of peaceful acquiescence in the laws of nature. He had no idea of committing himself definitely, however, by this visit to Peachy; his mind was not wholly made up and he desired nothing abrupt or startling; it was simply that at present a day of solitary musing did not appear so appealing as her companionship, and moreover, Ambrose shared the universal masculine delusion that his was the important mind to be made up.

A sense of humour means a sense of proportion and therefore an appreciation of values, so Ambrose Thompson, the young Kentucky Romeo, was not without a certain thrifty streak. In driving along it was not disagreeable to reflect that the Red Farm was the richest tobacco farm in the county and that Peachy was its sole heiress. Not that Peachy by herself was insufficient; Ambrose also had pleasure in recalling the firmness of her young bosom, the sheen of her auburn hair, the whiteness of her teeth – and then – how frequently and how delightfully she laughed. That her laugh was non-committal had not up to this time troubled her admirer, who yearned for a feminine audience and had not yet learned to ask that this audience be discriminating.

Even feeding chickens may be made an alluring picture, or at least Ambrose thought so, when he had driven unobserved into the farmyard and waited there watching Peachy, with her sleeves rolled back, flinging the corn to the ground. Also with his accustomed sensitiveness to impressions the boy realized that the girl herself was not unlike one of her own creamy leghorn hens; she, too, was both

red and white with her clear healthy skin, red hair, and red-brown eyes – and then the fulness of her figure! The young man laughed delightedly, when turning and catching sight of him the girl started running toward him with short, uneven steps that yet got over the ground very quickly, and actually when she spoke, there was a little cluck to her voice.

And yet, somehow, Peachy did not seem to feel the same degree of surprise that her visitor did at his own unexpected appearance. She blushed when he kissed her hand with an ardour peculiar to Ambrose though foreign to custom in the "Pennyryle," but she betrayed no wonder at his visit in the broad daylight when plainly he should have been at work in his store. Neither did she ask questions. Notwithstanding, after a few words of greeting, Ambrose had the impression of being shooed into the house, Peachy using her white apron for the purpose.

Yet this had not been his intention, for indeed he had arrived at the farm an hour before dinner, with the idea of taking Peachy out for a walk and then possibly confiding to her the original purpose of his escape from Pennyroyal; surely *she* could be made to understand better than any one else, and his mood was now one requiring sympathy. Instead, however, there was something mysterious the matter with the girl's costume, so that Ambrose shortly found himself divested of his hat and duster and shut up in a sticky parlour with the family album on his lap for entertainment, and only one window open to give him just enough light to be able faintly to see and air to keep barely alive. On entering the room his first impulse naturally had been to fling open wide all the windows, but hearing his hostess's cries of horror, both his arms and his inclination had weakened. Although truly the lawn about the Red Farm house was exquisitely green and free from dust, yet the thought of possible desecration to the best parlour had the effect of reality.

Now although Ambrose was miserably settled according to Peachy's directions, and in spite of having expressed the desire to change her dress at once, the girl still lingered on, her face wearing a look that troubled her suitor as it was so unlike her usually placid and admiring one. Her red lips were drawn, her brow puckered, her atmosphere one of extreme disapproval. Under the circumstances Ambrose's forehead was naturally moist with perspiration and his face not overly clean, yet his clothes, notwithstanding being somewhat crumpled and dusty, were plainly his Sunday best.

"What is it, Peachy?" he asked, first studying himself solicitously. Then, following her shuddering gaze across the crimson splendour of the Brussels carpet, he beheld a track of mud made with footprints so large that they could belong to no other feet than his. His eyes dropped. Surely his feet were caked with mud – mud from the shadowy cool depth of the woods, from the banks of that celestial river so lately deserted by him. Yet, seeing the girl's unhappiness, again the young man surrendered and so for a longtime (it was hard to tell how long) continued sitting in the same place. Peachy had gone away, to remain perhaps till dinner time, and taken his shoes with her. So Ambrose's feet were now encased in a pair of hot carpet slippers, a whole size too small for him, so that he could not even shuffle without crumpling his toes or else walking about in his socks.

