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# THE SHELLEYS & GEORGIA



BEATRICE YORK HOUGHTON

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THE SHELLEYS OF GEORGIA







"COME BACK TO ME, ROSE."—Page 395.

# THE SHELLEYS OF GEORGIA

BY  
BEATRICE YORK HOUGHTON

ILLUSTRATED BY

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THE SHELLEYS OF GEORGIA

## FOREWORD

In these modern days, when so much time and thought is spent on progress in the abstract; when the air is full of vague idealisms; and no one is quite "up to date" unless he or she is advancing some theory for the uplift of humanity; it is refreshing and stimulating to light upon a person who not only possesses a clear vision but a clear expression of it, whose mind is bent on solving large problems in a large way, and whose solutions are all the more astonishing for their simplicity and practicality. Such a person is James Arthur MacKnight of Atlanta, Georgia. His splendid loyalty to his State and to his country is only equalled by his intense longing to help onward and upward that country and that State. In this foreword I acknowledge my deep indebtedness to him for material and for inspiration in the writing of this book, and I desire publicly to thank him.

BEATRICE YORK HOUGHTON.



# THE SHELLEYS OF GEORGIA

## CHAPTER I

**A**T the close of the Civil War the town of Salem, located at Bethel Corners in Bucks County, Georgia, consisted of a small frame church, a smaller schoolhouse, a meager country store, and the scattered homes of perhaps a dozen families. One of these houses, a big, old-fashioned mansion at the town end of acres of rolling land, had been unoccupied and desolate for years, with its outhouses and stables falling into ruin, and itself taking on the haunted look which attaches to places that have once teemed with life and bustle. Then its owner, Captain Gabriel Shelley, returned from the war, weak and emaciated from a slowly healing wound and the hardships he had undergone, but his brain clear and overflowing with ideas. He opened the house, hired the negroes who once had been his slaves, and in less than thirty-three years he "made Salem."

Captain Gabe, as every one affectionately called

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him, was a tall, broad-shouldered swarthy man, now past sixty years of age, but hale and hearty and vigorous. His hair was thick, curly, and iron-gray. His face was clean-cut, with high cheek-bones, aquiline nose, and beetling brows. His mouth was humorous and tender, belying the uncompromising set of his jaws, and saving his face from being too stern. He was the sort of man who, once seen, is never forgotten. For years Salem had proudly pointed to him as its leading citizen.

In October of the year 1897, the town could boast a population of nearly ten thousand. It had stretched out to take in some of this number from the families scattered over the neighboring countryside, but most of them were from other States, drawn hither by the prosperity of this busy center. Recovered entirely from the one war, it was eagerly advocating another, doing all in its power to raise the enmity towards Spain to a white heat, and spreading broadcast the merits of its own special crack company of Georgia Militia, whose Captain, Thomas Blankenship, was easily the most petted and spoiled young man in the county. He belonged to one of the "best families," and still lived on the old Blankenship estate, once far out in the country, but now surrounded by suburban homes of the better class. For several years he had taken an active part in the politics of Bucks county, of which Salem was the official capital. His love-affairs were legion,



and gossip was busy just now in coupling his name with that of Gabe's beautiful daughter, Rose.

Rose was the Captain's child by his first marriage, when he had given Salem one of many surprises by eloping with its most popular belle. After her mother's death the little girl's sedate assumption of the rôle of housekeeper for her father, had made the whole town take pride in her. When, in 'ninety-three, he wooed and won Madge Oglethorpe, daughter of the county judge, the grace with which Rose handed over the reins of management to the young and lovely bride, and the ensuing comradeship between them, became an interesting topic in the town, cited on all occasions as a direct refutation of the old stepmother bugbear. Shortly after the marriage Rose went away to study nursing at a school in Atlanta. Why a girl of her expectations — Gabe was reputed rich — should care to do anything but enjoy herself, was one of the mysteries Salem was never able to fathom. She was graduated in the spring before this story opens, and as yet had put her training to no practical use.

Some years back Captain Gabe had entered the peach industry. His example was zealously followed by other landowners, and Salem soon became the center of a broad belt of orchards, producing an excellent quality of fruit. Gabe's other occupations of politician, orator, sheriff, banker, lawyer, and newspaper editor all bade fair to be overshadowed by this

new business. His partial crop of peaches, the last of which had been harvested in September, had been of such quality and quantity as to promise him a wonderful yield next year, and the fall had been spent by him in putting his orchards into the best possible shape for the short southern winter now to follow.

October is always a warm month in Georgia, more beautiful than summer itself, because of a mysterious something in the season which hints that its halcyon days are soon to give way to the rains of winter. This morning it was especially lovely, and all Salem went out-of-doors into its gardens, basking in the sunshine and the abundance of the flowers. At the Shelleys', the roses were still in bloom, and held up their pink faces bravely, wondering, doubtless, why no one came to admire them. They were not used to being left alone.

But through the whole long October morning, the big old-fashioned house idled in the glare of the sun, in a quite unaccustomed solitude. It spread itself in anxious hospitality among its trees and vines. Never had its porch chairs and hammocks looked more comfortable and inviting; never had its gables achieved such cool miracles in the way of shade, or its open doors and windows given forth more tempting hints of restfulness within. But it was all of no avail, and the big house at last grew tired from its unappreciated efforts, and drowsed disconsolately in the noonday sun.

Then all of a sudden everything changed. The place awoke to life as surely as if it were human and really able to indulge itself in slumber. For such homes gain in animation or sink into repose through the presence or absence of their occupants, and now Madge Shelley, Captain Gabe's second wife, was coming quickly from the direction of the orchard and the stables.

She was dressed in white, with the full sleeves and skirts which were fashionable then, and wore a broad-brimmed leghorn hat trimmed with violets. In one hand she carried a bunch of crimson dahlias, in the other a riding-whip. But she was pale and wan, with shadows under her blue eyes, for she had spent a long and tiring night with her Aunt Betty Oglethorpe, who was ill; and as she neared the house her face expressed increasing disappointment because Gabe had failed to come part way to meet her upon this lovely morning. She had counted on it, someway, longing to rest her tired self in the strong tenderness of his embrace, and in her present state of fatigue she found no comfort in the thought that something very important must have arisen to detain him. What could be more important than her return? What could have been sufficiently large in interest to step between them? She could think of nothing — nothing at all — and when she reached the trees in front of the house she sank down upon a bench, tossed her flowers and whip upon a chair near by, and gave her-

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self over completely to the feeling of sadness which the lack of his welcome had caused to grow in her after her night of sorrow and alarm.

Her coming had quickened the inmates of the house as well as the house itself, and she was allowed no time for self-complainings, for Uncle Jack, the negro butler, stepped at once out of the door. He was distressingly black in contrast to the immaculate white he wore, and possessed a pride of manner which nothing was ever able to upset. He was an "educated niggah," with the intention of some day entering the ministry. Holding no opportunity too small for practice, his least word was rolled forth sonorously.

"Baig yo' pahdon, Miss Madge, but hyah am a lettah, which Cap'n Gabe done tol' me to gib you when you come."

He held out a small silver tray on whose glittering bosom the letter reposed which was to start a course of events quite foreign to the bustling town of Salem.

Immediately Madge woke to eager life. She snatched the letter from the tray, tore it open and devoured its brief words. Immediately the color deepened in her cheeks, her blue eyes shone, and the dimples began to play hide and seek about her mouth.

"I reckon you wuz mighty glad to git dat ar lettah, Miss Madge?" insinuated Uncle Jack with the utmost solemnity. He was a privileged member of the household and so guilty of no presumption.

"Yes, Uncle Jack," laughed Madge, all her sadness gone. "He says important business —"

"Aw now, Miss Madge, do he begin it dataway?"

"Why? How should he begin it?" drawled Madge, peeping over the paper roguishly.

"Undah simlah circumstances, Miss Madge, I reckon I should deliberate, 'Honahed an' highly respectable lady: I takes my pen in hand to infawm you dat I is lamentably detain' f'om yo' beloved presence —' "

Madge's clear laugh rang out again. "Nonsense, Uncle Jack. You wouldn't begin a letter to your wife like that, now would you?"

A grin spread slowly over the negro's face. "Well, no, mistis," he admitted. "I reckon I'd jus' say 'Honey Lamb,' or some sech foolishness."

"That's what the Captain did, only he says 'Darling,'" confided Madge. "'My Darling: Important business calls me to the hills beyond Cave Springs. I am driving in a buggy and go alone, but I expect to have a passenger returning. I will try to get back by four or five o'clock. Say nothing to any one of my movements. Yours wholly, G.'"

"Isn't that a nice note, Uncle Jack? Of course you knew something about it, so he didn't mean I was to say nothing to you, did he? What do you suppose he means by saying he went alone but expects to have a passenger back? Did you see who it was that called him away, Uncle Jack?"



"Yes'm, dat I did, but I wuz not acquainted wid de pusson, mistis."

"Oh!" said Madge, with a smile. Evidently Uncle Jack did not approve of "de pusson." It was as well to change the subject. "I stopped in to see your mother, Uncle Jack, on my way back from Aunt Betty's."

"Did you, Miss Madge, did you?" exclaimed Uncle Jack, almost forgetting his dignity in his pleasure at the news. "Now I calls dat right down kin' ob you, mistis. Po' ol' maw, she cain't eben git out ob baid dese days, an' I takes it right kin'ly, Miss Madge, dat you stop to see huh."

"She seemed very bright and cheerful, and sent her love to you, and said you were to be a *good boy*." Uncle Jack put a hand to his whitening wool and looked a trifle foolish. "Where is Miss Rose?" asked Madge abruptly.

"Miss Rose, she done gone into town," returned Uncle Jack, recovering his equanimity and his dignity at one breath. "She 'spect to be home in time fo' dinner. Dah she, now."

Madge turned, and together they watched a tall handsome girl on a tall handsome horse, riding into the yard through the side gate. She was in the first rosy bloom of young womanhood, perhaps nineteen or twenty years of age. Her eyes were dark, and the clear color of her cheeks was like that on the breast of a ripe peach. Her skin had the creamy tint and

downy texture of the same fruit. She wore a khaki riding-coat and hat and divided skirt, which had given the old-fashioned folk in Salem quite a shock when she first appeared in it. She was gauntleted and carried a riding-whip. She guided her horse across the short grass to Madge, and, disdaining Uncle Jack's offered aid, swung herself down with a free and agile motion, and let him lead the animal away. But all the while she evaded Madge's eyes, and it was evident that, had she been able to do so without appearing rude, she would have evaded Madge herself.

"Awfully warm," she said now, fanning herself vigorously with her hat, which she pulled off for the purpose. "Almost like summer. How's your Aunt Betty?"

But Madge had no intention of being put off, and now she stretched out a slender hand and drew the girl down beside her. "Rose," she exclaimed. "What is it?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Rose, with a vexed laugh.

"Yes, you do," retorted Madge. "You are keeping something from me. I think I have a right to your confidence, Rose. Won't you give it to me?"

Rose stirred restlessly. "Why should I?"

"Haven't I proved myself your friend?" asked Madge quietly.

Something in her grave question touched the

younger girl. Impulsively she turned to Madge. "If I could be sure!" she cried. "If I could only be sure!"

"The only way you can be sure is to try me," explained Madge gently. "Be frank with me. I promise I'll be frank with you —"

"That's just it —" began Rose.

"What?"

"You'll be too frank," mutinied the girl. "You don't like Tom. You'll tell me so. You'll oppose —"

"Oppose what?"

"Our — our engagement." This latter very low.

For a moment Madge was tempted to do just this thing. But she controlled her impulse and said slowly. "Then you have been riding with him, as I thought. And you are engaged to him. Are you sure you — love him?"

"Of course I do," asserted Rose. "And I am engaged to him. But he warned me — as if I did not already know — that I was in for it at home. I don't understand," she went on petulantly, "how you and my father can be so — so narrow. Tom is almost as popular as Father, and has as much influence in this county. He knows every one and goes everywhere. He's been telling me about some of his friends in Washington and New York — you'd be surprised if you knew their names. He's good-looking, too, and a gentleman. Father might be prejudiced through

their political squabbles, but you, Madge — surely you ought to be too just to condemn a man because he loved you once,— and has changed.”

“So, he told you *that*?”

“Of course he told me. He has told me everything. We are engaged, you know.”

Madge rose with a hopeless gesture. She walked toward the house, then turned and came swiftly back. “How can I make you see? How can I make you understand?” she cried. “You are so young, so inexperienced, so untried. You have been kept so innocent, and the wonder is that you yielded to such keeping. I was kept innocent, too, and yet somehow I knew things — I was able to judge Tom Blankenship even when he loved me. I told myself a moment ago that I must not interfere,— that every word I say will only strengthen your inclination towards him. And yet I can’t, in fairness to you, leave you without warning you that you’ll be sorry if ever you marry Tom Blankenship.”

“How do you know? What proofs have you of that?”

“I have no proofs, and yet I know,” insisted Madge. “And your father feels as I do. Doesn’t his judgment count?”

“He makes mistakes sometimes,” flared Rose. “And Tom is too proud to stoop to self-defense. As for you, Madge, I love you dearly, and I believe you love me. But until you can show me that your mar-

riage with my father was entirely disinterested, I'll not believe you have the right to judge Tom Blankenship."

"Rose, stop!" cried Madge. "I know how you feel, but some day you will discover your mistake. Perhaps it is because I am so happy that I know that only a union like ours is worth while."

"Well then," cried Rose, springing to her feet. "It is my intention to marry Tom, and to make our marriage worth while, too. Does that satisfy you?" And she ran into the house.

Madge looked after her with a troubled face. She felt quite helpless, and knew she would always be helpless unless in some unexpected fashion she could light upon certain proofs of what she felt instinctively to be the truth. The telephone, which stood on the Gallery table, now startled her from her musing. She hastened to answer the insistent bell, and as she listened, she gave a low cry of dismay. She put down the receiver and called to Uncle Jack, who hurried round the corner of the house in answer to her summons.

"Uncle Jack," she said sharply. "Aunt Betty wants me right away. They are sending the carriage for me. She has something to tell me. She always has something to tell me—" And talking breathlessly, she rushed down the steps and over to the gate, as a handsome turnout dashed up to it.

She had entered the carriage when Rose, up-stairs,



leaned from an open window. "Madge," she called softly. "I was a little fiend to you. Forgive me."

Madge turned to wave a magnanimous hand. "Good-by, dear," she called. "Aunt Betty wants me. I'll hurry back. Good-by." She managed to put only the brightest, fondest love into her tones.

A second later she was out of sight and Rose withdrew her pretty head.

For a short space the old house sank again to slumber. And then so silently as scarcely to disturb it, a man stepped out from the orchard, and slipped over to the same bench where Rose and Madge had sat and talked a moment before. He was straight and tall, extremely handsome, very self-possessed, and so well-groomed as to make his slight look of dissipation rather attractive than otherwise. He was dressed in riding-clothes. He smiled to himself as he lit a cigarette and took a few meditative puffs. It was a smile of egoism, yet somehow lovable. Here was a man whom one liked while condemning, and who knew and traded on this fact.

Having settled himself on the bench to his satisfaction, he gave a soft whistle like the love-note of a bird, to apprise Rose that he was waiting, and then turned to a newspaper which he found on a rustic table near. It was Gabe's own paper, and the editorial was a direct attack upon the war talk now circulating through the town and county, and contained more than one allusion to "The Captain of our

troop," who, it seemed, had been busy stirring up still greater excitement, and getting in some political rows as well, wherein, according to said editorial, he had shown that he had the interests of himself and of his own particular class at heart, rather than the good of the populace at large.

As the man upon the bench read through this editorial his lips tightened, his eyes gleamed and his nostrils widened in a cruel sneer. Indeed, so plainly did he show that the feelings roused in him were due to personal rancor and offended pride, that it was not difficult to see that he was none other than the man referred to, Thomas Blankenship himself. His cheeks flushed, his handsome brow knit itself into an ugly frown, the whole contour of his face changed beyond recognition. One would have said that this was not the same man who had entered the garden a moment ago, eager, handsome, entirely complacent and at ease. His look so altered that instinctively one feared him.

It was so that Rose saw him, when at last she ran out upon the Gallery and down the broad steps to the lawn.

She had dressed to meet her lover, in a simple gown of white. Her hair, caught up loosely in a fashion he admired, shimmered in the sunlight. Her cheeks were flushed with expectation, her dark eyes like twin stars under their long lashes. But the first glimpse of his face brought her quickly to a pause.

She changed from expectancy to hesitation, and even to a something resembling fright. Then he realized her presence, and, flinging down the paper, sprang to his feet and came to meet her. Before his outstretched hands, his face now beaming with the love it knew so well how to express, her momentary feeling left her, and for all she remembered of it, had never been. Yet it had left its impress on her heart, and under its unconscious influence she spoke.

"What were you reading, to make you look so cross?"

"Oh, nothing," he answered lightly, striving to be magnanimous before her at least. "Your father has been holding up my virtues for inspection, and has succeeded in finding a number of places in need of patching. However, I am getting used to that sort of thing."

"It is too bad," murmured the girl, much distressed. "But, Tom, Father does not understand, that's all. I don't think he means those things quite as personally as you suppose."

"They do not matter." With a careless gesture he appeared to dismiss them entirely from his mind. Then, in low, passionate tones, he continued. "Nothing matters but just you. I've got to make sure of you, you beautiful thing! That's why I've been hiding in the orchard, and why I've ventured here in your stepmother's absence. I've got to make sure of you, at once —"

"Make sure of me? I do not understand you." Her eyes grew mocking.

"You know you promised. You promised me this morning —"

"I promised nothing. That is — I didn't exactly promise. I said — I said I'd think it over."

"And now you've thought it over, you are going to say 'Yes.' You shall! You must! I'll not let you say anything else. I'll seal your lips with kisses — so — and not let them open at all until I read in your eyes that you are going away with me to-night, far, far away, just you and I — alone."

She slipped out of his clasping arms and shook her curls at him in shy rebuke. "You take too much for granted, Mr. Blankenship," she cried with flaming cheeks. "You ought not to come here anyway. You know my father doesn't like it. And I truly don't know yet whether I shall go with you or not. I haven't made up my mind."

"Why not, if you love me, Rose? You are mine and I want you now."

"You see I've never been engaged before," she reminded him. "And I have never run away to get married, either. How do I know what it's like — to leave home and friends, to deceive my dear father, to give up everything I call life now, just for — for you?"

"You know now how it feels to be engaged. You have been engaged to me for two whole hours —"

"Two whole hours! Yes, and lots of girls are engaged for as many years. Why, I haven't had time to get used to it yet, and here you are begging me to run away. I don't think I want to run away. I'd rather be married here, in the church, with bridesmaids, and presents, and a wedding-cake, and, oh, a veil, and lots of things!"

"But your father does not like me. His wife hates me. They'll never consent to our marriage, much less to giving you a wedding."

"They might, if I coaxed," she said, demurely. "You don't know what a coaxer I am, nor how much my father will do for me if I set myself to make him. Let us wait and see."

He gave a groan of despair. "They'll teach you to despise me," he cried passionately. "They'll stoop to anything to accomplish that. Oh, my darling, listen but a moment! Your own mother — she whose place Madge Oglethorpe has usurped — why I can remember her, Rose. She was just like you, the sweetest, prettiest girl that ever lived in Salem. She was the light of your father's eyes, and they were happy, oh, but they were happy! Yet her people were against him, Rose, and she was forced to fly at night, to marry in the face of opposition. You know how Captain Gabe used to boast of it, and how often he said that runaway matches, like runaway horses, often turned out the best in the end?"

Again he put his arm about her and drew her

close, so close that his cheek pressed hers, and she could feel the beating of his heart against her shoulder. "See!" he breathed, pointing with his free hand as if an actual scene lay there before them. "See the glorious happiness that waits for us over yonder. To-night I'll come for you, Rose. I'll be waiting at the cross-roads at seven, with my fastest horse. In an hour we'll be at the Junction, in another hour we'll be in the city, and ten minutes later we'll be married, you and I. And then the joy! Think of it, Rose. I'll buy you everything. I'll take you to New York, London, Paris, everywhere. I'll lay the whole world at your feet. You'll be a queen, I tell you, a queen, clothed in shining garments, your beautiful hair roped with pearls, with diamonds flashing in those little ears and on these dear white hands. You will not even have to wish for things. They'll be yours before you have known you wanted them. I'll make it my business to create new longings in you, only for the pleasure of seeing them gratified. And always, behind the pleasure and the joy will be that deeper pleasure, that greatest of all joys—my love for you. I'll make you happy, Rose."

"But, Tom," she interrupted, her eager eyes clouded with sudden pain. "The suffering in the world,— could we be so happy when there is suffering in the world?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment, recalled



thus abruptly from his visioning. Then, "What has a girl like you to do with suffering?" he demanded, roughly.

"Oh, but it's there!" she exclaimed, her hands against her heart. "Always it's there — that dull dark undercurrent. I don't know much about it, but I feel it as I suppose all women must. And now we are verging upon war. What of that?"

"I shall make you forget it," he asserted boldly. "My love shall so enfold you that there'll be no room for brooding."

"But I don't want to forget it," she assured him earnestly. "I don't want to be just lightly happy, Tom. I want to be of use, and I'd never be quite satisfied if we were not doing something for those others who are not quite so fortunate as we."

"Then we will do something," he promised readily. "We'll fling our gold abroad, feed the hungry, clothe the ragged, and make our names blessed. They'll call you an angel, you human Rose, and when you die they'll build a monument to you — why, what's the matter, Rose?"

For she had withdrawn herself again and was sitting huddled on the bench, with white cheeks and staring eyes. "Death!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Death!"

"Are you afraid of it?" he asked, looking at her strangely.

"Not afraid," she answered. "But — let's not

“speak of it now, Tom. Life is calling me. I want to live, to live to the fullest capacity I have in me, just — to live. That’s all!”

Even at this moment he was constrained to marvel at her self-expression. This impulsive and spirited girl, standing on the threshold of her womanhood, felt things all too keenly. If the mere thought of the darker side of life could blanch her cheek, what must be her capacity for suffering when the realities themselves confronted her? And then so quickly she changed, and as she begged just to live, her eyes glowed, and the color flooded her cheeks once more. The man hesitated for a space, brought face to face with his half-formed intentions, and questioning if they were good. He knew he wanted her above everything else in the world. Would the fulfillment of his longing bring her all he promised her, and all she craved? And then he shrugged his shoulders and tossed his burden lightly off. He wanted her, and that was all sufficient to him to justify anything that he might say or do.

“Ah, but we will live,” he cried, drawing her close again. “Only say that you’ll come with me, Rose, and life shall give you of its best. Say Yes.”

“How can I help it when you paint such glowing pictures,” she sighed. “Father will forgive me, I know, for as you say he ran away with my own mother, so he will understand. But wait a moment, Tom. There is one thing I want to ask you to ex-

plain to me before I give my final answer. Not about yourself, but about your brother."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, you darling."

"Why did you inherit the Blankenship estates, and your elder brother receive nothing but what you chose to give him? I don't ask this because people say ugly things about you, but because I know your reasons for taking your inheritance without a protest must have been good, and because this is one of my father's strongest items against you. Hadn't your brother done something wicked, something unworthy?"

"No, he was good enough," said Tom. "But he is not a true Blankenship. I am, so it was my right to take my father's place."

"What do you mean by that, Tom?" she asked, wrinkling her pretty brow.

"I'll tell you the tale as it was told to me," he said, and, sitting with an arm about her, he began to weave the story as though talking to a child.

## CHAPTER II

“**O**NCE upon a time,” he stated, playing with the small firm hand that yielded itself to his. “Once upon a time, in England, long ago, there was a Lady Blankenship whose husband worshiped her as I do you. She was a lovely lady, imperious, self-willed, and wanting costly gowns, jewels, balls and parties, gaiety and fun. She got what she asked for. More than once her husband risked life itself to gratify her whim for some gewgaw that she flung away, dissatisfied as soon as she received it. And then, one day, when snow was on the ground, she said she’d nevermore be happy or content until she’d tasted cherries. There were no hot-houses in those days and for once her wish was unfulfilled. He brought her curious fruits from China, grapes from Italy, oranges from Spain, but at them all she shook her small dark head and called for cherries. ‘Only to taste but one,’ she begged. And, ‘Methinks, milord, that your love can scarce be all you claim it, if a dear wish of mine can thus be slighted.’”

“Oh, I think she was horrid,” exclaimed Rose. He only smiled as he talked on.

"My Lord Blankenship tore his hair and cursed his varlets all to no avail. Cherry-less my Lady was, and cherry-less my Lady stayed, until springtime came and brought the blooming trees. It brought as well a young Lord Blankenship, and there upon his arm, quite clearly cut, was a curious birthmark not unlike a cluster of ripe cherries."

"How odd! But what has this to do with you and your brother?"

"I'm coming to that. This Blankenship grew up to manhood and in time became lord of great estates, and his son, and his son's son bore upon them this same curious mark. The cluster now began to be regarded with superstition, and was embodied in their coat of arms. The fourth generation saw four sons without this cluster, and a daughter who bore it with exceptional distinctness. So deeply had the awe of it gone into their hearts that these four brothers voluntarily resigned their rights to her. When she married her husband took her name, and their eldest son bore the mark, upon his breast. So on, through generation after generation. The one who bore the cluster became the heir, boy or girl, eldest or youngest. Oddly enough in no single generation did it fail to appear upon at least one of the children."

"And if it appeared upon more than one?"

"The preference was given to the eldest boy who bore it. In time the Blankenships fell from their high estate. They took up the cause of Prince

Charlie, and their lands were confiscated. They fled to save their lives and came to America, where they waxed rich and great. With them they carried this dear tradition of their race. So only those of us who have this mark upon us are called true Blankenships. The others, in our eyes, might better never have been born."

"Then you have it?" she cried.

"Upon my arm," he said. "My brother was unmarked, and he stepped aside quite willingly, for he was imbued with the same awe for it as I. See, here it is!"

He slipped his left arm out of his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeve, and showed her, above his elbow, five small round crimson spots, and one elongated fainter shape, which, to the imaginative mind, might represent a leaf.

"Yes," she said, examining it curiously. "I see the resemblance. It is a very odd mark. I am glad you told me the story. But was your brother completely disinherited?"

"My father left it to me to do what was right," said Tom grandly. "So long as I live, my brother shall never want."

"That's nice of you," beamed Rose, slipping out of his reach. "I shall tell my father the whole story, the very first chance I get. No, stay where you are," she commanded, as he started from his seat. "Stay



right where you are, so I can say what I want to say without being at all embarrassed."

He laughed at her pretty air of authority, and remained on the bench watching her with gloating eyes as she tripped across the grass and up the Gallery steps. At their top she turned. "At seven, at the cross-roads," she called softly. "I'll be waiting for you."

Then indeed he made a mad rush across the grass, too late, for the house door slammed in his very face and she was gone, leaving behind her only the echo of a merry laugh.

He shook his fist impotently at the sturdy barrier between them. "Until to-night, then," he murmured, and a smile of triumph lit up his face.

He had turned away and was going toward the gate, when a carriage stopped before it and Madge alighted, fagged and weary, and not at all pleased to see him there. She did not trouble to hide her dislike of him, and ignored the hand he dared to offer her.

"Mr. Blankenship," she said coldly. "Why do you continue to disregard my husband's wishes? How could you come here in his absence?"

"A friendly call," he answered lightly. "Surely there's no harm in that. Mrs. Shelley, your manner towards me lately has been extremely cutting. Once it was not so cold —"

"You do well to speak of that time," she cried in-

dignantly. "I was a girl then, as Rose is now, and as susceptible to flattery as she. Mr. Blankenship, I am going to make an appeal to your honor, and to the best that is in you. There is no use in mincing matters. You know what both Captain Gabe and I have been trying to show you by our aloofness. You are not worthy of Rose, and you ought to be man enough to acknowledge that, and to leave her alone."

Tom laughed, but all the same his eyes gleamed angrily. "You say I am not worthy of her. I admit that, but what man is? She is a princess, and I, her humble subject. Surely there can be nothing but good in worship such as mine. It transcends any feeling I have ever known before, and is as far above that semblance of love I once offered you, for instance, as the stars are above this small brown earth of ours."

If he had thought to sting her so, he failed. She made a scornful gesture. "The love you gave me once was like the love you give her in this, that it was the only kind of which such men as you are capable. If you worship Rose, as you so frankly say, then that worship is an insult and should be stamped out. I believe I'd rather see her die than marry you, Tom Blankenship."

"Hard words," exclaimed Tom. "Let's be fair and temperate. What do you know of me that causes you to judge me so harshly? Nothing except that your own beauty could not keep me as its slave. Was that my fault, or yours? I'll acknowledge that a

lovely face and form attract me. That's Nature's own law, to which I, a man, am forced to be obedient. But behind the face and form must lie a loveliness of soul — which, pardon me, most women lack — or else my heart proves fickle. I see it there in Rose. I see in her my own soul's salvation. And then you come to me with your contempt, and petty jealousy and spite, and ask me to renounce her, as if you thought one such request sufficient. I tell you no power on earth could ever make me give her up, so long as she loves me and trusts in me."

"You coward!" The low intensity with which Madge spoke the commonplace words gave them new meaning, and his face turned white.

"A coward, am I?" he exclaimed between his teeth. "Well, maybe — when it comes to facing such as you. It takes a rarer courage than you can comprehend, to see the heights as typified by Rose, and to dare to attain them."

"Shame on you!" panted Madge. "You talk of heights to which you'll climb through her — you whose base passions long to drag her down —"

He gave a low angry laugh. "If you were a man, I'd say that such sentiments were inspired by the character of the mind that lies behind them. We are getting nowhere when we use them."

"We have gotten thus far," she retorted. "That we are open enemies now. You never shall win Rose while her father and I can fight against you."

"What can you do? What are your weapons?"

"We can take her away."

"To Atlanta?" he scoffed. "She speaks with pride of having been that far from home. Poor child! You and that father of hers would tie her down for her whole life to Salem, and offer her Atlanta for a bait when her restless spirit chafes at the narrow confines of her prison. 'Oh, the peach crop!' you exclaim. 'It needs us all. We cannot spare you now. Later on, perhaps, when the fruit has ripened and been gathered, we'll take you to Atlanta.' And Rose, dear girl, has dreamed of her Atlanta, as an acolyte might dream of Heaven."

His mocking tones roused all the fury in her. "Will you go, before I call the servants?" she cried. "Will you go before I lose all self-control, and tell you just how low you stand in my esteem?"

"I will, gladly, and leave you the last word," he said. "Get what comfort you can from that, for the game has just begun, and the next move is mine."

There was something so confident and self-assured in the sneering words that Madge could only stand still and stare at his retreating figure. What did he mean? That he had something in reserve she could not doubt. She longed for Captain Gabe, unconsciously assuming that he could act where she was helpless. A need for haste possessed her. It seemed to her that this triumphant man must already have set in motion the machinery which would take

Rose forever out of their reach. In this her woman's instinct told her true. And into her need of haste, of instant action, suddenly the face of her father, kindly old Judge Oglethorpe, intruded. Next to Captain Gabe himself, she felt that he was able to advise her.

She ran over to the gate, impulsively bent upon following up her new idea. Then she stopped dismayed. "I can't go to my father, either," she cried aloud. "He's busy at the court-house. Is there any one else in this whole town who could advise me what to do?"

"Try me," suggested a pleasant masculine voice.

"Oh!" screamed Madge, startled beyond self-control at the nearness of this voice. She had turned toward the house again in her hesitation, and so failed to see the man who had come so quietly up to the gate. Now she whirled to confront a tall, rather slender fellow, awkward in build and decidedly plain. This plainness was garnished and set off by a quantity of freckles, and his head, which he had uncovered, was blazing red. Nevertheless one look into his gray eyes was almost enough to make Madge relax and smile a greeting, they were so engaging and so cheerful, so downright sure of her friendliness and sympathy and understanding.

"I beg pardon," she murmured. "I didn't know any one was there."

"So I realized, the moment I had spoken," he answered with a merry twinkle. "But, hearing a

young and charming lady wondering if there was any one in this town who could advise her, and knowing my own excellence in counsel, and finding myself Johnny-on-the-spot, so to speak, I ventured to offer my services. Try them. Warranted wholesome and easy to take. Of an excellent pattern and the design — merely to please you.”

Again Madge hesitated, plainly uncertain what answer to make this dapper stranger. He was so at ease, so self-assured, that she unconsciously accepted him at his own valuation. It seemed already that he was an old friend, and so long as she looked into his honest eyes she never could have snubbed him. She might even confide in him, against her better judgment.

She glanced away, and lo! her whole conception of him changed. Here was a stranger, presumptuous and impudent, daring to address her familiarly whom he had never seen until a moment before. He must be taught his place. Yet in order to teach him she found it necessary to keep on looking away.

“I do not know you,” she said coldly. “But I do know that you have taken an unwarrantable liberty in speaking to me so. I must ask you to leave, instantly.”

The stranger leaned against the gate-post and began to fan himself with his hat. “But I’ve just come,” he complained. “And I’m hot and tired and — why shouldn’t I say it? — thirsty. I was in-



formed that this was an hospitable country, where the ladies were always gracious, and mint juleps so thick you couldn't step between 'em — or after 'em either, for that matter. And the first lady I meet refuses my offer of assistance, asks me to leave before I have time to present my card of introduction, and I haven't even heard a julep mentioned since I've been here. So much for advice. Take mine, and don't take it. Which may sound contradictory, but is nevertheless true."

Madge drew herself up proudly and turned to annihilate this insolent person with her most scornful glance. Unfortunately her eyes encountered his. Her anger vanished and to her intense surprise she found herself smiling and saying frankly, "I didn't know you had a card of introduction. Why didn't you tell me, before?"

"Haven't had a chance," he answered. "Now I'll be a good little boy and speak my piece nicely."

He drew himself up straight, put both feet together precisely upon the walk, and asked in formal tones, "Is this the residence of Captain Gabriel Shelley?"

"It is," answered Madge, trying to maintain her gravity.

"Is the Captain at home?"

"He is not."

"Have I the honor of addressing his daughter, or his wife?"

To save her life Madge could not help but answer roguishly, "Guess which."

"I give it up," said the stranger promptly, presenting her with a card which he drew from his breast-pocket.

She took it from his outstretched hand and read slowly, aloud, "'Bucknam and Bates, Wholesale Fruiterers and Produce-Venders, introducing Homer Fort.' Oh!" she exclaimed with quick dismay. "Are you Mr. Fort? The Captain was expecting you, though not so soon." Her thoughts flew back over all that had just passed. Had she said or done anything to offend this man? Not for the world would she hurt her husband's chances of doing business with him.

"The Captain's letter aroused considerable interest, you see," he explained. "His partial crop this year was a wonder, an eye-opener. His plan to form a combine of the peach-growers in this vicinity, so that our dealings may be simplified into handling one large consignment instead of half a hundred small ones; his personal guarantee that only those growers shall be admitted whose peaches are of like quality to his own — well, my firm decided to get busy right away, before some other company got the chance. First come, first served, holds good with Captain Shelley as well as with other peach-growers, I presume?"

"I don't know about that," commented Madge,

pleasantly. "The Captain says he'd rather make a thousand dollars out of a man he likes than a million out of an enemy."

"Then he has got to like me, that's all," grinned Homer Fort.

Madge signified that he was to enter the gate, and he was quick to respond to her invitation. As they walked toward the house he looked at her earnestly, in a way she would have resented in any man less innocent of wrong intent than he. Rose, coming out upon the porch again to find Madge, surprised them thus and hostility immediately bristled in her manner. Madge called her merrily.

"Come here, dear. Let me introduce Mr. Fort. He says he cannot tell whether I am Captain Shelley's wife or daughter. Now, Mr. Fort," she continued gaily as Rose came forward reluctantly. "Here we are, his wife and daughter. Guess again and tell me which is which."

Mr. Fort bowed to Rose who barely acknowledged the salutation. He was about to speak when she turned abruptly to Madge, and said coldly, "The luncheon-bell rang a long time ago. Where have you been?"

"Mr. Fort comes from Bucknam and Bates, dear," was Madge's apparently irrelevant response. Rose knew then that her father's interests were involved. It was best to be cordial to this stranger, who, after all, would be with them but a little while. Her sec-

ond nod of recognition was distinctly warmer than her first.

"I've decided," suddenly exclaimed Mr. Fort, and pointing triumphantly at Rose, he cried, "That's Mrs. Shelley. How do you do, ma'am?" Seizing her hand in his, he gave it a hearty shake.

"How dare you?" cried Rose, snatching it away.

Madge laughed. "Why do you think she is Mrs. Shelley? I'm the older."

"Well," said Mr. Fort, ignoring Rose and looking straight into Madge's eyes. "You are the more approachable. I understand that the Captain is well past middle age, and might have a daughter of perhaps twenty-three — you can't be more, you know. Don't tell me so, for I sha'n't believe it.— And he'd choose a schoolgirl for a wife, of course. The older men are, the younger they like 'em."

"Oh!" gasped Rose, outraged at being dubbed schoolgirlish. Her antagonism toward this man rose to fever heat. She would show him that very night whether she was a schoolgirl or not. And all of a sudden a tiny regret curled upward through the fire of her thoughts. She could almost wish she were not going quite so soon, if, by remaining, she could teach this man a lesson.

"I am Miss Shelley," she now announced with frigid distinctness. "And the lady you are pleased to consider so approachable is my stepmother. She

was married to my father four years ago — when she was twenty-five.”

That was really too bad of Rose. She shouldn't have said it, and the moment it was out she regretted it. But she did not let either of them see that, hurrying ahead of them into the house, with her nose in the air.

“Phew!” whistled Homer Fort. “That was the worst frost I've ever gotten in my life, Mrs. Shelley. No wonder the weather feels chilly down this way. I hate to accuse her, but I do believe she told a fib about your age.”

Madge forced herself to smile at his words, though Rose had hurt her deeply. “I do hope Captain Gabe will soon be home,” she said. “You will lunch with us, of course.”

“If I won't be in the way,” hesitated Mr. Fort.

“Oh, no,” she assured him. “I shall be glad to have you stay until the Captain returns. Unless you have something else to take up your time —”

“Not a thing,” he answered heartily. “And perhaps you will let me give you that advice of which you stand so much in need.”

She faced him a trifle defiantly. “What advice could you give me that would fit in with my unspoken needs?” she asked.

“Only this. It is my creed. ‘Don't worry. Keep on smiling, and something always will turn up.’

Say," he continued, with a sidelong glance. "Suppose I take it myself. Do you think I could persuade *her* to thaw out a little. I never saw a prettier girl in all my life, Mrs. Shelley. She's a peach, she is,—a regular Georgia Peach."

Madge laughed at this, and so, laughing intimately together, they went in to meet Rose's accusing eyes.



### CHAPTER III

**A**FTER luncheon Rose, still frigid, went to her room, to pack up a few necessities in a hand-bag, which was all the luggage she intended carrying, and to write a tender letter to her father, begging his understanding and forgiveness. Madge also excused herself, for she was tired from her long night with Aunt Betty, and from the morning's journeyings, and she suffered increasing alarm as time passed and still nothing had been done to thwart the plans which she felt sure were being perfected by Tom Blankenship. Homer's advice did help her. She strove to keep cheerful, and to believe that something must turn up.

Homer himself wandered about the Captain's orchards, which were among the largest he had ever seen. He was enthused over the thought of the wonderful harvest which the trees would yield next year, through the vigilance of Captain Gabe. Here was achievement which he could applaud. The acts of men thrilled him always.

He had heard much about Captain Shelley since he had come to Georgia. Gabe was not only a pioneer in the peach industry there, but he seemed to be foremost in everything that worked for the betterment of

his town and county. He "had a finger in every business enterprise in Salem, and a toe in every mix-up in the State," as one of his satellites once aptly said. Another, at the time of his marriage, had "allowed that Cap'n Gabe's bride wuz a-marryin' a'most every notable man in Bucks County." This was too good a joke to keep, and went the rounds to the Captain's great delight. He loved to refer to it slyly even now. When Madge kissed him he often asked her for which one of him the caress was meant, and it gave him the utmost pleasure if she pretended to consider seriously, and decided that this time it had been the editor, or the farmer, but never the politician, because she hated politics. They "weren't nice."

Some of this Homer knew now, and some of it he was to learn later on, but all musing on the interesting personality he was soon to meet, was secondary to the thought of Captain Gabe's beautiful daughter. Homer was not easily stirred. He had met many types of women, and, in spite of the disillusion inevitable for a man on the road, he had retained a heart as pure and shy as a girl's. In it he had enshrined an ideal which as yet no woman he had ever seen could touch. Rose was lovelier in face and form than his vision of this ideal. So he determined to know her better, and as his determinations usually bore fruit, the budding of this one might have alarmed the girl, had she known of it and been less sure that fate was

soon to take her out of his way forever. He had been amused by her unconcealed hostility and dislike, seeing that she had thought him and Madge too intimate; and had resented it for her father's sake. He set her attitude down to girlishness, not to be considered seriously for a moment. All the same he found it stimulating, for in spite of his homely face and freckles and red hair, he had never before met a woman who really disliked him.

At last his inspection of the orchards was over, and he slowly approached the house, pausing now and then to admire its quaint air of hospitality, which the nodding roses seemed to emphasize. As he looked, Rose came out upon the porch, and, seeing him, beckoned him to come to her. He smiled at the manner of her invitation, and at first was minded not to go. But, on second thoughts, deciding that this girl was worthy some concession, he walked toward her.

"I've been looking at the trees," he informed her seriously. "They are in wonderful condition. I am not surprised any longer at the kind of peaches shipped to us this fall."

He perceived that this subject met with instant favor, for her eyes kindled.

"My father is always so thorough in anything he does," she explained with pride, "that we know it will be a success before he begins it."

But even as she spoke her lips trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. She was thinking that for the

first time in her short life she had set herself deliberately against this dear father, and was soon to bring one of his most heartfelt wishes all to naught. Then anger at her self-betrayal before this stranger flushed her cheeks. She turned away for a moment, and when she looked at him again her eyes were dry and bright.

"Perhaps you would like to walk to town with me, Mr. Fort," she said. "I am going for the mail, and I have an errand for my father, also."

He hesitated. Although her words were cordial, her manner was perfunctory. It was evident to him that she was performing what she considered a disagreeable duty, rather than a pleasure, a mere courtesy to a stranger who must be entertained. Was this because of the sudden birth of friendship between himself and Mrs. Shelley, or was it because of some vital preoccupation of the mind of the girl herself? She appeared to be laboring under repressed excitement, and her breakdown of a moment ago made the latter supposition seem the more likely. Again he was tempted to refuse, and again he reconsidered, falling into step beside her with a formal thank-you for her invitation.

"Is this a typical Southern town?" asked Homer, in an endeavor to lighten the atmosphere between them. "I am most anxious to see a typical Southern town, and a typical Southern man as well. Is your father this last?"

Rose considered. "Hardly. My father is full of life and vim, always doing something, or thinking up something to do. I might call him the typical Southern-man-of-the-future, and not be far wrong."

"I like that," said Homer, smiling. "You think, then, that the South is progressing?"

"Most assuredly. After the Civil War there was a period when it degenerated. Used to issuing commands, overseeing, living well but lazily, its men shrank from putting their shoulders to the wheel, which ceased to spin, and for a while turned backward. My father was one of the first in this neighborhood, to get down to actual physical labor. He has often told me how he went out among the negroes, and did everything he wanted them to do, so that they might learn of him, and, following his example, do more and better work than they had been used to when there were usually too many of them."

As she spoke they turned into the main street of the town. It was irregular and dusty, lined with small crooked houses, interspersed here and there with larger, newer buildings. The court-house, which had once been imposing, was over-shadowed now by the city post-office, wherein the men of the younger generation had their offices for practising law, medicine, and what not. Further down the street she pointed out her father's newspaper office, a ramshackle building of the older type, which she said he was soon to replace with a gorgeous brick affair, on which the name

of the newspaper, *The Weekly Budget*, was to be blazoned ten feet high. Homer entered the post-office with her, amused that such a small portion of the place should be relegated to the purpose for which the whole structure was named. Later on, she told him, Salem expected to have mail-carriers, and then the whole lower floor would be taken for the one use to which the building was supposed to be devoted.

She mailed some letters and a package, taking her time while Homer watched. The postman handed her out so many different-sized envelopes that Homer begged the honor of carrying them for her. As they quarreled merrily over who should take possession of the mail, a young man entered, at sight of whom Rose changed so suddenly that Homer wondered. From merriment she passed to tense silence. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes grew starry. Her red lips parted and took on a dewy tint, while into her manner crept an odd and wistful appeal. She gave the man her hand, and then stammered his name to Fort, calling him Mr. Blankenship, and, a second later, Tom. The two men then shook hands, and Fort and Rose passed on into the street.

That was all there was to the incident, yet Homer found himself most painfully impressed. The undercurrent of the girl's excitement had become more clear to him. It was in some way ascribable to this Blankenship, and though he was yet but a mere acquaintance of the Shelleys, he felt indignation rising



within him that any one of this type could so stir her as she seemed now to be stirred. "She either loves him already, or is on the verge of it," decided Homer. "Does he love her? I wonder."

They went together to the newspaper office, where Rose delivered some papers, containing articles for publication, and then she undertook to show him about the town. It was so evident that she meant to keep him with her until her father returned, that Homer now inclined to his first supposition, and fancied her intention merely to keep himself and Mrs. Shelley apart. He was too much amused to be indignant, and too much interested in the girl herself to mind her reasons for entertaining him. As they sauntered through some quiet, shady street, he found himself delighted with the quaintness of the houses she pointed out, and with the hints of the characters of their inmates which her talk conveyed. When they came out upon some more modern thoroughfare, he was quick to note the slight contempt which crept into her tones as she spoke of these newly rich folk, many of them but lately come to Salem. It was clear that, in spite of her boast of progress, and her pride in the growth of the town, she was aristocrat enough to cling to her old families, and to bar these intruders out. Yet, when she spoke of her training as a nurse, it was evident that she had many friendships with girls far beneath her in social standing, girls to whom she must have seemed like a being from

another world, and whom her kindness must have often helped.

"She is a creature of impulses and contradictions," summed up Homer. "Vivid and emotional, yet not in the least degree shallow or fickle. Capable of great things if but given half a chance."

And again he thought of Mr. Blankenship. Was this the man to whom the molding of her flexible character was to be given? Was he the sort to shape it well, or ill?

In the meantime Madge slept peacefully, her troubles all forgotten. The servants, their work in the kitchen finished until time for dinner, congregated on the back porch and indulged in low-voiced badinage. There was Janey, the housemaid, and Margaret the cook, a couple of negro lads, and Uncle Jack. The last-named was holding forth at great length upon his favorite subject of religion.

"G'long wid you," Janey interrupted at last, with contempt in her voice. "You-all purten's to know all o' Gawd's business. Pity you couldn' 'ten' to some o' yo' own. Didn' I done hyah Cap'n Gabe tell you to rake up dat lawn dis mawnin'? When he gits back an' sees it still covahed wid leabs, I reckon you-all'll wish 't you'd done whut he tol' you. Dat's whut!"

"I clar to gracious, I done fergot all 'bout dat ar lawn," muttered Uncle Jack, and, followed by a chorus of laughter and sly quips at his expense, he

went slowly around the house, picked up a rake which leaned against a tree, and was soon absorbed in his labors.

While he worked the shadows lengthened. The sun turned sickly with the cold, and hastened westward. A promise of frost leaped into the air, and a sharp wind sprang suddenly into being, making Uncle Jack shiver and complain to himself. He had not completed his task, however, when he spied a buggy in the distance, and knew it for his master's.

"Looky yondah!" he exclaimed to himself, running to open the gate. "Gawd a'mighty! Who am dat ar in de buggy wid Cap'n Gabe? Doan't look lak none o' his folks. Bet dey's froze stiff, anyhow."

As he stood holding the gate and talking to himself, Captain Gabe urged his tired horse down the road and into the driveway, pulling up in fine style at the Gallery steps, and waking Madge up-stairs.

"Hullo, Unc' Jack," he cried. "Quick now, catch this bag! Put it down anywhere! You've got to take the baby! Can you hold him without dropping him? You'd better, you black rascal! Now then, Minnie, jump! I'll catch you. Quick! Ah, Madge? Been asleep? Come see what I've brought home with me. But first give me a kiss. That's it! How is my girl, anyway?"

So talking, Captain Gabe alighted, after flinging an enormous carpet-bag straight at Uncle Jack's

astonished head. He then burdened the negro with a small bundle inside of which something squirmed and protested vigorously, literally snatched his companion out of the buggy, gave Madge, who had come out and down the steps, a smacking kiss and a bear-like hug, and all with the utmost good-nature. Now he paused for a space in his activities, that Madge might see and make the acquaintance of the person who defiantly confronted them.

She was a young and pretty woman, scarcely more than a girl, in fact. She was deathly white, her pallor accentuated by her dark-rimmed sorrowful eyes. Her lips were stretched in a rigid smile, which reminded Madge by its gameness of some little street urchin's, beaten in a fight, yet refusing to acknowledge his defeat. Her hands were coarsened by hard work, and her slight figure was already stooping in pitiful imitation of old age. But her hat was gay with scarlet flowers, and her gown, though of calico, was gaudy, and desperately attempted style. Her feet were shod in slippers much trodden down at heel. Cheap gloves she carried carefully, evidently believing that they added to her appearance, but not liking to wear them out. In her whole shoddy attempt at elegance, Madge saw real pathos, and when Gabe introduced them, she tendered her kindest greeting.

"Madge, this young lady is Minnie Gray. You remember Corporal Gray, don't you? My old war

comrade? This is his daughter, Madge. And this is her baby. I've brought them both to you because they are in trouble, and need our help."

"My dear, I'm glad to know you," said Madge warmly. "You must be tired and cold."

"No'm," answered Minnie quickly, still watchful and defiant. "I had Maw's shawl. I took it off when we turned into the gyarden, 'cause it don't look noways smart, but it kep' us warm, li'l Tawm an' I. Maw, she giv it to me just befo' she went to the hors-pittal, an' she says to me, she says, 'whut's good enough fo' yo' maw, an' yo' grandmaw befo' her, is good enough fo' you, I reckon, an' if anybody tries to shame you out of wearin' of it, hol' yo' haid high an' flaunt it in their faces.' An' so I aim to do."

"Why, of *course*." Madge was bewildered by the rapidity of the words and the manner of their utterance, as well as by the contradictory fact that Minnie, though she flaunted the shawl in her speech, had yet been ashamed to wear it. But before she could decide what to say next, Minnie responded to the muffled cries of her baby, still in the arms of Uncle Jack.

"Mammy's sugar lump!" she cried, transformed by the tenderest of mother love, as she snatched it fiercely from his grasp. "Did he want to come to his mammy, then? Thar now! Don't you cry. Mammy's got her baby. It's all right, honey. Thar! Thar!"

The baby subsided into complacency upon his mother's shoulder, and, sticking one fat fist into a mouth much too small, yet which he had determined to distend sufficiently to accommodate its occupant, he looked placidly up at Madge, who surrendered at once to his charm.

"You darling!" she exclaimed. "You perfect darling!"

Minnie melted. Not so at home had people spoken of her small son. Her eyes filled, and impulsively she held out the child to Madge.

"Hyah! You-all can take him if you want. He's dreadful heavy for his size, and that smart — why, you wouldn't believe how smart that young-un is! He knows me — thar! What'd I tell you?"

As the child wailed again at touch of unfamiliar arms, his mother recaptured him and strained him to her breast. In spite of the gaudy hat and gaudier dress, she was a picture not to be lightly forgotten. Rose, coming up the road with Homer, and hastening ahead of him to greet her father, first caught a glimpse of Minnie thus.

"Rose," called Captain Gabe. "This is Minnie Gray, and her baby. Take them in and make them comfortable. Give your old daddy a kiss, first." Drawing her aside he whispered in her ear. She nodded ready comprehension, and went straight to Minnie.

"Come," she said tenderly. "May I carry the



baby? No? All right, then. Mind the step there. What a dear he is!"

By this time Uncle Jack had recovered from holding a "white-folk's baby." "So 'long, boss," he murmured, and led away the horse.

Captain Gabe and Madge stood side by side watching Rose, as she guided the mother and baby into the house. Homer watched, too, from a distance, more than ever admiring the lovely girl in her new rôle of ministering angel. Then, judging from the way Gabe turned to his wife, that he had something to talk over with her privately, he turned and entered the orchard, unobserved by either of the two.

On his way he stopped to tell Uncle Jack where he could be found when wanted, and finding that individual disposed to gossip, learned considerable of the Shelleys and their ways, which predisposed him still further towards them.

Meanwhile, Gabe settled his stalwart length along the steps, and drew his wife down beside him. She smiled at his boyishness which she loved the more because it went so oddly with his gray hair.

"You have something to tell me, Gabe. Go ahead."

"Only this, dear. Since Gray died, two years ago, Minnie and her mother have lived alone on their farm in the hills. And some one took advantage of their loneliness to wrong the girl. She will not tell me who that some one was, but I found out

enough about him to be pretty certain in my own mind."

"Who was it, Gabe?"

"Tom Blankenship."

"Gabe! Now I know whom that baby looks like!"

"It is his baby," answered Gabe, putting his hand to his chin in a way he had when he was much concerned. "But Minnie doesn't know I discovered that. She is the most faithful little soul! Think of it, Madge — no older than our Rose, and already the discarded plaything of a brute who calls himself a man! But I must speak of this to no one but you, Madge. I have no proofs. The baby's resemblance to Tom, and the description of her betrayer which the neighbors gave me from their year-old memory — that's all I have to go upon. Too bad I didn't learn about this sooner. I feel somehow as if I were to blame. I ought to have been a better friend to Corporal Gray. Talking all the time about our days together in the war, and letting him slip out of my ken completely! I ought to have been there when he died, and to have taken charge of Minnie then."

