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FIGHTING STARS

BY H. A. CODY

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To
my son GEORGE this
book is affectionately
dedicated

"As good luck would have it."

SHAKESPEARE

"When good luck knocks at the door,
let him in and keep him there."

CERVANTES

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FIGHTING STARS

CHAPTER I

HIS PLAN

Although Charles Stanfield was a wealthy man he was far from happy. Everything that money could buy was at his command. He had merely to give the order and it would be fulfilled without delay. From a worldly point of view he was an outstanding example of a prosperous man who had fought his way to the top of the ladder of success. By many he was admired for his keen business qualities; by others he was feared and hated. He was considered a hard man, and merciless in any transaction where money was the object of his pursuit.

But as he sat on the spacious veranda of his noble and luxurious suburban house, thoughtfully smoking an after-dinner cigar, his life to him seemed an utter failure. The evening was balmy and refreshing, a pleasant contrast to the intense heat of the day. The air was redolent with the scent of rare and old-fashioned flowers from the well-kept gardens surrounding the house. Smooth velvet lawns sloped gently to the street beyond, over which arched the outspreading branches of lordly maple and elm trees. It was an entrancing spot, and the admiration of all who looked upon it. But it was too trim and neat. Seldom did any weary wayfarer rest beneath the shade of those old trees, and never did little children wander along the gravelly walks nor tumble and play upon the grassy lawns. It was a paradise sealed so far as any touch with the outside world was concerned, and it had been so for years.

By Stanfield's side sat a man, somewhat younger, silently smoking. His strong intellectual face betokened the deep student. And so he was, for William Radcliffe, besides being the president of Strongbow University, was an authority on botany, and his lectures were always an outstanding feature of the college curriculum. Twenty years before when he had been called to his present position, the university was weak and tottering to its fall. But through his ability and the generous gifts of his friend, Charles Stanfield, a marked improvement was soon effected, and the institution ere long became one of the strongest in the entire country. Stanfield had endowed several chairs, and also had given large sums chiefly for the sake of his friend. Radcliffe was most grateful for such assistance, and he hoped that Stanfield in his will would make further liberal contributions. Of course, he had not even suggested this, although it was often in his mind. So when he had been invited to take dinner with his friend for the purpose of considering a very important matter, he cherished the idea that his hopes were at last to be realized. He confided this to his wife that afternoon.

"Charles is greatly changed of late," he remarked, "and since his serious illness he does not seem to take much interest in financial matters. Why, I was with him last week for over an hour and he never once referred to money."

"It was his sickness, no doubt, which made the change," Mrs. Radcliffe replied. "When he has regained his former strength he will be the same as before. He needs cheering up a bit. Ask him over here for dinner to-morrow."

"I am afraid he would not consent to come, dear. He seldom goes anywhere now. I know that the sight of our happy family only intensifies his loneliness. He told me so once, and said that he would gladly give all he possesses to have such a family of his own."

"I wonder who will get his money, William? Perhaps he will leave something to our children as he is so fond of them."

"No doubt he will remember them. But my opinion is that he will leave most of his wealth to the university. He has taken a great interest in it, and has received several honors in recognition of his gifts."

Radcliffe was thinking of this as he sat on the veranda by the side of his companion. Stanfield was unusually silent this evening, and several times he sighed. At length Radcliffe felt that he could endure the silence no longer.

"What a beautiful place you have here, Charles," he began.

"Beautiful, do you say?" Stanfield asked, arousing himself and turning his eyes upon his friend's face. "Yes, I suppose it is beautiful, but what is the use of beauty if you cannot enjoy it?"

"But what is there to interfere with your enjoying it?"

"Many things, William, and it is to talk over this very matter that I have asked you to spend a few hours with me this evening. I wish to apologize for taking you away from your family."

"Oh, do not mind that, Charles. They can get along very well without me for a while. We shall have the whole summer together, as this is just the beginning of vacation."

"You are a fortunate fellow, William." Stanfield again sighed as he knocked off the ash from his cigar into an ash-tray near by. "You can enjoy life because you have others to enjoy it with you. But with me it is different. What does all this beauty amount to?" He waved his hand toward the flowers, lawns and trees. "I have been so engrossed for long years in making money that I have lost all sense of the beautiful things of nature."

"But why did you have all this done then? Why did you not let your grounds grow up in weeds and bushes?"

"Partly for the sake of appearance, and partly in the hope that I might learn to enjoy it. But it's no use. It means little or nothing to me. If I had others to enjoy it with me, it might make a difference, but the very sight of it is almost like gall and wormwood to me now."

"You surprise me, Charles."

"No doubt I do, and perhaps I am foolish to talk in this manner to-night. But I am getting along in years, and since my serious illness I look upon life from an altogether different point of view. Until I was laid aside, I considered the making of money the only thing worth while. Ever since I left home as a poor boy I gave my whole mind and soul to that. And I have succeeded, but at what a cost! For the sake of money I sacrificed all the finer instincts of my nature, and all my family ties have been so severed for so many years that I do not know how many relatives I have living. My two brothers died childless, and my only sister left several children, so I heard at the time of her death. But how many, and what they are like I have not the remotest idea. They know nothing of me, I suppose, whether I am dead or alive, for my sister was a proud, high-spirited woman, who naturally resented my neglect of her. She married a worthless fellow, a drifter through life."

"Is he living?" Radcliffe asked.

"He died years before my sister."

"How did she manage to get along after his death?"

"I do not know, and that is one of the things which is causing me so much trouble now."

Stanfield rose from his comfortable chair and walked slowly up and down the veranda. Radcliffe noted the expression of agony upon his face as he silently watched him.

"Yes, William," he continued, "if I had only gone to her when her husband died and helped her, what a joy it would be to me now, and what a comfort I might have been to her through her years of widowhood."

Wearily he resumed his seat, and leaned his head upon his right hand. His cigar had gone out, but he still clutched it between the fingers of his left hand.

"It all came to me while I was lying in the hospital. Marion seemed to be very near me, and I saw her over and over again just as she looked when we played together as children. Try as I might I could not get her out of my mind, and gradually the longing came upon me to have her with me once more. This increased in intensity as the days passed, and although I knew that such a thing was impossible, I began to wonder if I could not do something for her children, that they in return might prove a comfort to me in my old age."