Several times he sighed, pushing back his long hair, a gesture with him expressive of mental unrest. Why, oh, why, had he given up his original plan of two days' solitary freedom and companionship with nature? Peachy had never seemed less alluring, and as for physical comfort or even the pleasure of her society, had he gained either? Cold shivers every now and then had their way up and down the young man's spine in the course of his meditations, notwithstanding the warmth of the room. For he knew himself to be easily stirred, so supposing that he and Peachy had taken the walk together that morning and something serious had happened! By and by young Ambrose began to feel as utterly uninterested in female charms, as cool and remote as a snow-capped mountain, and at about this moment Peachy returned to the room.

She was wearing a pure white dress and, moving over into a dark corner, smiling at her suitor, she sat down on a small sofa. Here, by dint of pinning his toes down into his slippers, and letting his heels rise above them, Ambrose managed to arrive a few seconds later. He was close up beside her, as comfortably near as Peachy's starched clothes permitted, liking the clean smell of her dress, the

perfume of her body; there were odours about her of warm new milk, of fresh honey, of ripening fruits.

And quite by accident, it seemed to him, the girl's plump hand was laid near his, so that a moment later it required pressing. Then the kerchief about her full breast, rising and falling softly, showed a hint of something whiter and softer beneath. With surprising rapidity the boy's recent regret for his lost holiday began slipping away from him. The room was still close, but a breeze blowing in from the partly raised window fanned them both. Perhaps Ambrose's head was swimming from fatigue and drowsiness, perhaps from his sense of his companion's nearness, of her readiness to fall into his arms with his first desiring touch.

"Peachy," Ambrose was whispering, when stealthily the door of the parlour opened, and there stood Peachy's father, his red face wearing such an expression of amusement and coarse understanding that instantly Ambrose felt a return of his former coldness. His boots having been cleaned and returned to him five minutes later, he followed the farmer and his daughter into their dining-room.

There the meal was a hideous one to him despite his hunger and the good and plentiful food. For seated at the family table, were several farm hands, white overseers of the negro labourers, and they made stupid jokes, shoving their elbows into one another and grinning idiotically from Peachy to him. Their ugly thoughts were like palpable close presences in the room, destroying all possible illusions for the boy, and yet the girl herself seemed not to mind. Instead, she blushed and bridled, sending challenging looks at Ambrose across the spring freshness of his piled-up plate of new potatoes, jowl, and spring greens each time he attempted putting his fork up to his mouth.

So that after a while, inch by inch, the boy felt himself being pushed into a corner where he had meant to walk one day of his own accord. And by the time dinner was over, not only had all desire passed from him, but apparently all will power as well. For next he allowed Peachy to lead him to an enclosed summer house. This summer house was some distance away from the big place and so shut in by carefully trained vines that it allowed no opportunity for distracting views or vistas beyond. It was what one under some circumstances might have called, "a chosen spot."

Now there is no reasonable explanation of why Peachy Williams, the chief heiress of "the Pennyrile," had so set her heart upon the possession of Ambrose Thompson. Lovers were plentiful, and among them the rich owner of the place adjoining her father's, and Ambrose had no fortune worth mentioning, and, moreover, was distinctly homely; but perhaps Peachy was drawn as many another woman has been before – by the lure of the unknown; for never could she have any proper understanding of Ambrose Thompson's temperament. Times were when he appeared more ardent than any of her other suitors, and then his attention being distracted, both physically and mentally he faded from sight. Now in contrast Peachy's own disposition was direct and simple. At a distance from the Red Farm to the village she recognized that her lover might be difficult to control, but near at hand she believed him tractable, and in a measure this was true, for Ambrose could always be managed by his friends up to a certain point – only the trouble was that at this time of life Peachy Williams did not understand where this point ended.

Like a long tallow candle slowly melting from the heat, the young man was now lolling idly on the narrow circular bench of the summer house appearing so limp and dispirited that he seemed incapable of any kind of opposition.

Would the afternoon never pass? Could he ever remember having been forced to remain so long in the society of any one woman? So long that he ceased to have anything he desired to say or any possible idea that he wished to express; indeed his mind felt as clean and empty as a slate wiped by a wet rag. Why in heaven's name didn't Peachy herself have something to say once in a while? Before this day his calls had been short evening ones, when he had had opinions of his own and to spare. Could the time ever come in a man's life when he might want a girl to be inspiration as well as audience, to have an idea of her own now and then?