"I can't have you blame yourself," cried Madge. "How did you find out about her now?"

"Trouble is," complained Gabe, "that once a family gets into the hills, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack to track them out. I've been right up by Gray's farm scores of times. But there!

It's no use talking now. Minnie's mother has been sick for a long time, and the doctor up there, a first-rate chap, finally persuaded her to go to Atlanta for an operation. She got along fine, but won't be home for a couple of months yet — slow recovery — case far advanced — all that. The doctor thought it a shame for Minnie to be so alone. There wasn't a woman up there would speak to her. One day Mrs. Gray mentioned me as having been her husband's friend, so he finally sent down for me. I was certainly glad he did. I felt so sorry for the poor little girl when I saw her, that I didn't know what to do. She was like a wild animal, frightened to death, but facing me all the same. She's never had a chance in all her life. Let's give her one, if we can, Madge."

"We will," was his wife's hearty answer. "May I tell Rose of this?"

"I don't believe I would," mused Gabe. "If she asked how I found it out, being my daughter, she would pounce on all the weak points in my evidence. She is as loyal in her way as Minnie. Has she seen him, to-day?" It was not necessary to name the "him."

Madge nodded. "What's more, she told me that they are engaged."

"That's bad news," sighed Gabe.

"He dared to come here, even. I met him. He was mocking, insulting, everything that's horrid. And someway I felt that he had mischief in his mind.

Do let me tell her, Gabe. Then if she disbelieves me,— well, at least I'll have done all I could."

"All you could to send her right into his arms," said Gabe. "No. If we could get Minnie herself to identify him, honestly I doubt if Rose would take her word even then if *he* denied it. That's just how much she thinks she loves him. She doesn't really love him, you know. Not a bit of it. But so long as she thinks so, she'll act as if she does, and her acts will live on long after her illusion has ceased — more's the pity. Don't let Rose out of your sight, my dear. And don't worry. Something is bound to turn up."

This repetition of Homer Fort's advice made Madge smile. "I forgot," she said. "A Mr. Fort has come from Bucknam and Bates, to have a talk with you about your peach-growers' combine."

"Is that so?" Gabe was surprised. "They must have been interested indeed to send him down so soon."

"Yes, so he says. By the way, Gabe, Rose was suspicious."

"Suspicious? What d'ye mean?"

"She thought I was too friendly toward Mr. Fort."

"Pshaw!" chuckled the Captain, who knew of his daughter's watchful attitude, and thought it quite a joke. "Did she make you stand around? If you could take care of her half as well as she takes care

of you, my dear, Tom Blankenship couldn't get a look at her sidewise, eh?"

"It is an insult to her for him to even speak to her," asserted Madge hotly. "He ought to be in jail this minute, for the way he has treated this poor girl!"

"If you women made the laws, I'd feel downright sorry for men like Tom," drawled the Captain. "Still, even if you tarred and feathered him and rode him on a rail, I don't know that I should interfere. But so long as we men have the say-so, Tom's hide is safe, and girls like Minnie haven't got a show. I wish I could put all that into my editorial for this week's paper, Madge. It'll be about the war, of course, but I'll bet you I'll find a chance to rile Tom a little in it somewhere. I'll get him on his politics, on his office of tax assessor — I'll think up something. If he resents it, let him come across. He'll find me waiting for him, Madge, and able to protect my daughter. Now I'll go meet this Mr. Fort."

## CHAPTER IV

ROSE led Minnie and her baby into the first-floor bedroom, a pleasant and spacious chamber, of a comfort and luxury such as the mountain girl had never seen before. Captain Gabe had whispered to Rose merely that Minnie had been wronged by an unscrupulous man and needed all her love and pity, and the generous-hearted girl had responded ardently to his appeal.

She found Minnie difficult and requiring patience and stratagem to melt, for the latter was quick-witted enough to see the difference between herself and Rose, and her defiant manner returned. She answered "Yes'm," and "No'm," to all of Rose's talk, and hugged the child to her bosom as though contact with its warm body comforted the aching heart within. Rose persuaded her to sit down, to take off the monstrous hat, and at last to yield the baby, that she might remove its wraps; but through it all Minnie glared, and sat upon the extreme edge of her rocker, straight as a ramrod, implying that the acceptance of a seat had committed her to nothing. So Rose turned her attention to the mite in her arms, and caressed and cooed over it, hoping thus to reach its mother.



This wholesale possession of her baby, that treasure which she had hitherto been forced to hide, roused Minnie, and for his sake she disposed herself a bit more comfortably, saying, "I reckon I'd better take him now. Ain't you tired?"

"Not a bit," said Rose. "But it isn't good for him to be held too much. There. Now he is all undone. Suppose we lay him on the bed — so. We mustn't yield to temptation and spoil him, must we, bouncer? Now Minnie — I shall call you that because Father said I might — I am going to make you, literally make you, let me brush your hair. I just love to brush people's hair," she confided, as Minnie reluctantly transferred herself to the chair at the dressing table. "And you have so much and such a lovely color — like ripe corn. You won't mind if I try it in a different way, will you? I saw such a pretty style the other day, that I know would just suit your face."

Girl-like, Rose, already determined to do all she could to comfort this poor woman, started in upon her hair. Her swift fingers undid the tight knot into which it had been twisted. Minnie unconsciously relaxed as she watched the lovely sympathetic face reflected above her own in the glass. "Yours is right pretty, and I like the way you fix it," she drawled.

"Oh, do you? That's nice of you," replied Rose, with a smile. "It's a very easy way. I'll show you

how. Did you ever hear that blue was your color?"

"Aw, now," blushed Minnie, who had thought anything her color. "This hyar pink dress kind o' sets me off, don't you think?"

The wistful appeal which crept into her voice spurred Rose to fibs. "It is becoming," she said warmly. "But blue is your color, all the same. After I finish with your hair, you must let me get out a lovely blue kimono that I have."

"What's a kimono?" asked Minnie.

"A wrapper," explained Rose gently. "A loose dress, to slip on when you're tired."

"Oh, a wrapper!" said Minnie, her interest vanishing. "I've got a wrapper to home. It's yaller, with li'l red berries in it—I don't wear it on'y whilst I warshes the dishes of mawnin's."

"There," said Rose, putting a few finishing touches to the pretty coil which her deft hands had fashioned. "How do you like that?"

"It's kind o' nice," admitted Minnie cautiously, still non-committal. "Purty loose. Up my ways they wears their hair reel smooth an' tight. I allus have wore mine tight, too. Seems neater, somehow. But this looks right peart. I reckon I'll leave it stay that-a-way for a bit."

"It makes your face so lovely," said Rose pleasantly, thereby advancing quite a distance in Minnie's estimation. For in all her short life there had been

only one to tell her she was lovely, and that one a man belonging to the same world as these new friends. The starved heart opened just a little, and the sad eyes brightened. In the meantime Rose hurried to her own room, and soon returned with an armful of blue silk, lace, and ribbons, caught up with pink rosebuds here and there.

Amazement approaching awe dawned on Minnie's face as she took the lace between her thumb and forefinger. "Is that a wrapper?" she asked in hushed tones.

"We call it a kimono," laughed Rose. "It is rather fancy. That lace is the petticoat, which shows when the kimono falls apart. These rosebuds fasten it together — so."

"Lawsy!" sighed Minnie. "I ain't surprised that you call it suthin' 'sides plain wrapper. You don't warsh dishes in that kind o' thing, do you?"

"No, dear, I don't. In fact I don't do any of the housework. I haven't been home very long from school."

"You don't say. You must 'a' been kind o' stoopid," marveled Minnie, submitting to having her dress unbuttoned. "I finished school when I wuz twelve. The teacher said I was that smart there wa'n't nawthin' else as he could learn me."

"This was a school to study nursing," said Rose. "If I had gone to college I wouldn't have been through yet. I chose nursing instead."

"Ain't it funny that folks have to learn to nuss?" asked Minnie. "Naow up to home, any of us kin nuss an' do it all right. On'y Doc Green, he 'lowed Maw needed special kind o' nussin'. It took him a hull year to git Maw to consent to bein' cut up. She couldn't see as how it could benefit her any to have part of her insides taken out. The Lord give 'em to her, she says, an' he must 'a' knowed what he wuz a-doin'. 'Twan't noway reasonable to suppose he had made a mistake in the proper disposition of 'em. But she got so bad hyar lately that I got plumb scairt, I did, an' I says to her, says I, 'Maw! Lis'n naow! You better take Doc Green's advice. Mebbe that's why they is doctors. The Lord puts in our organs all right in the fust place,' I says, 'but livin' like we do an' all, workin' so hard an' all, mebbe we get 'em kind o' wore out like, an' so the Lord sends doctors to mend 'em.' Well, that struck her as good common-sense, an' fin'lly she give her consent. That's huccome she went to Atlanta, an' got op'rated on. Doc, he wuz mos' afraid it wuz too late, an' tol' me to prepare myse'f — but Maw, she done fine. He says she's as peart as a kitten, a'ready."

While Minnie talked, in tones so naturally musical that her grammar sounded quaint instead of awkward, Rose removed the staring calico and replaced it with the lace skirt and the soft blue silken garment. Now the last rosebud was fastened, and with a little cry of pleasure she stood back for a survey of Minnie.

"Look at yourself," she cried. "Just look at yourself!" She pushed Minnie in front of the cheval-glass in the corner of the room.

Minnie shrank at first from the vision which met her eyes. She could not believe that this was she. Instead of the stooped and weary woman, whom she had seen in sections in her small cracked mirror at home, a slender, drooping form confronted her, all at once, with soft brown eyes shaded by masses of waving hair. She was lovely. She knew that she was lovely. And after her first astonished gasp she stood still, staring, staring, as though she could never stop.

It was so Madge found her, when she came in at last, and her cry of surprise and delight helped to make Minnie more awake to what Rose had accomplished. Defiance returned. She faced them both haughtily.

"Thar!" she said, tearing at the rosebuds in a fury of haste. "You've made a monkey outen me long enough, I reckon. Take back your finery. I don't want it. I'd ruther have my own clothes, poor as they be. Needn't think I'm goin' to cringe an' crawl. I'm a lady — that is I wuz a lady oncet —" and the poor creature sank down upon the bed beside her baby, and burst into passionate tears.

"Dear Minnie," cried Madge. "Don't you understand? Rose and I don't want to patronize you, or to do anything but help you. We know some-

thing of your sorrow and suffering, but see — we do not think it has disgraced you. We know that you were young and ignorant, and that you really meant no harm — you had no chance against the man who wronged you.”

“Don’t you dast say one word agin him,” panted Minnie through her tears. “I love him — to my dyin’ day I’ll love him. It wuz all my own fault — I jus’ lay myse’f out to please him — an’ he promised to marry me, he did. An’ he will come back yet — I know he will. He ’ain’t seen the baby. But if I can find him an’ show him li’l Tawm, he’ll marry me right off — I know he will.”

“Bless your loyal little heart, I am glad you believe that,” said Madge. “We won’t say anything to disturb your faith in him, ever. All the same we want to help you — to help you fit yourself for his world, Minnie. You’ll let us do that, surely.”

“How do you mean?” asked Minnie.

“Wasn’t he a gentleman, and didn’t he ever tell you of anything different from your life in the hills?”

“Oh, yes. But it all sounded like a dream,” said the girl wistfully. “Do you reckon I could ever grow to be like you?”

“Why, of course you can,” cried Madge. “There now, that is settled. You are to stay with us until your mother is quite well, and we’ll teach you everything that will please him. Won’t we, Rose?”



Madge had been stooping over Minnie's prostrate figure, and now she turned, expecting to receive confirmation from the girl. Instead she saw what she was never to forget — what froze her into silence until Minnie, roused to curiosity by the cessation of all sound in the room, stirred, lifted herself, looked too, and then cried out in wonder.

"Why, Miss *Rose*! What's the matter with Tawm that you look at him like that? What's the matter with my li'l Tawm?"

Rose had left Madge to comfort Minnie and had gone over to that side of the bed where the baby lay. He was awake and quite content upon the unaccustomed softness of the pillow. His fist again distorted his mouth, and his small legs waved aimlessly to and fro. His coarse dress impeded his movements so that Rose lifted it to give him greater freedom. She found his limbs quite bare and admired the pink toes and dimpled knees to her heart's content. Then suddenly she noticed a mark on the calf of his leg, and, stooping to get a clearer view, she stood transfixed. For the mark consisted of five small round crimson spots, and a fainter elongated shape, and differed in no respect from the one she had examined with such interest upon the arm of her lover, scarcely five hours before.

During those short moments that she stood staring at the mark, she told herself that it meant nothing. This was mere coincidence, this likeness to the

Blankenship cluster of ripe cherries. And yet she continued to stand staring, holding the baby's leg in a vise-like grip from which it struggled vainly to be free. It seemed to her years that she stood so, until Minnie's astonished cry broke in upon the coma that possessed her, and her heart began to throb painfully in her breast.

"Nothing," she forced herself to answer. "Nothing is the matter with your baby, Minnie. I must see my father. I think I had better see my father."

"I'll come with you, Rose," cried Madge. "Forgive me," she said hurriedly in an undertone to Minnie. "But Rose looks very strange. Perhaps she's ill. I'd better see what's wrong. Rest now, and later we'll return."

She overtook Rose in the hall. The girl's hurry had deserted her and she was leaning against the wall, looking deathlike in her unaccustomed pallor. At the moment she was conscious of nothing but the awful beating of her heart, and that somewhere near lurked a horror that sooner or later she must nerve herself to face. Madge's coming was welcome to her. She clung to her stepmother, and whispered hurriedly, "Madge, tell me! How can I find out who is the father of that baby? I've got to know."

"Why, Rose! What ails you that you talk like this?"

"I've got to know, I tell you. Is there any way I

can find out? Madge, is there any way?" repeated Rose in the same hurried breathless fashion.

"Minnie won't tell," parried Madge. "Your father feels quite sure, but he has no proof."

"Who does he think it is?"

"I promised not to tell you — yet. We were to wait for surer knowledge first."

"Then I know. You needn't wait," said Rose. "The proof is there for all of you to see. He is Tom's baby."

"I did not think the resemblance so strong as that," cried Madge. "The baby looks like him, yes. But then he is only a baby. Babies can look like almost anybody. Don't stare so, Rose."

"It wasn't the resemblance," said Rose. "But only this morning Tom was showing me the birth-mark on his arm. The baby has that same mark upon his leg. That's how I know. And to think that I had promised to marry Tom. Why, a moment ago I loved him, oh, so dearly! Now I believe that love is dead. I feel so strange. My heart has stopped its beating and is numb and like lead in my breast. I never knew that sorrow could make one suffer so," she mused wonderingly. "I never knew that sorrow was physical pain. Oh, Madge, help me bear it! I have got to bear it well for — let me whisper this — I was to have gone away with him to-night — in two more hours I would have started to meet him at the cross-roads. Now — well, I've

changed my mind. But I've got to be brave because — oh, Madge, only this morning I was speaking to him of the suffering in the world and how I longed to help — and this poor girl, and her little, darling baby — it is for them I must be brave, Madge. For their sake I must try to think out what is best to do. Let's go find Father."

The impetuous girl, as she talked, had actually risen to such heights of self-control that for the moment she seemed inspired. Noble in her forgetfulness of self, she roused in Madge a similar nobility. Her eyes glowed with a strange fire, and the color again flooded her cheeks, while everything she said and did seemed to come from a power within before which Madge, and, later, Captain Gabe, were to stand in awe. Under its influence Madge yielded her hand to Rose, and the latter led her hurriedly out to the Gallery.

Captain Gabe and Homer Fort were just coming up the steps to enter the house. Already the two were friends. Gabe was talking, in that sociable way of his which always delighted those with whom he favored it. "Yes," he was saying. "Uncle Jack is like a bad dictionary — his meanings are so often obscure. I love to get him on the subject of religion. There he entangles himself like a fly in a saucer of molasses. We'll get him to talking sometime. Ah, Madge, is supper ready?"

"Not quite," said Madge. "Rose wants you for

a moment. Mr. Fort, I haven't the slightest doubt that the Captain has taken bodily possession of you, that Uncle Jack is already on the way to the hotel for your bags, and that you are scheduled to spend the remainder of your stay in Salem with us. The room at the head of the stairs is yours."

"I see you are a lady of circumspection," laughed Homer. "And though you are too polite to call attention to the dirt on my hands, which got there in a worthy cause, I will avail myself of this chance to remove it." So saying, Homer, who saw at once that something was much amiss, took his dismissal gracefully, and entered the door.

"Well, Rose," said Gabe kindly. "I see you are all up in the air about something. Tell your old daddy the trouble, and perhaps he can help you."

"Father," returned Rose frankly. "I know who Minnie's betrayer is. I found out myself from a mark on the baby's leg."

"Hm!" was Gabe's comment. "Aren't you rather quick at conclusions?"

"Don't evade me, Father."

"I'm not trying to evade you, my dear. I know well enough who the fellow is. But I want you to be positive before I speak his name. Is the mark on the baby sufficient proof to you?"

"It is such a peculiar mark that it is sufficient. Since Tom's brother went away five years ago, he is the only one of his line left here in Georgia. I see

no way of escape for him. So that is settled. Father —" she paused.

"Go on."

"I was to meet Tom to-night at seven. Don't ask me why. I cannot bear to tell you. Madge knows, and later on, when you have had time to forget all my folly, you will be able to laugh when she tells you this crowning piece. Father, I want to make Tom see his fault, and mend it. He shall marry this girl."

"But the mark on the baby, Rose?"

"It is like a cluster of ripe cherries. Tom has it on his arm. His brother did not have it. So his brother went away and Tom inherited the estates. Tom calls it the mark of a 'true Blankenship,' and says it has been in the family for generations. He wouldn't come near Minnie or the baby if he knew they were here, but if he can once be gotten to look at the child, and to recognize it for a true Blankenship, it will influence him powerfully. And if I can make him see the disgracefulness of his act, perhaps I can bring him to do what is right. Minnie loves him, Father. Her only thought is for him. Won't you and Madge let me do as I like about this? If you will, then I can forget my own sorrow in planning to lighten hers. If I fail, well at least I will have done no harm. I won't let Minnie know that Tom is here, unless success seems sure. I won't let her face him herself. He would only hurt her cruelly now.



When he is ripe for such an interview, when she is changed so that he can be proud of her, then perhaps I can bring them together, and in doing so, find happiness myself."

During the whole of this rapid speech, Gabe looked at his daughter as though at a stranger. And, indeed, there was something so peculiar in the manner of the girl, in her glowing eyes and fiery utterance, that it was difficult to realize that this impassioned woman was his little Rose. When she had finished she stood with wide-flung arms, demanding, rather than asking, his consent.

He spoke thoughtfully, with his hand caressing his chin. "Well now, Rose, there is something in what you say. Tom is a woman's man — always has been — and if he ever gets his come-uppance, it'll be through a woman. And yet — you are just a girl, Rose, and so impulsive that you are liable to make mistakes. Tell me your plan. Let me decide if it is wise."

She dropped her arms to her sides with a gesture of despair. "I can't talk it over," she cried. "If I do, the inspiration for it will slip from me. I have got to act, not argue. Trust me, Father."

"But, Rose, if in your haste you compromise yourself —"

"What does it matter what happens to me now? All I want is to bring this man to his senses. I still love him that much — that I want him to make

amends. I love Minnie that much — that I want her to have a chance, and to give the baby a better start in life. The baby, Father — his dear little hands and dimpled feet — they are so lovely — it isn't fair that through no fault of his he should be branded as an outcast all his life. For the baby's sake, Father, let me do what I can to open Tom's eyes."

"But why not tell me of your plan?"

"I cannot. You'd forbid it. You wouldn't understand. All I want you to do is to let Uncle Jack go to the cross-roads with a note. I must see Tom here, to-night."

"My darling, Tom is not over-scrupulous —"

"He is with women of my class," said Rose bitterly. "We've talked enough. Give me my way in this, Father, and I promise you to keep my head — to do nothing unnecessary to the development of my plan, which has an object that surely you approve."

"All right, my girl," said Gabe. "After all, there is no way to learn like actual experience. Fight your own battles, and do it in your own way. Jack shall go with the note. Madge will stay at the house, within call. Her presence here will lend our countenance to your plan, and both of us, ignorant of it though we are, will help you all we can."

Rose thanked him only by a grateful look and passed rapidly into the house.

"What do you suppose she means to do?" whis-

pered Madge. "Gabe, are you sure you are acting wisely, to let her have her way?"

"I am sure of this much, Madge,—that if I am driving a fine horse I give the animal its head all I dare, and in the end it wins the race. If I tried to coerce Rose I'd only spoil her. She is young and she is untried. She doesn't know half the time what she is talking about. Her soul is full of vague stirrings of which she is just beginning to be conscious. She'll make mistakes. She's bound to. But she'll profit by them. So let's stand aside, unless it is absolutely necessary to interfere. I'm not afraid of the outcome, nor of having her misjudged."

"Mr. Fort called her a regular Georgia Peach," said Madge.

"Mr. Fort is a man after my own heart," replied Gabe, gravely. "That's just what she is. And when she ripens at last, my dear, she'll be the most wonderful thing God ever made—a true woman. So let the sun shine on her, Madge, and the wind and the rain beat upon her. There's nothing can harm her save the frost and the blight—and there's where we have our job cut out for us. We've got to stand pat and keep on the watch for the frost and the blight."

## CHAPTER V.

**A**FTER dinner Gabe and Homer Fort withdrew to the study, a small room opening off the dining-room, and dedicated to the Captain's literary work when he was home. They shut the door, lighted cigars, and were soon deep in a discussion of the project in which Gabe had succeeded in interesting Bucknam and Bates.

Gabe had not written to the Chicago firm until he was certain of his ground. He had a list of men whose peaches were of excellent variety, and who were eager to enter the combine. He had lists as well of the probable yield of their orchards, the facilities they had for handling the fruit when ripe, and the manner in which it would be packed for shipment. He had also seen the general manager of the railroad which passed through the county, connecting with the Chicago expresses at Atlanta. He had succeeded in getting remarkably advantageous rates. As he had the whole matter at his tongue's end, Homer let him talk, and, leaning back in his comfortable chair, watched the strong face of his new friend, and listened with growing respect and admiration.

But although the study was so peaceful, through

the remainder of the house there dominated a spirit of restlessness and haste. Minnie was persuaded to occupy an up-stairs chamber, and to let Rose take charge of "li'l Tawm" for his bath. The bath alone was sufficient to rouse protests in the breast of his mother, who had heretofore washed him off with a rag dipped into a basin of cold spring water, and regarded any other means of attaining cleanliness with suspicion. However, Madge, who deserved credit for obeying Rose without knowing why, quite won her over by producing a number of tiny garments, which, she explained softly, had been intended for her own little one, who died soon after its birth. Her deep sorrow over her loss, which even Minnie's untutored heart could understand, and her willingness to give the unused clothes to the "li'l Tawm," brought the two together as nothing else could have done.

Rose kept the baby in the first-floor bedroom. She was still under the influence of that strange something which had taken possession of her very soul, and every act or gesture betrayed the intense excitement under which she labored. Yet she indulged in not one single abortive movement, for she had been given the training which above all others makes for efficiency. Quietly she got ready the baby's bath.

Janey was now ordered to bring in hot water from the kitchen, to keep the fire blazing to remove

all chill from the room, and to air the tiny garments that were to clothe his sturdy limbs. When all was in readiness, Rose, with the baby in her arms, took her seat in the low chair before the fire. On one side stood a screen to defend him from all drafts. In front of her a low stool held the largest porcelain basin in the house. A piece of flannel lined it, that its rim might not chill the child when it came time for his dip. On her other side a chair held soap and towels, powder, vaseline, needle, thread, scissors, and on its back the dainty clothes, now warming in the glow. All these it took to make one small boy clean.

It was not yet time for Tom, so Rose spent long moments in unfastening the coarse dress, made of flour-sacking, the coarser petticoat, and shirt cut from a discarded adult garment, which had marked the tiny body with its hardened seams. She touched the ridged flesh pityingly, soaped, and at last dipped the little form into the tepid water of the bath. The accompanying gasp, which "li'l Tawm" removed his fist to accomplish, stirred her into more than perfunctory interest. By avoiding the mark upon his chubby limb, she almost succeeded in forgetting that it was there. And so, when the bell rang at last, she was flushed and smiling, oblivious of all she had at stake in the immediate pleasure of caring for the child.

Uncle Jack was in the stable, so Janey answered



the door. She returned at once, eager with excitement, and handed Rose a card. She knew enough of current gossip to be curious.

Rose merely glanced at it. "Tell him to come here. I cannot leave the baby, and you, Janey, need not return until I send for you."

When Tom Blankenship stepped softly into the room, at first he thought it empty. The big white bed filled up one corner, the dressing table another, the cheval-glass yet another. Across the fireplace was drawn a screen.

"What in the devil —" he was beginning to himself, when from behind the screen he heard Rose saying softly, "Tom, come here."

He strode forward and set the screen aside. "What does this mean?" he cried, and stood amazed.

Rose had now lifted the child again to a heavy towel spread across her lap. She was drying its body with soft linen, and as he stared, she began to coo to it in the way that mothers know so well. She ignored Tom, after her first command. She was entirely absorbed by the baby.

"What does this mean?" he cried again. "Have you forgotten that we must catch our train at eight? Why did you send Uncle Jack with a message that I should come here and ring the bell and ask for you? What has happened? Has your father changed his mind? Has your stepmother retired

from her position of defiance? Whose baby is that? Why don't you speak to me, Rose? Can't you see how puzzled I am by all this?"

"Isn't he dear?" asked Rose, powdering the little body, and reaching for band and shirt from the back of the chair. "Isn't he just the sweetest thing you ever laid your eyes on, Tom? I sent for you because I couldn't leave him. Besides I wanted you to see — our baby."

"Why? What have I to do with babies?" asked Tom with immeasurable scorn. "What baby is so important as to interfere with our plans? Whose is it any way?"

"Ours."

"Yours? Rose, don't speak in riddles. Whose is it?"

"Ours. I told you."

"Nonsense. You are trying to fool me."

"Oh, no, I'm not. See, Tom, the little duck — he smiled at me. He loves his bath. Look! How he kicks and squirms!"

"Now see here, Rose!" Tom came and stood over her in a threatening attitude which failed of its effect because she had no eyes to spare for him. "See here! There's something back of this. Of course *I* know that baby don't belong to you folks. It hasn't been so long since Madge's baby died. And if you'd adopted one, the whole town would have been ringing with the news. You've got to tell me why

you sent for me, and why you are busy with that brat instead of getting ready to go with me. Fire away! I'm listening! Go on!"

"It hasn't been very long since I came home from the hospital, Tom. You used to come to see me there, while I was studying. Remember?"

"Of course I do. You couldn't ever go out with me unless we took two or three nurses along for chaperons. Won't need any chaperons now, will we, Rose?"

"There was one night, Tom, when I went with you alone, and we didn't get back until late. I got a reprimand from the head nurse. Remember?"

"No. I wish I did."

"Tom, on that night of nights, you made me certain promises. You vowed to marry me as soon as possible, and swore such love and loyalty as to dull my sense of right and wrong. Remember?"

"What are you talking about, Rose? You know as well as I, that nothing of the sort ever happened."

"And I so trusted you. I gave you everything. I put my honor in your keeping recklessly, without a thought of consequences. Do you remember?"

"No, no! I tell you, no!"

"And time went on, and still I trusted you. I trusted you and loved you so that I was even happy when I found there was to be — a little baby, Tom — our baby."

"Rose! Are you mad? You can't know what you say."

"And then there came a time when others knew and whispered that I was disgraced. I suffered, Tom, and still I trusted you. I told myself all would be well. You had promised, and later, you'd fulfill."

"That's it! You must be mad!"

"No one would speak to me. I was sent forth in shame. The hospital had no place for such as I. And still I hugged my sorrow to my breast and gloried in it. It was for you I suffered, and in time I knew you would repay me."

"Listen to me, Rose. Listen, I tell you —"

"In my supremest hour of agony I still was happy. And when our little son lay in my arms, and I, so faint and tired from the pain, knew that there lay part of your very self, then most of all I felt my shame to be a glorious thing, yet longed with every fiber of my being to have you lift the burden from — our baby."

"Rose, Rose! I beg you, I implore you —"

"At first I tried to keep his birth a secret. I planned to have you come in ignorance of it, and for my sake alone, to lift the veil of infamy that clung so close."

"Oh, this is horrible! Rose —"

"And then I saw upon his tiny leg a mark that you yourself had on your arm. Only this morning

I asked you for its history. Remember? You told me of the importance of this mark, how Blankenships stood aside and passed on their inheritance to the favored one who bore it. I knew then that my baby had claims which could not be ignored. I knew it was time for you to learn of him. I knew that when you saw him you would feel that here lay not only the body of your son, but the one who had been destined from the first to carry on your line. Look, Tom — his little leg —”

She turned the body of the baby on her knee, and for the first time the astonished and angry man caught a glimpse of the small cluster, exact replica of his own. He leaned closer, staring with dazed eyes, for such a long interval that Rose said gently,—

“He’s not a ghost child, Tom. He’s a real baby, with a father and mother, like all other babies. And he needs food and care, and the love of parents —”

“Whose child is this?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Yours, Tom.”

“I’ll swear it’s not.”

“It is. I see in your eyes the acknowledgment you will not put in words. It is your child.”

“Rose, tell me the truth. You have woven a strange tale, for which you must have had some hidden reason. What is that reason?”

“You will soon perceive, if for a moment you’ll believe my story true —”

“I can’t do that.”

"Hush, Tom, obey me. Let's think the story true. Now, do you see what I want you to see? Do you realize what an awful thing you would have done, had I been the mother of this baby without becoming your wife first. You have said you love me, Tom. You have made me wonderful promises, which no doubt you meant to fulfill. Tom, Tom! How many other women have you loved? To how many of them have you made all sorts of promises, without the slightest intention of carrying them out? You meant to honor me, because I am of your class. You gloried in dishonoring them, because — as men say, they were legitimate prey. Now change the point of view. Let it seem to be true of me, only for a moment, what is true of them — what is true of the mother of this baby. Don't you get a very different idea, Tom? Don't you see that you did as great a wrong to innocent little Minnie Gray, as you would have done to me?"

"Minnie Gray! Is this child Minnie Gray's?"

"You didn't think she had one, did you, Tom? It's only four months old, and for almost a year she hasn't known where you were."

"And much she cared, either," exclaimed the astounded man. "So she told you this boy was mine, did she? You took her word for it — a light woman whom any man might have for the asking! This baby might be anybody's child. Shame on you for believing her!"



"She didn't tell me. She isn't a bad woman. She is loyal to you and has kept your secret faithfully. You know that, Tom. No, it was this mark upon the child himself that made me first suspect. Then I went to Madge and asked her if she knew who had wronged Minnie."

"Oh, then, it was your stepmother who enlightened you? I might have known."

"No, Tom. She wouldn't tell. It was I who told her what I knew and then she said my father had already found out—what I stumbled on alone. Both of them were just and fair to you, Tom, as I am trying hard to be."

While she spoke her hands had been busy with the child. Clothed at last, warm and rosy with sleep, and sucking his fist with all his might and main, she rang for Janey to take him to his mother. Feeling better able to talk while her hands were occupied, she busied herself with clearing up the disorder caused by the baby's bath.

"Shame on you, Tom," she said in low indignant tones. "How dared you come to me with your promises, when you knew that your honor was already bound?"

"Honor has no connection with girls like Minnie Gray," he sneered. "Put you in her place? Why, I couldn't, Rose. She has no sensitiveness compared to that you possess."

She turned upon him in a fury. "Tom, Tom!

Has all my effort gone for nothing? Haven't I made you see, by stepping into her place for a moment, that we women are all alike — just human beings equally capable of feeling pain and sorrow? The fact that Minnie was a mountain girl, who had never a chance, should have made you even more careful of her innocence than of mine. I've had plenty of opportunity to learn to protect myself, even if my father's reputation had not placed a fence between me and lawlessness. Minnie, poor child, lacked all protection. Her father, wounded in the war, was unable to support her or look after her properly. Her mother worn out with care and drudgery — the girl neglected and allowed to follow her own ignorant inclinations — oh, it was pitiful. It was a coward's part to take advantage of her helplessness, Tom Blankenship."

The man hesitated, roused by her words, yet unwilling to admit that she had stung him. Then he laughed lightly. "As I said before, you have not the slightest conception of what you are talking about," he asserted boldly. "What chance have you had to know anything of life, or of the standards that have been evolved by generations, and which have proved themselves? A couple of years in a hospital — pooh! You have filled your pretty head with all sorts of flighty fancies. And, Rose — by placing yourself in Minnie's place, you ran a risk. A man less of a gentleman might be tempted to think

of you in a more intimate sense than I dare to think. Where I revere you, such a man might now plot boldly to possess you. We Southern men — we are like all men in this — that the women we want for our wives we place upon a pedestal. Those others — well, being men, we have our fancies. We are all alike. Let them look to themselves before they rail at us. We only follow where they lead.”

“Minnie was not that type,” insisted Rose. “Her pedestal was as real as mine. You should have lifted her to it, instead of smashing it before her eyes. Come, Tom, be a man. Marry her and give your boy a name.”

“Nonsense,” said Tom roughly. “I am going to marry you. You know that. I’ll provide for Minnie, if you insist. I’ll even claim the brat, if by doing so I can satisfy your Puritanical conscience. But further than that, I wash my hands of them both. I advise you to do the same. She’s not fit company for you. Let’s be going now. Perhaps we can still catch our train. If not, well, I reckon we can get to Atlanta by daylight in my dog-cart.”

“I can’t go with you, Tom. I couldn’t marry you, when your place is with Minnie.”

“Do you mean that, Rose?”

“I do.”

“Then I might as well blow my brains out. there’s nothing left for me in this world if I’ve lost you.”

"You have a man's work to do — make restitution."

"To a thing like Minnie Gray? I see myself! No, I'll go to war and make myself a target for Spanish bullets. Or else I'll shoot myself."

She came towards him with outstretched pleading hands. "Ah, Tom," she said sadly. "You and I are miles apart. I thought, in my foolish blindness, that I could easily show you the truth. I was mistaken. My little play failed. No, I'll not admit that, for it has affected you. If you don't see it now, you will later. If I can't make you marry Minnie, yet I think you will hesitate before you place any other girl in the same position. But, Tom, the birth-mark on the child — the mark of your race — are you going to ignore that, too?"

"I deny that it is the mark of my race."

"The time will come when you can no longer do so," she cried. "Oh, Tom, believe me when I say I am your friend. My love for you is dead. It will never live again. But I feel no anger against you — nothing for you save the tenderest compassion. If ever I can help you, come to me. If ever you need me, you will find me waiting."

"I need you now," he muttered despairingly.

"Oh, no, Tom, you don't need me now," she answered sorrowfully. "What you need now is Minnie Gray."

"Damn Minnie Gray," he shouted, stung to frenzy.

by her insistence on this theme. "It's you I need. If I can't have you alive, by God I'll take you dead! No other man shall have you, if you are not for me."

As though entirely bereft of sense or caution he advanced upon her, she retreating until she encountered the wall of the room. She was conscious of no fear — only a dull sort of wonder. She could not have screamed, had she tried.

There was no need, however. His loud tones had penetrated to the study, and, with a hurried excuse to his guest, Gabe went to see what was wrong. As Tom raised his arm high, whether to strike or only to call on Heaven, she was never to know, the door flew open, and her father entered the room.

It was a dramatic moment. The girl, white and silent, almost crouching, her father stern and uncompromising, his whole attitude expressing his readiness to defend her, her lover beside himself with fury, yet brought to a standstill by the presence of Captain Gabe — all three appeared for a second like so many graven images, perpetuated thus for all eternity. Tom was the first to stir. Still acting under the influence of his tremendous outburst of passion, he turned on Captain Gabe.

"Gabe Shelley," he cried. "You are to blame for this. You have brought a common woman into your house to-night. I am sure of it. Take care that she does not turn your wife and daughter to like conduct — already she has poisoned Rose with her

lies. I shall tell the town what sort of friends you are providing for your household. You'll soon find out what they think of you and all your kind."

Gabe looked mildly interested, but his hand sought his chin, sure sign that he was striving for self-control. "Well now," he drawled. "I don't know as I'd do that, if I were you. You see, as soon as you begin to talk, I'll begin too, and my side of the tale is a darned sight worse than yours. I find that the man who champions a wronged woman's cause — while other men might sneer at him — *their wives won't let 'em*. Why, if I spread the news, I'll bet you ten to one there won't be a woman in this whole town that won't be knitting stockings for your baby, come fall. But though they'll take to the little one, the place won't be big enough to hold you, too, Tom."

Tom's fists doubled, but he said nothing.

"No, if I were you I believe I'd keep my mouth shut," repeated the Captain. "Let's take it out in calling names, impersonally — contemptible, Democrat, muck-raker, low Republican, grafter — you know — those things we're used to. I aim to show you up to-morrow, Tom. But there's nothing personal in that. That's politics. I don't think I'd want to descend to being personal, Tom."

"You let me alone, personally and politically," panted Tom. "I've been made the butt of your rotten paper long enough. You cut me out of your print to-morrow, or I'll shoot you like a dog."



"I dare say you have not always been so perfect that you can lord it over me with your damned superiority," he continued with a sneer. "So I warn you. If you so much as mention me in your paper to-morrow, I'll make it personal. Do you hear?"

And he strode from the room in a passion of rage.

Captain Gabe looked at Rose, who had drawn nearer. "Well," he drawled. "What do you know about that? Honey Girl, I won't ask you what was doing when I happened in. I know you'll tell me if you think I ought to know."

"I told him I could never marry him. He was so angry that he lost his self-control."

This scanty information had to content the Captain. "Well, well," he said cheerfully. "If that's what you told him, no wonder he had it in for me. Better go to bed, Rose. You look fagged out."

"I'll go to bed, Father," answered Rose dully. "But I don't believe I can ever sleep again."

## CHAPTER VI

**W**HEN Tom left the house he was beside himself with rage, and as he walked rapidly away, bits of the talk between himself and Rose would repeat themselves with more poignant meaning; or some lovely unconscious pose of the girl's would present itself again to his inner vision, serving to deepen his disappointment, his anger, and his shame.

The shame was not for any act of his. There had been no conscious sin in his episode with Minnie Gray. He was only doing what his fellows did, and to his thinking there was no harm in it. A man knew how to look at such affairs, a woman did not know. His shame was all because Rose had found out and judged him.

There were two standards for a man, one towards his mother, sisters, wife, another towards those who inhabited a lower plane of civilization. He knew how to conduct himself towards both classes properly. He himself was a man, made in the image of God. The fact that he could be one person to Rose and another to Minnie, was something for which he was not personally responsible. There was no possible

wrong in it so long as women kept their eyes closed. Even now his chief feeling was anger at fate, at Minnie for being the stumbling block between his sweetheart and himself, at Rose for daring to face the truth; but above all at the person most to blame,—Captain Gabe. There was no impatience with self in his soul, only a conscious rectitude and sense of power. A man, a real man, such as he felt himself to be, could play with fire without being harmed.

It was characteristic of his type that he gave no thought to Minnie. To him her status was clear. As Rose had put it, she was lawful prey. She had no rights. If she suffered, well, what of it? She had the consolation of knowing that a man far above her had stooped to her level for a time. Let that suffice. Besides, some other fellow would be glad to step into the place he had left vacant. As for the boy—well, if his mother could not keep him, there were plenty of orphan asylums in the land. The birthmark—strange that the nameless brat should bear it so clearly. And if there was any remorse as yet in Tom Blankenship's soul, it was that this precious segregating mark, this sign of blood and race, had affixed itself to Minnie's baby. This was not fair. It should not have been. And in it he found extra fuel for his wrath.

He would get even with Captain Gabe. He would make Madge Shelley suffer. With them out of the way, Rose was easier of access. And she had done

herself this harm, that where before he had thought of her only with the idea of giving her his name, he now toyed with the possibility of getting her for his own without that safety lock of civilization, a legal marriage. She had dared to assume Minnie's place, in order to teach him a lesson. He would force her to occupy it in order to learn her own. Then perhaps she would be ready enough to accept his offer. How quickly she would abandon Minnie's cause when it became hers. Ah, he would make her beg and plead, and kneel to him and promise anything, before he yielded to her importunings.

Indulging himself in such wild and evil fancies, he reached the main street of the town. His own home lay on the outskirts, but he rented a room in the Yancey Hotel of Salem, where he conducted most of his political affairs. It was to this room he now betook himself, after sending messages to a man named Cuthbert, and another known as Broadhead, who soon joined him there. Cuthbert was from the hills, in the upper part of the county where Tom was all-powerful. Broadhead was from the river section, where the other faction had eaten into Tom's majority. Cuthbert had some education and was neat and precise in his appearance. Broadhead was coarse and slovenly, with tobacco juice on his chin and shirt-front, and loose and careless in his speech. Yet the two were boon companions, never far apart when in town, and now they arrived together.

Tom really did not know why he sent for these two men. They were of types which he ordinarily disdained. He had always meant to play fair in politics, and had resisted almost all efforts to bribe him into false assessments. It was true, as Captain Gabe often charged through his editorials, that the office of county tax assessor was one in which there was peculiar liability to graft. But, hang it all, Tom could hardly help showing favoritism to his friends, now could he? He had never deliberately used his office to his own advantage, never.

He did not deliberately plan to do so now. Only he knew that Cuthbert and Broadhead were in town, and sent for them to come in.

Upon their entrance he nodded carelessly without troubling to rise. They silently found seats. Broadhead put his hat beside his chair and spat upon the floor. Then, wiping his gross chin with his dirty sleeve, he spoke abruptly.

"Wal! Hev you made up your mind to jine us, boss?"

"Sh! Not so loud!" begged Cuthbert in a whisper. "It wouldn't do to let folks know we're here."

"And why not? What harm is there? S'posen' folks does know. What then? We're in politics fer what they is in it, and anybuddy what purtends to be in it fer anything else is either a jackass or a hypocrite. I'm mighty glad to know that Mr. Blankenship ain't either one."

"You're giving yourself dead away," whispered Cuthbert again, in a panic. "Mr. Blankenship 'ain't said what we've been sent for, you damn fool."

"They's only one thing he could hev sent fer us fer. He's come across to our side of the fence. Ain't that right, boss?"

Tom made no reply to this, but signified by a nod that they were to help themselves from a bottle that stood on the table. Broadhead obeyed with alacrity. Cuthbert followed more slowly, but as he swallowed his liquor and it began to take effect, he grew jocose.

"I was telling Bob as we come along up, that, so far as I can see it, life's nothing but a big grab-game. If you don't get a prize out of the bag, it's your own fault."

"But you're a church man, Cuthbert," said Tom, speaking for the first time. "How do you reconcile that point of view with your expectation of a blessed future?"

"That's easy," scoffed Cuthbert. "The preacher says they make more fuss over one sinner brought to roost, than over ninety-nine that have always been good. So I'll do my repenting at the last minute, and then I'll have the laugh on 'em all — right up in Abraham's bosom, being kissed and cried over by all the angels, while the good little folks walk in unnoticed." Cuthbert chuckled to himself as he took another glass of whisky. He really believed what



he was saying, and thought himself a clever fellow for thus outwitting the Almighty.

Tom poured a glass for himself and drank it slowly down. He waited a moment until its glow suffused his veins, and then he began abruptly.

"I have sent for you two men with one aim in view. I have an enemy who is your enemy as well — Captain Gabe Shelley."

"That's right."

"That's so."

"He has attacked me more than once through his paper, charging my department with petty graft, with favoritism, and corruption. I will say this for him, that he honestly believes he speaks the truth. However, whether he believes himself right or not, his charges have got to stop, or else I lose my office at the next election."

"That's right."

"That's so, boss. That's so."

"I won't say I haven't been incautious sometimes, but I have tried to play fair. I have attacked him, too. I have called him every name I could think of. But somehow we were always friendly enough until the last few years. It isn't my official self he hates, but my moral self, which he chooses to believe loose and vicious. To-night he told me that he meditates a fierce attack upon our party in his next issue. My name will be mentioned. I answered that, if he

wrote one single word about me — I'd shoot him like a dog. I meant it, too."

"I'm with you there, boss."

"So'm I. So'm I."

"He is always armed, so it will require swift, sure work. And in these days of courts, I'll need a motive. The thing must happen when the crowd is at the Post-office just before noon. There'll be so much confusion then, nobody can tell a straight story."

"I'll help you. I owe him a grudge for that land deal of his'n on Beacher Creek," said Cuthbert.

"I 'ain't yet got even with him, boss, fer havin' me tuk up as a moonshiner," said Broadhead grimly.

"Then we all owe him a debt which we can make him pay in full," said Tom, who, under the influence of the liquor and of his hate, was by this time beyond self-control. "I'll start the quarrel. You two can step in and make it appear that I shot in self-defense, to which you both can swear. They couldn't get a jury in this county to convict me, anyhow."

"It's simple as A B C," said Cuthbert. "We don't draw a gun at all, but shoot from the pocket — so." He illustrated with a swift motion of his hand. "If he should be unarmed, we'll arm him. There won't be no witness in the crowd to swear to anything except ourselves."

"How about the gal o' his'n, that rides like a cowboy and shoots like hell?" asked Broadhead. "I'll

never fergit how she jined the posse that rounded us fellers up when I got caught fer moonshinin'."

"She's busy," sneered Tom. "Her hands are full just now. They have a kid up there whom she cares for as if she were his mother. Gentlemen, to the success of our plans, and the downfall of all our enemies! Drink!" With a wild laugh Tom drained his glass and sent it crashing to the floor.

Meanwhile, at the Shelley house Rose was lying on her bed awake, thinking of Tom in a very different fashion from what he was thinking of her. After bidding Gabe good-night, she sought Madge, to find her already in bed. Beside her stepmother she hesitated for a moment, half inclined to avail herself of help in warding off the suffering that still lay in wait for her. Then her native courage squared her young shoulders and sent her off to her own room to have it out with herself for once and for all.

There in the darkness she fought a bitter, and at first a losing, fight. The memory of his tendernesses would intrude between her and her sense of right and duty. The picture he had painted of their life together passed before her and added to her torture. It was to have been so wonderful. And instead it was dreary and sordid past belief.

At last exhaustion brought a measure of relief, and towards dawn she slept. But in her dreams her lover walked and smiled and kissed her, but always with that cruel look upon his face which she had first

seen when she had run down to meet him in the garden. It bore fresh meaning now. And what was this he said? "I'll shoot you like a dog!" He was talking to her father. Again and again she dreamed through the events of the day just past, ending always at that short sharp sentence, "I'll shoot you like a dog!"

When she awoke, late in the morning, the words were on her lips.

Janey brought up her breakfast, which she took in bed. Then, wrapped in a dainty negligee, she slipped in to see Minnie and the baby, to find them gone to the lawn with Madge. She hurried back to her own room to dress, choosing her riding-clothes because of those sinister words which persisted in her brain. It would be as well to ride down and warn her father to be cautious. And so at last she dressed and hurried out.

To Uncle Jack, who answered her swift summons, she issued orders to bring round her horse. And then she ran to see the child and Minnie.

Madge had arrayed young Tawm in a silken coat and cap, and in a bed improvised from a clothes-basket, the small instrument of fate was taking his morning nap. Beside him Minnie, in the pink calico, but with her hair awkwardly imitating Rose's masterpiece of the night before, looked up with a welcoming smile. During the night she too had fought her battle — a battle between her shame and pride,

both of which prompted her to hold aloof, and the longing to please these new friends by doing all they told her. It had left its mark in a new gentleness of expression. The eyes she now lifted adoringly to Rose had the wistful look of a beaten dog. "Good-mawnin'?" she whispered. "Li'l Tawm, he's asleep, an' Mrs. Shelley, she's in the orchard. We 'lowed you wouldn't wake 'til noon."

Rose smiled. "I've got to go to town," she whispered back. "There are some things to buy for his Young Highness. Minnie —"

"Yes, Miss Rose."

"Call me Rose, if we are to be friends," returned the girl. "I want you to stay quietly at home for reasons that I cannot give you now. Will you do that for me?"

"I 'ain't never been in a big town like this here," said Minnie wistfully. "Cain't I holp you buy the baby's things?"

"No, no," said Rose. "You have got to promise that until I give you leave you'll stay right here. It is for your own good that I ask you. Later on I'll tell you my reasons."

Poor Minnie! She was sharp enough to conclude that Rose was ashamed of her in her present costume. Rose saw her error, but let it pass. "All right, then, that is settled," she said brightly.

"But there's something else not settled yet," returned Minnie. "Come over here, whar li'l Tawm

cain't hear. Thar! Naow what I want to ax you is, Miss Rose, how am I a-goin' to pay you all fer what you aim to do fer me? You know I cain't take so much without makin' some return."

"My dear, if you'll let us love 'Tawm' and help take care of him: if you'll let us be frank with you and show you what you need to know to fit in to — your husband's life — surely you will put us in your debt. I cannot tell you why just yet — you would not understand — but my greatest happiness will come about if you give me my way in this. Now good-by. I'll be back in time for lunch."

She walked swiftly to her horse, which Uncle Jack was holding in the drive, leaped into the saddle to Minnie's great surprise, and galloped down the dusty street.

In the meantime the Square was filling slowly with residents of Salem, coming to the Post-office for their mail. As many as could do so crowded into the small room, while the post-master opened the mail. It was put in pigeon-holes, unless the addressee happened to be present. The crowd before the office augmented bit by bit, until the crooked sidewalk spilled its contents out upon the street. Captain Gabe was among those near the curb. He loved the bustle and importance of "mail-time" and seldom failed to be there, but he also loathed the close atmosphere of the Post-office, and unfailingly remained outside.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, with his glasses on his



nose; in his hand a copy of the newspaper through which he said all he could to help Salem and the surrounding country. Upon the outside his editorial held a prominent place, and to Homer Fort, who stood beside him looking interestedly at the scene, he was reading bits of it which struck him as particularly apt, when some one touched him on the arm and a voice whispered in his ear.

"Cap'n Gabe, they's a man out yondah wants a word with you."

He turned to encounter the shifty eyes of Cuthbert, with whom he remembered to have had some trouble over a land deal. But he had no idea that Cuthbert bore him malice, so, with a word to Homer that he would soon be back, he turned and followed through the crowd. On the outer edge Tom Blankenship stood alone, grim-mouthed and frowning, and fortified in his purpose by many deep libations. He was proud of his ability to keep a steady head, and outwardly seemed perfectly himself. A little distance off, half-concealed by the people between, and apparently with no design, stood Broadhead.

Gabe met Tom's lowering gaze calmly, although he foresaw trouble. "Did you want to see me?" he asked.

"Last night I warned you," said Tom between his teeth. "I warned you what would happen if you mentioned me in your paper. You can't deny I warned you!"

He took a step forward and pointed a pistol at Gabe's broad chest. No one noted his action except Broadhead, who crept nearer through the throng, while Cuthbert stood so as to conceal Tom's outstretched arm.

"Hold on," drawled Captain Gabe in an undertone. "Hold on, Tom, just a minute. I haven't got my gun with me, so I'm at a disadvantage. Have you thought what folks'll say if you shoot an unarmed man?"

But Broadhead was now directly behind the Captain, and even as Gabe spoke, a pistol was pressed into his hand. He saw then that he was expected to raise the weapon, that there would be a shot apparently from himself, that he would then receive his death wound from Tom, in "self-defense." He even had time to wonder if Tom had been crafty enough to see that the pistol had an exploded shell. Then he dropped it on the ground. "I am unarmed, you see," he cried.

But Tom was past heeding. He was fumbling his gun with the indecision born of a bad cause, and a vague sense of his own peril, when a shot rang out. The weapon was knocked from his hand by a blow so violent as to paralyze his arm. At first he did not realize that he was shot.

Rose had come quietly into the square and dismounted, leaving her horse standing in the street. With her hand on her pistol, which she carried in

the hip-pocket of her coat, she hurried to her father. She was in time to hear Tom's threat, to see Gabe reject the weapon that would have made him appear the aggressor, and to realize that there was no way of intervening between her father and his would-be murderer, save one. Then she fired.

While Tom stood in a daze, nursing his numb arm — while the people all about were yet startled by the shot, she sprang to Gabe's side and called in a ringing voice, "Look out, Tom! Look out! Don't let them get away!"

As she spoke she fired again and yet again, and during the noise and confusion resulting, Cuthbert and Broadhead slipped out of sight.

"What is it, Gabe? Tom, what has happened? God bless my soul, Rose! You here?" It was Judge Oglethorpe, who now waved back the crowd so that he and the three stood alone, facing one another.

Rose ran to him and grasped his arm in both her own. "Let me explain! There were two men who were about to shoot my father. They would have done it too, if Tom and I had not defended him. I'm a deputy sheriff, you know, Judge, so I had a right to interfere, even if it were not my own father's life at stake."

As she spoke she looked at Tom. He saw she meant to shield him.

"One of them was named Broadhead, a moon-

shiner, from the hills," she added. "The other I do not know."

"The other was Cuthbert, from Beacher Creek," interposed Gabe quietly. He was looking with interest from one to the other in the group, quite as though he were the person least concerned.

"Captain," said Judge Oglethorpe solemnly. "You have had a close call. Thanks to Blankenship and to Rose you are alive this minute. I am glad to see that you two men are enemies only politically. I'm afraid we shall have a hard time to catch those rascals, though. Why didn't you clap handcuffs on them, Rose, instead of letting them run?" And the Judge laughed, for he considered this a joke.