He paused and gazed out among the trees through the steadily-deepening twilight. Radcliffe sat very still, although his mind was most active. He was not at all satisfied at this unexpected turn in the conversation. His bright vision of a big endowment to the university did not seem so bright, for he saw instead Stanfield's money going to those shadowy and far-off nieces and nephews. They might be a useless lot who would not make good use of the money, but would squander it in a reckless manner. Stanfield should be warned.

"Suppose your sister's children are unworthy of your assistance or are incapable of looking after your money should you leave it to them?" he suggested. "They may be very common and ignorant, and so your bequest would do them more harm than good. Have you considered that?"

"Marion's children could never be ignorant or common, William. With her blood in their veins, and with her teaching

and influence they surely must be above the ordinary. While she was alive and with them I am certain that she kept them respectable. But what may have happened since her death is what I fear. They may be married now and have families of their own. They may have gone down in the scale of humanity. Oh, there are many things that may have happened to them. But I am going to find out, and I want you to help me."

"Why, what can I do?" Radcliffe asked in astonishment. "I know nothing about your family."

"That doesn't matter, William. I want you to go with me to find out. This must be kept a strict secret between us two. I have thought out the details, and to tell you the truth, I feel strangely enthusiastic about the adventure. I want to visit the place where my sister spent the last years of her life, and learn all I can about her children. I shall go, of course, under an assumed name, so no one will have any idea who I am. If I should meet any of my nieces and nephews they will have no suspicion that 'Daniel Doncaster' is their uncle, for that is the name I intend to take."

"But what are you going to do with me?" Radcliffe demanded.

"Make use of you as a botanist, of course. If I should arrive in a village alone with my chauffeur, what reason could I give for hanging about the place for several days? But if we go as tourists, traveling through the country for the purpose of studying the plants of the different communities, it would help out a great deal. You will have to do all the necessary talking about flowers, for to tell you the truth, I hardly know one from another."

"And what will you do?"

"I? Oh, I shall keep still, smile, look wise, and pretend to know all about your jargon. But if you will look after the flowers, I'll attend to family affairs. I guess my business training ought to help when it comes to ferreting out information. You can leave that to me. Now, are you willing to undertake this adventure? I want your company as well as your assistance."

"I see no reason why I should not go with you," Radcliffe replied. "I shall enjoy the trip, I know, and may get some rare specimens as well. I have never been to that part of Canada. Your sister lived in New Brunswick, so I believe."

"Yes, on the Saint John River, a stream noted for its beauty, and well named the 'Rhine of America.' We have no river in the United States like it to my way of thinking. It is attracting many tourists from this country every summer. They go not only for the scenic beauty, but for the refreshing coolness of the climate. Just wait until you see and you will then confess like the Queen of Sheba that the half has not been told."

"You have been dinning this into my ears for a long time," Radcliffe smilingly reminded. "I have seen much of Canada, your wonderful British Columbia, the great prairie provinces, and your fine Ontario and Quebec, but I have missed seeing your Bluenose land."

"You have something to look forward to, then, William, and I am going to introduce you to the beauties of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. Just wait until you see the noble Saint John River and its tributaries, the far-famed Annapolis Valley, and the Island, then I am sure you will be as enthusiastic as I am."

Stanfield was almost like a boy now as he outlined the proposed tour. Radcliffe listened in silence, wondering what would be the outcome of the adventure. He knew from experience how useless it would be to oppose his companion's plans. But the thought of those nieces and nephews, and what the finding of them might mean to his beloved university was more in his mind than the prospect of seeing new lands, no matter how wonderful.

CHAPTER II

WHAT HE DISCOVERED

After several weeks of pleasant traveling Charles Stanfield and William Radcliffe reached the little town of Radnor, and put up at the only hotel the place contained. It was evening, and after supper the two men sat and smoked under a big horse chestnut tree near the building. The sun was still shining brightly, and not a breath of wind ruffled the surface of the Saint John River but a short distance away.

"This is worth coming a long way to see," Radcliffe remarked, as his eyes wandered out over the water. "This is the climax of all the wonderful scenes we have beheld since we left home."

"I am glad that you have confessed at last," Stanfield replied. "You know now that I was not exaggerating when I told you about the beauty of these provinces down by the sea."

"The half was not told me, Charles. I shall never doubt your word after this."

"My name is Daniel now, remember. I am entered in the hotel register as 'Daniel Doncaster,' so please bear that in mind. It is here where I am to begin my inquiries about my nieces and nephews, so we must be careful."

"So this is where your sister lived?"

"It is one of the places, and here she died, so I believe. I am anxious to find out as much as possible, so I shall have an interview with the hotel keeper. He seems like an agreeable man, and should be able to give me some useful information."

"And I am anxious to get out into the fields, Charles. Oh, excuse me, I mean Daniel. Confound it! I am going to find it hard to remember that every time I speak to you."

Both men laughed heartily as they separated, one to his beloved flowers; the other to begin his family search.

Stanfield found the hotel keeper in his office sorting out some mail which had come for his guests.

"You have many visitors here during the summer, I see," Stanfield began as he looked down upon the guest-book lying upon the desk.

"Yes, this is our busy time," was the reply. "I have no end of trouble with letters, though. Now, here are three for a man who left town yesterday, and I have no idea where to send them."

"You have lived here for some time, I suppose."

"Most of my life. I was born just a few miles away."

"It is certainly a beautiful spot."

"You were never here before?"

"No. But I have heard much about it. I knew a man many years ago who lived somewhere near here. His name was Rivers. Perhaps you have heard of him."

"Oh, John Rivers. Yes, knew him well, poor fellow. I helped to lay him out after he was drowned. It is generally believed that he committed suicide, although it could not be proved."

"What was the trouble?"

"Oh, he got mixed up in some affair in the city, lost what money he had and his position as well. He became depressed when he failed to get another job. He was a hard worker, and honest as the sun. I have the opinion that he was made the scapegoat while others got off free. But you can't make people around here believe that."