"Oh, Lord," Ambrose groaned half aloud. If only he could think of some plan of escape, but in the rash enthusiasm of his arrival at the farm had he not promised Peachy to remain all day? And now in his exhausted condition even his imagination had deserted him. Certainly he could think of no excuse for getting away at once.

Yet more and more depressing were Peachy's long silences, her frequent laugh more irritating, since Ambrose could find no reasonable excuse for laughter in the dullness of the interminable May afternoon with nothing to look at but the ground at his feet, or the lacing of leaves overhead, except Peachy, stitching, stitching everlastingly on something so white and weblike that Ambrose felt he too was being sewed in, made prisoner for life.

His long legs twitched, fairly his body ached with his longing to be off, until by and by even the girl was made to realize that things were not going as she had reasonably expected.

"What is it ails you this afternoon, Ambrose?" she asked at last, wistful if he had but known it. "Wasn't there something special you wanted to say to me to-day, else why did you come so out of your regular time?"

"Why had he come?" Barely was Ambrose able to repress another groan. For the life of him he could not now have told what had drawn him that morning to the Red Farm. Whatever desires or emotions had then stirred him were gone, his head was heavy, his blood moved languidly, even the necessary domestic noises of farm life were inexpressibly annoying. Could Peachy ever have spelled romance? Sighing aloud Ambrose put up his hand to wipe fresh moisture from his brow, and then coloured.

"I'm afeard you're ill," the girl continued, suddenly solicitous, and again with a movement that suggested a motherly hen: "You're so quiet and unlike yourself and yet so nervous and wriggly."

Ambrose yawned. "I slep' out last night, so mebbe I'm tired," he confessed unadvisedly; then immediately observed the same expression on Peachy's face that had been brought there by the presence of his muddy boots in her parlour. Her lips had tightened, though her brow was smooth; it was that gentle but awful look of the born manager.

"I knowed you'd been doin' something foolish," she stated calmly. "Anybody else'd remember there is chills and fever out of doors these spring nights. It's the spring that has set in on you; your blood needs thinnin'. I'll get you some sassafras tea." Relieved by Ambrose's revelation, Peachy was for at once starting off, but the young man caught at her skirts.

Truly the spring was not at present working on him nor did his blood at this hour require thinning.

"Don't go, Peachy; it ain't sassafras I'm needin', thank you just as kindly," he said, touched and a bit shamed by her interest. "To tell you the truth, I'm beginnin' to feel restless wantin' to get back to the woods ag'in. I'll come back to see you soon," he pleaded, observing that her head was being shaken with unmoved persistence. Her reply was final:

"You'll do no such thing, Ambrose Thompson; you'll stay right here till your queerness has wore off. Haven't I been worryin' over you ever since dinner? Think I'll let you go moonin' off now by yourself with no one to look after you?" Like young Juno both in her majesty and plenitude, Peachy did this time move out of sight, leaving her victim greatly shaken.

In a few moments Ambrose knew that a bitter herb compound would be poured down his reluctant throat; later he might be placed in bed between hot blankets and more sweat drawn from his lean frame. Really there was no limit to Peachy's particular kind of mothering femininity, and since her intentions were kind – Ambrose knew himself of old – before kindness he would go down like a struck ten-pin. Already he could feel the blankets closing in over him, and now in truth he shook with a chill.

Soon after his tall form arose, and then crouched as it crept forth from the summer house, stopping only long enough to pin a white paper to the outside arbour, when with leaps and bounds it

disappeared inside the stable, to reappear a few moments later with old Liza hitched to his high gig. Driving as rapidly as possible he soon got past the outside farm gate leading into the road.

So when Peachy returned with cup and spoon in hand she found her shrine deserted and instead read this note pinned outside among the vines and scrawled in the handwriting of Ambrose Thompson:

You were right, Peachy dear, I'm not myself to-day. I *am* cold and my heart action is uncommon feeble, so I think I'd best not stay to worry you. Maybe I'll be coming back to the farm some day when I'm feeling different.

Your respectful

Ambrose.

However, safe on the road, Ambrose, looking back and catching a far image of Peachy with his letter in her hand, decided that never again should he return to the Red Farm. For not only was Ambrose fleeing, but knew the reason why. Peachy was a manager, and had that moment in the parlour before dinner been longer – well, thank God and old Liza, he was still free.