"There was no time for anything," said Rose, simply. "Father, Tom, take me over to the office. I feel a little faint."

If she felt faint she did not look it, for the excitement had brought vivid color into her cheeks. But, since after all she was a woman, the excuse served to gain a pathway through the crowd, and the three made their way amid a storm of congratulations and excited questions, to Gabe's office, a short distance down the street.

Once there, she locked the door and turned to Tom.

"You see I lied to save you," she panted. "You owe your life to me. If I had told them you intended to shoot my father, they would not have waited

for Judge Oglethorpe to try you. They'd have hung you to the nearest tree. You know that as well as I."

Tom made no answer.

"Father," cried Rose. "You proved my story true by keeping silent. Does that mean that you will overlook this mad act of Tom's? He must have been crazy — or drunk — or he would not have dared attempt it."

"Tom," said Captain Gabe. "I know your look when you're in liquor. I shall forget that scene. As far as I'm concerned, it never took place. I'll see that those two rascals keep away, or else their tale might harm you. Now go! Be a man, Tom. Be a man."

"I suppose you expect me to be grateful, but I'm not," muttered Tom.

"Good-by," said Rose. "Remember that your life belongs to me. As I have lied to save you, you owe me something. I shall expect it of you, Tom."

There came a knock at the outer door. Gabe unlocked it and admitted Homer Fort. His clothes were disordered and he was breathing quickly.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "I had a time to get here, and no mistake. That was the gentlest mob of people I ever met. They didn't do one thing to me when I tried to get through. What happened anyway? I understand that four moonshiners fired sixty shots at you, Captain, that Rose hit every last one of them through the heart, that nevertheless

they all escaped, but the coroner expects to recover at least ten of them, stone dead, by to-morrow morning. Have I the story straight?"

"Near enough," laughed Gabe. "Have you met Mr. Blankenship?"

"Fellow hero, I salute you," cried Fort, wringing Tom's limp hand, and dropping it in dismay as he perceived the red mark on the wrist. "I didn't know you were wounded. You should be proud of that — but you look awfully down. Must be you are mourning because Miss Rose shot more of them than you did."

Tom snatched his hat, muttered something incoherent, and made a dash out of the door. "Gee whiz!" said Homer. "That's the sulkiest-looking hero I ever saw, and say, Captain, this morning has furnished me with the realest thrills I ever felt. I have but one more longing left. I've been here two days almost, and I have yet to taste a julep."

Gabe laughed again. "Come over to the Yancey," he said. "We'll break you to them gradually, Homer. If I mixed you your first one, the joy of it might be too much for you. Run along, Rose. Your old daddy is proud of you. And here is a kiss for Madge."

At the Yancey the two men found Judge Oglethorpe, and while they waited to be served, Gabe told the old man of the coming peach-growers' combine.

The Judge was enthusiastic. "God bless my



soul," he exulted. "I've got a son-in-law to be proud of, if he is a year older than I. Let's drink his health, Mr. Fort, and to the success of his plan. May it be the best thing this State has ever known."

"I'm with you," said Homer, lifting his glass high. "On this, the momentous occasion when I first taste a julep, I drink to the glorious Georgia Peach."

His eyes met Gabe's over their glasses as they drank.

## CHAPTER VII

**T**HE days which passed after Minnie Gray and her baby were first brought to the Shelley home, were busy ones for the entire family. In those times of awakening to the proper amount of care necessary to one small infant's health, "li'l Tawm," even in the most ordinary and normal conditions, would have completely upset the well regulated household. But Minnie had undergone so much in the last year that she was quite worn out, and under Doctor's orders she was compelled to wean her baby, that both of them might thrive the better.

Rose took charge of preparing the artificial food, and astounded the ignorant young mother by the tremendous lot of detail necessary.

"I cain't see no sense to it," she had unhesitatingly declared. "Up to home, thar's Mis Slocum — she takes a ol' whisky bottle, an' fills it up with milk right outen the caow, an' then she puts some spring water to it, an' ties a rag around the top, an' her baby sucks that rag like it wuz his mammy's own breast. And he's just as fat as butter."

To this Rose had answered by asking, "Are all the hill babies fat?"

"Lawsy, no!" exclaimed Minnie wonderingly.

"Some on 'em are peeny-weeny as can be. Mis Slocum lost one on'y las' year — the one befo' this baby. Seems like they is allus a baby funer'l goin' on somewhar. Some folks has so many chillun that s'posen one does die — why they don't make no account on it a tall. Jes' digs a grave an' says some words over it, an' 'pears like they fergits it in a minute."

"That's why we are going to be careful with our baby," retorted Rose. "Mrs. Slocum may have one infant so healthy that he thrives on germs, but we'll take no chances with little Tom."

"What's germs?" asked Minnie.

An older person might well have grown discouraged, for, thought Rose, no sooner did she mention something a little out of the common A B C of everyday intercourse, than Minnie avowed utter ignorance of it. However, she set herself to work to explain germs to the mountain girl, and did her job so thoroughly and well that for days afterward Minnie looked with suspicion at everything that had not been baked or boiled, although she declared that she couldn't "see a thing a-crawlin' around nowhar, no matter how hard she kep on lookin'." The microscope, with its ability to show up minute organisms, was a baffling mystery to her, which Rose was not able to explain until later, when she took Minnie to the nursing home and gave her a practical demonstration of its powers.

Thus Minnie's education progressed by leaps and

bounds, through the medium of simple every-day occurrences, which each afforded its own peculiar opportunity for instruction. And her teaching was so gently and wisely given, that under its influence her mind unfolded rapidly, and her heart opened to the love and kindness of these new friends like a flower to the glowing sun. Freed from its burden of disgrace and shame, her head lifted again, and her slight frame straightened in imitation of Rose's agile bearing. She saw her transgression in another light, and while both sorry for it and eager to make amends, she learned to regard her baby, not as a living symbol of her sin, but rather as the outgrowth of all that had been noblest and most selfless in her love for his father, a Heaven-sent comforter to help her bear his desertion, and a means for the attainment of her own highest womanhood. Where before she had loved him in a secret, guilty fashion, getting him out of the way quickly if any one approached, she now basked in the glory of actually being proud of him, and her mother nature sprang to its full development unhindered.

Her gratitude for this one thing alone — the opportunity to enjoy her baby — must have made her yield to the suggestions of Rose and Madge, had there not been as well their own genuine liking for her, which Minnie felt instinctively through everything they said and did, and appreciated more than they could ever know. For though Rose had tried to step

into Minnie's place for a moment, and had grasped intuitively something of what her sufferings had been, she could have no real conception of their depths, nor of the alleviation which her ministrations brought. The good woman who has never sinned is miles apart from the so-called fallen woman, and though love can bridge the gap, and, standing over, peer within, it cannot enter the abyss through which the latter has just passed.

Minnie loved Madge with a deep abiding love, but she worshiped Rose, and clung to her so pathetically that when Gabe decided that she must be sent away for a time, it was quite evident that she would not be able to bear the separation. She was thriving now, and growing strong and well, but if Rose were taken from her at this critical period, it was only too clear that she would sink again into that miserable condition from which she was but just emerging, and this in spite of the advantages laid before her.

Gabe had patiently explained his reasons to the mountain girl, only suppressing the fact that in Salem lived Tom Blankenship, the father of her boy. This was in truth the main object of sending her away. After the shooting episode Tom had taken himself and his wrath across to Europe for a while, but at any time he might return, and come face to face with Minnie. Needless to say this would ruin the plans Rose had developed for them both.

There was another difficulty which had to be con-

sidered. Minnie had been introduced to some few of the townspeople as Mrs. Kemp, a young widow, who, with her baby, was visiting Rose. But sooner or later it was inevitable that some one of them would do more than merely address her, when she was certain to betray her mountain origin. This again would defeat the plans of Rose.

So Minnie had been told merely that she needed much which Salem could not give her, and which New York could readily supply. She saw that this was so, yet grew so piteous at thought of leaving Rose and her baby, that eventually it was decided to send all three away together.

"Of course! I can keep house and look after 'li'l Tawm' while Minnie studies," said Rose merrily. "Why didn't we think of that before? We will hire a flat, Father, and be quite settled. And I'll come home as often as I can."

But just as the matter seemed to be decided to everybody's satisfaction, Minnie balked again.

"I cannot let you do so much for me," she explained gently. "I can't possibly do it."

"You wish to be educated, don't you?" Gabe asked kindly.

"I—I reckon I do. Of course I must!" hesitated Minnie, a bewildered look creeping into her brown eyes.

"See here. Are you doing all this of yourself, or just because Rose wishes it?"



"I — I don't know," faltered Minnie.

"I'm very much afraid you have been swept off your feet by my impetuous daughter," smiled Gabe kindly. "However, you do want the education, and you are willing to work to gain it — aren't you?"

"Y-yes. But, Cap'n Gabe, I cain't bear to leave my baby so much to other people —"

"Don't you want him to be Tom — Somebody — some day, instead of Tom — Nobody?"

Minnie winced and nodded, unable to speak.

"Then that is settled."

"But I can't accept so much —"

"Nonsense!" interposed Gabe stoutly. "Didn't you know that you have valuable land up in the hills? If you and your mother will agree to selling some of it, I can easily find you a purchaser. Perhaps I might buy it myself, for speculative purposes. So you can pay your own way and feel under obligations to nobody."

This satisfied Minnie, who would have believed anything Gabe told her, and November saw the three ensconced in their small New York home. Minnie was to have private lessons, so that she might advance as rapidly as possible. She was naturally apt. As she had told Rose, the teacher in the mountain school had taught her all he knew, which was not inconsiderable since he was a city chap sent mountainward for health's sake, and teaching to pay his way. Naturally much of what Minnie then

learned had slipped away from her. But the training helped her now. And her ancestry was in her favor, too, for she was of the purest Anglo-Saxon stock, which, in the mountains of Georgia, the Carolinas, and Eastern Tennessee, has remained isolated from Revolutionary times. There was good gray matter in Minnie's flower-like head, as well as the marks of race in her small, graceful figure, and well-shaped hands and feet.

On their way north the two stopped over to see Mrs. Gray. Minnie's mother was now almost well enough to leave the hospital, and had displayed unexpected obstinacy in insisting upon going straight to the mountains, instead of to New York with Rose and Minnie, or to the Shelleys in Salem.

She was sitting up when they entered the ward, a small, gray-haired woman, with a face seamed into countless lines, flat bosom, and work-worn hands. She looked indifferently at the two girls, supposing them "ladies" bent on charity. She explained later that numbers of these ladies visited the ward from time to time, bringing flowers which she might have enjoyed had it not been for her pride, which rose in arms at their patronizing manner.

"Jus' ca'se I'm pore an' old an' sick, they think they kin lay it all over me. I says to 'em, says I, 'I nevuh axed you to come ter see me. When I wishes yo' comp'ny, I'll send you a invite,' I says. 'I got flowers to home — mounting laurel, an' wild roses,

an' rhodydenden, that'll put your pore hand-raised boughten flowers to shame. Gawd tends to my kind. He 'ain't got no use fer your kind, no more'n I hev', I says. En' they didn't know what to make of me. But I meant it, every word."

Now as the nurse in charge led the girls to her chair, she turned languid, incurious eyes upon them. They carried flowers, so she straightened to do battle. She was by nature militant, and under different circumstances might have fought and died joyously for a cause. Her fiery spirit had worn out her feeble body, so that she looked even older than mountain women of her age usually do. She could not have been much over forty at this time. But as her nostrils widened and her eyes flashed for the fray, she perceived that these were wild flowers, of the kind she loved.

"Glory be!" she exclaimed, forgetting everything in her interest. And, "Glory be!" she said again, when Minnie stooped and kissed her tenderly.

"'Scuse me, leddies," she explained politely, as soon as she had recovered breath. "But I ain't no-ways used ter bein' kissed, nor to them kind of blossoms in a horspittal. You-all must surely be a new kind of sick-visitors."

"Why, Mammy! Don't you know me?" Minnie shrank back, astounded at the very thought.

The familiar name and voice made the little woman jump. But she still looked doubtful. Her eyes

swept over Rose suspiciously. This was undoubtedly a stranger. But the other dainty girl had called her "Mammy," and the word had stirred her soul. She reached out a bony hand, clutched Minnie's wrist and drew her close. She looked long and searchingly into the brown eyes. And then faintly, incredulously, yearningly, she tried to give her feelings words.

"Air you my li'l gal, my Minnie? It ain't reasonable. It cain't be true. Them purty clothes wouldn't change a body so! You're different somehow. You're a reel lady — such as I've allus wanted my Minnie to grow inter. But you've got Minnie's eyes — and Minnie's hair — and Minnie's smile and voice. *Lawsy!* It mus' be true. What they done to you, honey, to make you so smart and all?"

She held the girl close to her meager breast while Minnie, in a few words, told what had transpired in the past two months — told all she had been unable to tell in letters which had to be read aloud to the prostrate mother whose eyes were dim from suffering.

The little woman made no comment, beyond intelligent eyes and nods of her gray head. She had learned the mountain way of scanty speech.

"— And this is Rose — she lets me call her that."

"I'm right glad to see you, Rose," said Mrs. Gray. "Yes, I'm right glad to see you. And to thank you fer all you've done."

"Don't speak of thanks." Rose was very tender.  
"Don't speak of thanks. Minnie has done more for me than I can ever do for her."

"You don't say!" Mrs. Gray was polite, but mystified.

"I have found happiness in planning for her happiness. Mrs. Gray, when you go to Salem, you will understand better what I mean. By the way, we have not let Minnie's story become known. We have introduced her to people as Mrs. Kemp, a friend of mine."

"Jes's you say." Mrs. Gray was quite obedient.  
"I reckon Minnie an' I hev no call to objec' to anything you may feel to do. We cain't help bein' grateful. Ef you don't want thanks, you don't hev to hev 'em, but they is in our hyarts, jes' the same."

Rose went soon after to call upon some friends, and Minnie spent a quiet hour by her mother's side. She told her story over and over to the little mountain woman, who gave free rein to her curiosity now that she was sure this lovely girl was her own daughter. She took the pretty dress in her wasted fingers, praised its quality and dainty style, admired the rose-trimmed hat, and let her hungry heart drink its fill of Minnie's unexpected beauty.

"I'd never 'a' knowed you," she repeated again and again. "Minnie, chile, I'd never 'a' knowed you. Good feedin', fine clothes, and such friends makes a sight of difference in a body."

It was characteristic of her, and something Minnie did not dream of feeling sad about or of combating, that she never once mentioned "li'l Tawm," left all this time in the care of a nurse in the corridor outside.

When Rose returned and Minnie said good-by, she clung to the girl wistfully. "I'd 'a' let you go to New York a whole heap easier ef I hadn't 'a' seen you a-tall," she whispered brokenly. "You wuz shamed and disgraced and a burden on my back. Naow you're so different I cain't begin to realize it, even yet. Good-by, my li'l gal. Good-by, Rose. Ef the prayers of a pore old woman are wuth anything to you, wal, I allow you hev 'em with you. And ef the time ever comes when I kin repay you, I'll do it — that's all."

"Your husband saved my father during the war," reminded Rose. "If there is any talk of pay, I fancy I could not discharge my debt. Good-by, Mrs. Gray. When we get back again, I hope to see you well and strong."

"Good-by, Mammy," whispered Minnie tearfully. "When *I* return, it will be to try to be a better daughter. Good-by."

From the hospital the two went directly to the train, and from the train to their new home, which was ready and waiting for them.

It was an eventful winter in more ways than one, for while Minnie was making astonishing progress with her studies, which, after all, was not so astonish-



ing when one realizes all she had at stake, occurred that astounding catastrophe, the blowing up of the battleship *Maine*, in Havana harbor. Although the courts were unable to fix the responsibility for this upon any one person or persons, it was instantly followed by such a tempest of denunciation that it is doubtful if the sufferings of the oppressed Cubans continued to occupy their rightful place in the minds of the nation at large. During the wait for the verdict of the court, this thirst for vengeance was fostered until people lost all ability to judge fairly, or to choose an impartial attitude and to maintain it.

"Remember the *Maine*!" became the nation's slogan, instead of "Help a defenseless and suffering people!"

So one thing led to another, and upon Monday, the 25th of April, 1898, after a series of misunderstanding, recriminations, and accusations such as has never been equaled, the House of Representatives at Washington, D. C., declared that war had been begun by Spain four days before.

The entire population of the United States, already in a white heat of impatience, burst into flames at this touch of the match. Apparently there was not one single doubt or fear, not one demurrer or one advocate for peace. Women advanced no protest, arbitration schemes were dismissed as the most utter folly, and everywhere the lust for battle spread.

Yet on this April morning Nature herself had

never been more peaceful, or more serenely beautiful. It was as though she tried to convey a message to humanity, scrawling it in long lazy lines of budding trees and plants, enveloping it in hazy green, and, upon the little town of Salem she set a special seal in the shape of myriads of rosy blooms, which filled the air with their elusive fragrance. By no means particular about the manner in which she affixed this seal, long splotches of pink and white stretched out in all directions from the nucleus of the town.

Salem was scarcely able to recognize itself in its fine new costume. Old Judge Oglethorpe told the children that they had suddenly been transported into fairyland, and delighted them by insisting that they must be fairies, gnomes, or goblins. The minister likened it reverently to Paradise, and drew stern morals for his congregation upon Sunday, which they forgot promptly. But Captain Gabe Shelley called the whole glory just "Peach-Blossom Time in Georgia," and said he thought it quite enough to be alive and able to see and smell upon this Monday morning. Perhaps he was the wisest of them all.

## CHAPTER VIII

**L**ESSER events will happen on the same day that larger events take place, so this April Monday not only sent broadcast the news of imminent war, but brought Salem back Rose Shelley, Minnie Gray, and the baby Tom, now nearly ten months old. Tom Blankenship, home through the winter months but now away again on a trip through the Western States, was reported to be returning to take command of his "crack company." And Homer Fort had journeyed southward to renew his acquaintance with the Shelleys, give Gabe some further help in his peach-growers' combine, and see the blooming orchards about Salem.

Rose frowned when she learned that Homer was again their guest. He had been with them at a time which was a painful memory to her. He had also been unwisely friendly with her stepmother. Her long winter away did not cause Rose to relax one iota of her vigilance, and the first greetings were scarcely over before she determined that Homer should have scant opportunity to converse with Madge. "It was well we came when we did," she thought. And as soon as Minnie and the child were

resting, she went with Homer through the aisles of trees.

After lunch Gabe undertook to drive Minnie and the baby to her mountain home. She was to stay there for a short time, and then return to Salem for a visit, when Rose hoped to bring about a meeting between her protégée and Tom, though this plan was frustrated owing to the latter's absence at camp in Tampa.

The day was chilly, and the Captain left many directions behind as to what was to be done in case there came a frost, the one thing dreaded most at blossom time. As the afternoon advanced and the cold steadily increased, both Madge and Rose were busied in carrying out these orders, and finally asked their guest to join them. It was Uncle Jack who brought Homer their message, finding the young man busily writing letters in Gabe's study.

"Ain't it strange, boss, dat ol' Maw Natur is so crooel?" Uncle Jack lingered to ask after fulfilling his errand. "We plant de trees, an' prune 'em, an' spray 'em, an' den de fros' come an' kill de fruit in de bud, an' all our labor done gone fer nawthin'. I reckon de Lawd knows bes', but hit do appear lak he set a mighty poor example to his chillun sometimes, an' dat's a fac'. How am I gwine tu'n dish yere into a lesson fo' de Sunday School? Dat's what I wants to know."

Homer laughed, professed himself unable to solve

the problem, and followed Uncle Jack to the windward side of the trees. Here he found the orchard bustling with activity. Madge, in plain blouse and short dark skirt, was directing the laborers who were building smudges everywhere. Rose, similarly attired, ordered the placing of the oil-burners, and as soon as Homer reached them, she called him before Madge could speak. He perceived, with deepening amusement, that she had determined to keep him and Madge apart.

"Here, Mr. Fort," she called. "Will you show those stupid men how to lay that brush to make the heaviest possible smoke? I'm needed yonder. You know how, don't you?"

Homer did know, and assumed command of the men who justified her complaint of their stupidity. When this was done, she ordered him to oversee the cutting of more green wood from the uncleared land belonging to the place. She flitted here and there and everywhere, unconsciously assuming entire command, and Madge obeyed her as well as Fort and the workmen, to whom the Captain's girl was a superior and wonderful being. Later she galloped off to town like a whirlwind, to Homer's intense admiration. He told himself that she was not only bewilderingly pretty, but that she was as spirited and full of life as the wild little horse she rode. She was back before the rest had missed her, but he knew the instant she had come. He must have known soon in any

case, for during her short absence Madge, passing by, had stopped for a little chat, embarrassed because of the constraint which Rose had placed upon her.

"We are almost through, Mr. Fort," she said, striving to speak lightly.

"Do you know," exclaimed Homer, sweeping out an arm to indicate the scene. "This is one of the most amazing things I have ever witnessed, this intelligent, organized fight against Nature by her children. It's great! It's inspiring! Those grimy sweating negroes and the ugly piles they rear, against the background of the glorious trees — if I were a poet I'd be tempted, I can tell you."

Her diffidence vanished before his enthusiasm. Her eyes kindled, as she realized how the scene might affect one unused to it. "Then you haven't minded helping, have you, Mr. Fort? I was afraid the work might prove irksome."

"Irksome!" Fort spoke emphatically and was sorry the moment after, for Rose, alighting, had heard the eloquence of his tone, and had again misjudged.

She turned to him with a superbly scornful gesture. "Mr. Fort," she said coolly, ignoring Madge, whose eyes grew proud. "Mr. Fort, the workmen can finish here alone, so perhaps you won't mind a little rest. Will you come back to the house with me, please?"

Fort looked at her calmly. Her beauty, though it dazzled, did not bewilder him. He was not only able to resist it, but to resent the girl's manner towards



Madge. "Miss Shelley," he answered. "Mrs. Shelley and I are both tired. I daresay you are tired, too. I quite agree with you that all of us need rest. Mrs. Shelley, will you take my arm?"

Rose quivered with indignation as Madge accepted. There was nothing to do, if she did not wish to leave them alone, but to tag along like a superfluous child. Fort, apparently oblivious, was really keenly alive to her presence just behind, and took impish delight in aggravating her further by his solicitous attentions to his companion. When they reached the Gallery, he stood aside to admit of both ladies ascending the steps before him. But scarcely had either reached the top than he was there by Madge, with a deep cushioned chair in which he installed her, with utmost satisfaction.

"There!" he announced, standing off to admire the effect. "Now you are perfect, Mrs. Shelley. Rest, and don't talk unless you feel like it."

There was mischief in his eye as he placed a chair for Rose. She ignored it, deliberately choosing a straight high-backed affair near Madge, and seating herself with her back almost turned on Homer, who sank down on the top step. Silence fell, deep, mysterious and baffling, a silence that Madge felt inadequate to break, and that Rose declined to.

"Well?" inquired Homer casually at last.

No answer.

"Miss Shelley?" It was Homer again, not plead-

ing, but pleasant and politely interrogative, as before.

"Well?" Rose felt obliged to answer and took refuge in the monosyllable.

"I always knew I was famous for my original remarks," said Homer modestly. "But I didn't know I was famous enough to be copied."

"Really, Mr. Fort, I don't know what you mean." Rose was icily indifferent.

"I said, 'Well?'" explained Homer patiently. "Then I called your attention to my remark by saying, 'Miss Shelley.' You repeated it. You said 'Well?' Don't you see? I said 'Well?' and you said 'Well?' Perhaps you copied me unconsciously but you did it, just the same. Since I said 'Well?' and you said 'Well?' all must be well."

Rose drew herself up with offended dignity. "Really, Mr. Fort," she said again, "I fail to see the connection."

"Between your 'Well?' and my 'Well?' is there really no connection, Miss Shelley?" questioned Homer sadly. "Were they not both fed by the same spring, 'well'-ing from a mutual desire to indulge in social talk?"

"How silly!" murmured Rose. Nevertheless she could not look quite so distant as before, and Madge was smiling sleepily.

"Miss Shelley?" implored Fort.

"Well?" Rose caught herself too late, and, start-

ing guiltily, she looked into his triumphant eyes. "I knew you'd say it," he exulted. "There! At last I've made you laugh. I feel repaid."

Rose composed her face again and looked away. She was determined to dislike the man. Again silence, deep and impenetrable as before.

"Miss Shelley." This time Fort whispered. "Miss Shelley, she's asleep."

Rose looked. It was quite true. The long busy day had been too much for Madge, and the sudden quiet and comfort had accomplished a lovely end. She lay sound asleep in her chair, her long lashes dark on her flushed cheeks. Yielding to the helpless appeal in her unconscious attitude, Rose hastened to spread a wrap about her father's wife. There was both love and tenderness in the action, and Fort drew new conclusions therefrom.

As for Rose, her uppermost thought was that now she could relax her vigilance. Yet when she turned to Fort to excuse herself, and saw that he expected her to go down with him to the settee under the trees, she yielded. Just why she could not have told. Sitting there, where she and Tom Blankenship had often talked so intimately together, her thoughts were all upon the man beside her. The antagonism which he roused in her made her unable to erase him from her mind.

Homer was a bold man when he thought boldness expedient. He thought so now. "Miss Shelley,"

he began abruptly, and then stopped to reconsider. "I shall not call you by that name again," he announced. "Our friendship has progressed beyond it. Hereafter I'll address you as Miss Rose."

He beamed as she gasped with indignation. Then, before she could voice her outraged feelings, he asked her playfully, "Miss Rose, why do you dislike me?"

"I dislike you?" exclaimed Rose. "I have not thought about you enough either to like or dislike you, Mr. Fort."

"One can like or dislike a person without thinking of him at all. You dislike me. If you thought of me a little, you wouldn't. Try it, and see."

He smiled at her contagiously, but it was of no use. She turned cold eyes upon him and answered scornfully, in her pretty Southern drawl, which lent all she said a peculiar emphasis. "Mr. Fort, you ask too much. I couldn't think about you if I tried. But I do think of — of Madge, and I resent your attempt to place her in an awkward position. I am quite frank, you see."

Homer was nettled. "In what way have I placed Mrs. Shelley in an awkward position?"

"You admire her too obviously. She is young still, and very pretty. My father is much older than she."

"So you conclude," interrupted Homer, with steeliness in his pleasant voice. "You conclude that because she is still young and pretty, and your father is

old, she is peculiarly liable to awkward positions? Why should that be so?"

Rose moved impatiently upon her seat. "You forget that we live in a small place, where the old ladies love to gossip. Such a sudden friendship as yours for my father's wife is open to misconstruction."

"But, Miss Rose," cried Homer. "Does not Mrs. Shelley realize this as well as you? Is she not quite as able to uphold your father's honor?"

Rose looked annoyed. "We have already talked too long upon this subject," she said crisply.

"One moment," returned Homer. "I am forced to infer from your attitude that you are distrustful of your mother. You fear that her affection for your father is not strong enough to keep her loyal. You are so sure of this that you feel the necessity of warning off possible trespassers. Is that it?"

"No, no," said Rose, but that was it, as he saw from the very force of her denial.

"If I were a different sort, I'd be inclined to take up the gauntlet you fling down—to prove her loyalty," he said. "But why doubt it, for a moment?"

"You misunderstand me," cried Rose. "I do not imply that her loyalty needs proving. All I ask is that you keep your distance."

Homer smiled. Inwardly he was boiling with wrath. He would have liked to shake this slip of a girl who defied him. "We won't quarrel," he said

calmly. "I did not use the phrase in the sense in which you took it. Let that pass. We seem destined to misunderstand each other. And when I try to correct your impressions of me, I only falsify them further. Let us talk on impersonal subjects, the war for instance. I dare say you have a number of admirers who are going to enlist."

Rose's eyes kindled. "I have many friends who will enlist," she answered quickly. "And all who do enlist I count my friends. If you really want my friendship, Mr. Fort, you know now how to obtain it."

"It is a temptation, certainly," murmured Homer. "However, I have not yet made up my mind as to the expediency of enlisting."

"How can you hesitate?"

"There are so many things to consider," said Homer comfortably. "First, am I needed? Not yet. Every harum-scarum in the country is crying to be a soldier. Would it be fair to rob one of them of his chance? The camps will soon be overflowing, with men burdening the country with their support while they are trained for a field they may never see. Then, too, our business interests need to be looked after now, as well as in times of peace."

"You are evading the question, Mr. Fort."

"Perhaps I am. As the poet says of his purple cow, 'I've never been a soldier boy, I never thought to be one. But this I'll tell you anyhow, I'd rather



live than "dee" one.' There's truth in that crude poem, Miss Rose. I should no doubt admire myself immensely, clad in regimentals and marching off to the tune of "'Way Down South in Georgia.' But supposing I got shot? What then?"

"How can you make a mock of your country's needs?" asked Rose indignantly.

"I am sorry. I did not know you felt the thing so keenly. Well, then, if I have any objection to enlisting, it lies in my deep-rooted conviction that war, for whatever purpose, is never justifiable."

"The justifiability of war is an abstract question, which, in times of peace, will bear discussing," cried Rose stormily. "But this is not the time to broach it. War is here. It is upon us now, justifiable or unjustifiable. We have got to face it. If I were a man I'd show you how quickly I'd enlist. The more swift and merciless we are, the greater numbers we send out, the sooner will the brutal work be over. We might as well win quickly, for we'll win. We never will be beaten while our women stand behind and urge our men to face the enemy unflinchingly. I wish I were a man," cried Rose, springing to her feet. "I wish I were a man!" So deeply was she moved that tears rolled down her cheeks, and she ran away to hide them.

Homer looked after her in surprise. He had stated his convictions frankly, merely omitting to mention that in spite of them he had joined a regi-

ment in Illinois. "I didn't think she had it in her," he now soliloquized, as he went off to the orchard to see how the men were progressing. "What a little spitfire she is! She dislikes you, Homer Fort," he continued thoughtfully. "Undeserved dislike, too. Won't you do something to deserve it, Homer? Perhaps that might make it lose its sting."

Dinner was hurried that night, for already the men were lighting the oil-burners and brush-piles, and getting to work in earnest to fight the frost which now promised to be a hard one. The thermometer dropped with terrifying steadiness until at half-past six it stood at thirty-five degrees. Although Gabe had but just returned from a long and fatiguing ride, he snatched merely a few bites of bread and meat, and then hastened to don old clothes, with which he also supplied his guest. And then the two men hurried out to superintend the battle.

If Homer had been impressed by the activity of the afternoon, he found it as nothing beside the bustle now. Already it was dusk, and the fitful light of the fires, now flaring into sheets of flame, now hidden by volumes of smoke, alternately threw into relief or obscured the fairy-like beauty of the trees, and the rough, toiling figures whose business it was to keep that smoke as heavy as possible. Where the flame was too free, water quenched its ardor. And as the wind shifted the fires shifted, too, new ones being hastily built to take the place of the old. There was

contagion in the fury with which the fight went on, and Homer threw himself gayly into the midst of it.

There was nothing for Rose and Madge to do now, so they watched the workers, and cheered the men with occasional words of encouragement or praise. Cold water was dispensed by Uncle Jack, to cool parched throats and mop blistered brows. As the evening advanced some negro started crooning an old plantation melody, and, taken up by the rest of the band, it rose and fell amid the noise of combat like a battle hymn. Homer felt as though indeed he had been transported into some foreign country, so strange the entire scene appeared to him.

At last Gabe ordered Madge and Rose to bed. "You'll have to be up early, to superintend a hearty breakfast for us all," he said. "Rose is tired, I know. Why, my girl, I've hardly had a chance to realize that you are home again, there's been so much to do all day."

He took her in his smoke-begrimed arms for a hearty hug, and she pretended to pick a clean spot on his face for a kiss. So, with laughing good-nights, she and Madge went to the house together, and to bed.

However, the weary men in the orchard kept the night stirring with the sound of their labor. The fitful gleam of the flames now and again played on the ceilings of the bedrooms. The cold was intense, for the thermometer now registered only thirty-three.

So Madge sought Rose at last in her pretty chamber, and nestled in bed beside her.

"Has the winter really gone as well as your letters pretended, Rose?" she asked, lying with arms crossed behind her head.

"Yes," answered the girl briefly. "We had so much to do and see and hear. And there was always 'li'l Tawm.'"

"Minnie has improved beyond belief," said Madge.

"She is a dear girl, Madge, in spite of that in her life which would condemn her utterly to most people." Rose paused for a long moment, and then continued thoughtfully. "I wish we need not have had to use secrecy at all, but still I cannot see how else we could have managed. Now that she has gotten used to the name, I think perhaps it has been an advantage to her. She is changed in appearance, speech, and dress. The change in name was another step away from the old life. Whereas Miss Gray was branded, Mrs. Kemp is free. Miss Gray faced every one distrustfully. Mrs. Kemp is staunchly unafraid. All the same I fear for the result now that she is in her mountain home again, and once more Minnie Gray. Will she not suffer?"

"I am afraid so," answered Madge. "But we won't let her stay there long enough for the bitterness to return. We'll get her back to us as quickly as we can, and perhaps we may be able to get her mother to come too. I love the baby, Rose. He seems a lit-

tle to me like my own — that died. I should like to have him in the house.”

It was seldom that Madge spoke of her loss, and Rose put up a sympathetic hand to pat her cheek. “As for me,” she said quickly, forestalling the question which trembled on Madge’s lips. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve learned to bear my sorrow bravely. I don’t love Tom any longer — at least I do not think I do. There is part of me that used to be alive and throbbing for him, that now is dead. But I am just as anxious as ever to see him marry Minnie, and make himself into the fine man which I *feel* under his devil-may-care exterior. I think of him often in this way, but never in the old way, Madge — never that, again.”

Nevertheless she burst into tears and wept her heart out on Madge’s breast, wept out the struggle of the weary months away, the heartaches of the past, the loneliness of the future. And weeping softly, and yet more softly, at last she went to sleep.

## CHAPTER IX

“**I**’M only home for a day or so, Rose,” said Tom Blankenship wistfully. “I’ve come to see if I cannot take your forgiveness with me to Cuba, and your promise that you have reconsidered, and will marry me when I come home again.”

She stood very straight and still, her cheeks white, her eyes dark with pain. She made no answer.

“Rose, as you loved me once — I know you did, or else you never could have been to me what you were — as you loved me in those old glad days, soften your heart to me now, and listen while I plead. I had not meant to plead, Rose. I was angry for a long while, and filled with bitter thoughts. But during the winter I’ve had time to miss you, and in spite of me I’ve softened. You are everything in life to me, my darling. If you would but just turn to me alone, and let nothing intrude between us, I know you would give in to me. You could not help it, Rose.”

They were standing in the orchard, among the trees whose blossoms showered rosy snow about them both. For Gabe had refused to allow Tom to enter the house, even for this one last interview.

“I don’t like to think of you and him alone in a



room together," he had said with a shudder quite unlike him. "Face him in the open, my girl, where he will not dare attempt to coerce you. I won't deny you the right to speak to him, but this much I do ask of you."

So she had written him to meet her in the orchard, where workmen went to and fro upon various tasks connected with the trees.

"Won't you so much as speak to me, Rose?" he now asked reproachfully. "Won't you say one word to me, to send me on my way less bitter, less sore-hearted?"

She drew herself up as though she had at last reached a decision. "Listen to me, Tom," she said slowly, turning her eyes full upon him. "I shall not preach or scold you at this time. You have my prayers, and my sincerest wishes for a safe and speedy return. I've not changed at all since the last time we — talked together, Tom. I still feel as I felt then."

His sneering smile sprang readily to his lips. "You've said enough," he answered. "You told me then that my life belonged to you. If that is so, it is because I love you, and not for any other reason. If I belong to you, it is as your lover and your future husband. I mean to win you yet, in spite of everything — just as in spite of everything I kiss you now."

With a fierce and passionate gesture he caught her

in his arms and pressed her lips cruelly with his own. It was not a lover's kiss, because it bruised and hurt. It was as though his burning mouth had placed a brand where every one could see.

"Oh!" she cried, passing her hand across her lips as though to wipe off the horror of the kiss. "Oh! And do you think that is the way to win me back? If you do, you don't know me. Another like that, and I should hate you, Tom Blankenship. I should — should *loathe* you."

He only laughed, pretending to take enjoyment in her scorn, and in the curiosity of the workmen near. "I wanted it to last until I returned. Forgive me, Rose. I am mad about you. I scarcely knew what I did, because I am so bent upon winning you that I'd stoop to any means. Forgive me. Wish me luck. Please, Rose."

Although he threw into his eyes all of that coaxing playful ardor which once had melted her, it was of no avail.

"Good-by," she said faintly. "Go! At once! Good-by!"

With a despairing shrug he turned and strode away. She remained where she was, debased, sore and bewildered, not knowing how to face life again under this odd new feeling of shame. But insensibly the quiet loveliness of the orchard, the unceasing soft shower of petals from the trees, soothed and calmed her. And when another man approached her, she

turned to greet him quite naturally, glad of the added sense of relief which his coming gave her.

"Do you go this afternoon?" she asked. "Hasn't my father been able to persuade you to stay any longer? He has such a fancy for you, Mr. Fort, that I don't see how he is going to get along without you."

"You make me feel proud and glad when you say that," responded Homer gently. "Fact is, I have to go join *my* regiment in Illinois, Miss Rose."

Although he had intended to surprise her, he was not prepared for the effect his speech had upon her. She gave a glad little cry, and her whole being was transformed as she began to speak impetuously.

"Oh, Mr. Fort, I am so pleased. You never told me — why, you said you did not believe in war —"

"I don't," he assured her gravely. "Nevertheless, as you said, war is upon us now. It is not the time for abstract judgment —"

"Did what I said that day make you do what you thought wrong?" Her eager face was overclouded. She could not bear to add to her other burdens that of having made this man enlist. But his next words reassured her.

"No. I had taken the fatal step some time before. However, you are responsible for changing my attitude considerably. You made a soldier out of a pacifist," laughed Homer. "Don't you think I'll look fine in my regimentals?"

"Of course you will. Every man does."

"This makes us friends, doesn't it?" continued Homer, dropping his bantering air so quickly as to embarrass her. She met his eyes frankly, however, and held out her hand.

"Yes, it does."

"Wish me luck!" he said, as his fingers clasped hers in a firm pressure.

It was the same thing Tom had asked of her so short a time ago. How differently she felt now. Tom had made her distrustful and afraid. Homer Fort had unwittingly brought her comfort, and aroused her trust. The two men were widely different, and she thought she loved Tom best. And yet —

"If you get wounded," she said suddenly. "If you get wounded, I shall feel myself to blame. As a pacifist, you would have been justified in keeping out of danger. Now I fear you'll rush pell-mell into the thickest of the fights. Your hair is too easy a mark, Mr. Fort. Keep your cap on, for my sake."

As she dimpled, all at once a playful merry girl again, he put on an injured air. "You, of all persons, to make fun of me," he murmured. "Well, I'll keep my cap on — for your sake. Good-by, Miss Rose."

"Good-by," she answered softly, almost tenderly. "Good-by."

"And don't forget," said Homer eagerly, "that there's very little I wouldn't do for your sake, Miss

Rose. All joking aside, there isn't anything I wouldn't try to do — for your sake."

. . . . .

Down the long dusty street they came, drums beating, colors flying, horses shying and sidestepping yet somehow keeping well in line — a company of gay young blades, perfectly equipped, splendid as to mounts, and eager and longing for the fray. At their head the darling of the town, Tom Blankenship, sat his horse like an image, looking neither to right nor left, yet conscious of each admiring glance which fell upon him as he passed. He had forgotten everything in the excitement of the moment. It was like wine to him as well as to his comrades. This was war — this glorious passage along streets lined with cheering friends, every one sure that these brave boys would lick the Spanish to a frazzle, and return unscathed, as bright and fresh as when they started. This was war — this passionate loyalty which uplifted them and bore them onward. This was war — this wonderful intoxication composed of the thud of the horses' hoofs, the throb of the drums, the shrill notes of the fife, but most of all of the envy in the eyes of those men who were not to go, the worship in the faces of the women, the enthusiasm everywhere.

"A finer company of men I never saw," declared Judge Oglethorpe to Gabe as they stood side by side in front of the Budget office. "With such a hero for a

captain they'll come out at the head of the entire army. Mark my words!"

"Tom's all right when it comes down to fighting," said Gabe dryly. "And he certainly is a handsome man, eh, Rose?"

Rose did not answer. She was standing with Madge upon the top step of the short flight which led downward to the sidewalk. With arms intertwined the two were absorbed in watching the approach of the company. The girl's eyes were like stars. Her bosom rose and fell stormily from her quick breathing. The color came and went in her cheeks. Then, impelled to action by the nearing horsemen, she slipped her arm from about Madge's waist, seized a flag which had been used to drape the doorway, and waved it high in the air.

Tom glimpsed the blur of color at his left and wavered. For the first time he turned his head, and saw her and saluted. His men all followed suit. Many of them knew the pretty girl. Some of them had loved her. All of them were touched by her act, by her utter abandon and forgetfulness of self. It was the crowning moment of the day.

"For God and for the Cubans," called Rose in her ringing voice.

"Remember the *Maine*!" shouted a man standing near.

Suddenly without warning, without conscious thought almost, the troop of soldiers gave vent as with



one voice to that old Rebel Yell which had struck terror to the heart of many a Yankee in the Civil War days, and which both sides were to use with telling effect in the coming struggle. It rose and ebbed and died away into utter silence. There was something presaged in it which chilled the hearts of the bystanders — something menacing — something ominous — but before this feeling had time to grow into tangibility the brief pause was over. The throb of the drums, the thud of the hoofs, the figure of the captain sitting erect upon his mount, the glory and the glamor dominated the scene again. The glittering array swept down the street once more upon its way to Cuba — a way that was to prove long and disheartening, and was to end for many of them in the camp of disease, for a few in death upon the battlefield, and for many in wounds that maimed and tore, and left them but half men for all the rest of time.

## CHAPTER X

**A**FTER seemingly endless preliminaries and delays, yet in advance of the time set for beginning active hostilities, Shafter landed his troops in Cuba, took Las Guacimas in a reconnoitering expedition on the 23rd of June, and then began his advance upon Santiago.

This advance led through a country of wonderful beauty, where the vegetation possessed all the wild luxuriance of the tropics. The ceiba-tree, the banyan, and the royal palm spread proudly above masses of plants and trailing vines through which the machete of the Cuban scouts could hardly cut a path. Underneath this wealth of growth, glimpses could be caught of rugged granite boulders, or deep yawning chasms, which the violent agencies forming the island had left in all their primal ugliness for Nature to tenderly disguise. So, under the glory and excitement with which war was invested by our troops, lurked the horror of war itself, to be unfolded later.

From the valley three steep terraces arose, the first of which was speedily surmounted, thanks to the guns of our navy. Five days were spent in climbing the

second ridge, and in deploying out upon the broad and undulating mesa beyond. Here the Second Division of the army camped while waiting for the First Division and the dismounted Cavalry.

This table-land was high and comparatively dry, but for at least two miles ahead the trails descended into low-lying alluvial lands, filled with guinea grass and coffee-bushes gone to seed, and bordered with cactus and Spanish bayonet. In the distance rose the heights of San Juan, the third step up to Santiago.

The struggle for bare existence among the soldiers now became acute. They were lost in the jungle, their only connection with the world three mule-trains which crept endlessly back and forth. The men "rustled" diligently for the hardtack, coffee without sugar, and the bits of bacon rind which were scarcely fit to clean their rifles, much less to satisfy their hunger. The long-promised canned tomatoes were the principal topic of talk. Would they come soon, or wouldn't they? No bets were made upon this point, however, for in the present situation money was valueless, and treated with merited scorn.

The purpose which had brought the troops to Cuba now seemed forgotten. Some of the dog-tents still bore mildewed signs reading, "No War Talk Here," but these were quite unnecessary. There was not only no war talk, but there was no war attitude, and when the familiar command, "Cannoneers Forward!" at last rang out, it startled the army into a

movement for which it was mentally and physically unprepared.

On the night of the thirtieth of June, the Second Division bivouacked upon the road to El Caney. It was in some ways an infinitely pathetic sight — those thousands of men and boys, clad mostly in flannel shirts and trousers, dirty and ragged and unkempt, going placidly to sleep upon the open highway. During the hours of darkness they lay everywhere, singly or in groups, profoundly unconscious that before another night fell, death would have taken terrific toll of their number.

At last the full tropical moon rose high enough to shed its rays upon the scene. Those in the shadows of the palm trees slept on. Those whose eyes were protected by their arms also remained unaffected by the effulgent light. But here and there a careless sleeper, lying outstretched with face upturned, stirred and woke from his dreams of home and satisfying food, and sought the shade in the hope of further rest. One of these, with a muttered oath at his rude recall from the first real slumber he had known for days, rose, walked down the road, and chose a seat upon the trunk of a fallen palm.

In this roughly clad fellow, whose whole appearance testified to the hardships he had just undergone, the folks at Salem, Georgia, would have had some difficulty in recognizing Tom Blankenship. His flannel shirt was open at the throat. His face was

unshaven. His cheeks were thin and his eyes hollow and wild. The change in him was not only ascribable to the past few weeks, but to his state of mind.

Unfortunately for the man, he could not keep from brooding upon what had transpired during the year before his enlistment in the army. His last interview with Rose, while in it he had endeavored to appear confident that in the end she must yield to his claims, had really convinced him that she would never change. In his self-conceit he had thought a little neglect would make her realize his value, and so had gone away. When he returned it was to find her gone. During his short spring absence she had returned to Salem. So Fate had tricked him all the winter through, except for that one short moment in the orchard, before his company left for its Florida camp. And that one moment had intensified the painful memories of the preceding fall. It had trebled the emotions those memories aroused.

In Tampa he had grown to welcome the prospect of going to Cuba, more and more as a chance for self-forgetfulness. Vacillating between a mad desire to die upon the field, and an equal hunger to live, revenge himself on Captain Gabe, and humble Rose, torn by the blackest of emotions, and by a conflicting longing daily growing stronger — to win again from the eyes of the girl that look of love and trust with which she had once honored him — the man was not accountable for his actions. Companioned by self

justification, befriended by jealousy and thwarted passion, fed on consuming rage and hate, and as yet absorbed in the contemplation of his own bitter disappointment, small wonder that he had changed from the easy-going, reckless and confident Tom Blankenship of former days in Salem.

On this night fatigue had closed his eyes for a brief respite. Awake and somewhat rested, he knew he should not sleep again, and so he sought the silent shadow and the seat upon the log. Then, as his thoughts began to whirl about the self-same cycle of events, a hand fell on his shoulder, and he looked up into the earnest eyes of a young lieutenant — a man so gentle and so boyish that he had been affectionately dubbed "The Kid."

"I wouldn't say one word to you," the Kid now declared wistfully, "if it wasn't that I like you more than any other man in the troop." In the face of this astounding statement, he released his hold of Tom's shoulder and took a seat beside him.

"What do you mean?" growled Tom. "You hardly know me. I've been in the devil of a humor for the past two months. I frighten myself sometimes, so I know that I must frighten others, too. They look at me askance, and whisper about me among themselves. Not one has dared to speak freely to me but you. What do you want?"

The Kid flushed a little at this surly speech, ending with the abrupt demand. Then, "To-morrow we



are going to fight — to-day, rather, since it is long past midnight now. Some of us may lose our lives, and many will probably be wounded. When I saw you rise and come off here alone, I felt that I must speak to you. I won't ask you to tell me what is troubling you — but I thought if you knew that you have the liking and the sympathy of all the boys, in spite of the distance at which you have held them, you might go into battle in a better spirit. If I am wrong, forgive me."

The simplicity of the words, backed by the young, handsome face, stirred Tom profoundly. And in a curiously softened manner he now spoke to the boy. "Have you a sweetheart at home?" he asked.

"Of course I have," flashed the Kid with a joyous smile.

"Suppose she spurned you on the eve of your departure," pursued Tom, too self-absorbed to keep from the subject of his wrongs. "How would you feel to-night?"

"That would depend," answered the Kid wisely, "on the reasons why she did this thing."

"I don't mind telling you," said Tom, still in the same softened mood, and without the slightest hesitancy he laid his case before the boy.

The result disconcerted him. He had expected a little approbation, certainly some admiration, and a large measure of sympathy. He had not looked for condemnation, yet this was what he now read in the

eyes of his listener, and it surprised him, coming from a man.

"She must be very noble," the Kid now said aloud. "She must have put aside all thought of self in trying to make you understand."

"I have not said I was guilty of the things she charged me with," defended Tom, though a moment before he had regarded himself as anything but guilty.

"You don't need to say so. An innocent man would be less violent, and less resentful."

"Where did you learn such wisdom?" mocked Tom. "Well, yes, the child was mine, I believe. The woman had been wronged by me — is that the way you moral prigs speak of such affairs? Now cast me off and go back to your comrades. I am beneath your notice."

"Not so," asserted the Kid warmly. "You are misguided. Her influence will win you over in the end."

"Nonsense," sneered Tom. "Do you claim prophetic faculties?"

"No, and yet, upon the verge of battle, I do believe a new insight comes to us at times," said the Kid so earnestly that Tom was silenced. "Some-way I feel that in the coming fight, or later in some scene which will be the outcome of it, you will be brought to face the falsity of your position, and will ask nothing better than to make amends. We men,"

continued the Kid proudly, unaware of Tom's smile at this inclusive statement. "We men, with our sense of special privilege, and our chivalry which claims superiority for woman while yielding her contempt — we are too apt to underrate her power. This girl you love will win you over yet. See if she doesn't."

So saying he rose, laid his hand again affectionately upon Tom's shoulder and bade him good-night. "Try to get more sleep," he begged. "You'll feel the lack of it to-morrow."

"To hell with to-morrow," muttered Tom.

The Kid did not apparently hear but continued down the road, stepping carefully across the sleeping figures prostrate in the dust, toward the spot he had vacated to follow Tom. The latter watched him with a covert smile. He had already regretted his confidences, although admitting that they had brought him some relief. But he had not chosen his hearer wisely. The Kid quite evidently thought purity of morals admirable in men as well as women. This attitude Tom set down to sheer boyishness, giving it the contempt which he felt it merited. It was something the fellow would outgrow.

And then again his heart softened, as he remembered the frank earnestness of the boy, and what he had said about all the fellows in the camp liking him, Tom Blankenship. Tom's arrogant self-confidence lifted its head again. People had always

liked him, whatever he did. They liked him even now. "The King could do no wrong."

And yet — "She'll win you over in the end," had prophesied the Kid. Well, he was wrong. Rose would never, never win. He, Tom, would stake his life on that, for he meant to win and on his own terms, too. So hardening his heart with repetitions of his vengeful purpose, he sat on the log until the coming of the dawn. The poisonous mists arose from the Valley to circle round his silent figure. At daybreak, when his companions stirred to action, he still was sitting there alone.

The Second Massachusetts Volunteers descended first into the Valley, where it was still night. From the heights Tom watched the shadows flee before the rising sun, until the village of El Caney floated out like a mirage under the clear light. It was so peaceful, with the smoke rising gently from the chimneys of the yellow-walled, red-roofed houses, that for a moment he felt the war must be a dream. And then he started as a sharp command to fire sent the first shot crashing down into the sleeping town. With a cry of impatient eagerness he ran forward and rejoined his troop. He thirsted for the battle, and scarcely waited for his orders before he plunged himself and his men recklessly into it.

For hours he was dominated by this lust for war. The bombardment of the field artillery was like the throbbing of a gigantic heart which gave his blood

barbarous impulses. He saw men fall about him, without bending a thought upon the fact that they were wounded, perhaps dying, perhaps already dead. As his own regiment crept doggedly nearer and nearer, and was able to return the devastating fire of the enemy, he put every faculty upon the work in hand, gloating over each volley fired by his men, and cheering them madly on. So passed the time until midday.

It was now intolerably hot, and the sun, directly overhead, seemed stationary in the sky. With the rest Tom crossed San Juan creek, a short half-mile below the heights from which the Spaniards poured their shots unceasingly. Well hidden in the jungle along the line of march Spanish sharpshooters also picked off man after man from the rear. Some few faltered under this nerve-racking attack. Tom never hesitated for a moment, but by his rush onward inspired not only his own men, but those of other troops.

Formation was now no longer possible, and as they plunged stubbornly ahead, regiments became inextricably mixed. It was at this time that Tom saw the Kid again, with a face so distorted by fear as to be hardly recognizable for the calm, earnest countenance which he had last seen in the moonlight a few hours before. This fear-ridden grimy visage gave Tom his first reaction from the passion for fighting which had held him so completely.

The men were now deploying into the jungle on the opposite side of the creek. Inspired by a mixture of emotions not the least of which was contempt for the Kid thus blanching under fire, Tom turned upon the open bank and pressed close enough to speak. At first the young Lieutenant did not understand, but stared into Tom's eyes with an expression so agonized and so distracted that even Tom was moved.

"Since you are so afraid," had been his sneering speech, "why don't you say you're sick and fall behind?" This, as he repeated it, he felt constrained to turn into an entreaty.

But the Kid, now comprehending, replied with stiff lips. "I'm sweating blood with fear; but I'll go ahead all right and keep my men in line, too, never fear."

And so he went on into the undergrowth, with his hundred or so of men, and Tom for the first time perceived that courage could be of a rarer sort than his own temporary mad oblivion to danger. Respect leaped into his heart for the boy who was born a coward, and yet by sheer force of will could drive himself onward at the head of his command. This was a man whose opinions counted. His words returned again, and, as Tom too pressed forward up the slope, they repeated themselves to him with new and more poignant meaning.