"Any of his family living here?" Stanfield asked as indifferently as possible.

"None now. His wife died several years ago, and I hardly know where his two daughters are. One is a school teacher somewhere, and the other is in the States."

"Married?"

"Guess not. It might be better if she were."

"Why?"

"Oh, I can't very well explain. Those two sisters were not one bit alike. Nita, the school teacher, was steady as clock-work, and stood by her mother to the last. But Ruth was flighty, wanted to get away from home and make a name for herself. She's been following the Stage, so I understand, and that doesn't sound good to us here."

"There were no other children?"

"No, just the two girls. And, my! they were handsome, pretty as pictures, and as independent as if they owned the world. People said they were too independent. But I guess they came by it naturally, for their mother was that kind. Why, when she was left with those two girls on her hands she wouldn't take a cent in charity, but went right to work."

"What did she do?"

"Anything that she could find that was honest. For some time she took in washing, and did scrubbing and housecleaning as well. She did most of the scrubbing here until her health failed. Then she did sewing until a short time before her death. She was a remarkable woman and all respected her very highly."

Stanfield hardly heard these last words, for he had turned away his face lest he should betray his emotion. He looked absently through the office window out upon the river. Something, almost like fire, was shooting through his brain, causing the perspiration to stand out in beads upon his forehead. He had been totally unprepared for such news as this. So his only sister had been struggling for years like that—scrubbing and taking in washing until her health had failed! And then sewing until a short time before her death! And while she was doing all this he had been piling up money just for his own selfish interest! He had been traveling and living in luxury while she had been grubbing from day to day in her effort to provide for herself and daughters! But what had the girls been doing? Did the mother work herself to death for them? He hesitated a little ere asking this question. What would the answer be? Would it prove them to be unworthy of any effort on his part?

"And what were the daughters doing all this time?" he at length asked in a low voice.

"Oh, Ruth worked in the city when she got old enough, trying to earn her own living. But when she could do little there she became discouraged and went to the States, as I told you. But Nita stayed at home, and did all that she could, looking after the garden and the chickens, and sewing her fingers off. She stuck right by her mother to the very last."

"And what then?" Stanfield almost whispered the words.

"Sold the house and put herself through Normal School. She had hard scraping, though she managed to do it somehow. I bought the house, thinking it might be a good bargain, but I have it still on my hands."

"How much do you want for it?" Stanfield asked.

"Anything that I can get for it now, although I was asking two thousand."

"I'll take it."

The hotel keeper looked quickly up, startled and amazed.

"You want to buy that house, sir?"

"I do. Have the deed made out as soon as possible, not to that name," motioning to the register, "but to this," and he handed him his business-card. "Please keep my name a secret for a time, at least. Stanfield means nothing to you, nor to any one in Radnor. But for the present I wish to be known only as 'Daniel Doncaster.'"

It was an unheard of thing for Stanfield to act in such an impulsive manner. In every step of his business career he had

thought out most carefully the smallest detail. But now he was about to buy a house on the spur of the moment, with not the slightest idea as to what the building was like. What he would do with the property he did not know. Neither did he care. He only knew that the house in which his sister had died appealed to him most strongly. He could do nothing for her now, but he could keep the house from going to strangers, and he would do what he could for her children. In that way he might be able to make some atonement for his neglect.

"Have you the key to the house?" he asked the hotel keeper. "I wish to have a look at the building. Is it far from here?"

"Only a short distance," was the reply. "I will show you the way as I am not very busy just now."

It took them but ten minutes to pass from the hotel to the end of the narrow sidewalk, and a few minutes more brought them to a little cottage standing a short distance from the street.

"This is the place," the hotel keeper explained, as he unlatched a small gate and pushed it open. "It's been neglected so long that it's in a pretty bad shape."

Stanfield made no reply but walked slowly up to the front door. A few flowers were visible, struggling bravely up through a jungle of weeds. Large shady trees surrounded the building, the only things of any apparent value there. The house was dilapidated, gray and weather-beaten, with many of the clapboards falling off. Panes of glass had been broken out, and the porch was in ruins. The interior was in a worse condition. The wall paper was hanging in strips, and in several places large pieces of plaster had fallen from the ceiling. Stanfield gazed ruefully around.

"So this is where the Rivers lived, eh?" he queried. "My! what a mess. And this is what I am about to buy."

"Five years have made a great difference sir," his guide replied. "It was quite neat at the time of Mrs. Rivers' death. That's the room right in there where she breathed her last," and he pointed to a small bedroom on the right.

A slight sigh escaped Stanfield's lips as he walked to the door and looked in. He found it difficult to control his feelings.

"I wish to stay here a while and look around," he said. "Thank you for showing me the way. You might as well leave me the key so I can lock up."

The hotel keeper left, wondering what could be the stranger's special interest in the old house. Perhaps the man wanted to repair it and use it for a summer dwelling. Anyway, he was glad at the prospect of getting the place off his hands, and making a good profit. He had paid only six hundred dollars for it in the first place when it was in a fairly good condition. He wished that he had asked three thousand instead of two, for he believed he would have received it.

Stanfield waited until he was sure that the hotel keeper had left the building. He then stepped into the little room where his sister had died. It, too, was much dilapidated, and rat holes were to be seen under the baseboards. The only window the room contained looked out upon the back yard. Most of the panes were broken and the glass was lying upon the floor. Stanfield removed his hat and stood with uncovered head in that room which had become so sacred to him. His brain was very active, and the expression in his eyes told something of the depth of his emotion.

"And so this is where Marion died!" he exclaimed. "Oh, why didn't I come sooner!"

The sound of his own voice startled him, so strangely hollow did it seem in that silent house. He glanced around to be sure that no one was listening. Then, under the impulse of his remorse, he sank to his knees upon the dirty floor and buried his face in his hands.

"Forgive me, Marion," he moaned. "I can never forgive myself for my neglect. I am not worthy to be called a man for leaving you to fight your battle alone. How much I might have done to help you."

For several minutes he remained kneeling there, and when he at last rose slowly to his feet, he stood in the middle of the room with bowed head and tears streaming down his cheeks. The thoughts that passed through his mind were known only to himself, but when he at length lifted his head and wiped away his tears there was an expression of determination in his eyes well known to men in the business world. But it was not of money Charles Stanfield was thinking now, nor how he could get the best deal in some big transaction.