"Good Lord, deliver me!" the boy prayed, though being a good Baptist he knew no litany save that of his own soul.

CHAPTER IV

"Even so, Love, even so! Whither thou goest, I will go."

So the boy continued driving on and on, loitering in the faint sweet-smelling May afternoon.

At first after having left the farm his heart had been troubled and his mind uneasy, burdened by an unconscious wave of sex weariness.

"Lord," he said aloud once, "seems such a pity you didn't make all critturs the same sex; I ain't carin' which, male or female, seein' what a lot of trouble we might all then 'a' been saved."

Naturally, so far as Ambrose himself was concerned, he was through with the dangers lurking in feminine society forever! He even intended confessing this conviction to his friend and partner, Miner, as soon as they should be alone together, for even at the moment of his resolution had not the boy's subliminal self whispered that he might need strengthening later on?

After getting well away from his danger zone, however, Ambrose had chosen that the remainder of his spring journey should lie through an unfamiliar part of the state, and so had turned his horse into every likely lane presenting itself until by degrees the ever-increasing beauty of the landscape wrought its effect upon his susceptible soul.

The houses along his route were finer than those of his own neighbourhood and, being placed farther back, showed only a chimney, or the white fluted column of a veranda every now and then beyond the closely planted avenues of beech or maple trees. Sounding across the fields came the voices of the darkies closing their day's tasks with songs. Truly this Kentucky was a happy land in the days before the war, and on this afternoon there were myriads of the soft, green growing things toward which Ambrose's young spirit had yearned, – acres of corn just creeping above the mould, and miles of tiny tobacco plants.

Then unexpectedly this character of landscape disappeared, and old Liza trotted on to a hard white turnpike. The twilight was closing down, but a toll-gate keeper showed himself a few yards ahead, and then a cluster of small stores. Afterward there was nothing further to interest Ambrose until he drove straight up to a big building surrounded by a high fence and set in the middle of a grassless yard without the influence of a tree or vine near it and where from the inside came the murmur of children's voices hushed to a pathetic, uniform note.

The boy knew the place at once for a county orphan asylum, and being what he was, reflected. In times past he had seen these same orphans led through the streets of Pennyroyal, a dreary set of little human beings, dressed alike and made to keep step like a chain gang. "Glory," he whispered, "here am I running away from the fear of havin' to keep step with *one* person; what if I had been made to keep step with so many?"

The next moment brought him nearly opposite a woodpile, and there he slowed up, for he thought that he heard a noise behind it sounding like a scared sheep or lamb.

"Stop!" What looked like a child's figure instantly rose and ran toward him. "Hide me!" she gasped; "oh, please be quick and don't ask questions." And the girl clung so tightly to the spokes of the gig wheel that had the young man driven on she must have been dragged like a slave at his chariot.

But of course he did no such thing. "Hop in," he replied cheerfully. Then, while the child crouched shivering and panting against his knee under the thin laprobe, Ambrose whistled to indicate his entire lack of concern in this latest adventure, and also to suggest that he rode alone.

Pretty soon, however, he began wondering what character of person he had rescued and from what or from whom she was running away, it being characteristic of Ambrose that first he had done what was required of him, and later had desired to ask questions. In the haste and semi-darkness it had been impossible to tell whether the child was a gypsy or a mere ordinary waif, and she had

looked so young – twelve or a little more perhaps. There was nothing much to judge by except that she was little and light and that her eyes were dark and shiny and she had two braids of long hair. But by and by of its own accord the figure under the laprobe started talking. "Don't let anybody take me away, – say you ain't seen me if they come along," she pleaded in such a tone that it was only possible for Ambrose to give a reassuring pat to her head and then to drive more rapidly along. Once when there was a moment of unusual stillness he did peep under the laprobe, only to catch sight of a pair of grateful eyes upturned to his and to jerk back his hand from the touch of cold lips.

Fifteen minutes of what had seemed totally unnecessary hiding, as there were few vehicles abroad on the turnpike at this late hour, and then both the occupants of the gig heard a furious pounding of a horse's hoofs behind them and knew that something or some one was being pursued.

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