But the reaction, once begun, continued merci-



lessly. Tom tasted weariness, physical and mental. There had been no breakfast, nor time for hunting food at noon. The water had been gone from his canteen long ago, and he dared not fill it from the fetid creek. The fight had degenerated into crawling through the jungle, with volleys coming both from front and rear. Tom crept on doggedly, with head bent down, but he suddenly became conscious of the helpless, writhing men upon all sides. Their positions, at first seeming grotesque, now took on the terrible significance of suffering, and Tom sickened at the sight. But as too much horror dulls the sensibilities, so in turn this feeling passed, and he was able to look indifferently about, and to fling a casual word or two of encouragement to the soldiers able to creep back to the temporary and wholly inadequate field hospital in the rear.

And then among the dead he spied a face he knew. It was the Kid's, his look of fear all gone and replaced by a smile of perfect peace. He lay in a bunch of guinea grass, almost as though he were asleep. Tom delayed long enough to make sure that all was over. And when he felt the tears creep down his blackened cheeks, he was quite unashamed. His confidences were safely locked in the still boyish heart which had been true to its master's highest ideals unto the very end. There was no time to indulge in sorrow or regret, and with a silent good-by Tom turned and crawled on wearily.

They had reached the tall sugar-cane and were deploying to gain the partial shelter of a little knoll about five hundred yards from the heights which the First and Third Brigades were soon to storm, when Tom, thinking to save his men a little from the ceaseless storm of bullets, rose to his feet and shouted to them to run forward with him to safety. As the words left his lips he staggered, whirled about and then fell prone. He had been wounded in the head by a shell, a fragment of which also struck him directly between the eyes. The glories of the charge and final victory were not for him, and through the remainder of that long hot afternoon he lay unconscious in the sugar cane.

Towards evening a light shower fell, and the rain upon his face brought him to himself. Seeing his head stir restlessly upon the ground, a soldier passing by, stopped and gave him to drink from his canteen.

"Is it night?" Tom asked in odd thick tones.

The soldier did not answer, being either indifferent or too moved by pity, and so Tom took his silence for assent. He felt very tired but quite calm. The passion in his brain had burnt itself out, and peacefully he went to sleep.

The night lasted long. Tom slept and waked again, and still the darkness held. He heard occasional footsteps passing, and called, but he had difficulty in managing his tongue, which was parched

and swollen. He fancied himself unseen, because of the enveloping darkness, and did not know that those with a better chance for life were being cared for first. Conscious of a dull grinding pain in his head, he tried to raise a hand, but could not. So time passed, interminably long, until he began to wonder sillily if the Spanish guns had not shot the sun down out of the sky, so that the night would last forever.

At last he heard rough voices just above him and felt a hand upon his heart. He moaned feebly for water, which soon trickled through his lips. He asked the time and was told that it was Sunday afternoon, the third of July. The fact carried no impression to his brain. They might as well have said it was ten years ahead, for all he knew of time. And then they lifted him, and the shock of the sudden movement jarred him into unconsciousness again.

Another interval and he awoke once more. It was still night. He was being jolted over a rough road, continually coming into collision with other men who shared the wagon bed with him. Some of them screamed in their agony, and others fought and struggled, delirious from long exposure. They were being taken to the Division Hospital for treatment, but Tom did not know that. He thought himself in hell, and wondered idly if it would always be as easy to endure as this, for he was conscious of no

pain — only that pain was crouching near, a great, black, ghoulish shape. And he wondered, too, if in hell there were no sunlight.

Another interval, and he lay upon the ground. He knew this because of the rough grass beneath him. He was almost naked for, in common with others similarly exposed to the weather, his clothes had rotted so that they tore apart, and there was nothing with which to replace them. He now began to suffer from a cold so piercing that it seemed to attack his very heart. And still it was night, long, black, interminable night.

Some one stooped over him, and a hand fell on his wrist. "When will the day come?" he asked of this some one, whom he felt to be kind and sympathetic from the pressure on his pulse.

"My good fellow," said a pleasant and somehow a familiar masculine voice. "The day has half gone. It is noon now."

"There has been no day," protested Tom. "There has been no day."

Ignoring this protest, which was, indeed, so low and mumbled as to be incoherent, the pleasant voice asked gravely if he wished to send a message to his friends. He considered for a moment. Had he friends? And then in his sick brain a picture formed of Rose, with a baby on her knee, and the firelight playing on them both. It was a pretty picture and he smiled and whispered that Rose — Rose

— and then again fell silent, to concentrate upon this vision of her.

“Rose who?” The pleasant voice intruded on his dreams.

“Rose. Tell her I love her.”

“Rose who?” Again the voice, insistently, trying to hold his thoughts.

“Rose,” he answered readily. “Rose Shelley. Salem, Georgia.” And then, wistfully, “Do you think she will forgive me?”

“I know she will,” the kind voice answered in an odd, interested sort of way. “Good God, man! But it’s a shame to let you die!”

The hand then withdrew itself from Tom’s limp wrist, but its owner could not keep his thoughts from the wounded man. Not that he knew it was Tom, for by now Tom was simply a case — a very serious case. He had been brought in and laid upon the surgeon’s table for examination some time ago. There the surgeon had looked him over, and had then asked sternly, “Why do you bring a man to me in such a condition as this?”

“Because, Major,” the contract surgeon had answered hopefully, “I thought we might save his life by operating.”

The Major had looked interested. “A pretty case! It is true we might operate, but do you imagine he could recover from the shock of it on hard-tack and rancid pork?”

To this bitter speech the contract surgeon made no reply.

"Anyhow," the Major had continued, "we can't waste time on doubtful cases."

And so Tom had been carried over to the ceiba-tree, and left to die.

Here, in a semicircle, lay the hopeless cases. Some were babbling the names of their dear ones. Others were falling quietly into their last long sleep. Still others were struggling valiantly for life against odds too heavy for them. And here Tom lay, vacillating between consciousness and unconsciousness, while the time passed on.

Among those whose sympathies were not too blunted by horror to make them quite indifferent, was a ragged man with freckles and a shock of carrot hair. On this hair he wore a cap shot through and through by bullet holes, which he found time to examine anxiously now and then. Asked why he looked it over, he answered calmly that he was wondering how best to mend it, lest his hair get sunburned, and joined readily in the laugh he thus unfailingly aroused. But though disposed to treat every incident with levity, he was all the time working quietly and efficiently among the wounded. It was he who had gone over to the hopeless cases, to alleviate a little of the suffering crowded mercilessly together there, and it was his hand which had felt Tom's pulse. His kindly eye had taken note of the



first-aid bandage, hurriedly replaced after the surgeon's examination, and it was he who exclaimed so earnestly, "Good God, man! But it's a shame to let you die." His name was Homer Fort.

Homer could not get this particular hopeless case out of his mind. He did not recognize the fellow as Tom Blankenship, but realized now that it was a friend of Rose Shelley's, who had thus interested him. Later he returned to the ceiba-tree, there to find the dying man muttering to himself that day would never come, and where on earth was Rose? This further roused his sympathies, so that he made up his mind to a final effort to save the wounded soldier.

There had come a lull in the work of the surgeons, due to the fact that the last wagon-load had been gone over, and the next had not yet arrived. Homer approached the surgeon major who had passed judgment upon the case in question.

"Major," he drawled whimsically, "there's a fellow over there among the hopeless cases who is as stubborn as a mule. He just won't die."

The surgeon looked up aggressively, inclined to resent this interference with his brief moment of rest. But as he encountered the guileless blue eyes of Homer, he found himself smiling in response to their honest friendliness, and answered cordially, "That so? Let's have another look at him." To his own surprise, he walked across to the ceiba-tree,

guided by Fort, and bent over Tom's prostrate body.

"Friend of yours?" he now inquired, as he took off the first-aid bandage.

"No," answered Homer. "But he is a plucky devil, and somehow I couldn't help liking him and wanting to help him."

"Has he said anything?"

"Spoke of a girl at home, in Georgia."

"Are you from Georgia, too?"

"No. Just a volunteer from Chicago."

"Your name?"

"Homer Fort."

"Well, Homer Fort, I'll give the man a chance. Get an orderly to help you, and shift him over to the table. I'll do my best. And don't thank anything but your own powers of persuasion. If you told the devil Hell was Heaven, he'd believe you, and get out to make room for the saints. Now then —"

Homer had beckoned to an orderly who came running across the grass, and poor Tom was flung again upon the table, very much like a sack of meal. The operation was performed, hastily but well, the wound was dressed, and with a hope expressed that the man might live, and not be blind if he did live, Tom, still a case, was laid again upon the grass, but this time with those waiting removal to the hospital at Siboney.

There Homer Fort kept watch of him, and when his consciousness returned, was ready with water, into which he had put a few precious drops of lime

juice. Tom signified that this was good, and then Homer, leaning very close, asked softly, "Is Rose Shelley your sweetheart?"

"I don't think so," replied Tom. "I'm not quite sure. Sometimes I could swear she isn't, and then again I could swear she is. What do you think?"

"I think if she were you'd be quite sure about it," answered Homer with a curiously lightened heart. "What's your name, anyhow?"

"Blankenship. Tom Blankenship."

"Oh — ho." Homer beamed with satisfaction. When he had entered Gabe's office, on the morning of the Captain's close call, he had seen signs of tension in the group, and Tom's sulky withdrawal had been significant that all was not plain sailing for him with Rose. Tom then, had been a different-looking man from what he was now, and Fort could not help contrasting that handsome, well-dressed fellow, with the poor wreck of humanity to whom he was now ministering. What would Rose say, if she knew? Would she be only sorry, or would she feel that deeper, more vital grief inspired by love? Homer was not at all certain, even yet, but in any case he was man enough to feel thankful that he had been drawn to Tom sufficiently to save him. If he lived, Rose would be grateful. Another step forward in her estimation, thought Homer gleefully, and this comforting thought stayed with him when later he was ordered again to the front.

## CHAPTER XI

**T**HE blossoms were now gone from the trees in Salem, and the green fruit was forming splendidly. The laborers were busy picking off the smaller peaches, to make room for the development of the good crop. This picked fruit was not wasted, however, as it made a good ration for the hogs.

The orchard, therefore, was still a scene of bustle and activity, visited constantly by Captain Gabe, who was jubilant over the prospects. But this joy of his, which would ordinarily have transcended everything, was wistful and subdued, for there were many things upon the Captain's mind. Himself a veteran of the Civil War, he recollected all too keenly the hardships of those days, and his heart went out to the boys in Cuba as it could never have done had he been less acquainted with all they were enduring and must still endure. Perhaps his sympathy with their sufferings lay at the bottom of his consent to let Rose go to Cuba as a nurse.

It was true that it had taken Rose a long time to win this consent, and twice already, when she had been given an opportunity of becoming one of a band

of nurses, she had refused for her father's sake. She had but just come home, he said. Surely she loved them well enough to tarry just a little while. What would he do again without his Rose? It was beginning to look as though she must give up all her hopes of helping at the front, when news came which altered everything.

It was Tuesday, the fifth of July. Minnie had come down from the hills the week before — the Shelleys kept her with them except for short visits home — and was sitting this afternoon, with one eye on "li'l Tawm," who was crawling about the room on mischief bent, and the other on Rose, who was half-heartedly practicing on the bandaging of wounds. Her intelligent eyes missed nothing of Rose's movements, and her fingers, long since grown deft, itched to perform the same feats with the shapely rolls of linen and the dummy figure. "Let me try," she said at last. "I know I could do it almost as well as that, Rose, even though I never was taught how."

This made Rose smile, and yield her place to Minnie. The latter found the task much harder than she had thought, and the two soon became absorbed, Rose in teaching, and Minnie in learning, what she discovered to be a series of complicated problems.

"I think you have done wonders," beamed Rose, when the lesson was over at last. "And will you just look and see what 'li'l Tawm' has accomplished?"

In truth, for a baby, the result was noteworthy.

He had found a roll of linen, fallen unobserved upon the floor, and with consummate skill and ingenuity, he had proceeded to wind it about his own person and an adjacent table leg.

"I prophesy nothing less than a doctor-of-medicine out of him," exclaimed Rose, when they discovered that the only way of getting the young rascal out with any degree of haste was to cut the bandage in a dozen places.

"No," roared Tommy loudly, tired from his confinement, and sleepy as well. It was the only word he said with any confidence yet.

Rose, still in her nursing costume, went with Minnie to put the child to bed. Then the two friends, with arms intertwined, answered the call to supper, which had been served on the veranda. Here they found Madge, with the evening papers still unopened, for this was an honor Gabe liked to have reserved for himself. He hurried in from the orchard, and the four were soon settled about the pretty wicker table.

"My Greensboros are ripe," he announced jovially. "I shall set the pickers at work to-morrow. They are slow this year, but I never saw a better crop. Next it will be the Crosby, and then the other midsummer varieties. But it is the late peaches which will be the eye openers. What is it, Unc' Jack?"

"Can'les, suh?" inquired Uncle Jack.

"What do you mean, you villain?" thundered Gabe. "It is still light enough and will be for an



hour. Do you dare to insinuate that my eyes are growing dim with age?"

"Naw, suh, naw, suh, I ain't in — insinnatin' naw-thin'," chuckled Uncle Jack, delighted with the sally. "But — but ain't you gwine read de papuhs, suh? Won't you want a light fo' readin' ob de papuhs?"

"We'll keep the papers until after we have eaten," decided Gabe eyeing them askance. "There are so many horrors in them lately that they don't go well with a cheerful social meal. Honey girl," addressing Rose, "how goes it?"

"Fine, Father," answered Rose affectionately. She knew that his question had not been aimed at externals, but at her inner self where he had discerned the sorrow which she hid so valiantly. Now she turned her eyes frankly up to his, and a long look of perfect love and understanding passed between them. Madge saw it with a little ache at her heart, not for the love Captain Gabe bore Rose, but because as yet she was shut out from the confidence the girl yielded so bountifully to her father. And again she resolved that the time must come when she, too, would share this confidence. Until it did come, her happiness would not be quite complete.

"Baby asleep?" asked Captain Gabe of Minnie.

"Yes, sir, sound asleep."

"That's good. Any news from your mother?"

"Oh, yes, a note this morning. She sent love to all of you, and hopes I'll soon come home."

"You shall stay here with us for a while, anyway. I hope you told her that?"

Receiving an affirmative reply, he turned to Madge. "My dear, have you decided yet what you are going to do with your riches?"

Madge shook her head. "But, as Mr. Fort said," she asserted brightly, "I shall keep smiling and not worry. Something will turn up. I can't get over Aunt Betty's leaving me all that money," she continued thoughtfully.

"She sent for you often enough," flashed Rose. "She made your life a burden the whole year before she died."

"She didn't realize that, of course," answered Madge. "But Tom Blankenship was her favorite nephew —"

"Not really her nephew, my dear," corrected Gabe, passing his plate for more fried chicken, that staple of a Southern meal.

"What is the relationship, anyhow?" queried Rose. She had accustomed herself to mentioning Tom casually, so Minnie had heard his name often enough not to be startled by it. Now she toyed with her food while Madge attempted to trace that elusive kinship which exists less often in the North than in the South where the old families formed a class apart and intermarried recklessly.

"Let me see," she mused. "Uncle John Oglethorpe was my grandfather's brother, and that makes

me his great-niece. I was Aunt Betty's niece through her marriage with Uncle John. She was a Munro, and an aunt on her mother's side married Tom's grandfather. So Aunt Betty was own cousin to Tom's father, and second cousin to Tom. But he was so much younger that he called her aunt, out of respect, and so came to be regarded as her nephew. She was certainly fond of him, and she told me repeatedly that he was to get all her money, because she felt so badly about having no children of her own, and Tom had in a manner seemed like her own son."

"You must have seemed just as much like a daughter," said Rose indignantly. "I should think you'd have said so, when she made remarks like that."

"What was the use?" asked Madge tranquilly. "I never did believe in reminding people of past favors. And the dear old lady really appreciated everything after all. She must have had a squabble with Tom, or she wouldn't have cut him off with a paltry thousand. But it was odd she never told me about changing her will."

"Aunt Betty was always quite a character," said Gabe genially. "I remember once, when I was a little shaver, and she a tall young lady, a lot of us youngsters were teasing a disreputable little nigger, whose mother had been sold to work in the cotton fields. She rushed into the bunch of us, boxed all our ears, took that filthy ragamuffin up in her arms, dried his tears on her lace handkerchief, carried him back

to his master, and bought him on the spot. He was her servant for several years, but he ran away at war-time, the ungrateful dog! My ears tingle yet, when I think of the whack she gave me, but I deserved it and I always admired her after that." And the Captain rubbed his ears as he laughed at the recollection.

"She was opinionated," declared Madge. "But I liked her, and I think she liked me because I would never argue or get mad."

"I'd have done both," laughed Rose. "Poor dear Aunt Betty! It's a mercy her sufferings are ended."

"It is," agreed Madge. "I'd feel her death more if it hadn't been such a relief. And then to think she loved me all the time, enough to will me fifty thousand dollars! I can't realize it even yet." The tears sprang to Madge's eyes, but she wiped them quietly away and looked at Gabe with a loving smile. "Tom doesn't need the money, or I'd think it my duty to step aside. I don't need it, either, with you to care for me. So it shall remain in the bank for the present, and something will surely come up for which I can use it, and so pay a tribute to her memory. Now, Gabe, if you are through let's have the news, and the candle, too, Uncle Jack."

"Not a bit of it," cried Gabe stoutly. "I could read the paper from A to izzard and then back again in this light."

So saying he settled his glasses on his nose, and took the folded sheets. The battles of San Juan and El

Caney had by now been given in full detail, so the first page was taken up with a repetition of events, a few local items, and a partial list of the killed and wounded in the two battles. From the headlines Gabe picked out the bits of news most interesting to his audience, and scanned the list of names, reading aloud those of men they knew or had heard about. So rapidly did he go down the columns, that his sudden pause gained significance, so that the three women were prepared when he laid the paper gently down, and said in an altered tone, "Tom Blankenship was wounded — seriously wounded — at El Caney."

At first they sat in silence, while the shock of the news bit in. Then Minnie shrank back into the shadow and slipped away. Rose sprang to her feet, her first impulse to refuse credence to the report. "It isn't true. Oh, it can't be true," she cried.

"I am afraid it is true," answered Gabe gravely. "If this list were not official I should question it, but by now they have had time to correct any mistakes. And they give his full name, his rank, and that he fell while attempting to gain a shelter in front of the Spanish fort. I am quite sure it is true."

As he spoke, to Rose there appeared a vision of Tom as she had seen him last, tall, handsome, virile, angry. Into the eyes of this vision leapt the look of love and passion which she had so often encountered in the eyes of the living man. And then she saw him

lying wounded, sick unto death, and her whole heart throbbed with tenderness and pity. But before she could speak Minnie had returned and confronted them, her eyes alight with suffering beneath which Rose's emotions sank into insignificance.

"Whar is he?" she asked abruptly, returning in her stress to the plain mountain speech so recently discarded. "Whar is he? I've got to git thar somehow. I've got to git thar befo' he dies.

"They's somethin' I ain't nevuh tol' you-all," she continued, turning her tortured face from one to the other in an agony of appeal. "But it wuz Tawm Blankenship I loved. It wuz him as wuz father to my baby. Now he's dyin'—shot—'way off in Cuby! I've got to git thar someway, I tell you. Ain't thar no way I kin git thar quick?"

"Of course there is a way," cried Rose, suppressing her own sorrow at the news, as she realized its effect on Minnie. "Of course there's a way. I had just written a letter to refuse an opening with a Ladies' Auxiliary from Georgia. The letter has not yet been mailed. I'll write instead and say I'll come if they'll let me take you, too."

"Oh, will you?" Minnie's sad eyes brightened, and her hands relaxed their pressure against her heart. "Will that be the quickest way—the very quickest?"

"The very quickest way," Rose assured her. "Come! We'll write the letter now. You shall



watch me do it, to be sure I put everything straight. Let's hurry, so we'll catch the evening mail."

"Just a moment," interrupted Gabe. "How about the baby? And Minnie's mother?"

"I'll take the baby with me," answered Minnie, into whose head the thought of leaving "li'l Tawm" had not entered for a moment.

"But you can't take him," explained Gabe.

"Why can't I?" asked Minnie piteously. "Why can't I, Rose?"

"I'll keep him here with me," said Madge, now speaking for the first time. "And your mother shall come here to wait for you. I'd love to keep him. It won't be a bit of trouble."

"Then that's settled," exclaimed Rose. "Now come! Let's write our letter."

It spoke volumes for Minnie's love for Tom that she did not question this decision. With a grateful look at Madge she let the impetuous girl hurry her away, and the letter was sent which would bring her nearer to the man she loved, and would grant Rose her opportunity for service.

"Are you sure you want to take so much upon yourself?" asked Gabe of Madge. "The care of this baby—"

"Will be a pleasure," Madge interposed. "A pleasure that would be greater only if he were my very own. If Mrs. Gray is willing to come down here, she will help me, though I really do not need

help. Oh, Gabe, there is nothing in this world that appeals to me like a baby. I love every one, black and white, rich and poor. And they say there are thousands of little ones who come to people who don't want them! They say there are tens of thousands whose homes are so poor, whose chances of life are so feeble, whose birthrights have been so travestied, that their coming is a misfortune instead of a joy. 'Li'l Tawm's' birth was this, even in his mother's eyes, until we taught her better. In helping her and him, perhaps we may find a way to help those other little ones. If we ever do, then the short life of our own baby will not have been in vain. He taught me how to love all babies, Gabe."

"Thank God for that, anyhow," said the stalwart man, with tear-filled eyes. "It is the maternal instinct in you, Madge, which draws us closer every day."

## CHAPTER XII

**T**O both Rose and Minnie the trip to Cuba was merely a period during which they had time to gather their strength for the ordeal to come. They kept much to themselves and their intimacy grew. Long hours they spent looking out across the blue waters of the Gulf, straining their eyes to catch the first glimpse of Cuba. As time passed, Minnie's quiet endurance of her anxiety and distress quite awed Rose, whose nature was more impatient, and who was so apt to chafe at delay. If she had taught Minnie much in the last few months, Minnie had also taught the spirited girl, especially since the news of Tom's wound had reached them. Rose often paused to look with both wonder and respect at Minnie, as she carefully rehearsed every bit of refinement or difference of speech which she had learned, that she might reflect no discredit on her lover.

A great deal of the preliminary work in Cuba had been finished by the time this particular auxiliary arrived. When Miss Barton, the first to reach the scene, had offered the services of her band of nurses to the United States Hospital, they had been indig-

nantly refused. The intrepid Red Cross leader, nothing daunted, had turned her attention to the Cuban hospital, which was in horrible condition, but scarcely worse than the American. Such wonders did she and her eight nurses accomplish there, that at last they were requested to take charge of the other, and it speaks well for their spirit that they wasted no time in resentment at their first reception, nor waited to be coaxed. Tom lay in a department directly under the charge of Mrs. Trumbull White, whose efficient services saved scores of men from blindness, and through Mrs. White, Rose was able to secure permission for Mrs. Kemp to help in those particular cases, and thus gain access to Tom. Rose herself was put in a larger ward, as being one of the more skillful graduate nurses, so needed in the dressing of abdominal wounds.

The two girls were together when Minnie first presented herself for service. She begged Rose for this favor, feeling more equal to the meeting with Tom if her friend was near. And Rose put aside her own feelings in her endeavor to help Minnie through her agony of suspense, which grew greater as the end of it approached.

"Rose," she whispered, as they walked across to the tent where Tom Blankenship lay. "What shall I say to him? How must I act? I reckon I'll forget all you have taught me. Will he recognize me?" This last question she had asked a thousand times.

"No, dear Minnie, I do not think he will recognize you," answered Rose, her head high and her cheeks aflame. It was her way to meet her trials with a courageous front. "You must remember that he is blind."

"I do," half sobbed Minnie. "But I'd know him if I was blind and deaf. I'd feel his presence, no matter how sick I was."

"Dear," said Rose, stopping short. "You love Tom, but you must not overlook the fact that as yet he does not love you. This is a truth which you have got to face and set yourself to undermine. Now is your opportunity. To a sick man there is no one like his nurse, and if she be sweet and bright, patient and tender and cheerful, as well as a trifle coquettish, she can usually do what she wills with him, provided his heart is not otherwise engaged. I have told you that Tom once thought he loved me. He may still think so, but even if he does, the odds are in your favor. This may sound cynical, but we have got to consider everything. Now calm yourself, and forge ahead. I am here to help you through the worst of it."

So they entered the tent together.

At first they were blinded by the sudden change from the glare of the tropical sun outside to the cool shadow of the canvas. As they hesitated in the opening, a Red Cross nurse came forward with a welcoming smile, for she was worn out and knew this

meant relief. "Which of you is Mrs. Kemp?" she whispered.

"This is she," answered Rose, pushing forward Minnie, now quite incapable of speech in her excitement.

"How do you do?" said the nurse. "Please do not fail to change the bandages as often as this chart indicates. Replace them with those soaking in the ice over there. Here are the medicines with full directions. I have just taken the temperatures, so you will not need to do that again before the Doctor's visit." Rapidly she explained what else it was necessary for her substitute to know, and Minnie had to force attention, while all the time her heart throbbed with alarming anticipation, and her eyes longed to search out Tom.

At last the Red Cross nurse took her departure and the girls were free. Rose hesitated, looking from one to another of the double row of cots, but Minnie never faltered. Swift as an arrow she sped down the middle aisle, and stopped by the bedside of a man so straight and still that he seemed like an effigy carved in stone, rather than a living being. With her hands against her heart she stood there for a moment, and then dropped on her knees beside him.

At first Rose thought she meant to call Tom's name, and spoil everything by a too sudden revelation of her identity. But even in this, her supremest hour, when she first faced the father of her child



after months of anguished uncertainty, Minnie remembered and was dumb.

His head and eyes were bandaged. His face was thin and of that ghastly pallor which olive skins take on through loss of blood. His lips were colorless and so drawn that the shapes of his large and perfect teeth were outlined beneath them. He seemed to be asleep, but whether he felt the presence of some one near, or only reiterated a request which was often on his lips, he now moved his head restlessly and moaned for water.

In a pitcher Rose found a concoction made by soaking dried apples in ice-water. This, which the sick men would ordinarily have disdained, had been a happy thought of Miss Barton's, and was welcomed now as nectar from the gods. Rose poured a glass and passed it to Minnie, who raised Tom's head and held it to his lips. He drank it thirstily, with a sigh of joy.

"Ah! But that's good!" he gasped when he was through. And then something in the tender reluctance with which Minnie released his head, and wiped his mouth, roused him to languid interest.

"Are you the nurse?" he asked faintly.

"I am Mrs. Kemp," faltered Minnie slowly.

"Have you been here — long?"

"I have just come."

"Are you going to take care of me — of us poor fellows here?"

"Part of the time I shall take care of you."

He was silent for a moment. Then, "You have a pretty voice. I like to hear you speak. God! But my head burns!"

She changed the bandages and he whispered feebly that she was an angel, with a magic touch.

But now the talk, low as it was, had roused others of the sufferers, and Minnie dared not linger by the side of the man she loved. With a last light smoothing of the bandage on his head, she left him, to do what was needed for the rest. Well for her that she had to be so occupied, or else she must have broken down and cried his name and told him all her story.

As soon as she was quite composed, Rose returned to her own part of the hospital camp, where, in her incessant duties, she too obtained relief from the storm which raged within her. That night, when she was given a few hours for sleep, she fought her last battle with herself about Tom Blankenship. She knew that her love for him was gone, but in its stead she bore a wound that every thought of him pierced through and through. She had given him her first love. He had betrayed her trust and so she suffered. But she now perceived a rift in the clouds ahead, that meant the future substitute of peace for pain. Before she forced herself to the sleep she needed so badly, she had made herself believe that this peace was nearer than she had at first supposed.

In the morning, she saw Minnie for a moment.

The eyes of the mountain girl held a new look of resolution. "He does not know me," she whispered to Rose. "But already he turns to me. The nurses here are not sympathetic. They haven't time to be. From a few words of his, I think he has suffered dreadfully. He imagines he is going to die, and has made me promise to be there to help him through. He is too sick to be unselfish."

"Then the start is good," Rose responded. "Make yourself indispensable to him, dear."

The days went swiftly by, for where there is much to do, the waking hours pass like dreams and sleep is mere oblivion. At first Rose was anxious, fearing Minnie's frail strength too sorely tried. But Minnie thrived in the presence of her lover and of Rose, the two people she most adored.

As it became certain that Tom's wound was healing, "by first intention," that his paralysis was slowly leaving, and that his recovery was only a matter of time, all of her anxiety sank itself in the joy of having him so in need of her. When she was relieved from duty and went to the nurses' quarters to sleep, his sightless face turned to the tent opening as she passed from it, and when she returned he would still be lying so, with ears alert for the sound of her footsteps. His welcoming smile was glorious to her. The gloom with which he invested her absence stirred her equally.

At last he was considered well enough to return to

the United States, and received his discharge. But he did not want to go home. By now he had grown so used to Mrs. Kemp's presence that he could not bear the thought of being helpless and without her. No other nurse was half so kind and gentle. No other nurse knew how to fix his bandages properly, or keep his pillow comfortable. No other grasped so readily how hot he liked his broth, or the exact coolness necessary to quench his thirst. In a word it was quite impossible for him to get along without Mrs. Kemp. He had early judged that she must be a widow.

"Take care of me until I am well," he begged in one of their last few brief moments of conversation. "I'll pay you anything you ask."

"It isn't a question of pay," she told him.

"Ah! I know that," he murmured. "It is a question of having you at any cost. I've got to have you."

It was difficult indeed for her to put him off. "I am sorry," she said, and her tones showed that she was really so. "But you know that they do not allow women nurses on the transport which will take you home. Besides, my duty is here, and will be for some time to come."

"Damn duty," he growled. He was still impetuous and yet, even in his illness, enough of a gentleman to apologize for the oath. "I didn't mean that. But I am a sick man still, and your duty is with me.

At any hospital in Georgia I would not even be considered convalescent, or out of danger. Here I am shipped off as soon as possible. It isn't fair."

"I am sorry," said Minnie again. "But in Georgia you have friends to care for you —"

"Friends? I tell you, Mrs. Kemp, there is only one other woman in the world who could take your place, and she has cast me off."

Minnie knew all the story, for Rose had thought it wisest to prepare her, in case Tom grew confidential. So now she only smiled and held her peace. Her silence piqued the man. Although he was still positive that he loved Rose, she was beginning to represent to him the unattainable, while this nurse was very near and very sweet.

"Well," he said in an injured tone. "Aren't you curious at all? Wouldn't you like to know who that woman is?"

"Why should I?" replied Mrs. Kemp coolly. "I am simply your nurse, Mr. Blankenship, and when we part we may never meet again. I not only have no right to your confidences, but I should much prefer not to receive them."

This was very hard for Minnie to say. It is doubtful if she could have said it, had Rose not primed her for some such talk, and drilled her in the proper answer. The crestfallen man lay still to digest her speech, while she forced herself to move away. When next she returned to his bedside, he

made a superhuman effort, and stretched out a skeleton hand.

"That's wonderful," she cried, pretending to misunderstand the reason for his act. "It won't be long before you can move about as well as anybody."

"I didn't do it to show off," he growled. "But I want you to shake hands and forgive me for my insistence. You see I've become so dependent on you that I quite forgot you may have other claims much greater than mine. You — you may stay here if you think it best. And if I die without you — I don't suppose you'll ever even know it."

So weak and childish was he that from under the bandages the tears rolled down his hollow cheeks. That was almost too much for Minnie. As she wiped them away she said playfully, "Big baby! Of course I shall keep track of how you are getting along. Didn't you know that I have friends in Salem?"

"No! Why, that's great! Who are they?" cried Tom.

"Rose Shelley, for one," answered Minnie.

Tom paused for a moment while the shock of this penetrated. If Rose and Mrs. Kemp were friends — had Rose made damning confidences? Then, "You don't say," he faltered. "Has Rose — but I have no right to ask that. Wait a bit — Do you know anything about me that might tend to make you — dislike me — disapprove of me?"



"Not a thing," Mrs. Kemp assured him heartily, so heartily that his heart gave a great throb and sent the color into his white cheeks. "Did you know she was here, in the camp? She came on the same ship with me."

"No. I didn't know," he muttered, turning his head away.

"Would you like to have her come in for a word with you before you leave for home?"

There was a distinct silence. Then Tom said slowly, "No. I do not think I want her to see me as I am just now. I can bear to have you see me, because you are so kind and sympathetic. But Rose is strong, and lithe, and well. She is a nurse, I know, and of course she is kind, too—but not like you, Mrs. Kemp. She saw me last when I was able to meet her upon her own ground. Now—well, I am at a pitiful disadvantage. I'd rather wait—but while I wait I want you. God! How I want you!"

"Well, you can't have me," she retorted, stung by the tenderness with which he spoke of Rose, and by his very reluctance to meet the girl he loved. "For I shall stay here, and you are going in a day or two—as soon as they can get you and all the rest on board the transport. But—" she relented. "If I should go to Salem, perhaps I'll meet you there."

With this he was forced to be content.

## CHAPTER XIII

“**W**ELL, well! Tom Blankenship! How are you? Didn’t expect to see me first of any one in Salem, did you, my boy?”

Thus Gabe Shelley, in his hearty voice, with a hand outstretched to shake Tom’s wasted fingers.

“You forget,” returned Tom drily, “that I cannot see at all.”

“I beg your pardon, I’m sure,” protested Gabe distressfully. “I meant no harm. It was a mere figure of speech. I heard last night that you had arrived, so I thought I’d drop in to see how you were, and to let you know something of what has gone on in your absence. Perhaps you’d rather I’d come back some other time?”

“No,” decided Tom. “I’ll talk with you now, for I might as well save us both trouble by letting you know at once that I wish you never to come back. When I left Salem we were open enemies, Captain Gabe. It was like you to come and gloat over me in my present miserable state. Well, look your fill, for you’ll not have the chance again. Nor would

you have had it now, if I had anticipated this, for I should have forbidden you entrance to the house."

"There, there!" soothed Gabe. "I see you still hold malice, Tom. That isn't fair, especially as I am willing to forget the past and start afresh. As a matter of fact," he considered whimsically, "I ought to be the injured party, Tom. And to tell the truth I should have kept my distance, if circumstances had not arisen that made me have to see you. A mighty good joke on both of us, eh, Tom?"

"I don't know what you mean," muttered Tom, lying back on his pillow.

He was in his own big room on the second floor of the old Blankenship mansion, and hither Captain Gabe had come, an uninvited guest. Putting his broad hat down upon the table, and pulling a chair up close to Tom's bed, he now proceeded to explain, with many a chuckle, for he had that saving humor which can always appreciate a joke.

"Well, Tom, everybody in town thought you had been instrumental in helping Rose to save my life. Their mouths were full of it all winter long. So Judge Oglethorpe, when he heard you were mortally wounded and likely to die — he appointed me to take charge of your affairs until you did die, or recovered sufficiently to manage them yourself. There I was. If I declined, they would think it mighty small of me after you had done me such a service. If I accepted, I had you to reckon with. Between the whole of

Salem and just you, Tom,— well, I decided on just you. It is a darn sight easier to get along with one enemy than with a hundred interfering friends. Besides, after Aunt Betty Oglethorpe died, there was —”

“Don’t talk to me of Aunt Betty.” Tom meant to thunder but his voice squeaked pitifully, as he was angrily aware. “After that wife of yours cut me out of my inheritance —”

“Stop, Tom!” Gabe’s voice took on the steely note which made men pause, and it now had this effect on Tom. “Don’t you dare to say one word against Madge, or I’ll tell my story to the town, and let you get along as best you can. It wasn’t because I liked it, or wanted to peek and pry, that I took over this guardianship business. I found things in a mess, and I’ve done well by you, Tom, and I am doing it for nothing, too, which I take a sight of comfort in. I know what Madge does not know, that Aunt Betty cut you off because you played her a trick on those Bascom lands of hers. You talked her into buying them at a big price, and then she was just smart enough to discover that they were yours, and not worth a damn. So she thought the money you got then was quite enough to do you, and gave the rest to Madge. She told Judge Oglethorpe, and he told me, but nobody else in this town knows, and they won’t know if you behave yourself. I don’t like to threaten, but you force me to it. Hadn’t you better

declare a truce, Tom? I'll do my best for you, and you'll have to bear it so far as I can see — reckon, I mean. Now I know it isn't good for you to get mad, and you know it, so calm down and let's have a good sensible minute of conversation before I leave. Believe me or not, Tom, I haven't called you a name in my paper for so long that I'm kind of aching for you to get well, so I can begin again."

Tom refused to smile, but he had been given time to think, and perceived the wisdom of Gabe's advice. He had unwittingly put himself in the power of this man, and politically his future would be ruined if the three items against him became generally known. The men might laugh at his escapade with Minnie Gray, but they would not laugh at the Bascom land deal, with an old and helpless lady for the victim, nor at the attempt to shoot Gabe Shelley in the public square. So, until he was well and able to marshal his forces and declare war in proper style, Tom decided to accept Gabe's proposition.

"All right," he said sulkily at last.

"That's fine, Tom," cried Gabe heartily. "I'm glad you see reason. Personally I always liked you, however much I disapproved of you. Now here are a few papers you'd better sign — I'll guide your hand — and some bills for repairs against your River Street houses, which seemed a little exorbitant. I thought I'd better ask you about them before I settled —" The two became absorbed in business mat-

ters, wherein Tom was forced to acknowledge that Gabe had acted conscientiously and well.

Before the Captain left, he sprung a bit of news on Tom, which had tremendous effect. "By the way," he said casually, stuffing the bills and memoranda into his capacious pocket, and reaching for his hat. "Did you know Rose was coming home?"

"No," cried Tom. "When?"

"Day after to-morrow. They are sending back the men as fast as possible, now that peace has been declared. Yellow fever is raging in Cuba, and I wouldn't hear to Rose's nursing those cases. I can't afford to lose my girl just yet, so I put my foot right down."

"I did not meet Rose in Cuba." Tom tried hard to speak naturally, but his voice quivered with excitement. "I had a nurse, Mrs. Kemp, who knew her well."

"Mrs. Kemp? Oh, yes." Gabe was quite indifferent.

"Is she — does she — will she visit you soon, do you think?"

"Might. She's quite a friend of my wife's and of Rose. I'm rather fond of her, myself."

"When — when do you expect her?"

"Couldn't say, exactly. Good-by, Tom. Good-by."

"Hold on a moment, Captain Gabe. I want to know —"



But Gabe had gone, and with a groan of impatience Tom sank back again. "Damn my eyes!" he exclaimed. "Why couldn't I have been wounded in some other place, so that I could at least see."

Before him there was the constant fear of permanent blindness, and already he had lost much of the strength he had gained in Cuba. Although he had then felt and voiced his need for the ministrations of Mrs. Kemp, he had not fully realized what she had meant to him, until on the return voyage. There his utter helplessness struck home. He felt that in very truth he could not do without her. He would die if she did not come to him.

He was, of course, quite positive of the foundation for this longing. He had loved Rose deeply, and this love he still believed in. He told himself that his desire to keep her away from him in Cuba rose from his wish to spare her the sight of his ravaged frame. In his dreams he still idealized her, while angry with her and bent on humbling her if ever he got his eyes, and strength again. The scorching, vital rage against her and Gabe no longer flamed in his heart. It had burned up, it is true, at Gabe's coming this morning, but it had speedily sunk again into the glowing embers which he refused to let quite die. Above it and beyond it, his thoughts hovered about Mrs. Kemp — that personality known to him only by voice and tender touch. The music of her tones haunted him. His ears ached for it.

She might be old and ugly — badly built and awkward — these things had always repelled him in a woman, but now they did not matter. Nothing mattered except that he wanted her. Her presence in the room spelt Heaven to him.

Of course this was because he had been ill. When he was well again, then he would return all the more loyally to Rose. This new obsession was founded only on his helplessness, and not on the fatal attraction which beauty always held for him, which he called love. If Rose were homely, awkward — ah, but how could she be Rose, if she were not her own lovely, charming self?

He had scant time for self-communion, for others of his old friends called, and he insisted upon seeing every one. And then there were countless messages to while away the time, and gifts of flowers, jellies, fruits and custards, to be acknowledged through his colored boy, Nathan, who ran endless errands all that day, quite overcome by his importance. When night came Tom fell sound asleep, and was quite grieved about it next morning, for he had meant to lie awake, and heap reproaches on Mrs. Kemp, the one person in all the world, it seemed, who was not interested in his wretched condition.

When Gabe arrived that day, shortly before eleven, he ran into the family physician, old Doctor Pearsall, at the door.

“Hello, Gabe,” said the Doctor. “I’ve been sent

for. I guess Tom's welcome home was a little mite too warm, from all I hear."

"Good morning, Doc," Gabe answered. "All Salem tried to play nurse to him yesterday. I thought, when I saw the stream of people coming in this direction, that it would be too much for Tom. And every last one of 'em had something to tempt his appetite. Lord! It would have been the death of a well man!"

And then the two solemnly clasped hands and entered the house together.

Doctor Pearsall shook his head over Tom's pulse, and put a positive veto on the sort of excitement which had filled the preceding day. Gabe suggested a famous specialist in consultation about Tom's eyes. Doctor Pearsall, though somewhat peeved because he had meant to do all the suggesting himself, thought this might be wise. He admitted being at sea as to the proper treatment for them. So Gabe sent for the specialist, and Tom lay in a quiet darkened room for the whole of that and the succeeding day.

The great specialist proved to be, instead of an awesome personage, a fussy little man with a rasping voice. He commended Doctor Pearsall's treatment, so far as it went, swore at certain symptoms due to negligence in Cuba, for which he persisted in holding the overworked surgeons there responsible — although Tom assured him they had done their best after they once got hold of him — he had lain upon

the field for two days as near as he could make out. And finally he decided that a very delicate operation might relieve the pressure on the optic nerve and restore Tom's sight permanently. He set the date for this operation ten days ahead — the patient must be in better physical condition — and took his fussy little self and rasping voice away by the next train.

Tom did not brighten at the prospect before him. Instead he grew so depressed that Doctor Pearsall shook his head over him. Rose had now returned and upon hearing of this depression, she said she thought she knew a way to overcome it, and asked Gabe to take her to see Tom. She and Minnie — they had come back together — made Gabe see their reasons, and upon Saturday morning, three days after the visit of the specialist, Rose entered the darkened room.

Tom had been prepared for her coming. At first he was tempted to refuse to see her, but then the thought popped into his head that through Rose he might hear something of his nurse. Therefore he was eager, and at the light footstep on the stair, he raised himself in bed, and turned his sightless face toward the door. As Rose came in, she exclaimed aloud in pity, and running across the room, grasped both his weak hands.

"Why, Tom!" she cried. "You have been very ill, haven't you? I really did not know how ill, before."

"I'm all right," answered Tom roughly, scarcely able to restrain his impatience. But politeness demanded something of him, and with almost a groan, he said, "So you were in Cuba, too?"

"Yes," she responded, trying to keep her voice cheerful and steady, although the tears rained down her cheeks. "Tell me about yourself, Tom. I haven't seen you since you went to Tampa. Remember?"

With another groan, which Rose heard and understood although he did not know it, he gave her some particulars of the camp life, and of his soldiering, up to the time that he was shot. He spoke of the Kid Lieutenant, and found her touched to the heart by the manner of his death. "Ah, he was a *man*!" she exclaimed, with flashing eyes.

And then he spoke of his first hours of consciousness, alone and suffering among the sugar cane, and she cried out with pity for him. He told of the journey to the Division Hospital, and of being left to die under the ceiba-tree, as he had gathered from the pitying words of a man who questioned him. He told of this man's going away and of his returning later on with a surgeon. This part of his tale was mere hearsay, of course, since he had been conscious only at rare intervals, and then not so that he could remember accurately. "But that man, whoever he was, saved my life," he declared. "Some day I hope to find him out and thank him."

Rose hoped so, too.

And so he came at last, by a long and devious way, to the hospital at Siboney, and to the arrival of Mrs. Kemp. Did Rose not know her? Yes. Where was she now? Rose couldn't say. In Cuba still? No, Rose was quite certain that she had left Cuba.

And now Rose must know about the coming operation. Her interest was sweet, very sweet, but her light dismissal of the woman who had come to mean so much to him quite broke down Tom. He longed so to hear some definite news of her. He had thought of her so much that he had fancied her in other people's minds as much as in his own. Rose's meagerness of detail astonished him. It grieved him, and before he knew it he was sobbing out that he could not bear it, he just could not bear it. His thin hands sought to cover his shamed face, but the tears trickled out between the bony fingers, so that Gabe, a silent listener in the background, had to blow his nose vigorously and announce that time was almost up.

"What can't you bear, Tom?" asked Rose very gently.

"I'm a fool, I know," muttered Tom, controlling his voice with difficulty. "But she was so kind and tender that I feel I cannot stand this operation unless she is here to help me. I know I shall die without her."

Rose half smiled, and then repressed her smile, for-



getting that Tom could not see. "Do you miss her so much as that?"

"Miss her? Why shouldn't I miss her?" Tom demanded savagely. "There was no one like her. She knew my wants before I told them. She knew just how to make me comfortable. I tell you I must have her to get me through this thing. Can't you persuade her, Rose? If you can —" His pause was eloquent.

"Perhaps I can." Rose pretended to consider. "I am not sure. But I'll try. I'll go to see her, and do my best."

"Will you, Rose? I shall be grateful indeed, if you do. It will put new heart into me."

"Well then, set yourself to obeying Doctor Pear-sall, and gaining the strength they want you to gain, and I'll add my word, too," promised Gabe.

"All right," said Tom. "Say, Rose, what does Mrs. Kemp look like? I—I have a fancy—I should like to know."

"She is young—" said Rose.

"Is she — pretty?"

"Yes, I should call her so, shouldn't you, Father?"

"Pretty!" snorted Gabe. "She's a beauty."

"Tall or short?" asked Tom impatiently, avid for more detail.

"Neither tall nor short," said Rose. "But — just right. She is slim and frail, for she has not been

well. She is growing stronger now, and developing a dimple that is distracting. Her hair is fair and wavy. Her skin is fair also, but her eyes are golden-brown. She has a sad look, as though she has suffered, and her mouth is inclined to droop. This makes her what people call 'interesting.' So she excited a good deal of comment at the camp. One young doctor went quite wild about her," laughed Rose reminiscently. "He followed her all about, and me, too, because I was her friend. I think he meant to propose before we left, but she didn't give him the chance."

"Does — does she like him?" asked Tom breathlessly.

"Oh, yes, after a fashion," answered Rose carelessly. "But she is such an attractive sort of person that she pays very little attention to a foolish young fellow like this doctor."

Tom breathed again, but Rose, with mischief in her eyes, added casually — "There was an older man with whom she seemed much struck — one of her patients. I shouldn't wonder if they hit it off some day — but of course that is only my fancy," she hastened to say as she saw the look upon his face. "Now hurry up and gain strength while I do my best to get her to come to you."

Having given Tom much food for thought, Rose was content to leave him. Gabe scolded her for worrying the poor sick fellow, but she only laughed.

"It won't hurt him one bit," she declared. "He will spend his time now thinking of Mrs. Kemp and of this 'older man,' and won't have any room for brooding on himself."

She was right. Tom did spend his time thinking of his nurse and the man with whom she had seemed much struck. Not for a moment did he imagine it was himself, blind and helpless, but rather some hero just interestingly ill, and able to plead his cause with eloquent eyes. Still, why should he mind her having a lover? He was in love with Rose, himself — but Mrs. Kemp! Ah! Pretty, attractively young, mysteriously alluring — he wanted, he needed Mrs. Kemp.

When he was told that she would take charge of his case, he went mad with joy. When he found that it would not be necessary for her to come until the morning of the operation, his transports died a little. When he discovered that she would not be with him until after it was over, he set his jaw and developed a new patience and a grim determination. He went under the ether without a murmur, so well prepared that the specialist smiled his approval and pronounced the operation a success before it was performed.

When he returned to consciousness again her small hand held his own, and her soft musical voice besought him not to struggle, that she, Mrs. Kemp, was there. Rose was there, too, although he was not in-

formed of that, for a nurse of more skill than Minnie had been needed for the actual operation.

When he was out of danger, and Minnie could be trusted to do all that was necessary now, Rose left, and for the first time the mountain girl and her former lover were entirely alone. Entirely alone? Not so, for Rose's counsel still dominated Minnie, so that she held to her part faithfully. Mrs. Kemp, that fictitious personality in whose identity Minnie had lost herself, now stood between Tom and the mother of his baby. It was her hands which held the reins, not Minnie's.

It was Mrs. Kemp, not Minnie, who was alone with Tom.

## CHAPTER XIV

UPON a warm afternoon in the middle of August, Tom received the glad news from Doctor Pearsall that the next morning he would be able to see. He went to sleep with this comforting knowledge, and in his dreams he thought a fairy hand removed the disfiguring bandages and also, with its healing touch, the last remnant of his pain. The hand must have been more substantial than a fairy's, however, for in the morning, after a sound refreshing sleep, he opened his eyes quite naturally to the blessed light of day.

At first he was scarcely conscious of any strangeness in the act. For years he had been accustomed to a similar experience, while his period of blindness had been so short that it now fell away like an ugly veil, and was entirely forgotten for a space. But as he lay, staring lazily up at the ceiling, where a lone fly buzzed busily, realization dawned upon him and he could have shouted out his joy. True the room had been darkened by closely drawn shades, and all those precautions taken which spelt the necessity for watchful care, but — *he could see!* His recovery was only a matter of days, and the long dark night was over for good and all.

For a while it was just happiness enough to lie and revel in this knowledge. Then gradually he shifted his gaze to take in the familiar objects about him, each one now gifted with a new and poignant charm. He could have kissed every bit of old mahogany, which, even in the semi-dusk, showed its perfect luster. His mother's picture on the bureau — its shining frame informed him that it stood in the self-same place. The bureau itself, with its huge drawers in which his clothes were always so carelessly stored that he had to rummage endlessly for the things he wanted — the washstand, with its hideous green-figured toilet set that he had laughed at once, but now adored — the table by the window indiscriminately piled with boots and shoes, and papers and tobacco, and collars and ties — ah, that was bare of everything but bottles, and bending over it, in the only ray of light she had permitted to enter, was the slender figure of a woman — was she his nurse?

He held his breath and watched her. She evidently thought him still asleep. That little pile of white — was that the stifling bandage? Had she but now removed it to give him the joy of coming to a full awakening directly from his dreams? As she moved noiselessly, setting to rights the table which to his masculine eyes had been neat enough before, the light caught her hair. It shone like pulled molasses, beneath her nurse's cap, in little tumbled waves and curls. Her eyes were downcast, so he had to guess



them, but her nose was straight and small, and her mouth a series of delicious drooping curves. Her hands had the deftness which he had often admired in Rose. Her figure was outlined by the close-fitting, blue undergraduate's costume which she wore. He could have looked at her forever and was almost moved to tears that his first conscious sight should have been rewarded by this lovely picture.

As though his gaze compelled her, she suddenly paused in her work and looked toward the bed. Then, with a cry of joy, she ran swiftly across the room.

"You are awake!" she exulted. "And you can see? Can you? Tell me quickly! I was so impatient for this moment—" She checked herself, and ended primly, "Good morning, Mr. Blankenship."

Bewilderment entered into Tom's intent regard.

"Where have I seen you before?" he exclaimed, and then repeated it, slowly, wonderingly. "Where — have — I — seen — you — before?"

"People are always taking me for some one they know," said Mrs. Kemp readily. "I sometimes think I must look like everybody but myself. Tell me, can you really see distinctly? Are things in a haze to you, or clearly outlined?"

"I can see as distinctly as this dim light permits," answered Tom, impatiently. "Go back to the table, Mrs. Kemp."

"Why?"

"You were in the light there. Now you are in the shadow."

"But you must not look at the light," she commanded brightly. "And I must call Nathan to give you your bath and dress you, and get you into your big chair for breakfast. I wonder what he will say when he discovers that you can see again!"

"Then if you won't go back to the light," said Tom crossly, "come here beside the bed."

She ignored his request, but busied herself in getting ready for Nathan. However, this brought her closer as she moved about the room, and each time that she approached him she felt his eyes upon her, with that same puzzled bewilderment in their intentness. The flush on her fair face crept up to the roots of her hair, but she bent her attention scrupulously upon the clean linen, towels, soap, and brushes, which she was laying out, talking busily about the joy that every one would feel at the certainty of his absolute recovery.

Nathan entered and Tom spoke. "Ah, Nathan, I am glad to be able to see that black moon-face of yours again."

"Lawd ha' mussy, kin you see?" exclaimed the negro. He came close and gazed into Tom's eyes. "So you kin! Ain't dat gran'? Um-yum! Dis am a proud day fer us all, suh. Dis suah am a proud day fer us all."

While the colored boy performed his master's

toilet, Mrs. Kemp went to help the housekeeper with breakfast. She was back by the time Tom was ready to move into his big chair, which he occupied the greater part of the day now. With Nathan on one side to steady him, and she on the other as an extra safeguard, he made the short journey between the bed and chair. Then she sent Nathan for his breakfast tray, while she settled him comfortably.

As she bent over to adjust the cushion behind his head he grasped her hand in both his own. His eyes continued to scrutinize her earnestly.

She tried to pull away, without success. "Mr. Blankenship, let me go," she ordered sharply. "You are stronger than I thought you were. I half believe you have been 'putting on' your prostration. Let me go!"

"Not until you tell me who you are," he answered. "Your face is familiar to me — more than familiar. I not only have seen it before — but I have the feeling that I have kissed it —"

"Mr. Blankenship! You forget yourself!" Her tone was horrified, and this time she succeeded in wrenching herself free. "I suppose," she continued angrily, "that you have given my voice and presence a personality which you now see more or less in me."