Ten minutes later when he left the house and walked slowly along the street in the direction of the hotel he was a man who had seen a vision, and whose soul had been deeply stirred by a sense of higher things.

CHAPTER III

FIGHTING STARS

"An' there are others besides Sisera, let me tell ye that, Sarah."

"For land's sake! what are you talking about, Henry?"

"Old Sisera, of course. Didn't ye hear the parson read about him to-day?"

"Certainly I did, and I am glad that for once you were awake to listen."

"Oh, my sleepin' time hadn't come when the parson read about the stars fightin' ag'inst Sisera. It's the sermon I generally sleep through, fer the parson is mighty long-winded, an' when he gits on to them patriarchs an' prophets I jist can't keep me eyes open. It must be the dust he shakes out of them old fellers that makes me so tarnation sleepy."

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Henry, for talking that way. But what kept you awake to-day?"

"It was that story about Sisera an' them stars, as I have jist told ye."

"They must have made a deep impression upon you. They are old enough to put you to sleep, if that was what you needed."

"I know that, Sarah. But fer all that, I was wide awake. I couldn't help feelin' sorry fer Sisera. The stars fought ag'inst him jist as they have allus fought ag'inst me. I've told ye over an' over ag'in that I was born under an unlucky star. But since the parson read that story to-day I've come to the conclusion that I was born under several unlucky stars, an' they've been fightin' ag'inst me all me life."

"H'm, I don't believe the stars have anything to do with your luck, Henry. It's your own fault, I guess."

Mr. and Mrs. Winters were on their way from church, walking slowly along the road toward their own home, known far and wide as "Red Rose Cottage," from the profusion of roses in the garden. Henry generally complained about the length of the service, and how tired and sick he was at being dragged out to church every Sunday. But on this bright summer afternoon he was in excellent spirits, as he had come across something at last which gave him great comfort. He had always known that luck was against him, and now he could prove it from the Bible. There was Sisera of ancient days against whom the stars fought. He was certain that Sarah could not deny the fact, as she pinned her faith upon Holy Scripture, and never doubted a single word in that sacred Volume.

"Ye believe the Bible, don't ye, Sarah?" he presently asked.

"Yes, every letter of it."

"Well, then, ye can't deny that the stars have a great deal to do with human bein's. Why, it's all there in black an' white. Look what happened to Sisera."

"But he was an old heathen, Henry, an' deserved to have the stars fight against him. He was warring against God's people."

"Say, Sarah, judgin' by yer words, I'm glad ye don't consider me a heathen. It's the first time in years that I've heard ye say anything in me favor."

"No, I wouldn't like to catalogue you as a downright heathen, neither would I care to call you a Christian. I don't just know where to place you."

"Put me with old Sisera, Sarah. I've taken a sneakin' likin' to that ancient feller. He was troubled like I am with the stars fightin' ag'inst him."

"No, I can't do that. You are different from him. He was a king, remember, while you are nothing but Henry Winters, of Willow Creek, with not a cent to your name. The stars don't know anything about you."

"But I have the farm, Sarah, an' everybody fer miles around knows me."

"And how long will you have the farm? Haven't you already arranged to have it mortgaged? People know you, oh, yes, as the laziest man in the whole country."

"Say, what's comin' over ye, Sarah, that yer so cranky? The service must have stirred ye up the wrong way. Surely yer not goin' to jine in with them stars an' fight ag'inst me, too."

"Oh, the service was all right, Henry, and the parson preached a good sermon. But I'm sick and tired of hearing you talk about your luck. You seized upon those few words about the stars fighting against Sisera, but didn't pay the least attention to anything else. You know as well as I do that the stars have nothing at all to do with you. I remember learning when I went to school that the fault is not in our stars but in our own selves if we fail. I can't remember the exact words, but that is the meaning. I have been patient with you for a long time, but now with our farm a disgrace and about to be mortgaged, I can stand it no longer."

"What d'ye intend to do, Sarah?"

"You'll find out to your sorrow unless you quit your nonsense and get to work. But, there, I might as well talk to a stone as to you. Words of mine don't seem to have any effect upon you at all."

When his wife was in such a mood as this Henry knew from experience that silence was the wisest course. He did not go into the house upon reaching home, but sat under the shade of an old apple tree and smoked to his heart's content. Here the blissful minutes slipped by, broken at last by his wife calling him to supper.

"I saw Ada at church to-day, Sarah," he remarked as he began his meal. "Wonder where Lem was. He hasn't been much at church of late. It's strange that she'd let him out of her sight so long."

"Lem's falling away, I'm afraid," Mrs. Winters replied. "His mind is so much taken up with his specimens that he's in danger of losing his hold on higher things. Anyway, Ada always feels safer when she knows where he is and what he's doing!"

"I do pity that poor feller, Sarah. He hasn't the life of a dog when it comes to freedom. Ada's 'most scared to death that he'll git tangled up with some woman."

"It's the money that makes her so watchful, Henry. If either of them marries they will both lose their father's legacy, and that's what frightens her. She's told me so over and over again. It worries her a great deal."

"It was strange fer old man Karsall to leave his money tied up that way, Sarah. I allus knew he was a queer duck, but gave him credit fer some sense until I heard about his will. Jist think of him blockin' his children that way an' preventin' them from gittin' married if they want to. Why, Lem doesn't dare to look at a woman."

"And I guess he doesn't want to, Henry. It's not his nature. He's too much in love with his specimens that he's got stored away in 'The Loft,' as he calls it. Ada showed me in one day when he was away. It was a sight to behold, with the glass cases filled with all sorts of queer things, and the tables covered with curious stones, and funny things fastened to the walls. He won't let Ada touch or handle anything in that room. He shows considerable spunk when it comes to that."

"An' he'll show more spunk when he runs across the right gal, mark my word, Sarah. He's that kind. I know Lem Karsall well enough to believe that when he gits in love he'll go in head an' shoulders, an' nuthin'll be able to stop him."