"That may be it," he mused, enthralled. "Yet I could swear that I have felt your lips against my own —"

"Mr. Blankenship!" Her voice was determined. "If you persist in speaking to me in this fashion, I must leave the room, and perhaps the house. You have no right to think of me or talk to me so. I am simply your nurse, hired by you to care for you until you are well enough to care for yourself. If I am to be insulted, then I am very sorry that I yielded to Miss Shelley's importunings and took over your case. Perhaps I had better go at once — I must confess I cannot understand your strange manner and stranger words."

This stung him and suddenly he realized what he had said. The thought of losing her made him abject. "I beg your pardon," he said humbly. "You will surely forgive a sick man's rambling remarks, and set them down to his dependence on you. Ah, Nathan, I expect to enjoy that breakfast this morning, I tell you! Set it down, you scoundrel, before you drop the tray. I know you and your proclivities too well to trust you, now that I can see you again."

The negro grinned as he placed the heavy tray on a small table by Tom's chair. "Dis suah am a proud day fer us all, suh," he said again.

"It's a proud day for me, all right," said Tom. "Has Mrs. Kemp had breakfast?"

"Missy Smif, she done sent word to tell de nuss it's ready," replied Nathan.

"Bring it here, so we can eat together."

"All right, suh. All right, boss." And before

Mrs. Kemp could interpose he had hurried from the room.

"I cannot do that, Mr. Blankenship," she said slowly. "The ethics of my profession forbid it."

He leaned forward with pathetic eyes. "You'll surely not deny me this one crumb of comfort," he protested earnestly, throwing into his voice all its most winning qualities. "I feel that I must celebrate this great occasion in some way. Spoil me a little, as you used to do when I was blind. You were so kind and tender then — be kind now! Ah! I had fancied you my friend, but I suppose I was mistaken. My helplessness misled me. Forgive me and leave me alone. I no longer need you to feed me, and so can manage very well. Forgive me!"

She hesitated a moment, and then threw scruples to the winds. "If you will promise to be kind in your turn —"

"I'll promise anything, if you'll only share my meal."

"All right," she laughed, and drawing up a chair to the other side of the small table on which the tray was set, she busied herself with its solitary cup and plate. Nathan soon returned with another laden tray, from which she transferred the china and food.

"Now we can begin," she said brightly. "Mr. Blankenship, I will still claim the privilege of pouring your coffee and opening your eggs. Be patient and everything will soon be ready."

"I could be patient forever," murmured Tom, lying back in supreme content. "I have a vague premonition that this is too good to last. Mrs. Kemp, I wish there were some way of chaining you to your present position, so you could do this for me every morning —"

"Nonsense! I am a usurper," she flashed at him. "This is a wife's prerogative, when a man is well."

"For the first time I realize the advantage of having a wife."

"Why for the first time? I understand that you are in love —"

"Love? So I am, but what is love compared to my present state of bliss?"

"Well!" she exclaimed with a long breath. "It is the woman he loves whom a man usually wants to do such things for him. Picture to yourself the woman you love in the place I now occupy, and you will understand that there is no comparison. Don't you get quite a different feeling?"

He considered seriously. "No," he confessed. "I don't get half so nice a feeling. Because I should have to exert myself, wait upon her, pay pretty compliments, assure her I loved her more now than I did ten seconds ago — all that sort of thing."

"There! Here is your orange-juice, and your eggs. It is too bad you don't like cereals, for you need to gain so much. I like them, you see, so you'll have to wait for me."



She was demurely unconscious of a sudden change in his expression, which had followed his last remark. He was gazing at her open-mouthed, as though some stupendous idea had suddenly leaped to life within him in connection with her.

Silently he drank the fruit-juice and then applied himself to his beaten biscuit, eggs, and coffee. All the time he watched her openly, still with the strange new expression, but she pretended not to notice and was really remarkable in her splendid self-control. He noted with approval that she had dainty manners, the hall-marks of a lady to him who judged so much by mere externals. The quirk of her little finger as she drank her coffee was adorable. Did she look so sedulously at her plate that he might the better see how long and golden her eyelashes were? Or was it because she was affected by his gaze and chose this way to avoid it?

It was the last-named reason, and in spite of her happiness she was tremulous and almost afraid, for she perceived that she was soon to face the crowning moment of her life. Being a woman whose hopes had been crushed to earth, she hesitated at their possible resurrection. Poor hopes! With bruised and broken wings they had crept back to nestle in her heart, and perhaps to be renewed. Thank Heaven for "Mrs. Kemp," that kind cloak which had made this moment possible.

Breakfast over, she piled the things up in the tray

and rang for Nathan. The negro came eagerly, and after him Mrs. Smith, the white housekeeper, who was religiously inclined and "praised Gawd" abundantly for the restoration of "Mister Tawm." Then Gabe entered, with his hearty voice exclaiming as delightedly over Tom as if he had been his own son. Then Doctor Pearsall, to express his approval of things in general, then old Judge Oglethorpe, some few other friends, and finally Madge and Rose.

It was the first time Madge had come in to see him, and she was quiet and exceedingly grave. Their greeting was punctilious in its courtesy. The truce between them was merely temporary. Tom still resented Aunt Betty's legacy, and remembered all too keenly their last stormy interview.

Rose was overjoyed in friendly fashion at his progress, and spoke warmly of Mrs. Kemp's ability, giving her much of the credit for his swift convalescence. The two girls whispered apart for a time, while Madge and he took refuge in polite commonplace. As Tom uttered his platitudes, he watched Mrs. Kemp and Rose, and that odd change in his expression further strengthened. He was making comparisons, and while he could find no flaw in either, he had learned which one occupied first place in his heart. And he formed a new resolution which he proceeded openly to put into effect, asking abruptly if he might speak to Rose alone a moment.

Madge hesitated, but Rose glanced at her meaningly, so she took Mrs. Kemp aside.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Rose gently, taking the chair Madge had vacated, which was close to his. "I see you have something important to say to me. What is it?"

"Rose," whispered Tom, tremendously in earnest. "There is something you can do for me, for which I'll thank you all my life."

"What is it?" she repeated.

"First tell me what has become of Minnie Gray? Is she still at your house?"

"N-not just now."

"Has she gone back to the hills — with her baby?"

"N-no."

"Where is she, then?"

"I — I don't think I had better tell you."

"It is necessary that I should know. I have got to get into communication with her — at once."

"Tom! Have you made up your mind to atone —"

"In a way — yes. I am prepared to recognize the justice of her claims, and — to buy her off."

"Oh, Tom! At first I thought your interest in her and in the boy inspired by a real change of heart."

"It is," said Tom. "But a change of which you are not yet cognizant. Rose, for a long time I have

loved you dearly, but — I know you will forgive me when I tell you that I was mistaken in thinking that love the best of which I was capable. I love another woman so much more deeply that I am convinced it is the greatest passion of my life. Can you guess who she is?"

"I — I'd rather not try."

"Rose, until this very morning, I fancied you still foremost in my heart. Yet all the time I longed to hear *her* voice, to feel *her* touch, to see *her* face —" He pointed to Mrs. Kemp who talked with Madge by the window. "It is strange that I did not at once understand what that longing meant. But now the truth has burst upon me, and I know that I love her with a love that transcends everything. I feel myself inconsequential, insignificant, incomplete — finding a road to definiteness only if I can be sure of her presence for the rest of my life."

"Oh, Tom! This is sad news," murmured Rose, turning her head away. He fancied her grieving, though really she was smiling in triumph to herself.

"I am sorry," he began awkwardly, when she interrupted.

"Don't think I said that from any personal sense of slight," she laughed. "I meant that it was sad news from Minnie's standpoint."

"It is the best of news. I had lost you, and I never hoped to experience such happiness as that I feel to-day," boasted Tom.

"So you want to buy off Minnie?" asked Rose.  
"Does Mrs. Kemp approve of your course?"

"Mrs. Kemp? She knows nothing of Minnie."

"Are you sure?"

"She told me, in so many words. I quizzed her once to see if you had given me away. Her answer showed you had not. Now, Rose, if you have any heart at all, you will let me settle with Minnie in the generous way I shall propose, so that she will never come between me and the woman I love, as she did once between you and me."

Rose considered for a moment. "Mrs. Kemp has accepted you, I suppose?" she ventured.

"Not yet, but I hope to make her do so before long." In his eyes shone the old reckless self-confidence. He was quite sure of his ability to win the love of any woman, and Rose longed to drag him from his pedestal. But she refrained, for that was Minnie's task. Instead she parried by another question.

"Suppose I refuse to see Minnie for you?"

"Then I shall try to see her for myself. You need only promise to stand aside and keep my secret."

"Do you still persist in thinking you can be dishonorable to one woman, and worthy the love of another like Mrs. Kemp?"

"I do not propose to be dishonorable," he retorted angrily. "On the contrary I intend to be most hon-

orable, but I mean to have Mrs. Kemp for my wife."

"Then all I sacrificed to make you see the truth was useless," mused Rose sorrowfully. "I forgot pride and self-respect in trying to open your eyes. And then I shielded you and saved your life — was it for this, Tom?"

"All that is beside the question," said Tom impatiently. "What is past, is past. You do as I say and I in my turn will relinquish certain plans which I had intended to carry out later. Will you, Rose?"

"Most emphatically, No."

"Do you mean that? Is it final?"

"I do. It is final. I shall continue to claim for Minnie all that I have claimed before. I will make you this one concession — to say nothing unless Mrs. Kemp promises to be your wife. If I know her, she will not marry you in the face of my opposition."

"She will if I can keep this knowledge from her, as I intend to do," stormed Tom. "If you thwart me, and advance your ridiculous demands so that she hears of them — I'll make you suffer. Take heed, before it is too late, and decide to help me."

"No," said Rose. "I'll not help you. I'll do all in my power to hinder you, waiting only to see if your own heart will not prompt you finally to the course I must insist upon your following. Would you mock the woman you claim to love, as you once mocked me, Tom? Would you offer her the place that belongs to Minnie Gray, as you once offered it to me? Would



you drag her highest ideals in the dust, as you once dragged mine? Shame on you, Tom. What sort of love is this you brag about? Selfish — unscrupulous —”

“Stop!” Tom’s voice shook with passion. He banged his fist on the arm of his chair, and, leaning forward, spoke in Rose’s ear. “I’ll not stand for this. I am a sick man still, but I am a determined one. I’ve warned you. I have offered to make every concession possible, to this mountain girl and her bastard baby. Now I’ll withdraw my offer. I’ll marry Mrs. Kemp before you can hinder me. She isn’t like you. She’ll believe me when I swear your story false. And as for Minnie Gray, she can starve before I’ll lift one finger to help her — I’m through with her forever, and you can tell her so. I’ll deny every claim she makes. Let her prove one of them if she can. What testimony has she to bring against me? I can command a hundred witnesses to swear to anything I choose to state. Is this plain enough? Are you satisfied? Do your worst — you’ll never —”

“Mr. Blankenship!” It was Mrs. Kemp’s authoritative voice at his side which brought him to a standstill. “Calm yourself. Miss Shelley, I am surprised that you, a nurse, would permit my patient to become so excited. You must surely know that it is very bad for him. Please go at once, and let me quiet him as best I can.”

Rose looked at Minnie in astonishment. In her alarm for her patient the gentle mountain girl had changed to a veritable lioness, and very like one indeed she hustled the two visitors from the room and down-stairs. Rose's eyes filled with tears which she was too proud to let fall. She had been defending Minnie's cause so earnestly that for a moment she had forgotten Tom was ill. That was his fault, not hers, and now she must bear the blame. It was not fair.

And then, from behind, Minnie's arms stole about her. "Forgive me, Rose," she besought, in her gentlest tones. "I had to scold you, but I quite understood that Tom was urging you to some course against me, for I am almost sure, Rose dear, that he has fallen in love with — guess who? Mrs. Kemp. Oh, Rose, think of it! I am my own rival!" And with a parting hug and kiss which made everything all right, she ran back to Tom.

She found him still laboring under the greatest excitement. He seized her hand in both his own and began to speak in a breathless hurried way, before she could interpose.

"Mrs. Kemp," he exclaimed. "Listen to me! Our talk this morning led me to believe that perhaps I can persuade you into loving me."

"Loving you?"

"Don't speak until I am through! I worship you!"

I am mad about you! There is nothing I would not do to win you — no price I would not pay, no barrier I would not attempt to overcome. I want you with every fiber of my being. Such love as mine must compel yours. It is unthinkable that it should not."

"Mr. Blankenship, I —"

"Wait! I do not dare presume that you love me now. But you will come to that in time. Something has happened which makes it vital that you marry me at once. There must be no delay. I had meant to go slowly in my wooing — to win you by presents, ardent lovemaking — all the gallantries which make a courtship sweet. But there is no time for that. Marry me to-day, Mrs. Kemp — this very afternoon — and then I'll set myself to woo you in such fashion as to tear down your defenses. Marry me — now."

"Mr. Blankenship, have you quite suddenly taken leave of your senses? What right have you —"

"The right of my tremendous passion for you. It seems to me that I have always loved you. I never really lived until I loved you. And, in spite of myself, I cannot help the belief that you love me too. Why, I can close my eyes and feel your kisses on my lips — your arms about my neck — your head upon my breast — I have held you against this breast of mine and pressed you close and called you tender names — where? In some other life perhaps! But as truly as I live I am convinced that you belong to

me. Make this odd feeling real. Be my wife. Marry me! Say 'Yes,' and make me the happiest man on earth to-day."

Almost she was persuaded. The eloquence of his voice carried her away as it had carried her once before, when he had proffered her less honorable love. She felt herself yielding to his clinging fingers, being drawn nearer and nearer by those hands so weak and yet so powerful. She was almost in his arms when suddenly remembrance of Rose and of her counsel intruded. There were things more important than the present joy of his caresses. If she received them now, how could she hope to gain that deeper, more vital happiness in store for her if she was patient? She resisted and succeeded in freeing herself from his persuasive grasp.

"No, no," she faltered hurriedly. "I cannot. You do not know — you do not understand."

"What don't I know? What don't I understand? I know now that you love me. I understand that almost I embraced you, and that, if I could once do so, your doubts would melt away before the onslaught of my love. Come to me, dear. Why do you hesitate?"

"Ask yourself that."

"What do you mean?"

"There is — a barrier — between us, Mr. Blankenship."

"Then tell me what it is, and I'll remove it."

"You cannot. It is there, irrevocable. Mrs. Kemp can never marry you, Mr. Blankenship."

He gave a low incredulous laugh. "Explain yourself. Is this barrier something in your own past life? Is it connected with — the man whose name you bear?"

"N-no!"

"You are a widow, aren't you, Mrs. Kemp?"

"Y — yes."

"Do you love some one else?"

"No."

"Then what lies between us?"

"Mr. Blankenship," she said bravely, "I must ask you to stop this questioning. I cannot bear it. You are making me suffer cruelly. It is enough that I have said I cannot marry you. Now it rests with you whether or not I leave this house at once, and never see you again, or stay until you are fit to be left alone. Which shall it be?"

"You shall stay, of course."

"On one condition — that you observe the same lines in our relations that have defined them in the past. I will try to forget this scene and act as though it has never been. You must do the same."

Tom looked at her as though he would penetrate her soul. He saw that she not only meant all she said, but would indeed leave him upon the instant, if he refused obedience. The thought of life without her was so unbearable that he must prolong her stay.

at any cost. When he was well and strong — then let her escape him if she could. In the meantime —

“All right,” he said, with a short hard laugh. “I’ll try to veil the love within my eyes and mask my worship under the guise of friendship. Later I’ll prove to you that nothing can keep us apart, but for the present I’ll lay down my weapons and observe your conditions faithfully.”

Her face relaxed. “I’ll stay then,” she replied. “Now, as your nurse, I shall have to scold you for indulging in so much excitement, and order you to take a nap. Shall it be on the couch, or back in bed?”

“The couch, by all means. But I cannot sleep — unless you hold my hand —”

“Mr. Blankenship —”

“How else am I to get calmed down?” he inquired with an injured air. “Every professional nurse is supposed to hold her patient’s hands at times. Her duties include it.”

“This one’s duties do not,” she retorted laughing, glad of his return to raillery. “Now remember, Mr. Blankenship.”

“I will remember,” he assured her, and watched her gloatingly as she left the room.

He tried to close his eyes, but could not. In his heart he knew that the barrier, the real barrier, between them, lay on his side. Yet if Rose had kept quiet — and he believed she had — then how could



Mrs. Kemp know of this barrier? Perhaps she did not actually know, but was so pure and high and noble that her instinct made her guess that he had not been quite frank. How best could he combat this instinct — for he was determined never to acknowledge its truth? He was not yet humble enough for confession. Rather, his pride was up in arms, willing to compromise on any terms save open acknowledgment. Mrs. Kemp should never know of Minnie Gray if he could help it. Mrs. Kemp should never know.

## CHAPTER XV

**T**HE peaches now were ripe upon the boughs. The trees were heavy with their weight, and leaned on props, languid with maturity and lacking strength to support the burden they had been prodigal in yielding. Gabe loved his orchards with a love that made them almost human, not only to himself, but to all those who heard him talk about them. Part of his land was apt to hold the moisture, and he was continually putting in new systems of drainage, which were not always improvements on the old. But,—“The peach trees hate to get their little feet wet,” he explained whimsically. “They curl up their toes and forget to pay attention to their fruit as they should.” And one immediately had a vision of the poor things cringing, stretching out boughs in mute appeal for help.

About the tying of those same boughs together, the better to support their loads, Gabe exercised the utmost care. The limbs must be wrapped, so that the cord could not bruise them. The cord itself must be interlaced. And in the propping of the heaviest branches, he exhibited the caution of a man who felt

that life itself was at stake, rather than a few perfect peaches in a perfect crop.

By this time the first peaches had been gathered. Gabe followed the practice of all commercial growers, in selecting such varieties of the fruit as would give a long succession. The White Mountain Rose, and the delectable Carman, Champion, and Crosby, had been packed and shipped by the end of July. The golden-fleshed Elberta had been picked on the first of August, and already the fall varieties, such as Hill's Chili and Crawford's Late, were turning rosy cheeks to the sun, and demanding the attention of the harvesters.

But Gabe held off as long as possible, for in the spring he had only arranged, through Homer Fort, to send the earlier and much smaller crop to Bucknam and Bates. And Homer had agreed to be in Salem in time to examine this later mammoth yield, and name his price for it at its gathering. Would he come? Gabe knew that he had enlisted, and so far not one single word had been heard from him. However he said comfortably, for he knew his man, "He'll come himself, unless he's dead in Cuba. And if he is dead, he will have made arrangements for some one else to come in his place."

As usual the shrewd man's judgment was not misplaced. Homer arrived in time, though it took a hack to bring him from the depot, and the driver had to help him up the walk and steps to the great front door. He sank into a chair while the negro rang the

bell, and when Janey opened the door, she was frightened for a moment, thinking this pallid figure must be nothing less than a ghost. His smile reassured her, so that she took his card, and with an exclamation of "Lawsy! Mistuh Fo't! But you-all is suahly fell away sence you wuz hyar las' spring," she hurried with it to her master.

The family were at breakfast, for Homer had taken a night train, arriving at Salem before seven in the morning. "By George, it is Fort come back, just as I said he would," exclaimed Gabe at sight of the name on the card, and, napkin in hand, he hurried out to greet his guest.

"Well! Well! I am glad to see you," he cried as he stepped out of the open door. "Why in thunder didn't you come right in? Don't dare to say that you have had your breakfast—" And then he caught sight of Fort's emaciated figure, and his eager welcome died on his lips. "For God's sake, what has happened to you, man?" he asked in the tenderest tones Homer had ever heard his hearty voice assume.

"N-nothing much," stammered Fort, moved almost to tears by the effect of his condition upon the Captain. "W-wasn't it j-just my l-luck, Captain Gabe, to go through the fight without a scratch, and then, j-just as I was c-crowing loudest, to come down with y-yellow fever? No g-glory, no p-praises for heroism—just plain tough work all through, and then a n-nasty, l-l-low-down disease like this to lay me

out — but I said I'd be here in August, and I g-got here, Captain."

"By Gosh, so you did," sputtered the Captain. "I knew you would, if you were alive, Homer. Can you walk in to breakfast?"

"Oh, yes, I can w-walk," said Homer, "if you'll lend me a hand now and then. You see," he went on as Gabe supported him through the doorway and down the shadowy hall, "the floor may appear to be solid to you, but to me it is as full of waves as the ocean, and about as stable. Thank you. Mrs. Shelley, I am overjoyed to see you again. Miss Rose, good-morning."

The two women rose hurriedly, suppressed their exclamations of pity and tried to suppress as well the emotion his condition aroused in them. He sank into a chair and smiled at them whimsically, always game. "Well," he drawled. "Why don't you comment on my appearance? You m-might tell me I have an interesting l-look, at least. I've always heard that men with hollow cheeks and cadaverous eyes were called interesting, and I've been trying hard to cultivate that appearance. Anyway, I haven't a freckle left, that's one comfort."

"Mr. Fort, how did this happen?" It was Madge who spoke. "You must have been very ill — wounded, perhaps."

"N-no," said Fort with a melancholy shake of his head. "Nothing so lucky as that. Just yellow

fever, and the insinuating beastly bacilli laid me out as thoroughly as a bullet, only it took more time about it. Gabe, I'm famished. Stand over me with a gun, or I'll eat more than I'm allowed. I haven't seen a waffle like that since I left Georgia. And peaches? Do you suppose a peach would hurt me, Mrs. Shelley?"

Madge didn't know, but feared it might, so with many regretful sighs Homer settled down to toast and milk, and gave the others a respite from his talk which had been designed to put them at their ease, but had only served to impress them more deeply with the seriousness of the illness through which he had just passed. As he had said, he was ravenous, and Madge had to restrain him, even to threaten that Gabe should get that gun, and "stand over" with it. But at last he had finished, and looked up with a contented smile and such frank cheerful eyes, that the hearts of all three ached for him far more than if he had been peevish or complaining.

"You shall come straight to the Gallery," cried Madge warmly. "We won't allow you out of the hammock all day long."

"I am a well man, I assure you, Mrs. Shelley. I have been discharged from the hospital at Siboney as cured. I missed almost everything good about the war," he continued plaintively when at last he lay ensconced in the hammock, with Madge hovering about him, and Gabe and Rose sitting near. "First



I missed San Juan and El Caney, because I was detailed to carry messages between El Poso and Siboney. Then I was hurried to the front to help guard the places the other men had taken. And just as we were about ready to march into Santiago with colors flying, then I had to come down with the yellow fever."

"And I suppose all the time you were working like a Trojan among the poor fellows already sick with it, or you wouldn't have gotten it," interrupted Gabe suddenly. It was what he would have done, and by his own nature he translated Homer. (The pun was his own, which he took delight in springing.)

"I couldn't do much," disclaimed Homer modestly, turning his sallow face toward Gabe. "By the way, I did meet up with a friend of yours who was wounded at El Caney — the fellow who helped Miss Rose to save your life —"

"You mean Tom Blankenship?"

"Yes, that's the man. They gave him up for dead, but finally they decided to operate, and I don't know whether he lived or not. He talked a lot about Miss Rose and wished to know if I thought she'd forgive him. I told him I hadn't any doubt she would, from what I knew about her. I suppose he was delirious, and fancied he had offended you, eh, Miss Rose?"

Rose looked up with eager interest. Her heart

softened toward Tom at the news that in his extremity he had sent her such a message. But now another idea burst upon her.

"You were the man who saved him, weren't you? He's here and getting well. He told me about some one who said it was a shame to let him die, and went and persuaded a surgeon to give him a chance for life. That was splendid of you, Mr. Fort."

All the blood in Fort's thin body seemed to settle in his cheeks. "I didn't know he took in what was going on, or I would have held my tongue about him," he muttered. "The fellow was so fine about it all that I just had to help him. Any one else would have done just as I did. I'm glad to know he lived, and bears me no malice for all the extra suffering I put him to."

His hearers laughed. Just then a queer old-fashioned little woman appeared in the doorway, dressed in spotted calico, and holding in her arms a crowing, laughing baby. "He's awake, Miss Rose," said this lady.

"Why, Mrs. Gray!" cried the girl, springing to her feet. "You know you should not lift that heavy child. You aren't strong enough."

Yielding her burden to Rose, the odd little woman bobbed a courtesy and disappeared. Rose cooed to the youngster, who gurgled in reply, and settled herself in a big rocker with him upon her lap. He was not contented, however, but clutched the col-

lar of her gown and pulled himself up until he stood upon his bare pink feet.

"Isn't he a buster?" she exclaimed, turning her bright eyes to Homer, for his approval of this Herculean effort on the part of "li'l Tawm."

"I haven't the honor of the gentleman's acquaintance," said Homer lazily. "But I don't know when I've seen a chap whose looks I've envied more. He is positively fat."

"He is the baby of a friend of mine," explained Rose ambiguously. "The old lady is his grandma. Now I've got to give him his bath and get his milk ready, haven't I, Sport? Show Mr. Fort how much you love Aunt Rose."

The baby put his rosy face to her pink cheek and grasped her hair. "Ouch!" she cried. "Let go!"

But when she attempted to free the clinging fingers, they grabbed in deeper, and the whole mass of her glorious hair came tumbling about her face. "Li'l Tawm" chuckled with delight at this, and pulled with all his sturdy might. Rose laughed. "Oh, you rascal," she cried. "You little, precious, rascal!" And with a pretended shake, she lifted him and carried him into the house.

"She loves that baby, Homer," said Gabe.

"He's a lucky fellow," said Homer. "Whose is he?"

"Minnie Gray's?"

"Then the grandmother is the husband's mother?"

Gabe looked dismayed. "Now I've done it!" he exclaimed. "I can't lie to you, Homer. She is Minnie's own mother."

"Is Minnie — er — divorced?"

"Look here, Homer," said Gabe with a comical look of chagrin. "I can keep a secret pretty well when it comes to outsiders, but you'll be a member of our household for some days to come, and will see some things you might not understand. So I think I'd better make a clean breast of the whole story to you. I like you well enough to believe that you will understand and won't be prejudiced against Minnie. I'm an old blunderer, ain't I, Madge?"

"Not a bit of it," retorted Madge loyally. "I myself think that Mr. Fort had better be taken into your confidence. Now I will go out to the kitchen to give my orders for the day, so this is your best chance. I wouldn't let on to Rose that you have told him, Gabe. She is so intense in her partisanship, and she is so afraid that Minnie will be condemned — you know."

"I know," answered Gabe. Madge departed, and he proceeded to give the details, all that he knew and some that he could guess, concerning Tom and Minnie, and the part Rose had played in the matter. "I shouldn't have spoken so frankly, Homer," he finished. "If I didn't count you as our friend. I trust my friends. Besides you saved his life in Cuba for Minnie, and it begins to look as though she were

going to win him. Since you have had a finger in the pie, you might as well be allowed a peep beneath the crust."

Homer looked thoughtfully up at the vines, through which the blue sky glimmered. "I'm not sure," he said at last, "that I'd want the girl to marry such a man."

"Under the circumstances it is the only thing for her to do," declared Gabe vigorously. "There's the boy."

"He has some claim to consideration, I will admit. But the man is a sad rascal. If I had known this in Cuba, I'd have been tempted to let him alone."

"No, you wouldn't, either," retorted Gabe confidently. "Being what you are, you just couldn't, Homer Fort. I sized you up as a fellow who has always kept pretty straight—isn't that so? Yes, that's what I supposed," he continued as Homer nodded.

"Well, then, it is probably hard for you to comprehend the complex nature of that type of humanity which we wrongly call a 'Southern gentleman.' Tom's environment and ideals have been different from yours for generations back. His father and his grandfather were slave-owners. The lax morality of the average slave-owner permeated them, and through them, Tom. There are men like him in the North, whose ancestry is just as much responsible. But at heart Tom is a fine fellow, with warm, albeit some-

what promiscuous affections. He has been taught to consider himself first, and his peculiar idea of honor is a high and very real one. He demands everything from his own class of women, and would kill the man that wronged one, while he scorns all other classes, and regards the ruin of one of them as a joke, something to be laughed over at the Club, and something which it was rather smart of him to have accomplished than otherwise. Rose has hit upon the only possible way to wake him up, and I believe she is going to do it."

"I hope so, but I have my doubts," said Homer. "Thank you for telling me the story, anyway. I shall be interested in how it all turns out. How are the peaches, Gabe?"

"Simply great," said Gabe enthusiastically. "I'll bring you up some samples of the coming crop. And if you say the word I'll set the men to work tomorrow. The Crawfords will soon be too ripe for shipment — almost that now, unless you have a quick sale for them in Chicago."

"I have," declared Homer. "They have written me to hurry the fruit along. The quicker you get it off, the better. I will be fit enough as soon as I am over the fatigue of the journey here, and then I'll go over the orchards with you. How's politics?"

"Nothing doing, since Tom stepped out," said Gabe regretfully. "I rule the county now, and



everything is orderly and consequently dull. Heard anything about my hotel?"

"No. What about it?"

"Oh, nothing," Gabe chuckled. "I've a good mind to tell you all about that, too, but I reckon I'd better not," he continued. "Rose is wild with curiosity, and it wouldn't be fair to tell any one else first."

"You make me curious," smiled Homer. "It isn't a hotel, then?"

"They call it that, and so I let 'em," said Gabe. "I've bought a tract of land from Mrs. Gray — and I'm putting up a fair-sized building on it — laying roads, and planting shrubs and flowers and a garden. Rose is helping me, and Madge, bless her, has put her all into the project. I doubt if I could have planned it yet, without her."

"Are you keeping its object a secret?"

"I am getting on in years, Homer," stated Gabe. "And while I feel as young as ever, it may be due to my age that I like to surprise people. Every one, even Rose, has settled it that I am going into the summer-resort business, so I let 'em talk, and I say nothing, one way or the other. Talk never hurt anybody, Homer. When the time comes, I'll show my hand, and then stand by and enjoy the effect. Now I guess I've talked you blind and deaf, and it's time for me to go to the office. Here comes Uncle Jack,

with my horse. He's a regular clock. Well, Jack, did you get religion all over again at the revival last night? Here is Mr. Fort come back again. Don't you know him?"

"I knows what's lef' ob him, suh," said Jack with a broad grin. The news of Homer's coming had been carried to his ears long ago. "I hope you-all is tolluble, suh? I'se tolluble, myse'f, thank yo' kin'ly."

"How about the revival?" repeated Gabe.

"It was shuah some glorious meetin', suh," cried Jack exultingly. "'Mos' ever'body git happy, an' fall on de flo' an' writhe wid de infloence ob de Holy Ghos'. Myse'f," he continued, scratching his woolly head. "I doan't eber git happy lak dat ar. I doan't ezackly onderstan' huccome it is dat I doan't — I jus' doan't, dat's all. I say de alphumbet baccards, an' de Lawd's prayer thew an' thew, an' I can't flop to save my soul. But I kin make de res' do it, so mebbe dat am my share ob de blessin'."

"Maybe the spirit is with you all the time," suggested Homer. "Therefore you don't go through the agony of getting it now and then. Perhaps you did your flopping when you were a baby."

"Dat mus' be it," said Jack, his face clearing. "I'se mighty obleeged to you foh de suggestiom. Maw, she often tell me how pernickety I use' to be. Reckon she'll bress Gawd when I tells her it wuz de Holy Ghos', 'stead ob de debbil, which las' she has allus allowed it wuz befo'. Good-mawnin', boss.

Good-mawnin', Mistuh Fo't. Hopes to see you-all lookin' mo' peart right soon. Good-mawnin'."

The old negro returned the way he had come, and Fort looked on while Madge came out to give Gabe his farewell kiss. She was very sweet this morning in a dress of softest pink, and now she turned to Homer with a smile.

"I'm going to get you an egg-nog, and you shall have to drink every drop. And then I will put up the screen to shade your eyes, and after that I will read you to sleep."

"You are too good," protested Homer. "I shall be horribly spoilt, but the process is so pleasant that I don't mind a bit."

A half-hour later, Rose, coming softly out, surprised them on the Gallery. Homer lay half asleep in the hammock, listening while Madge went through the pages of a popular magazine. They were both so absorbed that the girl stole quietly away, without disturbing them.

Her slightly suspicious attitude towards Madge was now revived, and strengthened by a queer rebellious sensation of which she did not know the meaning. She felt that Madge should have been busy in the house, and that it was her place to be caring for the semi-invalid. Her heart was stirred with pity and with admiration for Homer Fort. Like Gabe she had been quick to see the real heroism which lay behind his modest statements, and she liked his re-

fusal to brag about what he had done. This was in accordance with her idea of a man.

But all the same her old indignation returned at his ingenuous possession of Madge. She had argued with him once upon this subject. Why couldn't he have realized how much better it would have been had she, Rose, been the one to read to him?

Why couldn't Madge have realized this, too?

## CHAPTER XVI

**I**T was an endless task to pick the Captain's peaches, or so said the laborers to one another while they worked, for he possessed an eye that missed no slightest negligence on the part of his employees. He was here and there and everywhere, and not a speck upon a peach escaped him. The imperfect ones were laid aside for quick sale to canneries in Georgia. Only the perfect fruit was put in crates for the Chicago market. And every peach must be handled just so carefully, and placed just so particularly among its fellows, or else the picker received a sound berating, and sometimes a dismissal.

There is nothing like the odor of a peach orchard at harvest time. If it is lovely in the spring, with a fairylike scent and beauty, it is lovelier when all its promise is fulfilled and substantial to the taste and smell. The pink-clad branches are more graceful than the heavy-laden ones, but they lack the bountiful richness of the latter. Nature becoming pregnant is mysterious and alluring, but only in the completion of her time and in the yielding of her fruit, does she climb to heights which inspire and overjoy. Those

who have helped to gather a harvest, know the supreme delight of it, and the sense of exaltation which takes possession of them in the apparent drudgery of the garnering.

A few days after Homer's coming, he announced himself entirely rested and quite strong enough to go down to the orchard. Leaning on Gabe's strong arm he made the trip slowly, and with many pauses to exclaim at the wonder of the crop.

"I thinned the fruit unsparingly," said Gabe. "I didn't leave two peaches anywhere within four inches of each other. I've kept the trees low, so it is easy picking, but those damned niggers need constant watching, or they'd spoil half the crop for me. Every penny I make out of this sale goes into my Hotel, Homer."

"Is it for summer boarders, Gabe?" teased Homer.

"Summer boarders and winter boarders, too," chuckled Gabe. "Ain't that so, Rose?" he called over his shoulder to his daughter who was following with Madge and Uncle Jack, the latter bearing "li'l Tawm," an honor which made him perspire unduly.

"I've heard you say so, but I don't know a thing about it, really," pouted Rose. "I don't think you treat me fairly to be so mysterious, especially as I am writing all your letters for you and fairly taking charge of the building, while you are so busy here."

"That's so," said Gabe. "And I'm a cruel par-



ent. All the same I won't be done out of my surprise. Now here's a good place for you folks to sit. Hurry, Jack, and fetch more cushions."

"I don't want any," said Rose. "Here is a blanket for the baby."

She unfolded a shawl she had carried on her arm and spread it out upon the grass. But the moment "li'l Tawm" was placed upon it, he developed a strenuous desire to walk over the edge, and Madge and Homer were constrained to offer their help to Rose in keeping the young rascal within bounds.

"We'll each take a side," laughed Homer. "It'll be a sort of game, with the baby as a large-sized, animated ball. Gabe, can't you guard the fourth side?"

This the Captain agreed to do, and the four had a lively time with their prisoner, who enjoyed being headed off as much as anybody. But Gabe could not stand leaving the pickers long to their own devices, so he indulged in hurried trips about, always returning with another peach for them to sample, and being much crestfallen if they failed to go into proper ecstasies over it.

The baby tired of the fun at last, and went to sleep with his head in Rose's lap. She turned thoughtful, musing upon the scene, with wide dark eyes and serious face.

"What is it?" asked Homer, tossing her a peach.

She caught it with a smile, and set her white teeth into its luscious depths. "I was just thinking," she

explained, when the mouthful was consumed. "I was thinking of Cuba and the horrors there. It all seems like a dream. And I was wondering how it would be if this pleasant land of ours should be invaded. All this beauty would be blasted. These trees, the result of years of care, would be cut down ruthlessly —"

"Don't talk so, Rose," shivered Madge. "Let's just be thankful that peace has come so soon. It has been bad enough, but it might have been so much worse."

"That is true," asserted Homer. "In history, as wars go, this Spanish-American War of ours will not amount to much. Yet it took a fearful toll of the brave boys who went to Cuba, and is still taking it in the shape of sickness and privation, both there and in our camps at home. The whole thing was mismanaged from the very start. I heard one of the fellows say, while we waited in front of Santiago, 'Pshaw! Let's go back home and start all over again.' A good many of the rest of us felt that same way."

"Is that really so? From the newspapers one can never tell how much is talk and how much is fact."

"You may be sure of this," responded Homer, rousing to energy. "The newspapers were not allowed to divulge the real state of the case. Only the soldiers themselves know what they suffered, and they are too proud to spread it broadcast. If ever we go into another war, I hope to God we'll be better pre-

pared than we were for this. And another thing, I hope politics will be kept out of it. Men shouldn't be appointed through their 'pull,' to care for an army of soldiers and recruits. Such fellows bungle the job beyond repair.

"The trouble with us Americans is that we've got such swelled heads," he complained. "Take that word, 'American,' for instance. We have grabbed it for ourselves, so that the average citizen of the United States considers the South American a foreigner, with no right to this appellation. Folks who live in Canada are called Canadians. Brazil inhabitants are Brazilians. But there's no such word as 'United Statian.' We are '*Americans*,' if you please. Like little Jack Horner, we sit in our particular corner, with the plum of our democracy on our little thumb, and invite the whole world to witness what a big boy we are. Then we get properly slapped in the face, and we start to wipe out the fellow who slapped us. But while we have been busy feeding up on Christmas pie, the others have been hardening their muscles. We've got the thing all wrong, and we will always have it wrong, I am afraid, until some other country comes along and beats us good and plenty."

"I thought you didn't believe in war, Mr. Fort," said Madge gently. "Yet you sound as if you'd like to see us prepare for it."

"So I should," answered Homer stoutly. "Yet I don't believe in war. More than ever now, since

I've been in the field, and seen something of its horrors. Miss Rose, you were in Cuba. In the hospitals you saw a moiety of the suffering which went on in the battles themselves. Wasn't that enough to make you realize that war is — hell?"

"It was," agreed Rose. "And I too believe that we should be prepared. Then at least some of the more cruel aspects would be eliminated. So many lives need never have been lost, to accomplish the selfsame ends —"

"That's so," interrupted Gabe, coming up behind them. "Rose thinks as you and I do, Homer, and as all earnest people must. If ever we have another war I prophesy that we will not go into it with the same reckless confidence that we exhibited in this. Our women are waking to the fact that they pay the heaviest toll of suffering right here at home. They wouldn't be half so apt, again, to invite their sweethearts to be soldiers, and to cheer at the sight of a uniform."

"It's a funny thing — what you said about the word 'American,'" mused Rose, who had been turning over Homer's little speech. "It has just struck me that some of the States have names for their people, and some haven't. For instance we are Georgians. There are Pennsylvanians, and Virginians, and Californians. But there are no Massachusettsians —"

"Instead we have Bostonians, who think they rep-

resent the entire State, and Maniacs from Maine, and pie-eaters from Connecticut —”

“Or Michigianians, or — or Illinoisians, and all that sort of thing,” continued the girl, frowning at Homer’s levity. “What do people from those States call themselves, anyhow?”

“They say proudly, ‘I am *from* — such and such a State, and let it go at that,” laughed Gabe. “Well, Fort, how about a little walk over to the wagons? I’ve got a barrel there for you to sit on, and I’d like you to see how we handle the fruit.”

“I’m game,” said Homer, rising slowly from the ground.

Rose and Madge, left alone with the sleeping child, were silent for a space, each occupied with her own thoughts. Then Rose spoke softly, for she had been going over in her mind what had just been said of war.

“If little Tom had to grow up to fine young manhood, just to be shot to pieces on a battlefield, would it not seem a waste? Yet, oh so many died who could not have been much beyond twenty — and almost all had sweethearts, or wives, or mothers — I believe I’d rather he’d die now, than live for such an end.”

“Poor ‘Li’l Tawm,’” said Madge tenderly, giving the words Minnie’s drawling accent. “But it begins to seem as though he might be lucky little Tom after all. He is lucky now, for that matter, for he has many to love him and to care for him. Rose, do you

ever think of the homeless and worse than homeless little ones? The children with drunken fathers, widowed mothers, impoverished homes? Those with the brand of illegitimacy and those with that other brand of vicious parenthood? Do you ever think of the poor little orphans in asylums, bound down to rigid routine, trained not to think, and molded out of all semblance to healthy, happy childhood?"

"Of course I do," grieved Rose. "Who wouldn't! Tom is lucky. Sometimes I think we have no right to be so comfortable here at home. We ought to be helping those not so fortunate, and especially the children. Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why don't you use Aunt Betty's money — give it to a home, or something?"

"That is just what I won't do," declared Madge. "I have no use for institutions as such. Neither has Gabe. Besides, I have given him that money for his 'Hotel.'"

Rose curled her lip scornfully. "An old hotel, when little children needed it! Shame on you, Madge! But there! For all I know, Father is building some kind of an institution — forgive me for the word, and for speaking as I did. His hotel can't be any sort of an asylum, since you object to those, but as the poor cannot be reached except through an asylum, or through individual effort which is always inadequate, I really do not see that you have any



solution for really worth-while philanthropy. So what's the use? Why, hello, Minnie! You don't mean to say that you've come back for good!"

Madge started and followed Rose's eyes. Mrs. Kemp, now simply Minnie Gray again, was coming across the tall orchard grass toward them. She had hidden her nurse's dress under a long linen coat, and carried a suit-case, which, in her excitement, she had forgotten to leave at the house. She was flushed and breathless, triumphant and yet tremulous, so ridden by her state of mind that at first she was unable to speak.

She sank down between her two astonished friends, without a word of greeting, and laid her hot face upon "li'l Tawm's" sturdy body. He opened his sleepy eyes and favored her with a beatific smile, at which she caught him to her breast and kissed him hungrily. Holding him so, she looked at Madge and Rose.

"Yes, I've come back for good," she announced with a catch in her voice. "As soon as possible I must go home with Mother. Up there in the hills I'll wait, with the forests and the great wide spaces to teach me patience."

"Then Tom has said nothing definite —"

Minnie laughed wildly. "He has been very definite. He loves Mrs. Kemp. He despises Minnie Gray. How was it, Rose, that when your father brought that poor down-trodden creature home, you and Madge did not turn from her in disgust?"

"Why, Minnie, you are not like yourself at all. There was nothing about you then to inspire anything but tenderness and pity."

"Pity! Ah, yes. That is something to which I am still entitled—I and 'li'l Tawm.' To Tom Blankenship we both are loathesome. I am afraid—horribly afraid—"

"Minnie, what has happened? Calm yourself and tell me all about it," ordered Rose.

"I told him what he must do to win Mrs. Kemp, that's all," said Minnie. "It was the same thing you had told him, long before. He knows that Mrs. Kemp shares your opinion, takes your stand, and demands the self-same things. It is all up to him now—it is all up to him."

## CHAPTER XVII

**W**HAT did Tom Blankenship know, which had driven Minnie to desert him before he had sufficiently recovered no longer to need her care? Let us return and gather the thread of their relations up to this same August morning, when something definite occurred which forced Minnie to snap it hurriedly in twain.

It may seem strange that Tom did not at once identify Mrs. Kemp with Minnie Gray, when his sight returned to him. But consideration will reveal the reasons for this failure on his part. Over two years had passed since he last saw the little mountain girl. At that time she was only seventeen years old, and thin with the awkward angularity of youth. She seemed all hands and feet. Her hair, too, was rough and uncared for, and burnt by the mountain sun. She wore it strained tightly back from her childish face. Her eyes then possessed the ruminative qualities of a brown-orbed mountain heifer's, and character had yet to be developed in her. She was browned by sun and wind, coarsened by unceasing toil, and yet sufficiently pretty in spite of everything to rouse his momentary interest. So slight had been

the attention he paid her, that since he left her he had scarcely given her a thought until Rose forced him to it.

Between his memory picture and Mrs. Kemp lay an abyss so deep that no effort on his part could possibly have bridged it. In reaching motherhood Minnie had reached maturity, and though still slender, she had rounded. Her seclusion before and after the birth of "li'l Tawm" had bleached her skin, and restored her hair to its original glossy tints. Her suffering had molded her and given her strength and poise. Under Rose's tutelage, her carriage had become graceful, her hands soft and well-cared for, and she had quickly acquired a veneer of culture that was now becoming part of her very self. She was quite unmistakably "a lady," which Minnie had not been. She was moreover interesting, mysterious, alluring — all qualities foreign to the ignorant girl of seventeen. Even if Tom had recognized that the elusive likeness which Mrs. Kemp bore to some one he had known before, was a likeness to the girl he had wronged, he would have counted it an insult to his nurse to make such a comparison. It is safe to say that the two entirely distinct personalities were never associated by him. They lay as far apart as the poles.

After the scene between himself and Mrs. Kemp, in which he finally promised to be good, relations were strained between them. Mrs. Kemp attempted

to act as though it had never been, and at first she succeeded admirably. But what could she say or do to combat those beseeching eyes of Tom's, which followed her about the room and spoke as eloquently of his love as any words he could have voiced? In spite of herself she became silent and embarrassed, avoiding his gaze and absenting herself as frequently as possible. This last made Tom feel injured. He was amused at her embarrassment, and took pleasure in increasing it by throwing into his expression all he could of the worship he dared not speak. But her absence was a weapon he could not combat. During its lengthening intervals, he had time to foresee what he must soon endure without her, and to wonder if he did well to be obedient.

Another thing, fear haunted him lest Rose betray him. He knew the girls met often, and in spite of his confident assertion that Mrs. Kemp would believe him, he grew more and more to feel that she would incline to take the stand Rose had adopted. He began dimly to realize that this was the only possible stand for a modern intelligent woman, and to perceive that his respect for Mrs. Kemp would decrease if she did not take it. But he hoped she would not, while he trembled lest she would.

What was the barrier between them, of which she spoke so positively? Was it on her side? If so, then he must know what it was, and meet it face to face, or else how could he hope to vanquish it? So

he bolstered up his courage and sought an opportunity.

It came unexpectedly, as such opportunities usually do, and on this very morning which the Shelleys spent with their guest in the peach orchard, watching the picking of the fruit. The day was sunny, but, with carefully shaded eyes, Tom had been helped out upon the awninged Gallery to which the long French windows of his room gave access. Meanwhile Mrs. Kemp and Mrs. Smith "turned out" his bed to air, and gave the large chamber a vigorous cleaning. Nathan washed windows and beat rugs, and ran errands, with his usual good-nature, and Tom, safe from all the bustle and confusion, yet near enough to listen and look on, by turns made the two women laugh or scold at his multifarious orders.

"Don't you touch the inside of the bureau, anyhow," he called. "I have everything just as I like in there, and nothing must be disturbed."

"It has already been done," responded Mrs. Kemp from within. "Things may not be where you like them, but they are where you can find them, which is much preferable, I think."

"Well, you leave my desk alone," he growled. "My private papers —"

"Love-letters?" she mocked. "I promise you I'll be discreet and not read one."

"You can give Nathan those things in the corner of the wardrobe," he further ordered. "I suspect



he's been wearing 'em, anyhow, and he might as well do it openly as on the sly. I reckon I'd better part with all my clothes, for I'll be so thin I can't wear 'em."

"We'll fatten you, so don't get discouraged yet," retorted Mrs. Kemp. "Are these the ones you mean?" She came to the window with an armful of tailored garments.

"Those are the ones. Here you, Nathan, come here."

"Fer de Lawd's sake, boss," stammered the colored boy guiltily, when he came through the window and saw the pile of clothes. "W-whut you want wid me?"

"See those clothes?"

"Yassuh! Y-yassuh! I see 'em! But I swar to Gawd, boss, it's de fust time I'se took a look at 'em, sence you wore 'em las'. I s-swar to G-Gawd it is!"

"Who said it wasn't? Do you think they'll fit you?" asked Tom carelessly.

Cunning dawned in Nathan's eyes. He now perceived that he was not to be accused, but to receive a gift. That changed everything.

"Co'se dey'll fit me," he said proudly. "Specially dat black Prince Abbut. It goes on lak it wuz made fo' me, boss, dat it do. Ca'line — dat's my gal, boss — she say I looks so good in dat ar coat dat she bleeched ter say 'Yes' when I propose to her wid it on —"

"When will you be married?" asked Mrs. Kemp with a twinkle.

"Nex' Sunday, ma'am. Thank you kin'ly, boss. Dis'll make a scrumptious weddin' outfit fer me — better trueso dan whut Ca'line has got fer her own se'f. Thank you, thank you, boss."

Nathan's gratitude was wordy, and occupied the foreground until Tom ordered him to shut up and get out. The housekeeper now came through the window with an armful of cushions, and while she beat and dusted them, she gave minute particulars of last Sunday's sermon, and rendered Tom quite desperate. He sandwiched orders in about every possible or impossible thing, and listened for Mrs. Kemp's musical comments or replies.

At last the cleaning was over and the housekeeper and Nathan departed to see about the lunch. Tom called softly, but received no answer. Mrs. Kemp must have gone, too. He wanted to get inside now, for it was growing hot under the awning, so, after waiting patiently for a reply and getting none, he gathered his courage together, resolved to make an attempt to enter without help, and rose feebly from his chair.

It was hard work — that journey all alone. But from the support of his chair back, he reached for and grasped the shutter, and then the window-frame. Holding on desperately, he urged his body over the sill. There the table was handy and he reached it

breathlessly, pausing to lean upon it while he gained strength to proceed into the room. As he looked about he saw Mrs. Kemp beside his desk.

She had heard neither his call nor entrance. She was holding a photograph of his which had been taken a couple of years before, and which displayed him as he had then appeared in all his arrogant and manly beauty. So absorbed was she in its contemplation that, holding on by chairs, by the bed, by anything that might serve to help him, he went softly toward her and was almost at her side when he noted suddenly that her eyes were wistful and full of tears. As he paused uncertainly, she spoke in a half whisper, to the portrait in her hand.

"I love you. Oh, I do love you," she murmured yearningly.

He gave a cry of triumph, she an exclamation of surprise. But before she could replace the picture or ward him off, or say one single word in explanation, he had his arms about her and was planting burning kisses on her lips. "You darling!" he whispered. "You darling! You cannot evade me any longer, for I heard you say you love me. You belong to me now, do you understand?"

At first she made no effort to resist him. Indeed her own lips answered his hungrily, and her arms stole round his neck. But when his first transports were over, and she felt him stagger with sudden weakness, she was quick to seize her advantage and to

force him into a chair. Then, cheeks still aflame with the fire of his kisses, she faced him.

"Of course you know the result of this madness on your part," she panted.

"That you are mine now, and will soon be my wife!"

"No, never! The result is this — that I must leave you."

"Are you crazy?"

"I wish I were," she mourned. "If I were, then indeed I might yield to you. But I am most hopelessly sane, and there is nothing before us but renunciation."

"Say that you love me," he besought with wily eyes.

"I do love you. But —"

"And I love you. What matters besides those facts?"

"Right matters," she said firmly. "You had no right to take me in your arms or kiss my lips. You had no right, Mr. Blankenship."

"I had the best of right, after what I had just heard you say," he boasted. "What greater could there be than that?"

"The right of honesty," she retorted. "You have not been honest with me, nor I with you. Love cannot last that is based upon deception. I would only lose respect for you and for myself if I allowed myself to be conquered by it. You heard me say I loved you,

but that meant nothing. I can control that love and live it down. I shall never let it control me — again."

The last word was so low he missed it. Intent upon making her surrender, he bent frowning brows upon her.

"Deception?" he repeated. "What deception?"

"Is there nothing you have kept from me, Mr. Blankenship? Have you been — entirely frank — with me?"

"Why not?" he parried lightly. "Is it your idea that I should hold up my whole past life for your inspection? I have asked *you* no questions. I am entirely willing to take you on trust. My love would turn a deaf ear to anything that might be said against you. Forgive my plain speech, for of course there could be nothing said. I am just trying to convince you. Should you not be as generous, and show as sturdy a belief in me? I think you should. Come to me, dear, and let me kiss away your doubts?"

But she stood quietly before him, her hands clasped tightly and her eyes wide with pain. Although he held out his arms pleadingly, she made no move to enter them.

"You are not fair to me," she said at last. "You have me at a disadvantage, but I am resolute. I have suffered much in my life, and I know that happiness is not possible for us unless I share your confidence. I should have much preferred to have you tell me

what I am obliged to tell you — that the barrier of which I spoke is of your own making. I know —”

“What? What do you know?”

“I know — the story —”

“Yes, yes! Go on!”

“The story — of Minnie Gray.”

His eyes flamed fire with rage. “Ah!” he exclaimed between his teeth, striking a clenched fist upon his knee. “I might have known that Rose would not keep faith with me. Damn her for a mischief-making, meddling —”

“Stop! — Before you say what I could never forgive,” she interposed with steady eyes. “It is true that Rose and I have discussed this subject, but not until I had first told her that I knew you were the father of Minnie’s baby — I learned it from a source quite different from any you could guess.”

“I don’t believe you. It was Rose who told you. Who else could it have been? And now I swear that she shall pay for it —”

“I am speaking the absolute truth. Rose is not responsible for my knowledge of this.”

“Then Madge Shelley, or Captain Gabe —”

“Not one of them betrayed you, though to my thinking it would not be betrayal. Tom Blankenship, if I had been ignorant of this, and in my ignorance I had consented to marry you — don’t you understand that they would not have been true friends to me unless they warned me?”



"That's what they've made you think," he snarled. "But I say that the past is closed and done with. Minnie Gray is not worthy your commiseration. I have been indiscreet, but no more so than other men who are still bachelors at thirty-six. I will be faithful and loyal to you — more faithful and more loyal than a less experienced man could ever be. You see I know the difference between gold and dross. I'll never fail you, dear."

"What you might be to me is not the question. Minnie has a son whose rights demand consideration."

"I suppose you saw the woman and her brat at the Shelleys'?"

"Perhaps."

"And you took her word, as Rose did, that the child was mine? Why? Why do you good white-minded women at once assume that one man alone is responsible for a situation like this vicious girl's? You decide everything by your own virtuous point of view, and prattle of love as part of such lives as hers. You don't know what you are talking about!"

She was white to the lips. "I do know what I am talking about," she repeated quietly. "It is you who are unjust and unfair, Mr. Blankenship, and while you hold one member of my sex in such contempt, I should fear, indeed, to trust myself in your keeping. You make the mistake of differentiating between woman and women. Of woman you sound

the praises. Women you scorn. I won't sink to your level. Any argument you may advance is useless. I have made up my mind irrevocably, and I tell you finally that unless you make full and honorable amends to Minnie Gray, Mrs. Kemp will never marry you."

He laughed bitterly. "You speak in paradoxes. If I make full amends to Minnie, it means marriage, according to Rose Shelley. If I marry her, how can I marry you? Friendship is not possible between us two, so in any case I should have to part from you. This I will not do. I once thought I loved Rose, and in the suffering to which her scorn condemned me, I had a foretaste of the hell into which I must descend if I lose you. It is more than you have any right to demand. I'll have you yet, at any cost."

"Then marry Minnie," she besought him. "Marry Minnie Gray."

"And lose you? No, by Heaven!"

"Marry her and make me happy!"

"Make you miserable, you mean. No!"

"Marry her and save yourself and me!"

"And damn us both? No, no!"

She held out imploring hands. Like a child asking a wanted toy, she murmured beseechingly, "Please! For my sake!"

He rose from his chair more quickly than she had thought him able, and started toward her. She did not shrink from him. On the contrary she stretched

out her hands to meet his own, and lifted her face courageously to his. This balked his passion. Tenderly he kissed her.

"I don't even know your first name," he said sadly. "I don't know where you live, or what your past life has been. You speak of sorrow, and sometimes your face is very sorrowful. Give me *your* confidence, my darling, and see how understanding I shall be. I love you so much that I never could condemn you."

"I'll tell you all my story, if you wish," she answered readily. "But first you must offer marriage to the woman you have wronged."

Her persistence stung him past endurance. Flinging her off with sudden angry strength, he cried, "Do you suppose that Minnie is the only woman I have 'wronged'?"

Her eyes grew wild. "Don't say that," she begged. "Don't say that! Don't tell me that other children look to you for fatherhood! Don't say it!" And then, in the same breath, imploringly, "Tom, is that true?"

He shook his head, moved by her agony. "No, it is not true. So far as I know Minnie is the only one of her class whom I have made a mother. I'll do anything you ask of me — but marry her."

"That is all I do ask."

"It is the one thing I will not do."

"Very well! Good-by, Mr. Blankenship."

"You mean that you will leave me?"

"I must. Until you consent to do what I ask, I cannot see you again. Good-by."

He started forward, but the room was dim. She slipped aside, and was gone, even as he spoke her name. He staggered over to the door and found it locked. He pounded on it, and called Nathan.

But before the colored boy could answer his summons, she had crammed her things into her bag and left the house. He knew her well enough to realize that she would never return.

## CHAPTER XVIII

**T**OM, left alone, gave way completely to the sorrow and despair which now overwhelmed him. He saw before him a future bereft of everything to make it worth the living. Her absence accomplished this, that it made him comprehend to the fullest just what she had come to mean to him. At first he was desperate, physically prone and mentally distraught. He could not think connectedly, and the strides he had made toward complete recovery were in danger of being all undone. He wanted to see no one but Mrs. Kemp, and in his darkened room, which he locked against every one but Nathan, he allowed his torment free rein, giving himself entirely over to its grinding pain.

Lying upon his couch with face turned to the wall, he lived again through the hours he had spent with her. He felt again those first mad kisses on her lips, that somehow seemed like kisses he had given her before, only so much more sweet and full of ecstasy that there was no comparison between the reality and that elusive haunting memory. Again he felt her yield to his embrace, and grew intoxicated with the knowledge that she loved him.

And all to come to this — that he had lost her. For a mere principle she had renounced him. Her love for him had not been what it should be, or it must surely have overridden everything but just the fact that they had been created for each other. It must be that women did not love like men, or they could not give up so easily.

Marry Minnie Gray? Marry that ignorant commonplace creature, and spend his life beside her? It was unthinkable, actually absurd. He had nothing in common with such a woman. There was not one thought in his brain which she could comprehend. There was not one situation in his life which she would grace. Her presence would be torture. She might be teachable, but who would teach her? Not he, a man in love with such perfection. He saw a home in which she was the wife and groaned aloud in contemplation of it. She was repulsive to him. He would have none of her. He hated the very sound of her name.

And then his thoughts returned to her he loved and all was changed. He fancied her the mother of his children, and the picture was so vivid and delightful that he could not dismiss it. With his child upon her breast, she became a Madonna, worthy his reverence and worship. He could have knelt to her.

He saw her in a hundred pretty poses — in a low chair, sewing, like his mother; reading in the library with the lamplight glowing upon her pretty hair;



picking roses in the garden where she was the loveliest of all the flowers; or sitting by the fire with her head against his knee and his hand cupping her cheek while they two exchanged intimate nothings. . . .

And then again he held her in his arms, and called her dear tender names, and kissed her soft red mouth. Ah, God! The exquisiteness of the dream was almost enough to make the torment of it bearable. Better to love a woman such as she, and live in unending regret for what might have been, than to sink down to Minnie's level in order to achieve mere dull morality.

What was it she had said? "Unless you make full and honorable amends to Minnie Gray, Mrs. Kemp will never marry you."

It was a pretty conceit of hers, which he had often noted, this speaking of herself as a third person. In her earnestness she had become confused, or she would not have made a statement such as this.

"Unless you make full and honorable amends to Minnie Gray, Mrs. Kemp will never marry you."

Was it perhaps possible that in her mind such amends did not include marriage? Was this so? Why, he'd do anything, pay over any sum, acknowledge the boy and take him into his own home even, if she demanded it. There was nothing he would hesitate at doing, which made her his. Then he remembered her subsequent pleading, and knew himself too

hasty. "Marry her and make me happy," she had said. There was no getting out of it. Her meaning had been clear. Amends, to her, implied all that it had to Rose. He could not do this thing.

"Marry her and make me happy." The irony of it! Could she find happiness in mere abstract devotion, and in condemning Minnie, too — for the ignorant country woman could never adapt herself to his environment —? Far truer would it have been for her to say, "Marry her and ruin all our lives."

Yet she had vowed she loved him! And she did love him, too. He knew at last why she had been so joyous over his returning sight. He had been joyous also, but what did it matter now? What difference did it make whether he was blind or not, if the light of his life was to be forever gone? Everything was worthless without her to give it worth. Life was at its darkest, without one ray of hope.

So that day passed, and the next and the next. His friends grew anxious at his persistent refusal to see them, and feared, they knew not what. Doctor Pearsall gained admittance by bribing Nathan, and shook his head over the patient who had so suddenly taken a turn for the worse. "If this keeps up, he'll suffer a relapse," said the old Doctor. But it kept up, unceasingly.

*"Unless you make full and honorable amends to Minnie Gray, Mrs. Kemp will never marry you."*

The phrase seemed written in letters of fire upon

his brain. It mocked him, and when he tried to dismiss it, still it clung.

*"Marry her and make me happy."* Such altruistic irony! Such clever evasion! He could not get it out of his mind, and from long brooding on it, at last he read anew its meaning.

It was on Sunday afternoon that suddenly it dawned upon him what Mrs. Kemp must have really meant. Her paradox was no paradox. She herself had supplied him with a solution of the whole difficulty, which he had been fool enough not to perceive at the time, and which it has taken all these days of brooding to bring to his attention. The dear little rogue had indeed meant exactly what she had said. He could marry Minnie Gray, and still make Mrs. Kemp happy.

In his sudden relief at his new translation of her speech, he could have shrieked out his joy. He sent posthaste for Nathan, and bade him fling every window wide. Under his impatient supervision, the negro hurriedly laid out fresh linen, bathed, shaved and dressed his master, and then rode off to Gabe Shelley's with a note. So certain now was Tom that he began to make his plans, and already in imagination he saw her laughing eyes and felt her arms about him. "'You stupid boy,' she'd say. 'Why didn't you guess my riddle sooner?'"

The Shelleys had their Sunday dinner at two o'clock, so that the servants might have the afternoon

free. They were at the table still, when Nathan brought Gabe Tom's note. He read it aloud to the assembled family, of which Fort was temporarily a part.

"DEAR GABE:

"Hurry over here as fast as you can, and bring Rose with you. I've thought of something. I'll get my own way yet, and give you and Rose yours, too. We will all be happy. Hurry like the devil.

"T. B."

"Now what do you suppose he means by that?" asked Gabe, folding the sheet of paper and looking quizzically at his audience.

"He refers no doubt to the matter he and Rose were discussing," said Madge tranquilly, seeing a way to dispose of the subject comfortably before their guest.

"That must be it," cried Rose, her face clearing. "Perhaps he sees reason at last."

"He may not see reason, but he certainly has it back of the note, somewhere," suggested Homer hopefully. He was already looking much better and vowed he owed it to Madge, who cared for him indefatigably.

"We'll go, I suppose?" said Gabe to Rose.

"Of course," she flashed. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

She sent a confident look into Minnie's troubled

eyes. "Keep from worrying," she advised in a whisper. "You'll see! Everything is coming out all right. He is going to give in."

Minnie smiled oddly. Had Rose been less absorbed, she might have wondered at this smile. But she only thought of it as inspired by gratitude which Minnie could not voice in Homer's presence. Even had the girls known that Gabe had told Fort most of the story, they would have hesitated in discussing it before him. All interest in the excellent dinner was now quite lost, by Rose, at least, and she hurried her father until he complained that she ought to be ashamed to order her old daddy about the way she did.

They drove to Tom's house, as being the quickest way to get there, and Gabe's lively mare gave them no chance for speech. But father and daughter were so well attuned that they understood without words, just what each hoped and feared from the coming interview.

In his impatience Tom had made Nathan help him down-stairs, for the first time since his return from Cuba. He was seated in the window, watching for them, and called to them that the door was open and not to stop to ring. They made their way into the big parlor, and over to his chair. He waved them to seats, showing a face all flushed and eager with anticipation.

"I have just thought what she meant," he ex-

claimed, with no preliminaries. "I'll do exactly as she suggested."

"First you had better explain what she suggested," interposed Gabe, testing a delicate Chippendale chair before trusting it with his weight.

"She said she could never marry me unless I made full and honorable amends to Minnie Gray," explained Tom.

"Who said this?" Gabe was deliberate.

"Mrs. Kemp," cried Tom, chafing at his denseness.

"Oh! She did, did she? When?"

"Just before she left me the other day. You knew she had left, because she went straight to your house. Doctor Pearsall told me so."

"Did he tell you as well that the whole town is positive that you have been behaving so queerly because she refused you?" asked Gabe with a provoking smile.

"No, but of course they would be. It is so, anyway," said Tom sulkily.

"So she left because you proposed to her?"

"Yes. Didn't she tell you?"

"No, but I kind of suspected it," said Gabe comfortably. He reached for a palm-leaf from the table, and fanned himself as he talked.

Rose had perched herself on the broad window-seat, facing the two men, and now she interrupted.

"Mrs. Kemp told me something of what had oc-



curred," she announced. "So that I got a fair idea of the situation."

"Well, that is what I am driving at," exclaimed Tom, almost beyond self-control. "Now I've just thought of a way to satisfy everybody. I'll marry Minnie to-morrow, if you say so."

Rose looked up in glad surprise. "That's fine, Tom. I knew you were all right at bottom."

"It's the best news I've heard this long time," declared Gabe.

"Yes, I'll marry her to-morrow — to-day — the sooner the better," declared Tom. "You can't hurry matters enough to suit me. Where is she? In the hills? Hurry her down here, will you? I'll send my carriage after her, and perhaps you, Rose, will go to break the glad tidings and prepare her a little for the ceremony. Will you?"

Rose was about to tell him that Minnie was at the house, when Gabe motioned her to silence. "You have certainly made up your mind in a hurry," he drawled. "Now fire ahead, and tell me what is back of this. You might as well, for I won't stir one step towards getting this ceremony performed, until you show me your hand. You play a good game, but you can't bluff me. You have some scheme in your mind."

"Of course I have — the plan Mrs. Kemp suggested to me."

"What's that?"

“‘Marry her and make me happy.’ That was what she said to me, and I, like a fool, never saw what she meant until to-day.”

“Well? What did she mean?”

“Why, that I should give Minnie my name, of course,” laughed Tom, so relieved at his plan and his certainty of its finding favor in his lady’s eyes, that he failed to note how Gabe’s hand caressed his chin, or how keen and disapproving his eyes were growing. “And then, as soon as a decent interval has passed, I can give her a divorce and marry Mrs. Kemp. In this way I will reinstate Minnie, legitimize the boy, please everybody, and in the end gain happiness for myself and her. Don’t you see?”

“Yes, I see,” commented Gabe, while Rose’s glowing face grew downcast. “But I reckon you are still a long way off from our point of view, Tom. I thought it was kind of sudden for you to be coming around.”

“Tom,” said Rose, very low. “Don’t you know Mrs. Kemp better than that? She did not mean anything of that sort. She would not be your wife if you divorced Minnie. Moreover, I feel certain that Minnie would refuse to marry you on any such terms.”

“She needn’t know the terms.” Tom was sullen and crestfallen.

“Ah, but she’d soon learn them. And she’d never sue you, nor ever give you grounds to sue her,” cried

Rose warmly. "No, Tom, if Minnie marries you, it will be with the expectation that you will be her husband, and the father of your boy."

"The father of my boy!" repeated Tom bitterly. "That boy has become a millstone which you are all determined to hang about my neck. Why should I feel any special interest in this nameless brat? What have I to do with him, or he with me?"

"Tom, he is your own. He bears your mark," exclaimed Rose. "Besides, I have often heard you say that, even if there were no life beyond the grave, a man could always attain immortality through his children. You may never have another son, Tom. And so I think you must have something to do with this boy, in spite of yourself, for through him you will live on after your death. He will represent you, and by his means you will impress yourself on countless future generations —"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Tom roughly. "Now, leaving out your own decided objections to my plan, why not find out what Mrs. Kemp thinks about it?"

"I will. I'll call her up on the telephone, at once."

Rose ran from the room, upstairs to his chamber, whither the telephone had been removed during his illness.

Tom turned to Gabe with freedom, for now he was man to man and could say what he pleased.

"All this fuss about Minnie Gray," he growled, moody in his reaction from the eagerness which had possessed him. "Why, Gabe, if every man who had wronged a woman ended by marrying her, some of the outcasts would have fifty husbands, and the respectable women would have to get along without any. You know that!"

"Tom, you mistake my meaning in urging this marriage upon you," returned Gabe quietly. "Leaving out the small per cent. of natural wantons, the majority of so-called prostitutes enter their life of degradation through loving unwisely. Even so, this first man concerned might find a basis for square dealing with the woman, aside from matrimony. I am not urging this for Minnie's sake. She transgressed, and could no doubt redeem herself without your help. But the child needs you. He is yours. He has the right to your paternity, and to the honor of both his parents. The moment he came into the world he had claims which could not be ignored."

"Bosh!" muttered Tom. "Who cares for a baby?"

"The country cares!" thundered Gabe. "It has got to care. Nature has laid down a law which says that a child must have two parents, and ages of civilization have been spent in making both of those parents alike responsible for the being they bring into the world. That is why Minnie's claim is just. Lit-

tle Tom needs you, and you, his father, should be thankful that he is a fine, strong, healthy boy. You have been fortunate enough to escape disease."

Tom made a gesture of disgust, but Gabe continued, bent on establishing his point. "Yes, you have been fortunate, and the baby has been fortunate. Ah, Tom! The poor little crippled bodies I have seen! The poor little deformed minds! And blind — you've had a taste of blindness, Tom. How would you like to bear it always, because of your father's self-indulgence? Suppose little Tom had been born blind, or lame?"

"Nonsense!"

"Not nonsense. Good sound common-sense, which the women of our land are waking to, now that they have their female doctors to tell them what was so carefully kept from their ears before. Prudery has had its day, Tom, and the double standard is seeing the last of its time as well. Eugenics is an almost unknown science now, but it won't be long before every man and woman will be required by law to show a clean bill of health when they marry. You laugh, Tom, but, much as I want to see you marry Minnie, were I not sure of your physical condition I'd oppose the union."

"I am surprised that any consideration could move you one iota from your position," mocked Tom.

"I knew you would be," responded Gabe dryly.

"As a matter of fact, Tom, I am not half so inter-

ested in you as you imagine. Rose has set her heart on making you over, but personally I don't care a damn about you. Your change of heart interests me only in the light of its bearing on the boy. It is the future of the race that we must consider, not the present. That has pretty well taken care of itself already, and in your person has just now informed me that I am a meddling old man who had better be at home attending to his own business. Well, Rose?"

Rose came quickly across the room, directly to Tom. "Mrs. Kemp is horrified that you so misread her meaning," she said clearly. "Mrs. Kemp wishes me to assure you that nothing was further from her thoughts than that you should divorce Minnie. Indeed, all she asks is that you live happily with Minnie. This, she says, will make her happy, too."

"Tell her that, having known her, happiness without her would be impossible to me," stormed Tom. "Ask her how she can expect a man of my ability and social standing to content himself with a girl like Minnie Gray? Tell her I'll end by blowing out my brains, and she'll have only herself to thank."

"That is a cowardly message, which I forbid Rose to deliver," replied Gabe. "Face the issue like a man, Tom. Play fair. Take your medicine. It may be a bitter pill to swallow, but after you get it down, it'll do you a sight of good."

Tom did not answer, but flung himself back in his chair and turned his face away. In his action Gabe



rightly read an intention to end the interview which had by now grown painful to them all, so he nodded to Rose, and they went out quietly, leaving bitterness and disappointment behind them.

Tom knew now that there would be no compromise, and he was still determined never to yield to Gabe's and Rose's counsel. He would marry Mrs. Kemp, in spite of them all. Yes, and in spite of her, too. As for Minnie and that boy — let them never come in his sight if they did not wish to feel his wrath. Let them keep away if they did not wish to suffer. He had suffered enough through both of them, God knew! And now, in his last stand, he had no support but pride. Would that sufficiently uphold him?

## CHAPTER XIX

GABE had an errand at his newspaper office, so he parted with Rose in front of Tom Blankenship's home.

"Don't look so blue, girlie," were his final words to her. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

She smiled bravely, and stood on tiptoe for a kiss. "I never was so sorry for anybody as I am for Minnie," she said softly. "You should have heard her voice when I told her Tom's proposition. She was more than horrified, and now I know she is locked in her own room, crying her eyes out. She couldn't tell me what to say to Tom. I had to make it up. All this has hurt her cruelly."

"Let her alone for a while," advised Gabe. "The tears will do her good. After the storm has spent itself, see if you can't put a rainbow into her sky. Tell her I think it very encouraging that Tom is working so hard to solve the difficulty. It is natural that he should twist and dodge and double, but he will be kept facing the right road, and he is bound to take it at last. But there! You know how to present the matter ever so much better than I, because you understand Minnie better."

"I'm not sure that I do," returned Rose thoughtfully. "Minnie has not been herself since she returned to us. There is something strange in her manner, and in her longing to go home."

"I think you may exaggerate a little, dear. Minnie has had much to bear, and you should be patient, very patient. Good-by."

"Good-by, Father. Don't get interested and stay in that old office the rest of this lovely afternoon. Madge and I want you."

Gabe nodded as he gave the mare her head, and the restive little animal side-stepped down the street before settling into the long stride that pleased him most. Rose's eyes kindled at the picture the pretty creature made, and then darkened again as her thoughts returned to the interview just past.

But on this glorious day it was quite impossible to continue melancholy or distraught. The citizens of Salem were on their porches, and each one knew and loved the beautiful girl. From every side they hailed her with merry greetings, to which she was quick to respond. The children ran to meet her and hung upon her skirts. Even the dogs barked gaily, and one terrier in particular waltzed backward before her until she grew fairly dizzy at the sight, and ordered his small owner to take up his wriggling body and bear it home again.

Some there were in Salem who were outspokenly curious regarding Mrs. Kemp. Only the most inti-

mate friends of the Shelley family — those who could be trusted to keep their own counsel — knew that she was Corporal Gray's daughter. Gabe was always furnishing excitement for the town, and on top of the sensation caused by bringing a baby into his home, with a queer mother who shrank from meeting folks, "just like she had something to be ashamed of," he had raised a mountain of conjecture about his big hotel. Therefore, Rose had to run a gauntlet of eager seekers for information. Little old ladies strolled down to their gates when they saw her coming, and after a rapid fire of questions were loth to let her go. Young gentlemen were also on their garden paths, quite by accident of course, and wanted to detain her. Girl acquaintances, who thought her odd but worthy of imitation, stopped her for chats while they appraised her slyly, taking mental notes of her dress and hat, or her parasol or shoes, and quizzing her as to where she bought her gloves and perfumes. Like a queen she held a little court before each house she passed, dismissed would-be escorts, parried eager questions, and escaped at last, flushed and smiling and breathless, into the quiet country road which led home.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed aloud, fanning herself vigorously with her handkerchief. "It is fearfully nice to be so popular. I wonder if it is because of the father I have, or because of the girl I am?"

To a certain coterie it was undoubtedly because of the girl she was, and she dimpled as she remembered the admiring glances of the young gallants who had tried to intercept her. Then her active thoughts flew on ahead of her, and she wondered if Minnie were still weeping, and where Madge was, and Homer Fort. With winged feet she sped on and into her own front gate. Ah, it was as she had imagined. Homer was in the big chair beneath the trees, and Madge, on the old settee, was reading aloud to the buyer. Minnie was nowhere to be seen.

All the life seemed to go out of Rose. She drooped visibly as she went slowly up on the big porch, tossed parasol, gloves and hat upon the table there, and then hesitated, with downcast eyes and petulant mouth,—a pretty sulky child.

Madge looked up and called her, but she did not answer. With a slight sigh, the elder woman laid her book aside, and went to greet the girl. "You look tired, dear. Did you have a bad time with Tom?"

In a few words Rose spoke of what had passed, trying to seem her usual bright self, but failing so signally that Madge could not ignore her attitude. "What's the matter, Rose?" she asked.

"I do think," burst out Rose, as if against her will. "I do think it is scarcely necessary for you to be quite so attentive to that man. He is nothing but a business friend of Father's. Surely it is not essen-

tial for you to wait upon him every single minute, read to him, feed him, hang upon his words as though he were a marvel, instead of an ordinary — commonplace — red-headed — freckled — ugly —”

“Rose!” Madge’s quiet voice recalled the girl abruptly. “Do you realize what you are saying? Mr. Fort is Gabe’s *friend*, and I am proud and glad to call him mine as well. He should be yours, too, and would be if you were not so unreasonable. There, there! I didn’t mean to be so cross, but you are usually frank and generous to a fault, and that makes it all the harder to understand your hostility toward Mr. Fort, and your resentment at my playing the part of hostess. It is not like you, Rose.”

“I am sorry,” murmured Rose contritely. “I don’t know what does get into me, sometimes,” she confessed, with one of those sudden confiding impulses which were irresistible. “I love you, oh, so dearly, Madge, and I love my father so dearly, too, that I cannot bear to have your thoughts stray away from him. When I see you reading to Mr. Fort, and apparently so friendly with him, something comes up into my throat, and I get wild and quite unlike myself. Then I say things I do not mean, and afterwards I feel so badly — but it seems to be something I cannot help. Perhaps I have been through so much in the last few months that I am not responsible, and you should be patient with me. What do you think?”



She smiled engagingly at Madge, to find the older woman regarding her intently, with a new and strange expression dawning in her eyes.

"Why do you look at me so?" asked Rose, blushing furiously. "Is there anything odd about me? Have I suddenly turned black, or green, or something?"

"No, but you have turned red," laughed Madge. "My dear, I believe I know what ails you."

"Do tell me," begged Rose. "I am dying to find out."

"No, I sha'n't tell you, but I shall prescribe for you. Will you obey my orders, you naughty girl?"

Rose put up both hands in mock appeal. "I've got to, since I am not twenty-one," she said. "But don't be too hard upon me, Mother dear."

"If you call me that, I shall be merciless," retorted Madge. "First you are to kiss me and tell me you are sorry, and promise to be good. Then I am going in to rest, and I shall expect you to read to Mr. Fort while I am gone, and to see that he gets his egg and milk at exactly half-past four. Will you do that?"

Rose put her arms around Madge and gave her a hearty hug and kiss. "Where is Minnie?" she whispered.

"In her room."

"I thought so. I am sorry. But I won't bother her just yet. I'll do as you bid me, Mother—

Madge, though it is a distasteful task, and one I would forego if I could."

All the same her eyes were dancing as she went over and took a seat beside Homer, who had been looking on wistfully at the pretty byplay between the two women on the porch.

"I am ordered to entertain you for a while, Mr. Fort," she announced demurely. "As we can neither of us help ourselves, we shall have to make the best of it. Is this the article that tyrannical Madge was reading? Where did she leave off?"

As Rose held out the magazine for Homer to find the place, he took it from her hands and closed it firmly.

"I thought I was to read to you," she protested.

"Mrs. Shelley does that," he answered. "The rare moments in which you condescend to stay with me are too precious to be so wasted. If you are here to amuse me, you must do as I want you to."

Rose folded her hands, and adopted an expression of patient resignation. "Very well," she said meekly. "What shall I do first?"

"Look at me."

She raised long dark lashes and showed him laughing eyes.

"Next?"

"Talk to me."

Obediently she began. "Talk is the name for a method of communication between souls by means of

lips, tongue, teeth, and palate. Sometimes the lungs are used as well, and sometimes, for emphasis, the hands, feet, or other parts of the anatomy. When talk deals with abstract questions, it becomes conversation. When it tackles politics or religion, it becomes argument. When it descends to personal disagreement, it becomes quarreling. And when it is used as a way of entertaining, it becomes rhetoric, oratory, declamation, discourse, flights of eloquence, or plain speech-making. Which will you have, Mr. Fort?"

"I'll have conversation, if you please."

"I can't do that all by myself."

"I'll keep up my end if you'll keep up yours," he answered, and they laughed gayly, like two happy children.

"Start me," she begged. "Ask me a question and get me going. You don't know what a flood you are unchaining, or you might beg off beforehand. I'm a talker when I get started."

"All active thinkers are," he answered.

"No compliments, please."

"Mentioning a fact is not making a compliment," he averred. "Now if I told a woman she was beautiful when she wasn't, that would be a compliment."

"It would be a lie, you mean," said Rose. "If I informed you that your hair was auburn instead of red, it would be —"

"A kind evasion," he retorted. "But you can't

hurt my feelings by calling my hair red, Miss Rose. I am proud of my carrotty locks."

"Really?"

"Yes. They are distinctive. People always notice me. For the same reason I am glad I am homely and awkward, and usually freckled. Every one begins by feeling very sorry for me. 'What an unprepossessing fellow!' they say to themselves. 'We must be extra nice to him, to make up to him for his misfortunes.' So they set out to be extra nice, and this makes me feel very pleasant and responsive, and first thing you know they are saying, 'After you get to know him, you really don't mind his looks one bit.' Husbands are never jealous of me. Mothers regard me as safe and reliable. So I am privileged to have many friends among both men and women — and all because I'm homely."

Rose laughed.

"You, for instance, would be on the defensive with a handsomer man," continued Homer, regarding her narrowly. "Isn't that true?"

"Of course not," denied Rose.

"Wait a bit. To how many of your men friends do you talk naturally and freely?"

"To all who talk freely — and naturally — to me."

"How many do so?"

She pretended to count on her fingers.

"Name them."

"Father, for one."

"Yes?"

"Judge Oglethorpe, for another."

"Go on."

"The minister, Doctor Pearsall, Uncle Jack —"

"Get down to the younger ones, and keep to the one color."

"Tom Blankenship —"

"Did he always?"

She flushed rosily. "No," she confessed. "Among the young men here one has to be careful. But that is the fault of their bringing up. They have been taught to regard women as creatures set apart for admiration and worship, instead of sensible human beings, with brains and the ability to use 'em. They always start in by being silly. Before they go very far with me they discover that I don't like it, so then they take refuge in silence and eloquent glances. How tired it does make me!" she exclaimed, outspoken in her indignation. "Here am I, educated, well-read, interested in the news of the day and eager for information. I like men intellectually, and would like to have some real comrades among them. But what is the result of any such attempt on my part? Those near my own age promptly give way to a species of insanity which they call 'falling in love.' If I am friendly, then I am giving them encouragement. If I evade them, I am a coquette, drawing them on by holding aloof. I am

forced to look to the older men — between the ages of fifty and ninety — but to them I am merely a child, whose opinions should never be treated seriously. The consequence is that I must either depend for friends upon girls who are occupied just now in making conquests, and in talking of nothing else except clothes, or upon older women whose minds are taken up with their homes and babies. Madge is my only real, true friend, outside of Father.”

“How about this Mrs. Kemp? And me?”

“Mrs. Kemp has so far been a responsibility,” she said frankly. “But she is going to be another friend, and for that I am thankful. As for you —” she paused.

“Well?” he encouraged.

“I don’t know you well enough to place you yet. I do know that I could not have spoken as I have just done to you, if you were like those others —”

“I am not like those others,” he declared. “Miss Rose, there is always danger, when a young and susceptible man meets a young and beautiful girl — there is always danger that he may fall in love. That should be his misfortune, not his fault. I myself have never seen much fun in having it expected of me. Flirtations are waiting round the corner everywhere. Girls are taught early to consider sex their most effective weapon, and to be on the lookout for a mate. They raise shy eyes to every newcomer, and ask as plainly as if they spoke aloud, ‘Are you the



man who is to be my husband?' We men object sometimes to such frank appraisal. We would like to be taken on our merits, and allowed to stand or fall for what we are, and not for what we might become. I cannot imagine anything nobler or more inspiring than a real friendship with an intelligent woman. I have many such friendships, and I hope to have many more. I count Mrs. Shelley as my partner in one of them. May I also count you, Miss Rose?"

Rose looked seriously into his eyes. The expression of them reassured her. He meant all he said.

"Of course I warn you," he continued with a smile, "it may be my lot to fall in love with you. But should I do so I should treat the malady with proper respect, and with no levity. I should even be willing to discuss it with you, and to try any remedy you might suggest. And you might possibly fall in love with me, red head and all. That is a risk that men and women take, when they are friends. To my thinking it is a risk worth while. How about you?"

She was embarrassed, plainly at a loss. This frank discussion of the possibilities alarmed her. She knew how to parry the advances of the amorous fellows she had known, but Fort's clear, judicious statement of fact was something she had never encountered in any other man.

"I tell you what," he beamed suddenly. "We'll mark out certain lines for our friendship. Here!" He drew pencil and paper from his pockets, and

sketched a map of a highway, traversing valleys and hills, with here and there another road branching off.

"This highway is called Comrade Street," he said, and wrote it down. "It starts at the Bridge of Acquaintance, and goes down through the Valley of Doubt and Circumspection, up the Hill of Understanding, to the Heights of Friendship. We have traveled through the valley, I think, and up the hill to the heights. Already I catch a glimpse of the view beyond, which we two may behold together. But now the bypaths to Love fork out invitingly. We will put up 'No Trespassing'—so—before them all. There, how is that? The warnings will be heeded by us both, and so will hold us safely in the path."

"But," objected Rose, with mischief in her eyes, "some men would be tempted by such warnings. No path is so inviting as the forbidden one."

"That is true," he assented gravely. "It will be your part, Miss Rose, to keep my eyes ahead. If I should side-step, you must seize my hand and pull me on. Keep the no-trespassing signs so big and ugly that I get not the slightest hint of the wonderful beauties of the secret paths beyond them, which all lead to the selfsame goal. I have not the protection of being in love with some one else. I am heart-whole as far as any other woman is concerned, and thus must throw myself entirely on your mercy.

Shall we try the Heights of Friendship together under these conditions? I know that we would find much pleasure there — self-less, impersonal, abstract, and free from the elements of love and passion. You keep to your part of the bargain, putting no temptations before me, and I'll keep to mine. Will you shake hands upon it?"

She continued to look thoughtfully at the map, while his extended fingers almost touched her own. From the map she raised clear eyes to his face, turned them down to the rough sketch again, and again upward to meet his earnest gaze. And then, slowly, seriously, she shook her head, and drew her hand away.

Immediately a new something leaped into his eyes.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I am — afraid," she answered.

"Afraid of what?"

"That one of the no-trespassing signs might fall down."

"And you dread the possibility of straying from the path?"

"I wouldn't stray," she answered firmly. "But you might. And I would not needlessly cause you pain."

"Why, needlessly?"

"Because I could not go down the path with you. Mr. Fort, your frankness and honesty bid me be frank with you. Many boys have pretended that they

loved me. They sobered for a little, when they could not move me, and then turned to other girls for consolation. One *man* has sworn that he loved me, and after all, his heart proved fickle. But you seem different from him, or those others I have known. I do not wish to appear vain or self-conceited, but my experience has taught me that it is better to be careful. We'll tear up your ridiculous map, with its signs calling attention to forbidden paths. We'll make no compact with each other. Accept me as I am, and I'll accept you in the same spirit. And I'll not be held responsible if you — fall in love — with me."

"Wouldn't you even be — sorry?"

"Yes, very sorry. From what I have seen of you I do not believe you would recover lightly, like the rest. I could not fall in love with you, so I shall hope for the time when you can come to me and tell me of some lovely girl who has your heart and will become your wife. Then I will shake hands gladly, and promise to be your friend and hers. And the road we will travel together will have no branching paths to cause trouble — but will be straight and un-deviating.

"What a long time we have talked," she cried, with a sudden change of manner. "I must go tell Janey that you want your egg and milk, and then I must see Minnie for a moment. Please don't misunderstand what I have said, Mr. Fort."

"I will not. Instead I thank you for it, from the bottom of my heart. There comes your father."

"Good!" cried Rose. "He can talk to you and so I won't feel like a deserter."

She tripped hurriedly across the grass, while Homer watched her with something more than mere friendly admiration in his eyes. He missed no slightest movement of her lithe young body, and when she waved her hand to her father and called a greeting, he drew in his breath sharply. Uncle Jack led the mare away and Gabe came over to occupy the bench.

"I've been giving a few orders about to-morrow's edition," he said. "Newspaper offices have to work Sundays, Mr. Fort, to please the good Christians who like to get the latest news on Monday morning."

"Captain, you have a lovely daughter," said Homer slowly, turning his eyes toward Gabe, now that Rose had disappeared from view.

"So a good many have told me," answered Gabe satirically.

"I am head over heels in love with her already."

"A good many have told me that, too."

"I am different from those others," protested Homer.

"So each of them has informed me. However, I have a different answer for you. I have always said, 'Rose is old enough to choose for herself. Go see what she has to say.' They have followed my advice,

and been sent about their business. Tom Blankenship had the nerve not to approach me on the subject. Now to you, all I've got to say is that I like you, Homer, and I'd like to see Rose marry you. But you haven't the ghost of a show, and you might as well save yourself trouble by knowing it now."

"You seem very positive," demurred Homer.

"I am positive," replied Gabe with conviction. "Rose was very much in love with Tom, as I told you once before. She has suffered more than I like to think about. The suffering did not hurt her except in one particular. It made her lose her faith in men. She measures them all by Tom now, and she hasn't a bit of use for any one of them. She has decided to be an old maid, and she is a good, steady, hard-to-change decider. She excepts me from the general lot because I am her father," he continued whimsically. "She regards me as a person set apart. But she has her suspicions of everybody else, and I don't see how you or any other mere man could combat them."

"All the same I intend to try," returned Homer quietly. "I have offered her friendship, which she refused."

"That's odd. I had thought her willing enough to be friends with men. The only trouble is that they won't stay friends with her."

He mused for a space, and then, as Janey came up with a brimming yellow glassful on a tray, he roused and turned to Homer with a smile. "I like your



self-confidence," he said. "But it hasn't a chance against her prejudice."

"We'll see about that," answered Homer, taking the glass, with a nod of thanks to Janey. "We'll see about that, later."

His attitude puzzled Gabe. He would have been still more puzzled had he known what was passing in Homer's mind. For the young man regarded it as a distinct advance that Rose had torn up his map.

"She is afraid of me," he thought. "If she wasn't, she would have shaken hands upon the bargain I proposed. And she is not quite sure of herself, or she'd have done it anyway. She fenced well, but not well enough to deceive me. A little jealous for Mrs. Shelley, a little afraid of me and of herself — take courage, Homer. If you can once bring her to a standstill before one of those no-trespassing signs that she objected to, you may coax her to take a peep into the path beyond. And then, if you are cautious and very, very patient, she may step in a little way, and so be lost. At any rate the thing is worth a trial, and I am going to try."

## CHAPTER XX

SEPTEMBER passed, and October tinged the leaves rustily in Salem. While the vivid beauty of the northern autumn coloring was lacking in this southern State, the soft balminess of the air, and the clear skies and tempered sunshine, more than made up for the bright reds and yellows which meant a speedier waning.

The summer just gone by had witnessed two kinds of harvesting. The gathering of crops was one, which turned all men to saving for the winter, to the elimination of waste, and the husbanding of every resource. The harvest which Death gathered in the tropics was another, which taught them brutally to cast away what their womenfolk had labored to bring into being, and that the sacrifice of stalwart manhood was glorious and right and fitting. The harvester called Peace garnered for the ultimate good of all humanity. Her breast was firm and full, her rounded arms heaped blessings on mankind. Yet through all her busy season of growth, war had been harvester as well, reaping the bitterness of men's deeds, and getting ready the ground for further sowing of the seeds of contention and strife. What

greater contrast could there be than lay between these two extremes?

The weather was still warm enough for the out-of-door life in which the Southern folk love to indulge. At the Shelley homestead, on a morning early in October, the entire family deserted the house for the green lawn and the still welcome shade of the trees. The grass was sprinkled with fallen leaves, which Uncle Jack raked into piles and then carried off in barrow-loads to heap about the peach-tree roots. "They like to be nice and warm in winter," Gabe explained. "So I cover them with Nature's own blanket."

Minnie and her mother had long since gone to the hills, where their old home had been put into good condition with part of the money Gabe paid them for their land. Rose had been out to see them, and had spoken to Minnie with pity of the condition of Tom Blankenship, still half-invalided, and alone in his big house.

"I am tempted to go to him," she said. "He must be brooding and it can't be good for him."

"Do you think he has suffered any more than I?" was Minnie's unexpected answer. "Let him alone, and he will reach a definite decision all the sooner."

The two girls had wandered through the grounds of Gabe's hotel, and through the hotel itself, which was now complete.

"What do you think my father will do with

this?" Rose asked. "Is it an old ladies' home, or a sanatorium, or what?"

"I don't know," answered Minnie. "He has asked my mother to be housekeeper, but he threatens to lock the gates on me, until he is ready to unfold his plans to the rest of you. I have begged him not to do that, and have promised faithfully to keep away as soon as he gives me the word."

This word had been given over two weeks ago. Mrs. Gray went to the "hotel" mornings, and returned to her own home at night. Minnie remained outside, according to her promise.

"How much longer are we to wait?" Rose teased Gabe, seated beside him on the big settee, with a lap full of gorgeous dahlias and chrysanthemums, which she was fashioning into bouquets for the veranda.

"Perhaps next week, perhaps this afternoon," he answered with a smile. "Things are almost ready out there now, and I promised you should be the first to see what I have done."

"Mrs. Gray sees," Rose pouted.

"Ah, but I have to have some people working to get ready for you."

"Madge knows. She hasn't said so, but I guessed it. It is mean for you to leave me out, and tell *her* all your secrets."

"Not a bit of it. She put in her fifty thousand dollars, and besides she was the one to give me the idea in the first place," declared Gabe stoutly.

"Now it isn't a bit of use, your teasing me like this. I'm not going to give myself away. I've done this thing partly for you, and I shall spring it on you properly. Don't grudge this surprise to your old daddy, little girl."

His answer was all he had expected it to be, quick penitence, a hearty hug and kiss, and a promise to be good and bide his time.

Homer Fort, now strong and considerably stouter, and also possessing another good crop of freckles, came over from the steps, where he and Madge had been busy reading the morning papers.

"I heard that last speech of yours, Captain," he remarked. "I wish you'd hurry up. I've almost outstayed my welcome here, I'm afraid, and it is time I was getting back to Chicago."

"Your welcome has been drawing compound interest," returned Gabe heartily. "Now see here, Homer. After I took the trouble to write to your firm and describe your condition so eloquently as to get you this extension of your vacation, don't you think I ought to have the say-so as to how you spend your time? It won't be up until the fifteenth of the month, and until then your days belong to me. I am certainly delighted with your appearance now."

"When I get back they will think I have been playing off," laughed Homer ruefully. "I have gained thirty pounds and I haven't an ache nor a pain in me

anywhere. I believe I could throw you in a tussle, Captain."

"I'd like to see you try it," roared the Captain, to Fort's surprise. But then the Captain was always surprising people. He was proud of his strength and would brook no belittling of it. In a twinkling his coat was off and he was facing the young man, who, at a slight nod of encouragement from Rose, promptly followed suit.

The two regarded each other warily for a moment, and then clinched. Homer was no match for Gabe, and before he realized what had happened, he lay flat upon his back on the grass.

"Why, you haven't the grip of a baby," chuckled Gabe, as he helped the crestfallen young fellow to his feet. "Practice up, man, practice up. But I allow you couldn't throw me, however much you tried, for I've stood up against practically every man in Bucks County."

"You are pretty spry," admitted Homer.

"And so were you," cried Rose. "All the same, you couldn't trip my father."

The pride in her tones made Homer glad that he had been beaten. He sat down beside her, still breathing hurriedly, while Gabe drew up chairs for himself and Madge.

"Uncle Jack," called Madge.

"Yas'm, yas'm," answered the negro, hurrying forward.



"Bring our lunch out here and we'll picnic. And call up my father and ask him if he can join us."

"M-me call him up? How do you mean? On dat ar 'phome? No'm, doan't ax me fer to do dat. I doant lak to do dat nohow, Miss Madge."

"See here, Jack," thundered Gabe. "You've begged off long enough. You'll have to learn to use the telephone, so you might as well begin right now, when all of us are here to prevent it's hurting you. Get a move on! Off with you!"

"A-a-a'right, boss," stammered Jack. "D-d'you reckon I kin use dat 'phome widout no trouble, same as white folks, huh?"

"Of course," laughed Gabe. "Why not?"

Jack shook his head dubiously. "White folkses' contraptions ain't got much use fer niggers," he muttered as he shambled across the grass.

"I've never been able to get him to send a message before," whispered Gabe to Fort. "He has such respect for a Yankee that he is ashamed to back out before you."

They watched with interested eyes while Jack went slowly up on the porch, his feet lagging more at every step. When he reached the table he hesitated perceptibly, nerving himself to touch the instrument. At last his trembling fingers snatched the receiver from the hook, and he spoke into the mouth-piece.

"S-scuse me, Miss 'Phome," he said aloud. "But

I wants to speak to Jedge Oglethorpe, thank you kin'ly. W-what's dat? Numbuh? De Jedge ain't no jailbird, to be spoke at by a numbuh, miss. Yas'm. I has heard de boss gib numbuhs, but I doant reckon dey wuz aimed at no pusson lak de Jedge."

Rose was about to call the number of the Judge's telephone when Gabe restrained her. "Sh-h! Wait a bit," he cautioned.

"Infohmation? What foh does I want infohmation? I ain't axin' foh no infohmation—jes' de Jedge. He ain't no infohmation. Yaas, dat's whut I done said. I wants Jedge Oglethorpe. What's dat? West 235? Mus' I say dat to de op-ratuh? Suah enuff, now? Aw, g'long wid you—you'se a foolin' dis ol' nigger. Hol' on a minute.—Say, boss, dis 'phome do switch aroun' somethin' scan'lous. I'se kinder skeert to hyah fust one voice an' den anudder, comin' right outen de same instrument, lak it wuz folks.—Hullo? Who am dat? Jedge Oglethorpe? Please to see you, suh. You're lookin' tolluble dis mawnin'. Kin you-all come ovuh to de Captain's foh lunch, suh? Ya-as suh. Yas suh. Good-mawnin', suh. Good —"

The Judge evidently shut off and though Jack listened for a moment longer no sounds came to his ears. "I reckon de spring is run down, suh," he said, turning to Gabe. "Does I win' it up f'om dis en'?"

"No. The Judge is all through —"

But Jack was listening to the telephone again. "Gawd a'mighty," he screamed. "Dis thing am a-axin' me to hang up. Hit suah am somethin' scan'lous, how it talk lak it got brains. Law-dy! Hit keeps on a-talkin', an' it's a-gittin' mad! Reckon I better put it down? Aw, now," he soothed in wheedling tones, venturing to stroke the mouthpiece with one black hand. "Doan't you go to gittin' riled, honey, doan't you go to gittin' riled. Soon's you shet up, I'll shet up. Dar, now."

With a sigh of immeasurable relief, Jack put the receiver back upon its hook. "He say he come, an' I done use de 'phome all right. Dis am a proud day foh dis ol' nigger."

"Jack," commanded Gabe. "Come over here and explain the doctrine of original sin to Mr. Fort. He is a little mixed on the subject, and I know you can set him straight."

"'Course I kin," said Jack proudly, willing to tackle anything so simple as religion, after he had just come safely through the ticklish process of handling the telephone. "You see, it's disaway, suh. When de Lawd Gawd put Adam in de gyarden, you mought a-thought dat man would a-been satisfied now, moughtn't you, suh? Naw, indeedy! He say to Gawd, 'Has I gotter lib hyah all my life widout no comp'ny but you an' de sarpint, Lawd?' Gawd, he 'low dat wuz what he had intended to do, an' he 'pollygize to Adam. He say to Adam, 'Go to sleep,

an' bime-by you'll hab comp'ny.' So Adam, he go to sleep, an' Gawd took outen a rib an' say some words, an' it tu'n right smack into a lady. Ya-as *suh!* When Adam woke, he wuz right please'. He say, 'Thank you, Gawd,' an' he set out to play wid de lady. But right dere is where he met his come-up-pance. She say to Adam, 'You-all is done make a mistake, *suh*. De las' shall be fust, is Gawd's own words, written in de New Testamen'. I may get hyah late, but I'se right on de job. You wuz meant to serve me, an' now git busy an' bring me a apple. I'se hongry.' Adam, he 'low Gawd done ferbid apples. Eve say she want one, an' dat's enuff. So Adam fotch huh one, an' she eat, an' he eat, an' so dey gits sont out ob de gyarden. Dat wuz de 'riginal sin, *suh*, what Gawd ain't nebbuh done fergib, untwell Chris' die on de cross. Eben dat wasn't quite enuff foh Gawd, so we all has to be bo'n agin befo' we kin be save'."

"That is a very clear explanation," said Fort seriously. He felt genuine respect for the fervor of old Jack, and went up another step in the estimation of his friends because he did not joke nor laugh. "Do you think you ought to put quite so much blame on Eve?"

"Wal, bein' in de presence ob ladies, I doan't know ezzackly how to 'spress myse'f," hesitated Jack. "But it suah am de truth dat Gawd made a mistake in makin' Eve aftuh Adam. Bein' de las' one fin-

ished up, 'course he put in some extry improvements. When I hyah folks a-talkin' nowadays about women gittin' eddicated lak Miss Rose, an' women's rights, an' women votin', an' all sich, I jes' shakes dis ol' woolly haid, an' I says, 'Dey's still atter dat ar apple, an' de menfolks mought as well gib in. Dey's gwine to git it anyhow, an' pore old Adam hatter do de climbin' foh 'em, jes' de same.' Fas' as dey finishes up wid one apple, dey wants anudder. De on'y advantage I kin see in ebery one ob deir deman's is, dat *dey allus is willin' foh de menfolks to hab a bite*. Now if Adam had a-been made aftuh Eve, suh, an' *he* had wanted a apple lak she want it, an' *he* had made Eve git it foh *him*, suh,—why Adam would 'a' set right down an' eat it all up his-se'f. Ya-as *suh!*

"Dar am de Jedge a-comin' yondah. Thank you kin'ly foh listenin' to dis ol' nigger, suh. May you-all come to see de truth ob de doctern ob 'riginal sin, an' all othuh docterns, suh."

He hurried off to open the gate, and to hold the Judge's horse while he alighted. Although a stout and elderly man, the Judge liked to ride horseback, and still indulged himself in the habit, though he was forced to groan audibly as he eased himself down from the saddle.

"God bless my soul!" he sputtered, rubbing an aching knee. "The rheumatism got in some pretty licks on me this morning, while I was in bed asleep. I woke feeling like a hen that has set three weeks

on stones instead of eggs. How are you, Gabe? Rose, you are lovelier than ever? Mr. Fort, I'm glad to see you looking so hearty — Gabe knows how to stuff waffles and fried chicken down your throat — and mint juleps, too, eh? Got any of those last about, Gabe? I'm thirsty as usual. Madge, give us a kiss and a hug. How is everybody, anyway?"

They all acknowledged his greetings, and he took a chair among them. "Well, Gabe," he said. "Tom Blankenship thinks he can manage his own affairs now. I went in to see him this morning. So if you'll come down to the courthouse to-morrow, we'll relieve you of this guardianship business."

"How is Tom?" Gabe inquired.

The Judge shook his head dubiously. "Such a change in any man I never saw," he declared solemnly. "Do you remember how Tom used to strut about like a fighting cock? I tell you I'd give a good deal to see a little bit of that old time self-conceit in him now. He is so moody, downcast, and so lacking in energy and life, that it almost breaks my heart to talk to him. No more political quarrels, I am afraid, Gabe. And they were the richest things in the newspapers, too."

"I reckon Tom has gone through a whole lot," said Gabe. "He'll come out all right."

"I don't know," answered the Judge thoughtfully. "I — don't — know. He looks to me as though he hasn't got enough nerve left to raise an



umbrella when it rains. If I hit him in the face, he'd not resent it. He'd just turn the other cheek and invite me to help myself. No spirit left — God bless my soul! Whatever will Salem do without its bold reckless devil-may-care Tom Blankenship? Who will furnish us our thrills, supply us with food for gossip, make our heads shake over his misdeemeanors, and all the time command our heartiest liking? It was a sad day for this town when Tom joined the army," mourned the Judge, shaking his old head. "It was a sad, sad day for Salem."

"Captain Gabe seems able to furnish some excitement," interposed Homer with a smile.

"Of a good kind," objected the Judge. "It is all very well as far as it goes, but the virtuous old ladies, bless their hearts, will never be happy unless some scapegrace is hashing up the other kind for their benefit. It's the same with us old men, and with the young folks, too, for that matter. We hold up our hands and gasp. 'How awful!' And then we stand breathless, watching to see him do it again. It helps us to be moral, Mr. Fort, to contemplate the immoralities of others. The church folk could never be so saintly without the sinners to look down upon. Heaven wouldn't be worth shucks, if it wasn't for hell. We measure our future bliss in one by the future pain in the other. Take away hell, as you modern thinkers are doing, and heaven won't be left a leg to stand on. Brotherly love will take the place

of orthodoxy. Saints will consort with sinners, instead of laboring with their souls. Then where will the churches be? Instead of Sunday places of worship they will degenerate into week-day club-houses, with libraries, swimming-pools, gymnasiums, theaters and dance-halls. God bless my soul! It's enough to make the Almighty hasten Judgment Day. He'd better hurry up, anyhow, before the new-fangled ideas have done away with it entirely. The line between the righteous and the unrighteous will be wiped out, and then what will become of us? Every last one of us will turn into Democrats, and this great republican nation will go to smash."

How much of this was irony, and how much was due to the Judge's sorrow at the passing of an old day, Homer was unable to tell. As Rose and Madge and Gabe laughed, he joined in, too, and then perceived that the Judge's half-querulous complaints had been made with this end in view. He laughed himself, patted Madge on the back, shook hands with Gabe, beamed at Rose and Homer, and asked for the latest news.

Meanwhile Uncle Jack and Janey had set the table in the garden, and the family now drew up their chairs to partake of a bounteous meal, which Gabe called, and evidently considered, a light lunch.

"No wonder you grow fat fast, Homer," commented the Judge with his mouth full. "How Rose and Madge keep their figures is beyond me."

"We control our appetites, Father," laughed Madge, and then she jumped, as a small and respectful cough sounded just behind her back.

"Who's there?" she exclaimed, and turning, faced a slender sunburnt boy, who stood first on one bare foot and then the other, in an agony of embarrassment.

"Why, hello, Jimmy," she said. "What do you want?"

Jimmy swallowed, made a desperate attempt to speak, then turned and ignominiously fled.

"Aw! Whatcher scairt about?" came in shrill staccatos from the other side of the fence, where the grown folks perceived a group of white boys from the poorer quarter of the busy town.