"I guess his sister will soon settle any love-affair."

"Not a bit of it, Sarah, unless she gits in love herself first, which isn't likely. She's too fond of money, an' she'd sacrifice her heart-feelin's quick enough fer a dollar bill."

"You shouldn't say that, Henry. Ada Karsall is a good living woman, and attends strictly to her household affairs."

"Yes, an' the affairs of everybody else in this place, Sarah. Not that I have anything ag'inst her, remember, fer I like her a hull lot. If I was a young man an' not married, I'd make a dead-set upon her. She is mighty good lookin' an' has nice takin' ways, too."

"It's lucky for her, Henry, that you are married. I know all too well what it means to be tied to a man like you."

"But the gals around here think I'm all right. They like to have me at their parties. They tell me I'm a good sport an' as young as ever."

"They don't know you as well as I do, Henry Winters. If they had to live with you and depend upon you for a living they'd soon change their tune."

Henry said no more just then, permitting his wife as usual to have the final word. He finished his supper, pushed back his chair, and groped in his pocket for his pipe and tobacco. As he carved off several slices from the small portion of the plug that remained, he glanced occasionally at his wife's face. Then he began to sing, as if to himself, the first line of the familiar hymn,

> "'O day of rest an' gladness,
> O day of joy an' light,
> O balm of care an' sadness,
> Most beautiful, most bright.'"

He ceased and looked again at his wife.

"We sang them words at the service this afternoon, Sarah, but somehow they don't seem to fit in here. The Day's all right, as fer as the Lord made it, but there's not much joy an' gladness in this house."

"And whose fault is it, Henry?" his wife sharply asked. "I have tried for years to be a consistent Christian, but with all the trials I have to face, it is almost impossible to be full of joy and gladness."

Mrs. Winters' lips quivered, and tears came into her eyes. These she hurriedly brushed away with the corner of her apron, rose quickly from the table and began to clear away the dishes.

"There, there, old gal, don't take on so hard. I know I'm an ugly cuss to git along with, lazy an' all that. But I swear I'll do better from now on, providin' them stars don't git too fractious. We'll go to town t'morrow night an' take in a picture. There's a rattlin' good one on at the Imp, so I hear. We haven't been there fer months, an' I'm jist dyin' to see them actors doin' their stunts. I've a notion that way meself, an' I believe I'd make a good movie actor."

"I believe you would, Henry. As far as acting is concerned you'd make a grand success. That's all you've been doing since we were married. But acting such as yours doesn't make much of a success on a farm. It's only hard grinding work that will accomplish anything there."

Henry made no reply, but rising from his chair, picked up two pails and sauntered out to the barn, expecting to find the cows in the yard waiting to be milked. But they were nowhere to be seen. He searched the pasture until he came to a gap in the fence through which the animals had strayed. It was dark by the time the cows were found, brought home, and milked.

"That's jist my luck," he growled, as he set the pails down upon the milk-house floor. "To think that them brutes should wander off on the Day of Rest! It's them fightin'-stars ag'in, Sarah."

"Did the stars tear down that fence, Henry?" his wife sternly asked. "Didn't you do it yourself when you were hauling wood last winter, and neglected to fix it properly? For goodness' sake, don't blame the stars for your own laziness."

Henry beat a hasty retreat, and did not again refer to the stars the rest of the evening. But next morning as he went out to draw a pail of water, the bucket broke loose, and fell with a splash down into the deep well. By the time it had been drawn up with a long pole with a spike driven through one end, Henry was in a very bad frame of mind.

"There, now, Sarah," he roared, as he entered the kitchen, "kin ye deny that my fightin'-stars are ag'inst me? The bucket broke, an' I've had a dang hard time gittin' any water fer breakfast."

"And what caused the bucket to break, Henry Winters? You know as well as I do. It's because you fastened it to the pole with a string when it broke before, instead of fixing it right. Haven't I warned you time and time again about it? I have also begged you to get a pump instead of that ramshackle affair. Why, we are the only ones who use an old-fashioned

bucket and sweep. It almost kills me every time I have to draw water. And, besides, it is the laughing-stock of the neighborhood. Don't talk to me any more about your unlucky stars."

"That old well is mighty interestin', though, Sarah. Ye know how people from the city, an' tourists, too, come all the way to have a look at it. Artists have painted it no end of times, while one young feller wrote some verses about it. They all say it's most pictureskew."

"Why don't you include the battered barn, the broken-down woodshed, as well as the house, Henry? They are all certainly 'pictureskew' if that's what you want. When will you ever learn to speak the English language? You make as bad a mess of it as you do of everything else, farming included."

CHAPTER IV

MEDICAL ADVICE

Henry was not anxious to hear any more solid truth, so instead of attending to things around the place, he started for the store to arrange about the mortgage, so he informed his wife. Mrs. Winters sighed as she gazed after him from the kitchen window while she washed the breakfast dishes. She knew that a visit to the store meant the rest of the morning, and that she would not see him again until dinner time. She was more discouraged than she had been at any time in her life. Henry was hopeless, and the future looked very dark. She had schemed and slaved to make an honest living, but with such a careless lazy husband the task was impossible. But something had to be done or else both of them would be in the Poor House. The mortgage was the last straw. Soon their place would be gone, for she well knew that the interest would never be paid, to say nothing of the principal. It would be only a short time when the house would be sold over their heads.

When the dishes were at last washed and put away, she went out of doors and busied herself in her flower garden in front of the house. This was her sole relaxation. When among the roses, poppies, morning-glories, gladioli, pansies, and other smiling flower-friends, she was content, and her care gradually slipped from her mind. As she dug around the roots, or tied up some weak stalks, she hummed softly to herself. She was a woman of considerable ability, and naturally sweet-tempered. But years of grinding toil and discouragement had left their marks upon her face and form. Only when among her flowers was there a renewal of her old-time enthusiasm and almost youthful buoyancy of spirit.

So engrossed was she with her work that she did not notice old Doctor Benson approaching in his light buggy. His cheery voice rang out as usual as he drew up his horse in front of the house.

"Your garden looks fine, Mrs. Winters," he complimented. "It's a pity I can't say the same about the rest of the place."

"It is, Doctor," Mrs. Winters replied as she moved close to the fence. "But Henry will not work, as you are well aware."

"Too bad, too bad, Mrs. Winters. Something will have to be done."

"But what can I do? I'm at my wit's end. I have talked and scolded until I am tired. I don't know what will cure a lazy man."

"H'm," the doctor grunted, while a twinkle shone in his eyes. "Some humorist has said that he didn't know of anything that would absolutely cure a lazy man, but that sometimes a second wife would help a great deal."

"But I'm not going to give Henry a chance to get a second wife," Mrs. Winters stoutly declared. "I don't want to die just yet, and, besides, I wouldn't like to see another woman afflicted as I have been. You will have to suggest something else, Doctor."

"I don't blame you, Mrs. Winters. Live as long as you can. But is there any way whereby we can give Henry a good downright scare? I have known that to be beneficial in several cases. Of what is he most afraid?"

"Work, of course, and next to that, dying. The thought of death sends shivers through his body. He hates to talk about it, and it is next to impossible to get him to attend a funeral."

"Then that's the way to scare him, Mrs. Winters. Don't scold him, but tell him that he isn't looking well, and that he needs a rest or he won't last long. Seize upon the first opportunity. If his appetite is not up to the mark, start in right there."

"I'd never begin, then, Doctor. Henry's appetite never fails. It has not varied since we were married. He is always hungry, and eats everything that is put before him. I am sure I wouldn't be able to make any effect upon him through his appetite."

"Dear me! Now, what can I suggest? Suppose you tackle him on his shortness of breath. If he should come into the house panting for instance, you might——"

"Nonsense, Doctor, I thought you knew Henry well enough to know that he never pants," Mrs. Winters interrupted. "He never does anything hard enough to make him out of breath, so that scheme won't work."

"But he gets excited, doesn't he? I have seen him stirred up to a great pitch of eloquence down at the store during an election. Anyway, wait your opportunity, and give him a good scare. He's contrary by nature, and if the fear of dying doesn't make him buck up just for spite then I lose my guess. Start in as soon as possible, and I will help you all I can. Well, I must be moving. Good day, and good luck to you. Get along, Jerry."

During the rest of the morning Mrs. Winters thought over the doctor's suggestion. She smiled grimly as she prepared dinner and awaited her husband's arrival. When at last he ambled into the kitchen, and braced himself just inside the door for the usual scolding, he was surprised at his wife's quiet manner.

"You are late, Henry," she accosted. "But, wash yourself and sit right down to the table. You will feel stronger after you get something to eat."

Henry's eyes bulged in astonishment, and he sagged back heavily against the wall.

"I don't feel sick, Sarah," he gasped. "What makes ye think I am?"

"From the way you walked up the road, dear. And now you are leaning against the wall. I really believe you are not well. I scolded you yesterday and also this morning, but I am sorry now. I blamed you for letting the farm run down, and neglecting things in general. But I should not have done so, for you are not strong. I am going to take better care of you after this. I was talking to the doctor this morning, and he is certain that you need special treatment. Get washed, now, and sit right down before your dinner gets cold."

For once in his life Henry was at a loss for words. He did as his wife ordered and took his seat at the table. But he did not feel hungry, a most unusual thing for him.

"Can't you eat your pie, Henry?" Mrs. Winters asked.

"Naw, don't feel like eatin' any. I can't make out what's come over me."

"You need a rest, so the doctor said. Lie down a while and I will prepare some medicine for you to take when you get up."

Henry pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"I don't want to lay down," he growled. "I don't feel sick. It's fresh air I want. It's as hot as—as an oven here."

"You must have a fever if you feel so hot, Henry. This kitchen is quite cool."

"It is! Jist look at my forehead; it's streamin' wet."

"That is a bad sign, dear. Oh, I am afraid you are going to be very sick. Fever comes that way, and it should not be neglected. Do let me send for the doctor. I don't want you to die and leave me alone in the world."

This was more than Henry could stand. He seized his hat and made for the door. On the way he glanced at his face in a little mirror hanging over the wash-basin. Mrs. Winters smiled as she removed the dishes from the table.

"I feel very guilty," she said to herself. "I am deceiving Henry and acting a lie, which is the worst kind of a lie. And yet, what am I to do? Anyway, it is started, so I must see it through. If this will not stir him up, then nothing will."

As soon as Henry was out of the house, he sat down upon a block of wood and fumbled in his pocket for his pipe. Once he glanced toward the kitchen window, and seeing that his wife was not watching, he examined his hands, doubled up his left arm and felt the muscles.

"There's nuthin' the matter with me," he muttered. "What's comin' over Sarah, anyway? She thinks I'm sick, does she, an' need a rest an' medicine? But I'll show her a thing or two. Sick! who ever heard of me bein' sick? What stuff has old Doc. Benson been gittin' off? He wants to put me to bed, treat me, an' send in a big bill. Oh, I know his game, a'right. But it won't work on me, not by a long chalk. I'm on to his tricks. He can't fool this old boy."

After he had filled and lighted his pipe, he picked up the bucksaw lying near, and worked away steadily for over an hour. He cut enough wood to last for a week, and split it, too. When he was through he went into the milk-room for a drink of cool buttermilk, as he was hot and thirsty. And while he was there, Mrs. Winters entered.

"I am afraid you are working too hard, Henry," she began. "Won't you take a rest, as the doctor suggested?"

"The doctor kin go to blazes, Sarah," Henry retorted. "Do I look sick? Do I act sick?"

"Well, no, not now, but the doctor——"

"The doctor be hanged! Don't I know how I feel better'n he does? He wants to stuff me with medicine, an' run up a big bill. But I'll show him, an' you, too, that there's nuthin' wrong with Henry Winters. He's as sound as a nut, an' strong as a moose."

Henry flung himself out of the room, and made his way to the barn. Here he found a piece of wire and went at once to the well where he securely fastened the bucket to the pole.

"There, I guess Sarah won't be able to twit me any more about that," he muttered. "I'll tend to the fence next."