"That's what I want to know," roared Gabe. "Jimmy Brown, come back here and tell me what you boys have come for, or I'll lick the stuffings out of you."

This threat had the desired effect. Jimmy paused, and jeered on by his comrades outside, slowly retraced his steps.

"Here! Have a piece of cake," invited Madge. "And a glass of iced tea. Shall I put sugar in it?"

"Madge!" exclaimed Judge Ogleshorpe in mock horror. "The idea of asking a boy if he will have sugar in his tea! What you should ask him is will he have iced tea in his sugar."

Madge took the hint and liberally sweetened the

tall, frosty glassful. The sight of Jimmy cramming tea and cake was too much for the boys outside, and they promptly advanced in a body, to support their leader who had been basely left to go through the ordeal alone.

"Now see what you've done," sighed the Judge. "I'll give up my share of cake — it ain't good for my rheumatism, but, God bless my soul, I won't give up my tea."

"There are plenty of both, Father," laughed Madge, with a nod to Uncle Jack, who disappeared kitchenwards. "Did you forget that I am the wife of a man famed for his hospitality? I don't ever make a cake — I make *cakes*. Come on, boys, we'll have an impromptu picnic. Jimmy, you wait for the rest. Maybe you'd like some bread as well. Here is a plateful to begin on. Janey, get a whole lot more, and bring out that ham I ordered boiled yesterday. Send one of the boys down to the spring-house for more butter, and have Uncle Jack bring out the whole water-cooler."

At these commands the last shyness on the part of the youngsters disappeared. With whoops of delight they swarmed about the table, their mission quite forgotten. Ten minutes later they were busy stowing away eatables as fast as Madge, Rose, and the servants, could get them ready.

"Now, Jimmy," said Gabe when momentary re-

pletion brought a lull in the hubbub. "What did you want me for?"

"Our new baseball team, Cap'n Gabe," said the boy eagerly.

"You don't want me to join, do you?" asked Gabe with a comical look of dismay.

"Naw. But we need some bats and balls, and we want a place of our own to play in, where the bigger boys won't be allowed to maul us. And we want to mark out our field with lime, like the big boys do, and have a flag, and uniforms, and a catcher's mask, and mitt, and lots of things."

"Well! Why don't you get 'em?" Gabe was mildly inquiring.

"'Cause we 'ain't — we 'ain't got no money."

"How do you usually get money?"

"Sometimes we do odd jobs, and sometimes our folks gives us pennies. But we thought, bein' as how this is a regular nine we are forming, maybe you'd give us a donation of five dollars," stated Jimmy modestly. "If you could make it ten, we could put up a bench so as you could watch us play."

"God bless my soul," snorted Judge Oglethorpe. "I'm glad I haven't the name of being a philanthropist. Why don't you ask me to help on this thing, Jimmy?"

Jimmy looked doubtful. "My maw says as how you don't never put but fifty cents in the missionary

box," he blurted out at last. "And the furreign kids git so much more attention than us Salem kids do, that we thought if that was all you'd give to them, you wasn't likely to give nothin' to us."

"Hear, hear!" sputtered the Judge, much amused. "Jimmy, my boy, I don't happen to be enthused about foreign missions. If I can spare fifty cents for the heathen, I reckon I can give you youngsters a dollar. Now tackle Mr. Fort over there, and see what he has to say."

Homer searched his pockets. As the Judge tossed four quarters into the group of boys, he followed with a handful of small change, and there was a wild, enthusiastic scramble. When the noise had subsided, Gabe looked into Jimmy's expectant eyes, and said slowly, "You see the Judge is more of a philanthropist than I am, if that word means the giving away of things. If I donate anything to your baseball nine, it won't be money, but something you can turn into money. Your field will be more precious to you if you earn it. Now don't look sorry until I have told you what I have in mind. I've got a peach-tree nursery over yonder, where the trees are the right size for sale. I expect to get a dollar apiece for every nursling. I'll give you boys ten cents on each tree you sell for me around the town here. You take the orders, and I'll deliver the goods, collect the money, and turn over your share to the treasurer of the nine. How about it?"



"We-ell," hesitated Jimmy. "If that's the best you can do, I reckon we'll just have to hustle and see how many peach-trees we can sell. If we had the money now we could go ahead with our grounds. Will you give us a place on a field somewhere, and warn off the big boys, or have we got to earn that, too?"

"I'll loan you some ground," promised Gabe. "And I'll see that you get protection. Now you all get to work and sell those trees for me. Good-by, boys."

"Good-by. Good-by, Cap'n Gabe. Good-by." With nods, and sheepish smiles the boys filed away, leaving their elders much amused as well as enlightened by the incident.

"Don't ever tell me you are a philanthropist again, Gabe," said the Judge. "You're a regular skinflint. You know darned well you'd have to pay a man a salary and a commission, to sell those same nurslings for you. You are getting off cheap, God bless my soul!"

"So I am," admitted Gabe. "But then I aim to come across with some extras if the boys make good. I'll print 'em handbills, and give their nine a write-up, and get their uniforms for next to nothing. But I don't believe in promiscuous giving. Every boy in town would be after me, if I had forked out what Jimmy asked for. Now they will all be selling trees for me, which will suit me very well. As for you,

Judge, and you, Homer, you look out. Your charity will hound you to your graves."

"That's so," sputtered the Judge. "That's so, Gabe. Never mind. If another boy comes to me for money, I'll threaten to set the sheriff on him."

But other boys did come, and the Judge's hand went into his pocket unfailingly, just the same. Whether he thus created paupers, while Gabe's scheme created workers, it is not for this story to detail. Suffice it to say that the peach-tree nursery was emptied of its trees by spring, and the number of new uniforms, bats, balls, masks, and other paraphernalia which blossomed forth in Salem, quite put the peach-trees in the shade. And Gabe said whimsically, as he paid the last money over to the treasurer of the nine, "It's a good thing, Jimmy Brown, that I limited you to the nurslings, or every tree on my place would have been sold."

"Just give us a chance at the big trees, Cap'n," answered Jimmy modestly. "By gosh, we could show you some profits."

## CHAPTER XXI

**I**T might seem as though Judge Oglethorpe exaggerated Tom Blankenship's condition, but on the contrary his statement was mild and far short of the truth. During the old man's visit Tom had made a tremendous effort to appear like his former self. How far this effort failed we have already seen, and yet it was in a measure successful, since the Judge was kept from realizing the true state of the case.

It was now considerably over a month and a half since Mrs. Kemp's departure. That month and a half had been a nightmare of longing and despair to Tom. He alternated between one tortured mood and another, until he was no longer capable of active suffering and sank into a dull apathetic state, into which nothing intruded except his love for Mrs. Kemp, the acme of his pain.

At first he paced his room and wrung his hands and wept the bitter scalding tears of bereaved manhood. At first, too, he experienced rare moments of ecstasy in which he again held her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers. But those moments were followed by others so black that he learned in time to

fight shy of all such recollections. He even sought to cast her image from his heart, hoping to find relief in absence of all thought and memory, but this was impossible. Though he no longer dwelt upon her in his mind, he was conscious of her in the same way that he was conscious of himself. This consciousness persisted through the dark days which followed, wherein he forced himself to be quiescent and resigned.

However, in spite of himself, Tom was a convalescent. His body was cared for by Nathan, and his appetite coaxed by his housekeeper. The Doctor put his brain to sleep sometimes, out of sheer pity for the once splendid physique that was now struggling to return. And his long abstinence from dissipation, together with all the other influences which had been at work upon him, made his brain tissues healthy. He needed only a touch to wake to clear thought and understanding.

This touch he received shortly after the Judge's visit. The cheerfully querulous old man had always amused Tom, who liked him heartily enough to make an effort at his entertainment. When he left Tom felt exceptionally lonely. He looked at the paper, decided that nothing interested him there, tried a novel with no success, lounged about his room aimlessly for a while, and then began to rummage in his desk.

It had been locked ever since the day Mrs. Kemp

had put it into order for him, and now, as he glanced at its neat arrangement, his letters all tied into orderly packets, the dull ache in his heart throbbed into active pain. He took down one of the bundles, and found it labelled "Business Correspondence." She had sorted out some envelopes with return addresses in the upper corners, and banded them together. He reached for another packet. "Legal Matters" was written upon this one. He noted that the return addresses were all those of attorneys. Another — ah, these were upon notepaper, and the mischievous little nurse had labelled them boldly, "Love-letters." On the reverse side of the tag, so fine that he could hardly read it, he found a tiny verse of poetry:

"Oh, letters of love, with each word a caress,  
Kissed by the lips that against mine would press,  
I am jealous of you, for the words you contain  
Would be stale if by me were repeated again.  
Had you all been by me, then you all had been true.  
Since you all were by others, your phrasings won't do.  
This makes it much harder my love to confess,  
Since I must seek new words my thoughts to express."

Tom read and re-read the faulty little verse, and then he laid his tired head down upon the package of letters. They were not all love-letters, but, alas, some of them were, and of a type he would not have had her pure fingers touch. Did she guess this? Or had her rhyming been inspired by mere impulse to tease? Didn't she know that, even if she did repeat

the words of some of the letters, they would never sound the same from her as they did coming from those others? Was it true that he had cheapened himself and his love, and had lost her respect forever?

Suddenly he rose, went to his bureau, lifted up his mother's picture in its silver frame, and carried it back to the desk. He started to put it beside the packet, and then gave a slight shiver of disgust. Had he been guided by some instinct in keeping her face in one spot, and these records of his loves in another? He only knew that now he could not see them together, and after removing the poetic label, he threw the letters into the grate and touched a match to them. After watching them burn merrily, he returned to the desk again, where Mrs. Kemp's writing lay against his mother's face.

"Mother," he said aloud to the sweet placid countenance of the photograph. "Did you ever think your son would come to this? You were an old-fashioned mother. There were many things unspoken of between us. Dad was an old-fashioned father, too. How often he spoke to me of sowing my wild oats, as if it were the only natural thing for a man to do? How often he told of other men sowing theirs, and of his own young days when 'wine, women, and song' took up all of his waking hours and most of his sleeping ones. 'I was a rare dog then,' he would say with a wink, and of course I thought it was great



sport to be a rare dog, and longed for the time when I could be one too. And I early learned that such remarks were not for your delicate ears. Ladies were to be loved and honored — and deceived. Oh, Mother, wouldn't it have been better if you had been less satisfied with your anomalous position? Was it quite fair to your son, to accept the old traditions and customs, and resign yourself to the one niche in Dad's life which he fashioned for you to occupy? I've been proud, too, of the pedestal on which we keep our women. But is it not wiser for them to step down, than to remain forever aloof? I wonder!"

For a space he sat in silent thought with his eyes still bent upon the fair faded countenance. Then again he spoke, this time with conviction. "Why wasn't I told things?" he demanded fiercely. "Why was I allowed to suppose that I could do as I pleased with impunity? Why was I encouraged instead of restrained? Why were wild oats given a glamour, and purity made to seem the cloak of passionless fools? It hasn't been all my fault — this mess I have made of my life. You, Mother, with your pretty smiling lips, your unworried brow, your calm proud eyes — you were to blame. You had no business to be calm and proud and unworried when you knew — you must have known — *you couldn't help but know* — what sort of life my father led. You had no business to sit serene and watch my feet start on the same course — without one single protest be-

cause 'there are some subjects ladies do not discuss.' And my dad was to blame, too. He pointed out the way for me. He taught me my morals while you taught me my prayers. He was to blame — but back of him and you goes the long line of my ancestors — fighting, roistering young blades, smooth-browed, smirking damsels, old men boasting of their youthful follies, old women indulging virtuously in spicy gossip. What chance had I? I was foredoomed to the sort of life I have led — and would in time have become a boaster in my turn, had it not been for Rose, and the Kid Lieutenant, and Mrs. Kemp. I ought to be thankful for being made to halt upon the road down which I was galloping so gayly. They did me one good turn."

He leaned his forehead upon his hand and continued to gaze earnestly at the picture, while he toyed with the bit of verse. "Still," he mused, "they do not seem to be able to take all this into consideration. They hold me responsible alone, and alone they would have me pay the dreadful price. They condemn me willingly to such a course. I wonder I do not hate them all. I wonder that I can consider so calmly what they would have me do. I wonder that I no longer feel those wild longings for revenge, which once leaped within me. Regret and melancholy have sapped my soul and left me nothing but my love for Mrs. Kemp. It is all of me that is alive to-day. If, in the future, I could see one ray of hope that some

day she would be my own, I would be able to accomplish anything, but now all is dark before me. Life with Minnie Gray? Is there no alternative that would please her? I can see her in my fancy, with her brown eyes so clear and unfaltering, her little head poised so proudly, her lips so firm and uncompromising. She stands at the branching of the roads and points one way — to Minnie. ‘Marry her and make me happy,’ she said. Is that true?”

Another pause, and again he spoke aloud. “I love her so dearly that I should try to make her happy. But for the life of me, I cannot see that such a course as this she proposes could ever make her so, or Minnie either? Minnie Gray would be as much at a loss with me as I would be with her. During that one short episode, which I now regard with such regret and shame, there was no intimacy between us save the fleeting one of sexual attraction. Why, then, should we have to be bound together to the wheel? Wouldn’t it be as much of a penance to her as to me? The boy? Always the boy! He is the reason they advance. Well, let me consider that reason calmly. Could I ever hope to be the proper sort of father for him? Could I train him to honor and revere his mother, and, through her, all women? I wonder! Suppose I go to Minnie Gray, as *she* would have me do. Does she intend that my task should end with the mere act of marriage? No, for she wishes me to remain a husband to Minnie and a

father to the boy. Husband and father! Father and husband! For the first time I perceive a glimmering of what those words contain. To be a husband to Minnie Gray, I must suppress myself entirely. I must be kind, sympathetic, understanding. I must merge my personality in hers — O God! — and try to lead her on and upward. To be a father to the boy I must teach him purity of heart and soul, nobility of purpose, gentleness of spirit, faith in God and man! And I must teach him to respect his mother more — much more than I respected mine. I see now what I must do first of all — and that is, teach myself. Yet surely in teaching them I will teach myself, and perhaps some day I may attain the heights as well, and be worthy of this wonderful love I bear Mrs. Kemp.”

He paused again, and re-read the bit of poetry, with a tender smile. After all, who was he to dare aspire to the pure, alluring, tender, mysterious bit of femininity he knew as Mrs. Kemp? She was right and he was wrong. She was farther above him than the stars. Her own small feet were firmly planted upon the way of truth. And yet he had dared to lift his stained soul and try to compass hers! She was right and he was wrong. She was a being set apart, whom he had done nothing to deserve. Whosoever the fault, the expiation must be begun, or else the future generations too would bear the yoke which he had borne, and bearing it, would drag others down.

And so at last the weary man surrendered. He locked away his mother's picture, half ashamed that he had arraigned her, yet conscious that he had been merely just. He put the scrap of paper in his pocket, a talisman — the only bit of his nurse which he possessed. It would stay with him, a constant reminder that she had loved him, and had placed his honor before everything. He would act as she would have him act, and justify her love. Then perhaps the "new words" would spring unbidden to her heart, and though he might never hear her speak them, yet he would know that they were there.

The morning had passed by while Tom made his resolution. His long vigil had put its mark upon him. He was still pale and thin, and walked slowly, but with a new vigor now that he had at last reached active purpose. His eyes were quite restored. Upon his forehead the cruel mark was partially hidden under his hair, and time would whiten it into less fiery prominence. He tolerated it because it had brought him her whom he worshiped with the best that was in him. And when he left his own door for the first time in months, he bore well the curious glances which swept over him to rest inevitably upon it.

"*Lawsy!* If it ain't Tom Blankenship!" This sentiment, differently expressed, preceded him down the street, and he ran the gauntlet of curiosity, interest, sly questions and genuine friendly sympathy, all

of which he knew enough to regard leniently as the most natural thing in a town like Salem. To all who accosted him he answered in a manner so different from his former devil-may-care raillery, that the noise preceding his coming died after his passing, and silent wonder took its place. The town's-folk had no words to express this new something they sensed in the young man — unless it was that he had “gone and got religion.” Later on this conjecture became current gossip, and was developed into permanent history.

Tom bent his steps towards the Shelley house. Having flung down his arms, he was willing to go to extremes in his expiation, and it seemed to him only right and fitting that Rose and Madge and Gabe should come first. He realized now how truly his friends they had tried to be. He was bent upon humble acknowledgment of this fact. And it was in keeping with his attitude of mind that he walked instead of using his fast horse.

For this reason he was tired when he reached their gate, and paused for breath and to look about at the beautiful garden and dignified mansion. There were evidences that a lunch party had been in progress, but the place was now deserted, for a wonder, and its peace struck him anew. The characters of those who lived within had made their impress on the scene. Again a sense of his unworthiness stole upon him, so overwhelmingly that he was tempted to turn away.



But his will held him, and with bowed head he entered.

As he neared the porch merry voices from within the house struck on his ear. Rose was laughing and talking to some one,— a man, as his gruffer tones now told Tom. But before he could wonder who this man might be, the front door opened, and Gabe came out with Madge and old Judge Ogleshorpe.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the Judge, while Gabe called, "Rose, look who's here!" and then dashed down the steps to seize Tom's limp hand in so hearty a grip as to quite bewilder the poor fellow, who, from too much brooding, had imagined a reception more in accord with his just deserts.

Madge followed Gabe, and caught hold of Tom's other hand. "It does seem good to know that you are well enough to be walking about again," she beamed.

"By Jove, it does," seconded the Judge, and, since Tom had no other hand available, he grabbed a coat-lapel, and shook it vigorously.

"Who is it, Father?" called Rose's gay voice, and while Tom was still helpless in the hands of his friends, she ran out and spied him. The color left her cheeks, and for a moment she stood wide-eyed. Slowly, hesitantly, she came forward, while the others stepped back so that Tom stood alone. And then, with a glad little rush, she swooped down the steps. "Tom, Tom!" she cried. "How glorious to see

you here once more!" And in her excess of extravagant emotion she gave him a hearty hug and kiss.

"Here, here!" cried the Judge. "This won't do, Rose."

"Oh, I know," she cried. "But I had to express myself somehow. Tom, how are you? Come up on the porch and rest, and tell us all the news about yourself. Come up and meet Mr. Fort. He was at the front when you were, and it was he who saved your life. Hurry! Mr. Fort, come here! This is Tom Blankenship!"

So speaking breathlessly in a whirlwind of joy, Rose pulled Tom up the wide steps. He protested laughingly, touched to the heart by his welcome.

"I don't want to meet Mr. Fort yet, nor I don't want the Judge around either. I want to speak to just you, Rose, and Madge and Gabe. I have something to say to you all."

Fort, from the doorway, had seen the welcome Rose gave Tom, and had quite understood. That was one of the likable things about him, his readiness to understand. He now came forward with a smile of greeting, and extended his hand to Tom. "I'll say, how do you do? first," he remarked, "and then the Judge and I will go for a stroll. I met you once before, Mr. Blankenship, in Captain Gabe's office."

Every vestige of the color which had flooded Tom's sallow cheeks left them as Homer spoke and grasped his hand. There was no mistaking that kindly voice,

nor the warm clasp. Tom was carried back to a night in Cuba, when he lay dying.

"It was you who saved me," he now said simply. "I know your voice and touch. I didn't deserve your kindness, but some day perhaps I can make you glad you went out of your way to help me. After all, why should you or the Judge leave us? I presume you both know the particulars of my story, don't you?"

Homer nodded, at which Rose looked surprised, and Gabe a trifle guilty. The Judge chuckled softly. "God bless my soul, the whole town knows your story, Tom. You'd be surprised how near they come to some of it, too. They know you were in love with Rose and that she refused you. They know you are in love with Mrs. Kemp and that she left you. But it has been so long since you have furnished Salem with any real thrills that they are quite disconsolate. I came to Madge and got straight information, so I had the excitement of waiting for the final outcome. If you don't mind I'll stay, and so will Homer."

Tom, eager to acknowledge his fault, was ready to humble himself wholesale. "I don't mind at all," he said. "What I have to state can be gotten over in a very few words. It is merely that I have taken time to think the matter over, and have come to see the reasonableness of yours and Mrs. Kemp's position. My only honorable course is to do as you desire. I have also decided that I made an utter fool

of myself that day at the post-office, Captain Gabe, and several other times that I could mention. I have been punished severely for the past. I am ready to turn about. Madge, will you forgive me, and give me a chance to prove myself your friend?"

"This is fine of you, Tom," said Rose earnestly. She was the first to clasp his hand.

"Don't say another word, my boy," commanded Gabe. "Your coming here to-day was quite enough to show how you had changed. We'll just turn over a new leaf and start fresh. By the Lord Harry! You just wait until you see my editorial to-morrow. I'll rip you up and down the back, Tom, in my best old-time style."

This brought a faint smile to Tom's lips. "You can call me all the names you like, Captain," he said. "So long as you take me by the hand and call me friend as well."

"Gabe," said the Judge plaintively. "Can't we celebrate with a julep?"

"Of course we can," answered Gabe. "Jack, you rascal, where are you?"

"Hyar, boss!" The negro appeared so suddenly from behind the corner of the veranda that the Judge exploded.

"God bless my soul, the scoundrel was listening, I do believe."

"Baigin' yo' pahdon, suh," responded Jack with dignity. "I wuzn't ezzackly listenin', but I—I

jus' happened to be in de vimecimity, an' ob co'se sut-tin words reached my years. But listenin'! Huh! Ain't dis ol' nigguh got a right to listen, foh dat mat-tuh? Ain't I one ob de fambly? Ain't I done been wid de Boss eber sence Miss Rose wuz a baby? Ain't much goin' on around hyar dat I doan't hab a finguh in, is dey, Miss Rose?"

"That's right, Uncle Jack," said Rose. "And we'd all trust you anywhere."

"Dar now," grinned Uncle Jack, much mollified, and departed upon his errand. Tom nervously turned to Rose.

"Where shall I find Minnie Gray?" he asked directly. "I mean to marry her as soon as possible. The sooner I can get it over, the better."

"Is that the way to approach your wedding, Tom?" reproved the Judge.

"It is the only way to approach this one," said Tom quickly. "I have made up my mind to do the best I can," he continued frankly. "I shall devote myself to Minnie and the boy. I'll try to teach him to avoid the course I followed. I'll try to educate her and turn her into a woman he can be proud to call his mother. I may fail, but at least I will have made the effort. And my reward will be in your respect and friendship, and perhaps, once in a great while, a word from Mrs. Kemp. Do you think she would grant me that one small favor, Rose?" he asked wistfully. "Do you think she will send me a

word of encouragement now and then, to sustain me on my course?"

"Oh, I am sure she will," cried Rose, with tear-filled eyes. "I am quite sure she will. Minnie is in her old home, waiting for you, Tom. You will find her changed by suffering, as well as you. And perhaps your task will prove easier than you now apprehend."



## CHAPTER XXII

“**W**E have got to hurry if we are going to get to the hills ahead of Tom Blankenship,” announced Gabe, after Tom had gone.

Rose looked up in glad surprise. “Oh, Father,” she exclaimed. “Then it is to be this afternoon, after all? I had been so afraid you meant to make me wait until next week.”

“Perhaps I might, if Tom had not come,” returned Gabe. “Well, no, I won’t say that, either. I was debating whether to go to-day or to-morrow, and now I think it had better be to-day. I want Minnie to be with us, and I want all of your attention, my dear. So, before your pretty head gets filled with wedding plans, I’ll get in my innings.”

“I’m going along, Gabe,” said the Judge at his elbow. “But I can’t ride horseback that far. How soon shall we start?”

“As soon as Jack can get the team harnessed,” answered Gabe. “How are all of us going to pile in? You, Judge, need a whole seat to yourself, and even then you may break the springs.”

"I don't care, I'm going," declared the Judge obstinately. "I've got to know your secret as well as Rose and Madge and Homer Fort. If I break the springs, I'll pay for 'em, Gabe, you old skinflint."

"I shall ride Betsy," said Rose calmly.

"Lend me a horse, and I'll keep you company," cried Homer.

"You can take mine, so that's all settled," interposed the Judge. "Madge, I'll drive, so you and Gabe can spoon behind my back."

"If Gabe goes as sheriff, I shall keep my distance," retorted Madge placidly. "But if he goes as the gentleman farmer he has been all summer, I'll not answer for the consequences."

"Gentleman farmer it shall be," chuckled Gabe delightedly.

"I see," laughed the Judge, "that you have a choice of gallants, Madge. Don't you care for the editor, or the politician, or the Civil War veteran?"

Madge shrugged her pretty shoulders. "I prefer my farmer husband," she said loyally, "for ordinary every-day existence. But I don't mind telling you that the philanthropist is the one I really most adore."

She went with Rose into the house to get ready for the journey, which Gabe had announced with such scant preliminaries. The three men walked out to the stables, and a half-hour later they were on their

way to the hills, with Rose and Homer leading the way on their spirited mounts.

The two young people were silent, at first, Rose occupied with her own thoughts, and he with watching her. While he was "head over heels in love" he had his emotions well under control, and until his opportunity came he meant to continue to restrain them. The intimacy between himself and Rose had daily grown. During the past few weeks Madge had sought out opportunities to throw them into each other's company, and Rose had been unwontedly meek and docile, accepting demurely the plans Madge made for her, and outwardly had been calm, quiet and friendly. But her eyes baffled Homer. He could not guess what went on in the active brain behind them. Frank though the girl was, up to a certain limit, her reserve beyond that point was impenetrable.

However, it was clear that Rose had been deeply touched by Tom's visit, and Homer was wondering if her softened mood did not give him the chance he wanted, of probing into the depths of her heart. So he continued watching her covertly, while he kept his horse beside hers.

At last she roused from her reverie, and it was evident that his gaze upon her was what had accomplished this end. She fidgetted on her horse, galloped ahead, and then waited his coming with a sudden change of front.

"Mr. Fort," she asked soberly, "how long have you known of this affair of Tom's?"

"Your father told me the whole story the very day of my arrival here," confessed Homer. "He thought I ought to know, because, being his guest, I would inevitably see what was going on, and might draw false conclusions."

"And besides," mused Rose, "you saved Tom's life, and so were entitled to the knowledge in a way."

"I did nothing," replied Homer shortly. "I was fortunate in being on the spot at the time, but that was all. Is it true," he continued with characteristic directness, "that you once loved this Blankenship yourself?"

Rose colored. "You have no right to ask me that."

"Perhaps not. Yet I am interested enough to transgress. I should like to know something of what has gone before in your life. There are certain sad little poses of yours which tell me you have suffered deeply. I claim the right of friendship to sympathy and understanding."

She looked bravely into his eyes. What she read there reassured her. "Well, yes," she admitted, while their horses went shoulder to shoulder down the dusty road. "I once thought the world of Tom. He was older than the other men I knew — and he seemed very wonderful to me. I woke from my dream soon enough to realize that it was founded on

what I had imagined him to be, rather than what he was. Did my father tell you the circumstances which led to my refusal of him?"

"Yes, something of them. I guessed the rest."

"Did he tell you how I tried — to make Tom see the truth?"

"Something of that, too," said Homer. "But I gathered that even he and Madge were not in your entire confidence there."

"No," said Rose wearily. "I shall tell them some day, I suppose, especially now that Tom has turned about and given my foolish act results. I debased myself, Mr. Fort, for Minnie's sake. I played a part — took 'li'l Tawm' and pretended he was my own — so that Tom Blankenship might see how it would have seemed if I had been — the girl he had wronged, instead of Minnie. He refused to concede that Minnie might be affected as I would be, and I know that for a time I lost his respect."

"Why have you told me this?" asked Homer abruptly.

"Because," she parried.

"Shall I tell you why?" he answered clearly, pulling their horses to a walk. "You realize that I love you, and you wish to warn me off. You think I will adopt Tom's point of view, and like you less for this act of yours. Isn't that it?"

She was silent. It was true and she could not deny it.

"Rose, I respect you for that impulsive deed," cried Homer earnestly. "It was like you. Instead of making me love you less, it has made me love you more. I think the time has come for me to speak."

"No!" she interposed breathlessly. "I will not let you do so, for I can give you but one answer."

"Then don't answer yet," he begged. "But tell me, do you still care an iota for Tom Blankenship?"

"No, no!"

"Then there is a chance for me."

"No, there is not. I cannot let you deceive yourself," stated Rose firmly.

"Why not? Is it because I am so ordinary,—commonplace — red-headed — freckled — ugly —"

"Oh, Mr. Fort! Did you hear me say that to Madge?"

"Unfortunately for my peace of mind I have keen ears," he answered with a smile. "However, Rose, I don't mind telling you that those very handicaps of mine which you mentioned so frankly, spur me on to the race. I'll win you yet, in spite of my homely face and commonplace manners. I'll make you love me."

She looked troubled, then defiant. "I am sorry you heard me call you names," she worried. "I didn't mean them, really. I was in a temper. I do like you very much, Mr. Fort. I—I think your



face decidedly attractive. But I cannot love you. I do not believe I can ever love again."

"Because one man deceived you, is your whole life to be spoiled?"

"As far as love goes, yes. Mr. Fort, you cannot appreciate the depth of the feeling I had for Tom. I was just a foolish young girl, and I gave my whole heart to him. If you could go back to the time of your first love — and could then imagine her proven false and wholly despicable — you might perhaps realize a little of what I suffered."

"I can go back to that time, but I cannot imagine her false. You are the only woman I ever loved," vowed Homer.

"That is what they all say." She looked at him askance.

He stared back in blank astonishment. "Rose," he said slowly. "If loving Tom Blankenship has made you lose your faith in men, then indeed he has done you irreparable harm."

"That is just what he has done," declared Rose stubbornly. "The wound has healed, but it has left its scar upon my very soul. I'll never trust a man again."

There was a pause. Then Homer mused aloud, "I scarcely know how to combat your prejudices. I might usher witnesses to prove to you that there are men whose ideals are as high as yours, but you would probably think them perjured."

Rose curled her lip. "You are a traveling-man. I have heard many tales of such men. They stop often at the Yancey Hotel. I know that you are much better than the average, or my father would never have invited you into our home. Yet, how can I tell what slips you may have made?"

"You must take my word for that," asserted Homer quietly. "If it is necessary I will swear to you that I am not like those others. I had a wise mother, God bless her, who taught me to demand nothing from the woman I would one day marry, that I could not give her in return. I knew that the woman I loved must be pure, and years ago I resolved to keep myself so, against the day I met her. I have found her in you, and now I can face you honestly, and tell you that my past has been consecrated to you just as fully as my future will be. There is not a conscious act of mine that has not been held up beforehand for judgment in this light. Look at me, Rose, and tell me you believe me."

Rose looked into his eyes. Her own were troubled. "Unfortunately you have the sort of face to inspire confidence," she retorted. "You could tell a lie straight from the shoulder, and, backed by your eyes, could get yourself believed. Mr. Fort, I do not dare to trust you. Frankly, I do not dare."

This admission left him breathless, and before he could recover she had touched Betsy with her whip, and flashed ahead of him down the road. He gal-

loped after in mad pursuit. When he caught her again she was laughing, a bewitching embodiment of the clear sunny afternoon.

"Mr. Fort," she cried gaily. "I see you have baleful intent in your eye. I won't have it. I feel about ten years old to-day, and I am on my way to the hills, to a surprise which is sure to please me tremendously, because my father has worked so hard for it. This party shall not be spoiled. Be kind and lose yourself with me in the present moment. Laugh with me. Don't look so stern, or I'll turn back to ride beside the carryall, and flirt with old Judge Oglesworth."

"Give me a promise, first," he answered her. "Promise me you will let me speak of this again later."

"Anything to oblige," she mocked. "I'll do even better than that. If ever I feel like returning to this subject I will do so of my own accord, and invite you to make love to me. I won't be at all bashful. Now I'll race you to the crossroads, and then we'll get down and drink from the spring there, and maybe the persimmons will be ripe, and the chinquapins— Oh, Mr. Fort, I do love persimmons when they don't pucker my mouth."

Who could resist her, as she pursed her rosy lips and opened her dark eyes wide? Not Homer, and with a laugh he joined in the mad race. Later they knelt together at the spring, drinking from cups

made of big plantain leaves. She was as active as he in throwing sticks at the persimmons. He got a puckery one and was almost glad when he saw how she enjoyed his wry faces. They searched for chinquapins in the bushes by the road and found a few which the squirrels had overlooked. And then, like two children indeed, they played at hide-and-seek among the low scrub-pine, until the arrival of the carryall warned them to grow up again in a hurry.

They now fell in behind, and amused themselves by flipping the tiny nuts at the Judge's tall silk hat, until Gabe threatened to stop and chastise them both. After that they indulged in jokes and merry badinage until the woods rang with their gay laughter.

"Rose," called Gabe at last. "You are not in the proper serious mood for my surprise. We have only a mile to go now. If you don't stop your frivolating I shall turn around and make for home."

"Just as though you could get me to turn back now," she mocked. "Wait a minute, Father. I want to show Mr. Fort the view. See how high we are? That little strip of white, way down yonder, is the road we were on an hour ago."

She pointed and the eyes of the party followed. It was a familiar scene to every one but Homer, so he was a trifle startled when Gabe emitted a low whistle of astonishment.

"Whose team is that down there?" asked the Captain.

Rose strained her eyes upon the speck below. "Tom Blankenship's," she exclaimed.

"God bless my soul, he lost no time," cried the Judge. "Hurry up with your surprise, Gabe."

"Yes," seconded Rose. "Please hurry, if Minnie is to share it with us, Father. Then I can send her out in time to meet Tom."

So it was at a gallop that the party rode up to the gates of Gabe's hotel.

## CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. GRAY'S little old weatherbeaten house stood just outside the arched entrance through the tall new fence that surrounded Gabe's portion of her land. It had been renovated within to an astonishing extent, but for reasons of her own Minnie had kept the exterior in its former dilapidation. She wanted everything to appear as though she had not changed, in case Tom should come into the hills to find her. But plans were already on foot to repair and paint the clapboards, and to enlarge and beautify the porch, for Gabe meant the place to ultimately serve as a sort of lodge for his hotel, and to present a pretty rustic appearance. As yet the plot of ground remaining was neglected, and chickens and black "shoats" scratched and rooted contentedly about the doorstep.

Minnie heard the noise the arrival of the merry party made, and came out to greet them. Rose leaped from her saddle straight into the arms of the mountain girl, while Homer dismounted more at leisure. With many groans the Judge forced his



stout bulk out of the carryall, and Gabe, almost as spry as his daughter, jumped out and lifted Madge to the ground.

"An imposing gateway, Gabe," commented the Judge, wheezing from his exertion. "Is that the name of the place,— 'Suncrest'? Good name for a summer resort — beautiful lawn, too. What are the swings and seesaws for? Are you going to take only boarders with children?"

Gabe did not reply, but walked forward and swung wide the big gates. "Welcome!" he cried. "Welcome to Suncrest, all of you. Rose, come and take my arm. Minnie, come around to my other side. Madge, Homer, and the Judge can bring up the rear. Now then, forward, march!"

Rose was looking with all her eyes at the rolling land before her. It had once been a rocky mountain pasture, and the larger stones had been allowed to remain where they were. But the grass had been cut, and presented a trim prophecy of the velvet turf into which Gabe meant it to develop. Huge pines and hemlocks, oaks and chestnuts, bounded the open space, and beyond, through their close ranks, a glimpse of a long, low brick structure could be caught.

But now, as Rose gazed about she saw movement in the trees. Little figures were creeping stealthily forward under cover. At a given signal they swarmed into the open, and shouting, laughing, talking, in the noisy happy abandon of childhood, some

thirty small boys and girls launched themselves upon the group.

"Hi, Cap! Hillo, Cap'n Gabe! What you got in your pockets for us this time?" "Oh, Cap! The black cow has got a calf a'ready, with the wobbliest legs, and a white star on her nose, what won't hold her up, sca'cely." And, "Cap'n, whatchu think? We foun' a bees' nest in a ol' holler maple. D'ye reckon they is honey in it?"

Rose and Minnie drew back, leaving Gabe alone to bear the brunt of the onslaught of children. They surrounded him, each eager to get in his or her own bit of important news. Small moist fingers searched his pockets, eager arms reached up towards his shoulders, and one tiny creature hugged his leg and shinned up it like the trunk of a tree, so eager was he to reach the Captain's ear.

The stalwart man among this bevy of admirers made a picture that brought the tears to the eyes of the rest. "Never mind, now," he shouted laughingly. "Here! This won't do! Take yourselves off and play while I explain your presence. Scoot!"

As reluctantly as before they had been eager, the children scattered, some to the swings, some to the sand piles, some to seesaws, merry-go-rounds and sliding boards, all bent on showing off before their audience. Such prodigious feats as were performed must at any other time have won Rose's heartfelt ad-

miration, but just now she had something else to think about.

"Those children have been here for almost a week," whispered Minnie in her ear. "I know because I heard them. And I saw some of them come in, but very few had mothers."

Rose had noticed that many of the little faces were pinched and pale, and some few of the little limbs were sadly crippled. Now as Gabe turned to her she looked up with shining eyes.

"It isn't a hotel, after all, is it, Father? But you and Madge do not approve of asylums — so I don't quite understand —"

"I reckon that now is as good a time for my speech as any," said Gabe. "So I'll get it over. Everywhere in this country they are conserving the forests, the water-power, the minerals, the cattle — even the hogs. I've been interested, but it seemed to me that another kind of conservation was more imperative — the conservation of the children born under the stars and stripes. The only ways in which this has been attempted are private charity, and sectarian institutions. Both are imperfect. The first only reaches the individuals of a small number of families. The second rears boys and girls under dwarfing conditions, with inadequate food, rigorous punishments, set rules for conduct. It establishes a routine under which it attempts to pour every variety of char-

acter into the same mold, and to drive each child to the same goal. To my mind this is a crime. Imagine yourself, Rose, as a child of twelve, suddenly snatched from your free and merry life, clothed in an ugly uniform, forced to conform to the rules of a machine in which you soon become merely a cog. Imagine your spirit broken down, yourself shaped into one groove from which there can be no deviation, and you will see why I abhor all such institutions."

"But, God bless my soul, Gabe, ain't *this* an institution?"

Gabe only smiled at the Judge and continued.

"In every State of this union there are tracts of unoccupied land. Suppose the Government secured such tracts, and started state reservations for work and play, discipline and recreation, and the mental education and training of every ward that comes under its care. These reservations would consist of orchards, vineyards, gardens and fields, in which the necessary food stuffs could be grown by the children themselves, under the care of men and women living on the reservations with their own families, and mentally trained and fitted for the work. They would be similar to Annapolis and West Point. The man at either of those places does not feel himself a dependent, a charity pauper, though he is being trained at the expense of the Government for the nation's service. But there would be this difference, that whereas every boy educated at West Point is intended

to become a soldier, the children trained in these State reservations would be free to develop along the lines indicated by their individual talents and propensities."

"Hear, hear," shouted the Judge. "God bless my soul, Gabe, what would become of the criminal class? I'd lose my position, I'm afraid."

"You have hit it, Judge," returned Gabe. "My proposed system would be an extension of the public-school system, to take in the thousands of children now left on the outskirts of our civilization as a menace, and would train them to become hardy, brawny, robust men and women, instead of criminals diseased in mind and body. Of course some few would turn out badly in spite of any care, but I speak for the vast majority who have never had a chance."

"But would you separate the child from its parents, Captain Gabe?" asked Homer, deeply interested.

"No," answered Gabe stoutly. "There is already a plan on foot, to keep the dependent mother in her home, and supply her with enough to support her children until they are old enough to support themselves. But that home is often poor and unsanitary, in a vicious neighborhood, or an unwholesome atmosphere. The dependent mother should be allowed a place on the reservation, to assist in bringing up her children, and to have a part in their work and recrea-

tion. Herself thus taught, would have a better chance later on, when her sons and daughters are equipped to make their own ways in the world. The entire scheme, carried out in its fullest and most thorough detail, would cost the country less than the orphan asylums, the almshouses, and the jails to-day, while such schools can eventually become entirely self-supporting. The military advantages are too obvious to mention. You all know the intense patriotism of a West Pointer, or an Annapolis man. Many of these boys, otherwise mere pariahs, would develop into soldiers, and the entire school would foster a pride and feeling of national unity that would be a tremendous asset in case of war. To the intelligent parenthood of the State, her children would respond passionately."

"This is all very well," observed Homer, "for those children too young to work and those others too ill or crippled. But what of the tens of thousands of boys and girls who swarm about our great factories, who have both father and mother, and yet no adequate home or education?"

"You forget that our state-mothered children are to be taught trades," said Gabe. "How better could they learn them than by exchanging places with such children for a month or so at a time? There are a thousand ways in which the wards of the State could be made agencies for good. There are a thousand ways they could be turned to account during their



growth to helpful manhood and womanhood. I cannot go into every detail now. Many of your questions will answer themselves after a little thought. I will only add that this is the kind of work that Jesus Christ himself might inaugurate were he living in the American republic to-day. His wonderful text, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,' hangs in every room of my State Home yonder. It is the kind of work of which Abraham Lincoln would approve, and perhaps he would urge for it as a motto, his slogan, 'Free the slave.' So firmly am I convinced of this that, in the best way I could command, I have started this Conservation School for Georgia. As soon as it becomes self-supporting and has proved itself, I shall turn it over to the State — if the State will accept my gift. Rose, what do you think of it all? Do you approve? Will you help Madge and me to develop this scheme, and gather from the cities and towns the little waifs and strays who must form our first material?"

Rose did not answer at once, and the eyes of all turned upon her, a fact of which she was quite unconscious. Homer thought that he had never seen anything so lovely as the slender girl, in her khaki riding clothes, standing a little apart and looking at the long, low house through the trees. She was absorbed in a dream that partook of the nature of a vision, as was evidenced by her glowing cheeks, her

rapt eyes, dewy lips, and the quick rise and fall of her bosom.

"Father," she said at last in thrilling tones, "it is more wonderful than anything I had imagined possible. How did you come to think of it?"

"First Madge, with her sorrow over our baby, stirred me into yearning over all children," said Captain Gabe simply. "Then little Tom, so helpless and dependent, bound to go under if circumstances had not placed him in our hands — little Tom roused Madge to more active and insistent longing. Aunt Betty's legacy came opportunely. She wanted to use it to benefit the uncared for and abandoned children of humanity — there were so many of them and she could not bear to sit idly by when they needed everything. Between the two of us we worked out this plan. To her principal I added all I could, and set to work to realize our dreams. Perhaps I should have included you in this preliminary planning, Rose, but you were in Cuba when first we hit upon the idea, and so I made Madge promise to help me to surprise you."

"It was a glorious surprise," exclaimed Rose, running to her father and standing on tiptoe to put her arms around his neck. "It was the best one I have ever had. I cannot tell you how I am stirred, exalted, touched to the heart by the whole grand idea, and by your development of it. I should be deeply hurt indeed if I were not allowed to help you now."

She emphasized her words by a warm kiss which Gabe heartily returned.

And then the impetuous girl, quite carried away by her emotion, turned to Madge. "You world-mother!" she said softly. "I've not always been quite fair to you, dear Madge. Forgive me. I know now how noble your heart is, and how faithful and loyal. I'll never judge you again, never distrust you, never fail you. Oh, Madge! How perfectly splendid to be able to help the children in such a way as this! How like you to have thought of it! How could I have missed seeing the real you all this time! Forgive me and love me, Madge! Forgive me!"

Madge put her arms about the girl and drew her close, while Rose wept happy tears upon her breast. "My dear girl, I have nothing to forgive. I am the happiest woman in the world to-day. You know now that I love your father."

"Yes, yes, I know," sobbed Rose. "For some reason I have known lately, anyway."

And then with one of those sudden unexpected transitions which made her so delightful, she lifted up her face and smiled radiantly through her tears. "What are we standing here for?" she asked. "Show us the house, Father, and the rest of the children, and the people who look after everything. Where is Mrs. Gray?"

"Mrs. Gray is learning how to be the housekeeper, under the tutelage of an expert who will return to

Atlanta as soon as she is no longer needed. It is quite wonderful how she has taken hold. She is naturally apt, like Minnie here."

"And she is as grateful as I am, for all you have done for us," interposed Minnie gently.

"God bless my soul," snorted the Judge. "Don't you go to getting grateful, Minnie, or Gabe won't like it. He knows well enough, the rascal, that he couldn't show off his generosity except the world had lots of destitution in it. What will future philanthropists do, I'd like to know, if Gabe eliminates the flotsam and the jetsam of society by his schemes? Have a little mercy, Gabe. There are others who like to work over poverty-stricken humanity as well as you do. Give 'em a chance, Gabe, give 'em a chance."

Gabe smiled contentedly, for he had seen the tears in the Judge's eyes and knew his heart. "Judge," he said earnestly. "If the time ever comes when there will be no privileged class, but *one* class, with equal opportunities, equal rights, and equal chance to exercise both, I'll be the first to stay at home and enjoy myself. Besides you know I never give something for nothing. Even in this conservation school I expect to gain a lot more than I ever pay out. Not in money, perhaps — but — well, let's continue our investigations."

He led them through the field and woods to the school itself, still so new that it smelt of paint and

turpentine. And he was in his element explaining the careful working out of his scheme. The house-keeping was as thorough and efficient as expert help could make it. The school-rooms were under teachers whose kindly faces inspired confidence. The children were being sent out by the Associated Charities in the cities, and already workmen were busy knocking up rows of tiny cottages, for mothers who wished to continue guardians of their own broods. The stables were well stocked with gentle-eyed milch cows, and the new calf with the wobbly legs eyed them distrustfully from beneath his anxious mother. The Plymouth Rocks were cackling in the coops, the sheep were grazing on a pasture near at hand, and altogether the entire scene was typical of a well-to-do and thriving country home. The possibilities, as Gabe had said, were manifold, and increased at every turn.

"Rules?" said Gabe contemptuously. "We don't have 'em, except for the grown folks. The children learn without knowing that they are being taught. They are so happy it is punishment enough for any misdemeanor, to deprive the culprit of his share in the work and play. Children are naturally the busiest folk in the world, and here we encourage them to do what they like to do. Ben Tolman, show the ladies what you are at work upon?"

Gabe knew all the names of the children already, to their great delight. And this remark had been addressed to a little ten-year-old, seated on the edge

of the big veranda, whom Gabe discovered as he led his party around the house and up to the wicker chairs upon this porch. The child had a lump of red clay over which he was quite absorbed. He lifted a flushed face, and, forgetting to be self-conscious or shy, he cried out, "See, Cap'n Gabe! This here is the funniest stuff. The gutter-mud in Cabbage Alley wasn't nawthin' like it a-tall. That there was black an' sticky. But this is kinder waxy-like, so when you punch a hole inter it, it stays. I'm a-makin' a hoss, a real, fire-engine hoss. Ain't it a beaut?"

Strangely enough, by careful scrutiny, they were able to discern which was the head and which the tail. "Them bendin' marks is the legs, which is a-goin' lickety-split," explained Ben proudly. "Ain't I a-gittin' along fine, though?"

"He works in that clay all day long," whispered Gabe as they left the child. "He is simply crazy over it. Garnet, the superintendent, told him that, if he really wanted to be able to make animals and people out of clay, he must learn arithmetic, so as to judge dimensions, and anatomy, so as to know the shape of the bones and muscles under the skin, and geography, that he might seek out the natural habitats of the beasts he meant to copy. You ought to see the child study. He is working for a purpose now, and he is going ahead like mad, though in the school at home he was considered a very backward child — almost deficient. So it is with all the rest. Leave



'em free to choose, and they gravitate to their own particular line of best development, as naturally as a rabbit to its warren."

Through all her enthusiasm and delight, Rose did not forget that Tom was coming, and when an hour had elapsed, she whispered to Minnie that there would probably be some one to meet her outside the gates. Minnie did not need to be told who that some one was. Her face glowed, her eyes looked frightened, and then oddly determined, and she slipped hurriedly away.

## CHAPTER XXIV

**I**N the meantime Tom's spirited horse settled down to the steady climb up the long hill, shaking his head and switching his tail about it, for it was a task decidedly not to his liking. Tom paid small attention to the handsome animal's disinclination, however, for he was immersed in thought, and though still bent upon fulfilling the object of his journey, he was more and more tempted to lag upon the way.

He was aware that Gabe was building some sort of a hotel in the hills somewhere, and now saw the deep ruts made by the teams which had hauled cement and bricks. He began to wonder if it was Minnie's land which had served Gabe's purpose, and was in a measure prepared for the change in the entire landscape which greeted him on his emergence from the tree-screened mountain road.

He saw the high fence in its pristine newness, and the children happily at play beyond. He read the gilded name, "Suncrest," in the iron scrollwork of the arch above the gate. He glimpsed the brick building through the trees. But in the foreground

and most prominent to his reluctant vision, stood the house which was his destination.

As he looked disgust overwhelmed him. It was so poor, so mean, so altogether undesirable. Contrasted with the beauty of Suncrest, it shrank into an abject, shiftless poverty far beyond what even he remembered. With its sagging doorstep, its unkempt garden, its chickens and shoats, it seemed typical of the down-at-heel Minnie, whose commonness augmented each time he thought of her. He was blind to every virtue, of which there had been many in the untaught girl. But his eyes were wide open to faults which she had never possessed. Classing her as wholly despicable, he experienced actual physical revulsion and nausea at this final moment. How could he face the reality of a memory that had grown to be so loathesome?

He saw the horses and the carryall, and judged that the Shelley family were in the spacious grounds somewhere beyond. He told himself grimly that this suited him exactly. He wanted no witnesses to his first scene with Minnie Gray. He stopped his horse at the edge of the clearing, and, alighting and leaving the tired animal to graze at its will, he walked slowly toward the dingy front door.

And then he paused. Why need he hurry matters? Why shouldn't he have a moment's respite, a glimpse again of Rose? She was Minnie's champion it was true, but she was also Mrs. Kemp's friend.

She would instill new courage in him, and make his hard task less distasteful.

While he hesitated the voice of Judge Oglethorpe sounded almost in his ear.

"God bless my soul, Tom Blankenship! You haven't let the grass grow under your feet, have you, Tom?"

Tom whirled about. "Hello, Judge. No. Why should I? Where did you spring from, anyway?"

"I'd just walked down to see if the horses were all right. You were so busy looking at everything else, you never saw me. Good luck to you, Tom." He held out a plump hand.

Tom shook his head sadly. "I've lost my nerve," he confessed. "I'm not going in there just yet. I want to see Rose first. What is this Gabe has built, Judge?"

He fell in beside the old man and they walked together through the gate and towards the school, talking on the way. The Judge explained the purpose of Suncrest, and the presence of the children there. Tom looked about with new appreciation. After all, he thought, Gabe had some right to his authoritative stand. He wasn't just an idle theorizer. He was really accomplishing something for children, many of whom were probably nameless, as was little Tom just now. In his mind's eye he saw his small son grown older, and playing with the rest, and to his own great surprise a sob welled in his throat. For the first

time he realized the justice of the child's side of the case, and the pathos of it as well. And he turned and interrupted the Judge in the midst of a sounding homily on the merits of Suncrest and its future development.

"Judge," he said abruptly. "I take it you are fully informed of my fix respecting this Gray girl?"

"Yes." Judicial sternness predominated in the syllable.

"Has Minnie sought your legal advice, perhaps?"

"Not that I know of —"

"Well, Judge, as the old-time legal adviser of my father, and on a suitable retainer from me — I want to ask you just what the legal standing of that girl is concerning me?"

Judge Ogleshorpe thought a moment and then spoke slowly. "Well, Tom, first she has good cause for action against you, as the father of the child, unless you can prove, as I hear you claim, that she had other lovers prior to the child's birth."

Tom made a gesture of disgust. "Judge, I lied about that. I think the girl absolutely innocent. What else?"

"Well then, Tom, she can sue you for support in any case, and can maintain an action under the common law to force you to give her your name, and to legitimize her child. Her mother heard you promise to marry her, I believe?"

"I know it and I admit it," said Tom, now past

evasion. "Judge Oglethorpe, here is the point. I've made up my mind to marry the girl and do my duty by her. This is voluntary. She has made no threats to coerce me that I know of. I want you to marry us here, to-day, and I want to have the marriage certificate and record dated back to October eleventh, eighteen hundred and ninety-six. I now claim that we were really married in all that concerns the fate of ourselves and our child — in all that concerns the law or society — on the day I first took her in my arms. Can this be done?"

"It can be done, and shall be. The law has a spirit, Tom, as well as a letter, and as I interpret it, its mission always is to help a man do his duty, and to hinder him from committing a wrong. The date is an affair of the contracting parties, so long as no fraud or deceit is contemplated which might interfere with the property or other rights of any other person. As no such question is involved in this case, and as you propose to set back the date for Minnie's protection and benefit, I can and will do it with a clear conscience."

Tom turned and grasped the Judge's hand in a hearty grip. "I am glad I yielded to the impulse to speak to you like this," he said. "You have helped me in the worst crisis of my life. I can recover ground in the eyes of Rose and Madge — and of Mrs. Kemp — only by doing my full duty towards



this girl and her child. I mean to take Minnie to my relatives in England, and put her in a good school. I will teach her myself also, and before long I am sure she will be outwardly my equal, as she is already my superior — for I betrayed her trust in me so I am guilty — she is innocent.”

“God bless my soul!” groaned the Judge. “What a long, long road our pet scapegrace has traveled, to be able to talk like this!” And then with a sudden change of tone, “I congratulate you, my boy. A man who can take the stand you have taken is an honor to his name and a credit to human nature. I am proud that it falls to my lot to help you.”

He returned Tom’s hearty grip with one as hearty, blew his nose like a trumpet, and preceded Tom up the steps of Suncrest.