With ax over his shoulder, he went to the pasture where he worked for the remainder of the afternoon. He not only repaired the gap through which the cows had escaped on Sunday, but several other defective spots. It was supper time when he again reached home. His face and hands were well covered with balsam and dirt, and he presented a woeful picture as he entered the kitchen.

"Do I look sick now, Sarah?" he asked.

"I never saw you look worse," was the laughing reply. "What in the world have you been doing to get in such a mess?"

"Workin', of course, to prove to you an' the doctor that there's some life left in me yit. I'm goin' to fix up the hull pasture fence, an' it'll take me several days to do it. I'm not goin' to have any more long Sunday tramps after the cows. Git me some hot water, will ye? Ye kin then pour a little paraffine oil on me hands. This balsam's hard to git off."

Mrs. Winters was much encouraged at the outcome of her scheme, and she believed that her husband had turned over a new leaf. She praised him as he sat down to supper, and told him how glad she was that he was feeling so much better. And Henry was quite pleased with himself, and for a change spent the evening at home instead of going over to the store. All the next day he worked hoeing out his weedy potatoes. Toward evening, however, his enthusiasm began to wane, and he longed again for the comfort of the store, and the gossip of his neighbors.

"Guess I've proved to Sarah's satisfaction that there's nuthin' wrong with me," he mused as he leaned upon his hoe. "I've won out, a'right, this time, so I might as well have a little let-up. Jist wait till I see the doctor an' I'll give him a piece of me mind."

At supper he informed his wife that he was tired of farming, and longed for a change.

"There's nuthin' wrong with me, Sarah, as ye kin see with yer own eyes. But farmin' isn't in my line. It's too dang lonesome workin' all by one's self. I need more excitement."

Mrs. Winters realized only too truly what his words meant, and her bright hopes suddenly faded.

"Then, if you make a change, Henry, I shall do the same," she declared. "I was hoping that you were going to do better and settle down to steady work. You can do so if you only have the will, and it will not be necessary for us to mortgage our place. The stars won't help you unless you do your part, and neither will I. If you find it lonesome here, what about me? I never get any change, and as for excitement, I do not know what it means. Anyway, if you will not work, I shall make a change."

"What d'ye intend to do, Sarah?"

"I shall go to the city and get work there. It will be some change, anyway, for I am sick and tired of this humdrum grubbing life. There is nothing going on here from morning until night, and not the least bit of excitement."

"Ye'll take in the movies, I s'pose, Sarah?"

"Most likely I shall once in a while. My sister has been urging me to pay her a visit, and so I can stay with her until I find something to do. If I am to be a slave, I might as well get a little for it, and some amusement at the same time. I haven't had a new dress for years, and never have a cent of my own to spend. I have some pride left, and every woman likes to

be dressed decently. I have made over my old dress so often that I am ashamed of it."

"But what am I to do, Sarah, if ye go away? Who'll look after me?"

"You can look after yourself the best way you can. If you won't work, you can starve. You might as well sleep at the store, for that is where you spend most of your time. Perhaps you can get a bite to eat there now and again."

"An' so ye want excitement, Sarah, eh?" Henry queried. "Well, there isn't much around here, that's a fact. When that hawk came an' took one of our chickens two months ago, it was the last thing of note that I kin remember. Wonder if I could start anything."

"Yes, you can, Henry. You can keep to work and build up our run-down farm. Why, I wouldn't ask for any more excitement than I have had these last two days. But that is all over now, and you are going back to your old ways."

"Yes, that was a bit excitin', Sarah, I admit. But ye see, I had to furnish the hull show, like a dog chasin' its tail. The fun soon got mighty stale. No, ye need others in the game to make it interestin' an' real lively."

"I am glad that you agree with me, Henry," Mrs. Winters replied. "You can get some change over at the store. But what about me? I never go anywhere except to church once on Sunday, and but for the comfort I get there I do not know what I should do."

"An' so ye really intend to go away, Sarah?" Henry anxiously asked.

"I not only intend but am going unless you make a very decided change."

"When, Sarah?"

"That all depends. I shall give you just another week to make up your mind what you are going to do, Henry Winters. We shall leave it at that for the present. It's all up to you now."

CHAPTER V

HENRY'S VIEWS ON EDUCATION

This declaration on his wife's part was the severest shock that Henry had received for years. He was fully aware that what she said she meant, and that she was determined to leave him if he did not mend his ways. He knew now that her apparent concern about his health had been merely a ruse. It made him mad to think how he had been fooled, and he vowed to get even with Doctor Benson for aiding her in the scheme. But Sarah's new plan was different, and he did not dare to treat it lightly. What in the world would he do if she should leave him? The very idea sent cold chills through his body. He had depended upon her so long to keep things together, to cook his meals, look after the house, and also to help around the place, that he could not bear the thought of her going away. And she had given him just one week to make up his mind. He thought over it until late that night, and the next morning instead of going over to the store he worked at his potatoes. The hours dragged slowly by, and it seemed a long time before his wife called him to dinner. As he entered the house, Mrs. Winters handed him a slip of paper.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Your school-tax. Jed Peters left it this morning. It's higher than it was last year, and I do not know where we are going to get the money to pay it."

"Ten dollars!" Henry exclaimed, as his eyes rested upon the ominous figures. "Ten dollars fer the up-keep of that school, an' we haven't a child to send, an' never did. It's outrageous, an' I won't pay it."

"The place will have to, then, Henry," his wife reminded. "That bill's got to be paid, or they will sell the farm for the amount."

"Let 'em try to sell it!" Henry savagely roared. "I'd jist like 'em to try it."

"Oh, it's no use making a fuss about it, Henry. That won't do one bit of good, and you know it. We shall have to sell one of our cows unless something else turns up to save us."

Henry was too angry for more words. He thrust the offending paper into his pocket, and ate his dinner in silence. When he was through, he informed his wife that he was going out to the pasture to finish the work on the fence.

"There are only a few more rods to be mended," he explained, "so I might as well git that done now."