The Shelleys, with Homer Fort, had been sitting at the end of the porch, talking to some of the children, and drawing Gabe out still further about his schemes, which were apparently limitless. They welcomed Tom as one of themselves, making room for him and for the Judge, while Gabe went on with what he had been saying. In Homer he had found an unexpected and eminently satisfactory interest, and it was to Homer that his talk was now chiefly addressed. Fort had numberless questions as to how the place was to be made self-supporting, and its ulti-

mate good to the race, but so thoroughly had Gabe gone into the subject that not one question caught him napping.

At last Tom rose. "Captain Gabe, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for letting me listen to what you have just said. It has done me good, and brought me peace of mind. I shall want to help in any way I can, when I return — again."

"Tom, that is good news," said Gabe, touched to the heart by the spontaneity with which his plans had so far been met. "And now where are you starting out to go?"

"To Minnie," answered Tom manfully. "May Rose go a little way with me? I'd like to speak to her alone —"

Rose came forward at once, and walked with him toward the gate through which he had so recently come.

"I meant to have it out with her at first, but I lost my nerve," confessed Tom in much the same way that he had done to the Judge. "Give me a word of encouragement, Rose?"

"I will do better than that," answered Rose warmly. "I will go with you to the house, and help you through that first, worst moment. I know how it is, Tom. I can even feel what you are feeling."

"Oh, no, you can't. You never could unless — Rose, you are wise beyond your years, but though we both thought you loved me, you never did. When

the time comes, and you *fall in love*, then you will be able to comprehend all I am renouncing to-day, and will understand."

"But I do understand. Believe me, Tom, I do."

"If you do, you are in love. Who is he?"

She colored hotly. "Why do you insist that one must feel love to know love?" she asked. "Haven't I seen my father with Madge? Haven't I seen my girl friends married and happy? Haven't I — had love — proffered me?"

"It isn't the same." Tom was obstinate. "I tell you no one knows what love is unless they actually experience it. I thought I knew, but I didn't. I was just a blind fool, Rose, and even under the spell itself, was slow to realize its meaning. That must be how it is with you. You are in love and do not know it. Or else you could not be so sure of what lies in my heart."

"Nonsense," interrupted Rose, brusquely. "I will never let myself fall in love, Tom, until I meet a man who fills my highest ideal —"

"Nonsense," interrupted Tom in his turn. "You'll fall in love with the man meant for you, ideal or no ideal. If he is weak, you'll try to help him. If he is bad, you'll try to make him good. But you'll love him all the same, good or bad, weak or poor — because you cannot help it. Take that red-headed peach-buyer, for example. I suppose there is no person farther from your ideal than he. Yet if it had

been decreed that you should love him, you'd overlook everything unsavory about him —"

"I fail to see why you should take it for granted that there is anything 'unsavory' about Mr. Fort," said Rose cuttingly. "You forget his help to you in Cuba."

"I forget nothing. I am grateful to him beyond words. But that does not hinder me from taking him at his real value. What is he, anyway? An upstart! A nobody! A 'man-on-the-road!' We all know what lives such men lead, as a matter of course."

"I will not listen to such talk," cried Rose indignantly. "Mr. Fort is my friend. He is a gentleman. You are cowardly, Tom, to say such things about him. You would not dare say them to his face."

"Wouldn't I? My dear Rose, what do men talk about when they are alone? He'd be the first to introduce the subject of his numerous affairs. But I didn't mean to enter into a discussion of his merits or demerits. I merely used him as an example of the realities which women love. Their ideals are all very well, but in real life they are much more apt to meet men like Homer Fort, and love them, too."

"And I say you had no right to bring him into the discussion at all," insisted Rose stormily, with flashing eyes. "I must ask you to take back what you have just said about him. My father does not choose

his friends at hap-hazard. Besides I have Mr. Fort's own declaration — which I firmly believe — as to the sort of life he has lived."

"So he has been telling you about his past?" sneered Tom, returning for a moment to his old domineering self. "And you believed all that he told you — when not for a moment would you believe all I told you — Why, Rose, you love that man already."

"I do not."

"You do. You may not know it, but you do. Well, Rose, I'll apologize most humbly for my statements. I am not prone to believe in faultless pasts — I know men too well for that — but I'd be the last one to disturb your faith in him — if you really love him."

"I tell you I do not. I am sorry I came with you, Tom."

Her cheeks were rosy, and her eyes confused. She tried to look defiantly at Tom, but wavered. Why had her heart throbbed so when she defended Fort? Why had she felt such deep resentment when Tom spoke lightly of him? She did not know. But Tom thought he knew, and as he smiled it seemed to her almost as if he did. However, that was just because he was so certain.

They passed out of the big gate together and over to the dingy house. As they neared the porch Tom perceived that a huge clothes-basket occupied almost half of its narrow space. Within lay a baby asleep

— his baby, no doubt. Side by side, he and Rose looked down upon the unconscious child.

“Li’l Tawm,” now almost sixteen months old, lay sprawled on a pillow, one fat arm flung above his head, the other stretched out beside him as far as the confines of the basket would permit. He had been bathed before his nap, and was fully dressed except for bare rosy feet, which had kicked aside the coverlets and short white frock. He was a handsome baby, pink-cheeked and robust, with a quantity of dark curls clinging close to his shapely head. In spite of himself Tom’s heart lightened just a little at the thought that this was his son, sturdy and dimpled, with deep chest and broad shoulders like his own. Stooping, he lifted one rounded limb, and saw the birthmark clearly outlined there — the mark of a true Blankenship. Come, it was something to be father to such a boy. And the child was sweet and clean and healthy, which spoke well for Minnie’s care. Already Tom’s repulsion lessened, and he perceived the baby to be a rift among his clouds.

Infants are nervous, even the calmest of them, and “li’l Tawm” stirred under the eager gaze of the man. His brown eyes opened sleepily, and rested on Tom with that first blank stare which follows on sound sleep. So for a space the child and the man looked gravely at one another. Then a smile dimpled the baby face, and “li’l Tawm” yawned, stretched, and held up confiding arms.



Tom lifted him and hugged him to his breast.

"He's a fine boy, isn't he?" he asked of Rose.

"Li'l Tawm" yawned and stretched and rubbed his eyes. "Da-da," he announced.

"By George, he knows me!" exclaimed Tom delightedly, not being versed in the ways of babies, and supposing this an attempt at intelligible speech.

"Have you got a kiss for your daddy, eh?"

The baby only yawned again and said "Da-da" plaintively, for he was hungry. At least he supposed he was hungry, as he was always fed promptly upon awakening, and did not know that he should have slept an hour longer. "Da-da" he wailed, and punched a fat fist in Tom's eye.

"Oh, is he awake?" cried a voice from the open door.

Tom jumped, and turned, for it was a voice he knew. Yet surely it was not possible that Mrs. Kemp was here—ah, of course she had come up with Rose. That explained it. Tom did not have time to feel hurt that he had not been allowed a glimpse of her during his interview with the Shelleys at Salem some three hours ago. He was too happy at seeing her now.

She was bare-headed, her soft fair hair tangled by the mountain wind into an aura about her brow. Her serious brown eyes were upraised to his. Her sensitive mouth trembled in a nervous attempt at a smile.

"How do you do, Mr. Blankenship?" she faltered. "I had not expected to see you again — so soon."

Transferring the baby to his other arm, Tom held out an eager hand. "By Jove, Mrs. Kemp! This is more happiness than I had hoped for," he exclaimed, seizing her rosy palm in a warm pressure. "If I could have just a word with you —" He looked helplessly at Rose.

"I'll take the baby to Janey," said Rose readily. "Janey is his nurse now, Tom. She adores him. Minnie will lend you her parlor for awhile — I am sure she won't object to this final meeting with your nurse," she added mischievously as she bore "li'l Tawm" through the doorway and back towards the kitchen.

With a slight inclination of her head, which Tom interpreted to mean that he should follow, Mrs. Kemp led the way through the tiny hall into the front room of the small house. There she turned to confront Tom, and found him staring with surprised eyes at the transformed room. It was dark still, as it boasted but one window, but white paint and creamy paper had worked wonders, while the pictures and simple furniture were of a kind he could appreciate.

"You and Rose have been at work here," he said suddenly, his face clearing. "Perhaps you have been at work on Minnie, too, and thus prepared her a little for the changes I mean to effect in her. She may be hard to teach — these mountaineers are such

a strange mixture of superstition and obstinacy — but if you help me we'll make her into a woman whom little Tom will yet be proud to call his mother. Mrs. Kemp, I presume you know why I am here, don't you?"

"I can guess."

She had remained standing, probably feeling better able to face him when firmly planted on her feet, and he, placing his hands upon the center table, leaned toward her above its polished surface.

"I came to offer marriage to Minnie Gray. I did not know that I should find you here. I shall be grateful for this moment all my life. Have you known long about — this girl?"

"I have known — all along."

"And that the baby there was mine?"

"Yes, I knew that, too."

"Have you seen Minnie?"

"Often."

"And you still have the heart to condemn me to her?"

"I still have the heart to do — even that."

The monotony of her repetition showed him the strain under which she labored. His eyes kindled. His breath came sharply. He longed to hold her in his arms with a longing that could scarcely be gain-said. He was starving for her with a hunger which clamored to be appeased. By these signs he read her present feeling to be equal to his own.

And yet he must command himself for she was not for him. Once again a wave of utter bewilderment swept over him, that she could know the wonder of this love and still renounce it.

"Mrs. Kemp, I won't ask you to reconsider your decision," he whispered hoarsely. "I will bear my punishment as best I can. I will only repeat that all my life you will be my guiding star. I will try to make myself worthy of the love I feel for you."

"You must forget me," she said breathlessly, as if speaking a part to which she adhered with difficulty. "Think of Minnie. Try to care for her."

"I will be tender toward her — and loyal — but I will not forget you. If I did, I should sink again to that level at which you found me. Only by remembering you — dwelling on you — picturing you to myself at every turn, and loving you with my whole soul — can I keep my martyrdom before me and find it worth while. Only for your sake can I compass it."

"You are wrong to speak so." She tried to keep her voice from trembling, but his passion swept her on, as it always did when she was with him. And as she faltered she felt his hands upon her. She gave a little moan of sheer terror — not at him, but at herself, for she had nerved herself to resolution which slipped from her at his touch. But he misread her exclamation.

"Don't be afraid —" he whispered tenderly.

"Don't be afraid. I shall not break down or act the fool. I have control over myself — I can even smile — see? But you know how I adore you — and this may be the last time that we shall ever meet. Let me just take you in my arms a moment, and kiss your lips once more before we part. My darling —"

"This is more than I can bear," exclaimed the girl in an agony, wrenching herself free and facing him again. "This farce has continued long enough. Can't you see? Can't you understand? I am Minnie Gray. I am the woman you have wronged — the girl you scorn."

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "You are Mrs. Kemp," he protested.

"No! Not that — again. That was a name I hid behind. I am Minnie Gray — who spurns you as you have spurned her."

He looked so strange that she became alarmed. The watchful attitude of the nurse returned to her. "If I am not very careful he may lose his mind," she caught herself thinking.

"This is the absolute truth," she said aloud, slowly and clearly, as if speaking to a child. "Captain Gabe took me to his home, when I was ill and worn out with suffering and shame. Rose taught me all I know. I went with her to Cuba, and nursed you there. I came back with her. I lived with the Shelleys all the time except the days I spent with you, until I came back to my home here. I am Minnie

Gray, the mother of little Tom. Do you believe me now?"

Still he continued gazing at her with uncomprehending eyes.

"Wait just a moment," she commanded quickly. "I know a way to prove it to you —"

She ran swiftly from the room, and returned in a moment, with an armful of gaudy calico. "Don't you remember this?" she asked. "It was my Sunday best at the time when you used to come to the hills to meet me secretly. I'll put it on, so. Button me up the back, Tom."

While his fingers bungled awkwardly, in tune to the pounding of his heart, she lifted her arms and took out the pins which confined her hair. Straining it back she wound it into its old-time knot. Then, slipping on a yellow sunbonnet, she faced him.

"Naow," she drawled. "I reckon you-all air some surprise' ter see me, ain't you?"

Her tones became beseeching, and she lifted clasped hands pleadingly.

"Ain't you gwine ter kiss me, ner nawthin'?" she asked brokenly. "I sure do like ter have you kiss me — seems like you loved me still — which somehaow you doan't act s' if you do noways lately. I feel awful sorry-like an' full of fear. Doan't fool me, Mister Tawm. Ef you doan't love me no mo', say so, an' I'll go away. I ain't aimin' ter hang atter a man what doan't love me no longer."



If there had been any further doubt in his mind as to the identity of the girl before him, it must have been dispelled forever by the nasal drawling repetition of these, the last words he had ever heard from the lips of Minnie Gray. He remembered now that he had answered with a taunt that he had never loved her. He remembered how she had turned sobbing, and had run away through the woods, with her face hidden in her hands so that she collided with the trees and once fell prone. It all came back so vividly that he recoiled and grew white to the very lips, while the sweat stood out in great drops on his scarred brow.

"My God! Take off that awful dress!" he whispered. "Let down your hair—your beautiful, beautiful hair! Don't torture me like this!"

In a twinkling the dress lay at her feet, and she was pulling her hair into the loose knot which so became her. She was Mrs. Kemp once more, and now he needed nothing else to prove that she and Minnie were the same. The two extremes had met.

But as he realized this potent fact, new wonder dawned, for everything became clear to him. In marrying Minnie he *would* make Mrs. Kemp happy. How well he remembered that speech, and his interpretation of it! Blind fool that he had been! He had made no allowance for the girl's native wit. She was a wonder! What mentality must have been lying dormant in that childish brain, that she had been able to remold herself like this? What love

she must have borne him, to spur her on to accomplish this miracle of change? What happiness lay before him in place of the misery he had pictured? What joy was his for the taking! Was it possible that this lovely woman was the mother of his boy?

She watched him with troubled eyes as he passed from realization into triumph. She shrank back when he at last approached her.

"Now I know why I felt that I had kissed you," he laughed, his face transfigured. "Now I know why I felt that I had held you in my arms before. The joy of it! The wonder of it! Minnie! My wife! Come to me! Kiss me again as you used to once! Tell me you love me!"

Intoxicated with joy, mad with desire, he snatched her to him, and kissed her hair, her eyes, her shrinking lips, all unaware that she was struggling desperately against him — was evading, enduring, but not yielding, in the slightest.

"I have hungered for you," he cried between his kisses. "I have longed for you until it seemed to me that I would die only for a touch of your hand, a smile, a glance from your beautiful eyes —"

"Let me go!" she managed to say at last. "Let me go!"

"Never! You are all mine! I love you!"

"Tom, you must release me! There is that I have to tell you which will —"

"There is nothing more to say. You belong to me."

"I'll call for Rose —"

"Rose would not come. Besides, you know you love me. Kiss me, Minnie, kiss me. Put your arms about my neck. Why don't you respond to my caresses?"

He was waking at last to the meaning of her struggles. She was trying to escape his arms, and being sure of her he let her go, for the mere pleasure of taking her again. With a low delirious laugh of utter content, he watched her as, still panting from the force of his embrace, she faced him once again.

And then he read the purpose in her eyes, and wondering, he waited. He had no doubt that she belonged to him absolutely. But something troubled her — lay still between them. Very well! She had only to speak, and she would find him ready to yield anything.

"Mr. Blankenship," she began. He laughed fondly at the absurdity of this formal title from her lips. "Mr. Blankenship, you misunderstand. You take too much for granted. It may be true that I love you — I shall not deny it — but I have had time to think things over, and I must tell you now, once and for all, that neither as Mrs. Kemp nor as Minnie can I for a moment consider your proposals. I shall never marry such a man as you, never — never!"

## CHAPTER XXV

“**I** SHALL never marry such a man as you — never — never!”

The words rang in his ears as he looked at her with the love still shining in his eyes. He laughed unbelievably.

“Don’t play with me any longer, Minnie darling,” he said fondly. “The time for that is over.”

“It is, indeed,” she panted. “The time has come when we must face things squarely, and see them as they are. At first Rose dominated me. She had such plans for you and me — together. And I, ignorant, shamed, deeply in love — how could I judge if they were wise or right? She carried me on by her impetuosity. She painted such glowing pictures of you to me, and of my part in making you different — what could I do but acquiesce in all she wanted of me?”

“What else?” assented Tom. “Sit down. We’ll have done with this for once and for all.”

She sank into a chair by the window, glad of the support, for the scene just past had left her strangely weary. He, seeing now that something was really amiss, seated himself beside her and watched her

warily, by no means ready to admit her first words true, though they still repeated themselves within his brain, as he listened to her explanation.

"Captain Shelley, too — he encouraged her and me, and seemed to think her plans the very thing for us. And Madge, dear patient Madge — helped Rose in every way she knew. Marriage for us was the only possible solution in their eyes. Of course I thought so too — at first."

"Why don't you think so still?"

"They held the baby up before my eyes — always. They talked of his rights until I became confused. And then, I loved you, Tom. Had they left me ignorant as I was in the beginning, I could have imagined no greater bliss than just being allowed to go on loving you — and serving you — unhindered."

"And don't you feel so now?"

"Wait! This thing went on — all of us openly conniving in bringing you to your knees, ready to humble yourself to the woman you had wronged — until the very moment I came back to my home here. Had you sought me then with your promises, I should have flown into your arms — I say it frankly."

"And something has happened since?"

"Nothing has happened — no. But I have had time to recover from the confusion into which so much sudden knowledge thrust me, to recover from the influence Rose exercised over me, to think and weigh and judge — to find myself."

"And so — ?"

"I reached the conclusion that I don't want to marry you on any terms."

"Tell me your reason for this decision," urged Tom. He was all at sea. His swiftly built castle was tumbling about his ears.

"I will try to explain it just as it came to me," continued Minnie quietly. "First of all, the peace of the mountains entered my soul and healed it. The hurry and the bustle of the town, and of the active life there, intruded no longer. I saw everything clearly, and not distorted by the minds of others. While still with Rose and Madge, I had felt that this culture they talked about, this veneer of civilization, this ability to walk and talk as they did, to wear their kind of clothes, to read their kind of books — this was *everything*. I really felt that I had become a different woman. And when they added to all these other differences, another name, I believed that my personality must have entirely changed. At any rate my old self seemed impossible — a dream. I wondered at the funny, awkward mountain girl named Minnie Gray. I was able to feel but scant sympathy for her, to hear you speak of her scornfully, and to use her deliberately to work upon you and to bring about my own happiness with you at some later date."

"I understand. Go on."

"But up here, the false veneer soon slipped away.



Under it all I saw I had not changed. I was still Minnie Gray, with my baby a burden and a shame again as he had been but a short year ago. I found the disgrace no easier to bear because I had learned to think. Instead it was harder, more humiliating. I learned that one does not change character with clothes or education. Instead one intensifies it, and with that intensifying comes no new capacity for suffering — only what was once dumb anguish can be now expressed — that's all."

"Yes, I think that is true. Go on."

"I saw you, Tom, struggling between the girl I was, and the girl I had become. You loathed the one, you loved the other. Yet — *they were the same girl*. Only the outer cloak was different. The things you loved in Mrs. Kemp were exactly the same things you hated in Minnie. I asked myself why this was so. The answer was plain. Mrs. Kemp was of your class. Minnie was a rejected outcast. What sort of passion was it that fed on a change in voice and manner? What sort of love was it that depended on the way I held my fork, the accent I gave my words, the clothes I wore? I was just the same exactly under a few externals — just as jealous, just as loving, just as selfish or unselfish, just as ready to serve you as when I was the mountain girl in calico. But you —" contempt crept into her voice. "You were unable to see all this. You regarded Minnie as a bauble, a toy, a plaything.

Her happiness was nothing to you. You tossed her lightly aside, never discovering that she had the same qualities which delighted you in Mrs. Kemp. And why? Because she wore queer clothes. Her face was tanned. Her nails — horrors! — were unmanicured. She was well enough for amusement, but for a wife? Ah, no! ‘*You still have the heart to condemn me to her?*’ Were not those your words? And hearing them, do you think I, that girl herself, could enter your arms willingly, knowing that she and I were one? And are you still surprised and incredulous, that I will not marry you? I wish I could tear this love for you from my heart and trample on it — so! I wish my eyes had gone blind before ever they rested on your face and found it beguiling. I wish that I had died when I was a little child, before I had ever known the joy and pain of loving you!”

She had risen again to her feet, with a passionate gesture as though, indeed, she longed to tear her very heart out and stamp it into the ground. And as Tom looked and listened, he felt that, in spite of all his love, he had never sounded the deeps of Mrs. Kemp’s soul — had never given Minnie credit for the character she possessed. None of them had, not even Rose. But at thought of Rose his face lighted. Minnie had said that Rose dominated her. Perhaps this old domination would help him now. And he strode to the door and opened it.

"Rose," he called loudly.

"Yes?" The gay voice showed how Rose thought things were going.

"Come here!"

"Madge is with me. May she come, too?"

"Yes, yes! Hurry!"

"It has been a long interview," said Rose laughingly to Madge. They could hear her plainly.

"And probably highly satisfactory to them both," was Madge's response.

But as the two entered the little room they saw at once that things were far from satisfactory. Minnie had reseated herself by the window and was looking pale but very determined. Tom was frowning, troubled, and began at once to speak.

"She says she has had time to think, and does not want me."

"Why?" Rose was direct, as usual.

"She is the girl I scorned, for all her culture. She thinks I should have perceived the character of the mountain girl as quickly as that of the nurse, Mrs. Kemp. She will have none of me."

"Minnie, is this true? I thought you loved him dearly, and agreed to all my plans."

"So I did," assented Minnie. "But, as I told Tom, I have had time to find myself. I only agreed because I had not taken this time before. If he could see no virtue in the girl I was — well, I am still that girl, and I don't want him. Don't you

see that I would sacrifice myself if I yielded to him? I would be virtually saying what my mother used often to declare — ‘It is clothes that make the lady.’ I was just as much a lady then as I am now — down in my soul, I was.”

“But, Minnie —”

“Now, Rose! The fact that I have learned a few pretty tricks makes not the slightest difference. You can teach a dog tricks. But you cannot teach him fidelity. If he is a good dog, his loyalty is born in him. Frankly, I resent Tom’s inability to see beneath externals.”

“But, Minnie —”

“Oh, I know what you are going to say. You are going to tell me that Tom was not used to regarding the mountain people as having souls or hearts. It simply never occurred to him that souls and hearts existed out of well-bred, well-clad bodies. He could not recognize their presence unless properly labeled. Very well! But I am proud of my mountain origin. My mother still uses the plain mountain dialect, and I love her just as dearly as if she tried to change. I have neighbors as much gentlemen and ladies as any college graduates. I care more for earning their respect than that of anybody you could name to me. Marrying Tom now may gloss everything over in the eyes of the world, but not in their eyes. So I shall settle down among my mountain folks, and by my life I’ll win

them into reinstating me among them. Don't misunderstand me, please, Rose. I shall not forget all you have taught me, and I'll try to pass some of it along to the people here — that part which is worth while. Unfortunately that part is just what Tom does not care about, for it isn't the style or polish, but the fundamental knowledge such as boiling a baby's bottle, and keeping houses sanitary."

As she paused for breath, Rose spoke quickly, remembering what every one else had so far failed to mention.

"But the baby, Minnie. Have you forgotten how prominent a place we gave him? His rights —"

"I've not forgotten one of them. But, Rose, his rights received consideration too late, since he was already wronged. Marriage now won't help him, so far as I can see. I'd rather have him grow up here among these mountain people, a simple lad with simple aims, than to live in the town in surroundings like his father's, — with perhaps the same results. You may say what you like about our mountain boys, but they don't betray women. They defend them. I will give my life to making up to 'li'l Tawm' for the harm he has already suffered, but I'll not give him a father who scorns his people while blind to their true worth."

"But, Minnie! It is your business to show Tom all these things. I daresay he is quite ready to acknowledge the worth of your mountain friends. I

am sure he will help you in educating them. He has already yielded everything in coming to Minnie Gray."

"In coming to the girl he considered Minnie Gray," corrected Minnie. "Rose, I know what sort of man he has been all these years. Come now, I'll put you a straight question. Suppose you loved a man and suddenly discovered that in the past he had lived as Tom has lived. Would you marry him?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"That lies at the bottom of it all. I know you refused Tom, but you had never really loved him. Suppose the man you *loved* came to you, and you found out those things about him. Would you marry him? Answer me, Rose."

"I would not," admitted Rose. "The man I love must be as pure as I."

"I knew that was how you felt. I should like it to be true of myself. If Tom's transgression against Minnie had been his only one, I might have condoned it. He has accused her of faithlessness a score of times. He has offered that as his excuse for abandoning her completely. I am ready to acknowledge that, had it been true of her, he would have been justified. Well, so am I justified when it is true of him."

Rose turned to Tom with a hopeless gesture. She was as surprised as he. That all this had been brew-



ing in Minnie's brain had been wholly unsuspected by her. Consequently she had no weapon ready to combat it.

But Madge, with a magnificent belief in Gabe to uphold her, felt none of the hesitancy which characterized Rose.

"I'll call my husband. He'll know what to do," she said, and left the room.

But Minnie looked more resolute than ever, and Tom frowned and grew increasingly disconsolate. Rose went to her friend and sought in whispers to alter her point of view. And in a short time Madge returned, with Gabe.

His face was inscrutable. Madge had told him of the unexpected development, but he gave no sign of this knowledge.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked at once, and, going to Minnie, took her hand in his. "Tell your father's old friend all about it, my dear," he said in his kindest tones.

Instantly Minnie responded, pouring out again all her doubts and troubles which had still further crystallized in her first expression of them. She had been brooding, perhaps unwisely, but too well. Even Gabe was stumped as from Madge, and then from the girl herself, he heard her reasons against marrying Tom.

As she finished, he looked at her admiringly. "I must say, my dear, that I didn't think you had it

in you. What has Tom said in reply to these objections of yours?"

"Only this," burst out Tom. "I will admit that in the past I have been crass and cowardly. I have insulted Minnie Gray a thousand times — but I had no conception of the personality that she possessed. I can only make amends if she will let me, by devoting my whole future life to showing her that I too have changed."

"Doesn't that satisfy you, Minnie?" Gabe was impersonal, a kindly mediator.

"No." She shook her head. "I can't forget."

"Nor forgive?"

"Yes. But it would rise between. And he has been — that sort of man."

"He will not be again."

"But he has been."

"I cannot deny that. He has been, it is true. Minnie, have you stopped to think that Tom was not altogether responsible for this?"

"Of course he was responsible. He was a man, free to choose —"

"Ah, but he wasn't. That's just the point. He wasn't free to choose. He was a victim, just as you were."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Let me tell you something. When Tom was a little fellow he was given over into the hands of a colored nurse. All the white babies of his class are.

Now this particular nurse — understand, I don't condemn her, for she was a victim, too — this particular nurse was the child of a slave by that slave's white master. There was no morality put into her composition. Her mother was proud of her relationship with her master, and boasted of it on every occasion. The girl grew up as rank as any wayside weed. She was sly and respectful to her mistress. Behind her back she was bold and vulgar to a degree. I daresay baby Tom received his first lessons in sex from her."

"How did you guess?" Tom was amazed.

"I have eyes and ears," said Gabe drily. "Now, then! From the influence of this nurse Tom passed to school with other boys fresh from like influences. I have heard it said that the talk of school-children would often shock their parents. I know this to be true. Tom came home steeped in morbid, unhealthy knowledge. He saw his father with keen eyes. I don't condemn that father, either, for he also was a victim. But from him Tom learned more lessons. His first transgression was applauded — his second was accepted as a matter of course. He soon learned how men regarded such things, and of course he did not wish to be a mollicoddle. He was as clear a victim of the double standard as one can hope to find nowadays. He was educated in the code from the moment of his birth. The only wonder is that he did not go still farther. In spite of his teaching, he must have had a saving sense of decency, to keep

himself clean and healthy. Through you, Minnie, he has had his eyes opened at last. He sees the justice of your claims. He sees the immorality of his past life, and with him you can make the little Tom a better man than you can without him. And you love him —”

“But I do not respect him.”

“You will. You must. Conscious reaching for the higher things of life always earns respect in the end. Minnie, I did not expect to find you cold, and hard, and unforgiving —”

“Captain Gabe, I’m not —”

“Oh, yes, you are. You are showing yourself to be narrow and Puritanical. I had counted on your broad-mindedness. You have suffered enough yourself to make allowances. Minnie, Jesus did not condemn the sinner. Rather he rejoiced over ‘the sinner that repenteth.’ I know what is the matter with you, Minnie.”

“What?” Minnie looked eager.

“You are so used to being miserable that you are afraid to look happiness in the face. Now it confronts you, you’ve run away like a rabbit from the gun of the hunter, and, hiding way back in the dark burrow you have made for yourself, you are fancying everything to be true but truth. Come out into the sunshine, Minnie. Know that Tom loves you. Know that you love him. Nothing matters but just that.”

"Rose wouldn't marry a man with a past like Tom's."

"Perhaps not. I sincerely hope she will fall in love some day with a fellow who, by birth and environment, by influence and by heredity, is clean morally and physically. Such a man is hard to find. He is an accident nowadays. He should be a commonplace. However, if Rose should love a man with a past — and he 'fessed up and promised good behavior — and showed he meant it, every word — and if he had no other claims upon him — I'd say, 'Bless you, my children.' There are plenty of us morally besmirched in other ways that I am almost more afraid of, Minnie. And now I am going to say something you may not like. Minnie, did I ever speak to you of what you yourself have done?"

"Captain Gabe —"

"Yes, I know. Rose has been busy holding up your wrongs until you have grown to believe in them. But you were seventeen years old and ought to have had better sense. Tom did not sin alone, Minnie."

"Captain Gabe!" The girl was sobbing.

"There, there! I did not mean to make you cry. What I wanted to show you was that if it comes right down to rock bottom there isn't one of us that hasn't done something to be ashamed of at one time or another. We are all human, Minnie. Give over thinking about wrongs, my dear. Think of rights. Tom has a right to you and to his boy. You have a right

to him. Help one another, and between you help the little son. Now, folks, I'm done. Come out and leave these two alone. They'll soon decide —"

He rose to lead his wife and Rose away but Minnie rose too. "You don't have to go," she said tremulously. "I've decided. I'd gotten everything all mixed up, I reckon. If Tom still wants me, after all I've said —"

"If Tom still wants you! Hurry, Rose and Madge. Let's give Tom a chance to tell her if he wants her."

It was a chance of which Tom made the most.



## CHAPTER XXVI

“GOD bless my soul,” chuckled old Judge Oglethorpe. “I didn’t expect to officiate at a wedding when I decided to come out to the hills with Gabe this afternoon. What I want to know, Tom, is what the folks at Salem are going to say about all this?”

“I’ll attend to the folks at Salem,” said Gabe confidently. “Tom, how about an article on the front page of *The Budget*, headed something like this: ‘Sheriff unearths romance of long standing. Judge Oglethorpe guilty of performing secret marriage. Tom Blankenship a married man.’ Then I’ll go on to explain that you fell in love with a mountain girl and married her secretly, for fear of your Aunt Betty Oglethorpe’s disapproval. I will state that the young lady is a daughter of the late Corporal Ben Gray, and every one knows how I loved my old war comrade, so that is voucher enough, to my thinking. And then I’ll say that, under the name of Mrs. Kemp, Minnie has been busy finishing her education and getting ready to assume the high position now hers as Tom’s wife. Also that the young son and heir is thriving. How about it, Tom?”

"You may say what you please, Captain," replied Tom heartily. "I am content to leave matters in your hands. For myself, I'd face the music, but I have to think of Minnie now. It wouldn't do for her to start life in Salem under a cloud. That is why I have asked the Judge to ante-date the marriage certificate."

The men were waiting in the living room of Suncrest, while the women packed Minnie's few belongings, and the girl said her farewells to her mother. Now Homer Fort suggested, with a smile, "It is the modern inclination, Mr. Blankenship, to stand forth in one's true colors, and let people take you for exactly what you are. Maybe Minnie has some of those high-flown ideas, and will not want to hide under a false date."

"We have the baby to think of," said Tom with magnificent simplicity. "From those who would understand, we have no intention of hiding our true selves. Salem generally would never understand. Minnie would be ostracized. That wouldn't do, you know. I can't have her hounded all her life for a girlish indiscretion that was all my fault. You men know that she would bear the burden of shame, while I'd go scot-free."

"That's true," admitted Gabe sorrowfully. "Minnie wronged, sad and humble, would come in for a measure of patronizing sympathy. But Minnie righted, taking a place in the community — she

wouldn't have the ghost of a show. Salem would tear her heart open with its scorn and then rub salt into the wounds. You are quite right, Tom. I shall go ahead and put that article in the paper. Here come the ladies! Ready, gentlemen!"

Mrs. Gray was weeping softly as she entered the room, leaning on her daughter for support. "I nevuh thought to see this hyar day, Cap'n Gabe," she murmured. "I'm a moughty proud ole woman. My gal has gotten to be a real lady, thanks to you-all."

"Now, Mrs. Gray," said Rose, who followed close behind with Madge, "you must calm yourself and listen while the Judge performs the ceremony. Minnie, are you ready?"

Minnie had changed to a simple suit of blue. Under her small hat her face was pale and composed. One would hardly have guessed from her quiet manner, how momentous the occasion was to her. She and Tom took their places before the old Judge, who dropped his usual half-joking, half-querulous attitude, and adopted the solemn dignity which consorted best with his office. He proceeded at once with the simple words which he thought suited to the occasion.

"We are gathered here, as the friends and witnesses of this man and woman, to unite them as husband and wife."

"Thomas Blankenship, do you take this woman, Minnie Gray, to be your lawful wedded wife, to have

and to hold, to comfort and to bless, so long as your united loves shall endure?"

"I do." Tom's voice was steady and firm, and yet with a touch of sadness in it.

"You will love, honor, cherish and care for her, and for her children, in sickness and in health, in prosperity and in adversity, and will cleave tenderly and loyally unto her as a true husband unto a true wife?"

"I will." The words were spoken with purpose and conviction.

"Minnie Gray, do you take this man, Thomas Blankenship, to be your lawful husband?"

"Yes," answered Minnie simply, her earnest eyes upon the Judge's face.

"You will love, honor, cherish and care for him and for his children, in sickness, in health; in prosperity and in adversity; and cleave unto him with loyalty and tenderness, so long as your united loves shall endure?"

"I will." Though the words were clear and distinct, the tears rained down her cheeks. The hearts of those present swelled in sympathy, but the Judge went on with low and fervent voice.

"Such a union is ordained in the laws of our being, the welfare and happiness of ourselves and of mankind; and, therefore, is not to be entered lightly or unadvisedly, but with honest hearts, discreetly, advisedly and soberly. To be true, this outward trust

must be but a symbol of what is inner and real — a sacred personal union, which society deems fitting and honorable, and which our laws make legal, but which neither laws nor society can either create or annul. Its high quality and success depend upon the wisdom and temperance of you who enter into this relation; and on the steady unwavering devotion of each of you to the other; and in the fidelity of both of you to the noblest ends and purposes of life. Believing that you have carefully weighed these obligations, and that you intend to faithfully fulfill them, we, your friends and witnesses, pronounce you man and wife; which I, as a servant of the state, confirm and publish in *her* name and with *her* authority.”

As the last solemn word fell softly on the air, Tom turned to Minnie with a tender smile. He did not kiss her there before them all. Some way he felt too humble and too thankful for that, even in front of these friends who knew his story. But as they two looked into each other's eyes, it seemed as though their very souls leaped together in a mute caress — a promise of what was to be.

“We have the Captain to thank for everything,” cried Minnie, turning impulsively to Gabe. “And Madge and Rose — every one of you has had a share in making this moment possible. By your kindness you have made me all I am or ever hope to be as Tom's wife. How can I express my gratitude!”

“Don't try,” whispered Rose, as they all crowded

around the pretty bride. "Don't say another word about it, dear."

"And remember," warned the Judge, "I shall keep my eye on both of you, for I feel a deep sense of responsibility towards you now. God bless my soul! To think of Tom a married man, and liking the situation! I am surprised!"

"May I say just a word?" asked Homer from the outskirts of the group.

"Fire away, Homer," ordered Tom familiarly.

"It is just that I am very happy to have been counted in on this. I feel it an honor. I am a Northerner, and a commonplace business man, and I am proud to be included just as if I were one of you. This has been a mighty pretty wedding, and the bride one of the loveliest it has ever been my good fortune to kiss." Here he suited the action to the word, to the embarrassment of Minnie and the delight of every one else. "We made a mistake in not foreseeing this, Judge, and bringing Uncle Jack along with the necessaries for a julep—how are we to drink the health of the bride and groom?"

"Law-sy!" exclaimed Mrs. Gray. "I clean forgot. I have fruit cake an' dandelion wine. Do you reckon them'll do?"

"Anything will do, Mrs. Gray," cried the Judge. "Anything will do."

So a little later Gabe lifted high his glass and proposed a toast to Tom and Minnie. "May their life



be all roses with the thorns removed. May they be as happy — as happy — as you and I are, Madge." The Captain's deep sincerity left nothing to be desired.

Just then a wail sounded from the adjoining room. "Li'l Tawm" felt that he had been left there with Janey quite long enough, and expressed his resentment with a lusty pair of lungs. For a moment the wedding party were at a loss. Though they were all old friends, they really did not know what to say or do about the baby. But Tom knew. He hastened out and was soon back with "li'l Tawm."

"Judge," he said gravely. "It isn't every man's luck to have a boy like this."

"At least not on his wedding day — God bless my soul, Tom, I didn't mean that —"

"It's all right, Judge," Tom assured him. "It's all right. Minnie and I were really married almost two years ago."

"That's the way to talk, Tom," approved Gabe. "There is always merit in a struggle upward, and the farther down the start, the more glorious the finish at the top. For myself, I have forgotten everything except that you and Minnie are my friends, entitled to my sincerest liking and respect — except when I am writing a political article, Tom. Then I reserve the right to lamm you."

The party separated soon after, for Tom was in a hurry to be gone. Janey and the baby were to ac-

company them, on a trip long enough to allow gossip to wax and wane before their return.

Gabe and his family were to have dinner at Suncrest, so good-bys had to be said. Minnie clung to Rose and Madge, and to her mother, and cried a little and laughed a great deal. Tom shook hands all round, and then, with his wife, led a merry procession across the lawn, through the gateway, and over to his waiting team. He swung Minnie into the seat beside his own, settled Janey, the baby, and the small amount of luggage in the back, and amid a chorus of good wishes he drove away, bound directly for Atlanta. From there he intended to take his small family North.

"Well, Rose," said Gabe as the wagonette disappeared over the brow of the hill. "A year ago you set out to bring this event to pass. Now that you have succeeded, how do you feel about it?"

"Father," replied Rose earnestly, "to-day has been the happiest of my whole life. I can think of nothing to make it more complete."

"I can," said Homer. "Wouldn't you like to climb to the summit of this hill and look down upon all Georgia? Your father tells me there was never such a view."

"Yes, I should like that," responded Rose with a bright smile. "Can Judge Oglethorpe stand the walk?"

"I'm going back to 'Gabe's hotel,'" replied the

Judge. "You don't think I'd be fool enough to attempt that climb at my time of life, do you?"

"Gabe and I will go back, too," said Madge.

"All right, then. Even though every one deserts us, we will make the trip alone," cried Homer. "Come on, Miss Rose. It is nearly time for sunset, and we have a glorious picture waiting for us at the mountain top, if we hurry."

They ran away together, laughing. Rose was as free as a boy in her riding-suit, and Fort had a hard time to keep up with her. She had left her hat behind, and now her beautiful hair escaped its bonds in a hundred bewitching little wisps and curls. As she looked around to mock at Homer for a laggard, her flushed cheeks and starry eyes made her lovely past belief. His keen intuition told him that the events of the day were not alone responsible for this, though each one had undoubtedly influenced her. The lunch party on the lawn at home, with the visit from the boys, had first served to lift her out of herself. Then Tom's visit, with its unfolding of his change of front, had made her fairly tremulous with joy. During the ride up the mountain-side she had behaved like a child indeed, and Homer knew that her mood had been induced by Tom's declarations. "Swiftly upon this had come the springing of Gabe's surprise, with its wonderful possibilities. And then the marriage of Tom and Minnie, in which her secret plans had borne fruit."

And yet she was so remarkable in her glowing beauty, so stirred to the deeps of her soul, so softened and tender and appealing, that Homer felt that something else must have transpired, of which he was yet ignorant—something which had wrought a change in the heart of the girl herself, so wonderful that his vague sensing of it tempered his thoughts of her with subtle reverence. A new quality crept into his love which was to endure through all the coming years.

While he was pondering as to what this could be, they reached the summit of the hill, and Rose uttered a cry of pleasure at the scene which spread itself before them. Far down in the valley, where it was growing dusk, they could see the tiny glinting lights of Salem. Peach orchards stretched away in all directions from the nucleus of the town. The road wound in and out, and the river, like a silver thread, showed sections of itself stitched through the willows which crowded its banks. Farther away it widened into a placid lake, which reflected the rosy tints now spreading over the sky.

Beyond the rim of another hill the sun had already hidden its jovial face. Broad rays shot outward, veritable Jacob's ladders. The clear, translucent blue of the autumn sky showed through the tumbled clouds, which were no longer ordinary banks of mist, but resplendent canopies of gold and purple, and

crimson shading into rose, transmitting the after-glow.

They stood side by side in a long silence. At last Rose gave a little sigh and murmured, as if fearing to break the spell if she spoke aloud. "How this completes the day, Mr. Fort! I feel as though the universe had conscious thought, and had spoken to me just now, making me promises which are sure to be fulfilled. I know that God is,—and more wonderful than humanity has dreamed — more mighty and more infinitely tender and compassionate."

"Come back to me, Rose," whispered Homer.

"I am here."

"You stand beside me, but your self is far away. I feel cold and lonely. Come back to me. Give me your hand."

So great was the spell, into which his words accorded, that she stretched out her arm and laid her hand in his. He drew her closer.

"Rose, your eyes see visions yonder. Let me share them."

"I will try. First I see Tom and Minnie, going far away together. They will be very happy. Next I see my father — and Madge. She has no thought beyond him, he none for any one but her. I used to doubt that, guarding a little jealously the memory of my own mother. Now I am glad that it is so, for together they will work for the good of the children

everywhere. Suncrest will grow and broaden. When Father gives it to Georgia, I can fancy his gift being looked at askance at first. But it will prove itself and will lay the foundation for similar schools all through the land. I see this whole country stirring to life, and leading in a world-movement for peace and progress, which must come sooner or later. Mr. Fort, I see things so great, so vast, so wonderful, that I cannot quite grasp them — but I know that they are there, and are destined to come to pass.”

“And in all this visioning do you catch no glimpse of me?”

“Of you?”

“Yes. Am I left quite out? Is there no future for you into which I enter? Rose, surely this afternoon’s events have restored your faith in humanity. I love you, oh, so dearly, that I cannot let the day come to an end without another plea for your consideration. Have I no chance at all?”

She was silent, looking into the distances which were now fading into duller hues, but clear and transparent still. He felt it some concession that she did not withdraw her hand, and that it trembled a little in his grasp.

“Rose, take me with you into that future about which you are dreaming. Tell me that I am to be happy as well as all the rest, and that in being happy I will make you happy, too.”

So still was she that as his words died on the air



it seemed that the silence reached out from her to enfold him. With her hand in both his own he stood waiting for her answer. But her eyes brooded over the distant hills and sky. She was so remote from him that he felt suddenly as if his life itself depended upon arousing her. Roughly he dropped her hand and caught her to him.

"You shall come back and hear me," he cried boldly.

And then he saw that she was dimpling, and that her eyes were mischievous. In the quick revulsion he let her go, and his own face grew stern. "You are playing with me," he accused her. "I would not have believed it of you, Rose."

"Forgive me. I was thinking —"

"Of what?"

"Sit down here, on these stones beside me. There! Now we can talk."

"Of what were you thinking?"

"Of a little map you drew for me some time ago — of a highway called Comrade Street, which went up the Hill of Understanding to the Heights of Friendship Mountain. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. What of it?"

"It was symbolical. I tore up the map, but I could not alter the progress of our acquaintance, Mr. Fort. I couldn't even keep the 'No Trespassing' signs as high as you advised."

"How do you know?"

"Because, Mr. Fort, I have caught you twice in the very act of peeping over. Mr. Fort — let me whisper this so that even the birds can't hear — I should like to take a peep myself, to see what lies behind."

She was so bewitching in her pretended confidence that he feared to speak lest he spoil her mood. But as she waited for his answer, he ventured, "Why?"

"Because, I might look all by myself, but I fear I could not see plainly. It is all so very mysterious. If we looked together, you might explain things to me, so I would know — what love is — what it is like —"

"Very well." He pretended to be calm and judicious, in spite of the racing of his pulse. "Take my hand — so. Look where I bid you, into the heart of that huge cloud. Do you see nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Don't you catch even a glimpse of the elusive form of Love?"

"No. It is only a big purple bank, promising rain to-morrow."

"Then look yonder, down into the valley. Perhaps love lies there, below us."

"No. I see nothing but a busy town —"

"Above you, then, in the places which held visions for you just a little while ago."

"No. Love is not there. It is all growing cold and still."

"Ah, Rose, I can tell you why. Love does not lie hidden away in secret places, guarded by signs. It is about you, everywhere. It lies in my eyes, if you will only read them. It lies on my lips, if you will let them speak. It lies in my heart, yours from the moment I first saw you. Look only at me, Rose, if you wish to see Love. Listen to me if you want to hear its voice."

She turned her head away and he was silent, waiting and fearing lest he had said too much. Would her mood hold?

"Mr. Fort," she said after a long pause. "You and I once promised to be always frank with one another. I even went the length this afternoon of telling you that if I ever felt like returning to the subject of your love for me, I would do so of my own accord. You see I meant what I said. I have made up my mind to consider this matter seriously. There is only one drawback to such a consideration — my own ignorance."

"Your ignorance? I don't know what you mean."

"Some time ago I began to suspect that Madge suspected — I mean I perceived that Madge perceived — this is harder to say than I supposed it would be."

"Do go on. I think I understand you."

"Madge *thought* I was falling — in love — with you. She kept this to herself, but she is so transpar-

ent that I read through the meaning of her actions. She sent me to you at once — that was the day you drew the map for me — and ever since she has worked valiantly to throw us two together.”

“Yes, I know. Madge has been on my side for some time past.”

“Indeed! Well, it all amused me very much. I liked you, and so I did not mind. But this afternoon Tom told me roughly that I was in love with you.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I denied it.”

“Did he believe you?”

“No — He didn’t.”

“So you denied it again, I suppose, and looked him in the eyes —”

“That’s just it. I was quite able to deny again, but —”

“But what?”

“I could not look him in the eyes.”

“Rose. Do you mean —”

“I don’t know what I mean, Mr. Fort. I don’t even know why I am telling this to you. I only know I could not meet his gaze and say I did not love you. I don’t believe I love you. I don’t believe I shall ever love any one. Only — what is it that I feel for you? Is it friendship? I should like to classify it, and label it plainly, so I would no longer misunderstand, or be misunderstood. That is why I

venture to speak out like this. I want you to help me analyze the sincere liking I have for you, so that our future relationship may be clearly defined."

Was she laughing at him? Apparently not, for the eyes she lifted up to his were as clear and limpid as a mountain brook. Yet it was too absurd, thought Homer, for her to come to him like this, and ask him point blank for such a definition. Should he fling scruples to the winds, take her into his arms, and kiss her soul awake into either love or loathing?

He considered for a time and a new feeling rose within him which he soon recognized to be resentment. She had no right to tax him so. Did she not know how hard this was for him? And then, in its turn, resentment gave way to admiration. Her courage was superb in thus flinging down the barriers, and meeting him face to face. He saw that she was really in earnest about it all. She was puzzled, alarmed perhaps, and in throwing herself upon his mercy she had unconsciously displayed reliance on him of which he could be justly proud. And with this realization came to him the knowledge of how best to meet her frank confession.

"I will help you," he said gravely. "Rose, I think we have been such true comrades that you have lost your perspective. I have been in your home and near you, so that you've grown to accept me somewhat as you would if I were your brother."

"I should have liked a brother —"

"Yes, I know. But, Rose, I love you in a different way from that. I want you to think of me differently. So the very best thing for both of us will be for me to go away sooner than I had planned — to-morrow."

"Away? From Salem? From me?"

"From Salem and from you. You need time to get a new point of view. You need to miss me, Rose. If I am absent, then perhaps your own heart will plead my cause. You will learn just how much of yourself belongs to me. And when you have settled everything, write to me either to come to you — or stay away, forever."

"But I could never endure that," she cried quickly. "I could not bear never to see you again. Why need that be?"

"Rose, don't you know what torture mere friendship with you is, when I want so much more?"

"But we've been happy this summer —"

"Indeed we have. The memory of it will never leave my heart. I'll take that memory with me to Chicago —"

"So far away?"

"So far away. My work lies there, Rose. It will help me bear the suspense I'll feel while waiting there alone."

She thought a moment. Then, with eyes upon the ground, "I do not want you to go away," she announced quietly.



"I must go," he repeated. "It is the only way. Come, Rose. We shall be late for dinner."

He helped her to her feet, and hand in hand they went down the mountain path together. She was silent, preoccupied, and he, wise from the depths of his love for her, was silent too, for he knew she was dwelling on his absence, picturing the time without him, and wondering how it would seem. They had reached the level ground once more, and had turned into the narrow way which led to Suncrest, when suddenly she paused and faced him, speaking with conviction.

"I do not want you to go away."

He smiled. "But I must go."

"I wish I were a man, and could go with you."

"I wish you were my wife, and so could go."

She shook her head and preceded him down the path. And then again she paused, this time with uplifted hand to enjoin his silence. He stopped beside her. Ahead, half-hidden by the leafy undergrowth, lay the clear spring from which the mountain folks about were wont to come to get their drinking water. Minnie's mother, stifling her own emotion at the events of the day, and busy in discharging her new duties as housekeeper for Suncrest, had come alone with a pitcher to the spring.

Once there, however, the thought of her daughter, her "li'l gal," had risen uppermost. How many, many times, in the days gone by, had Minnie come to

this same spring for water? First, as a barefoot child, so little she could scarcely lift the pail, next as a maiden, shy and diffident; then as a woman, with the near prospect of her motherhood to shame her, and at last as a mother, shunned by her friends, forsaken and disgraced. Now she had gone away a happy wife and mother—it was too much. The fountain of Mrs. Gray's tears had been so long dry that she could not find relief in weeping, so, in her gratitude for the final outcome of her daughter's suffering, she had knelt by her full pitcher, and with uplifted hands she was pouring out her soul to the only God she knew.

“Gawd, I hev been a hard an’ onforgivin’ ole woman, thinkin’ as how you had deserted me an’ mine. I laid things up agin you, Gawd, an’ wouldn’t pray ner ax fer mercy. An’ all the time you wuz a-plannin’ out how best to make Minnie happy. But I didn’t know. My faith wuzn’t built on a rock, I reckon, but it is naow. O Lawd, do give me another chanct, an’ I’ll show you how I am desarvin’, in spite of all my meanness. When you took away my Ben, I wuz jus’ natterally plumb wore out, an’ it did seem like as though I didn’t hev no prop to lean on no longer. Fer a long time the bottom jes’ seemed to drop right out of ever’thing. O Gawd, them years without Ben — them years without my Ben! — But naow, sense Minnie is righted, someways I feel like Ben wuz near to me once more. I feel like he’d

sorter holped you plan, Gawd. Mebbe he went up to you, an' whispered in your ear 'bout his ole frien' Gabe, an' started you inter doin' all this what's come to pass. An' I'm sure, Gawd, that when I come ter die, Ben'll be thar beside you, waitin' fer his ole woman.—Gawd, somehow I cain't think of Heaven an' you without thinkin' of my Ben. A-men."

It had seemed the kindest part to stay discreetly silent, and let the woman think herself unwatched. As she rose from her knees, with her worn face transfigured by the fervor of her prayer, Rose shrank still further back into the leafy path, pulling Homer with her. Together they watched the work-worn figure go slowly toward Suncrest. And then Homer saw that his companion's eyes were soft with tears.

"Gawd, somehow I cain't think of Heaven an' you, without thinkin' of my Ben." It was those simple words, from the lips of Minnie's mother, that woke Rose up at last. Prepared for them by Homer's announcement that he was going away, touched to the heart by Mrs. Gray's passionate outcry against the years when she had seemed to be without Ben — those long, sad years, when poverty and shame had made her hard and rebellious — Rose was roused as she had never been before in her whole young life. She did not try to analyze the meaning of the feeling which swept over her. She did not have to try. She knew. And, knowing, she was not the sort to keep her lover waiting. Like a homing bird

she turned and flew straight into his arms. They closed hungrily about her. Though it is safe to say that Homer was the most astonished man in Georgia at that moment, he allowed nothing of his bewilderment to betray itself in his manner. And when she lifted up her face, with her mouth all rosy for his kiss, he lost no time in placing that kiss exactly where it belonged.

"Mrs. Gray once told me that she hoped the time would come when she could repay me for all I'd done for Minnie. Homer, she has repaid me," whispered Rose.

"How do you mean?" Homer was completely puzzled. He had but just now made up his mind to months of doubt.

"She said she couldn't think of Heaven and God without thinking of her Ben. Homer, that is exactly the way I feel about you. I cannot think of anything at all without including you. You were right. I had fancied Love as something high, something to be attained, when all the time it is just life — and you."

"It's life and *you*, you mean," cried Homer, straining her to his heart.

"I think it's just we two together," answered Rose.

THE END

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