Henry's real object was to get away from the potato patch. He could not loaf very well there. But out of sight of the house he could rest whenever he felt like it, and that was quite often. It was necessary for him to keep up the pretense of working, even though he did not accomplish much. And out there he could nurse his wrath over that school-tax. The line fence which Henry was repairing separated his farm from the Karsalls'. The latter was cleared and well cultivated, while his was nothing but pasture. Lemuel had always been very patient with his careless neighbor, and had more than his share of the fence in good condition. This Henry knew, and at times he felt ashamed of himself for his neglect and the trouble he had given the Karsalls. But on this hot afternoon his mind dwelt entirely upon that school-bill. He would not pay it, so he declared aloud, and uttered some most uncomplimentary words about those who were responsible for the burden. He swung his ax with unusual energy, at the same time declaring that he would see who was running the district.

"They're a hull bunch of idiots," he growled. "It's a downright imposition, an' I won't stand it, by jingo! I'll show 'em a thing or two."

"What's the matter, Henry?" a cheery voice asked. "You seem to be in a fighting-mood to-day."

Henry dropped his ax to the ground, and turned quickly around.

"Oh, it's you, Lem, is it? Well, ye needn't scare a feller out of his wits by comin' up so sly an' quiet like a cat after a mouse."

"Why, I made quite a noise, Henry," was the smiling reply. "I tried to acquaint you of my presence, but you outdid me by the racket you were making. From your words I judge that you are getting ready to run for a councillor at the next

election."

"H'm, that wouldn't jar me one bit, Lem. It's this that's stirred me up," and he handed forth the tax-bill which he had jerked from his pocket. "That thing says I'm taxed ten dollars fer the school in this deestrict. Jist think of that!"

"That shouldn't worry you, Henry. A public-spirited man such as you are should be only too pleased to pay. It helps along the good of the cause. Education is a most worthy thing."

"But look at what it costs, young man. Ten dollars. Gee whitaker! An' I recollect when I didn't have to pay a quarter of that. Ah, them was the good old days. Why, we could git a teacher then fer almost nuthin'. We paid her sixty dollars a term, an' sometimes less. Now we have to fork out sixty dollars a month. That's what riles me."

"But surely any reasonable man can't object to that, Henry. A teacher must have a living wage. 'The laborer is worthy of his hire,' so the Bible says."

"Oh, the Bible doesn't say anything about women. It only means men. No, the Lord never intended women to have so much money; it makes 'em too independent."

"In what way?"

"Well, ye see, when we paid a school marm jist sixty dollars a term, she was quite willin' to look at the young fellers in this deestrict. She was more'n ready to grab the fust chap who'd ask her to marry him. There was Nancy Hoppins, Judy Perkins, an' Martha Sloan, fer instance, an' others I could mention, who taught school here. Why, they was more'n glad to git married. It was their only hope an' salvation in them good old days. But now, land sakes! the school marm earns more'n the young fellers 'emselves, an' it makes 'em mighty independent. No, 'taint right. The Lord never meant young women to be so independent an' sot up."

"You are unreasonable, Henry," Lemuel remonstrated. "I don't agree with you."

"No one axed ye, young man. I'm a hold-backer, that's what I am, an' that's what this deestrict needs more'n anything else. I'm goin' to hold back ag'inst them new-fangled notions that are comin' in."

"But surely you don't object to that new school house. The old one was a ramshackle affair, and the roof leaked like a sieve."

"I object when a thing like this is given me," and Henry tapped the tax-bill with his forefinger. "Wouldn't ten dollars make any man object?"

"But that old building wasn't fit for a school house, Henry. It was a disgrace to this community."

"H'm, it was good enough fer me when I was a kid. I got my edication there, an' who says I ain't got larnin'?"

"But it wasn't safe for the teachers and scholars to sit in such a building."

"It made 'em tough, though. People are gittin' too tender now."

"It killed one teacher, didn't it? She caught a severe cold there, which resulted in her death."

"Oh, she didn't know how to look after the fire. She couldn't build a decent one to save her soul."

"What! did the teachers then have to light the fires?"

"Yes, most of the time. We hired a young feller fer a few cents to do the work, but he was ginerally late, so the teacher had to do it herself."

"And the people were willing for her to do it, Henry?"

"Oh, they didn't mind. It kept down expenses."

"Sixty dollars a term!" Lemuel softly remarked. "What generosity!"

"Yes, all that. An' it was real edication we got, too, an' none of yer new-fangled notions."

"What new-fangled notions, Henry?"

"Oh, lots of 'em; manners, fer instance. What has a school to do with manners, I'd like to know?"

"Very useful, I should say."

"H'm, ye think so, do ye? Look here, we had one school marm who was much sot on teachin' manners. An' what came of it? Ax Joe Steffins, an' he'll give ye an earful, a'right. He'll tell ye how his kids undertook to larn him manners. They said he shouldn't eat with his knife, shouldn't drink out of his sasser, he shouldn't say 'them merlasses,' 'I seen,' 'have went,' an' sich stuff. Joe had a heart to heart talk with that teacher, that's what he had. Now, what right has any young snip of a gal to come here an' upset old established customs? What's a knife fer, anyway, if ye can't eat with it? An' what's the use of a sasser if ye can't drink out of it when yer tea's bilin' hot? An' isn't it right to say 'them merlasses'? What yould ye put before the word, anyway, if ye don't put 'them'? Doesn't the word end with an 's,' like measles? We say 'them measles,' so why shouldn't we say 'them merlasses'? It sounds a'right to me, an' Joe says the same thing. He should know, fer he's got a dictionary in his house. He bought it at an auction once. Yes, any man with sich a book as that should know what's what."

Henry sighed and gazed thoughtfully at his tax-bill, while Lemuel gazed thoughtfully at Henry.

"Ten dollars!" he murmured. "Ten dollars fer sich things as manners! What's the world comin' to, anyway? But that isn't all, young man."

"No? Something worse?"

"Ye kin jedge fer yerself when I tell ye. Why, the school marm we've got now is teachin' hijinne."

"What in the world is that, Henry?"

"Why, don't ye know what hijinne is? It's a new-fangled word fer, oh, ye know, fer keepin' yer teeth clean, yer face an' hands washed, an' sich like."

"Health, is that it, Henry?"

"Well, I s'pose 'tis, but they call it 'hijinne' now."

"Why should you object to that?"

"But what has it to do with edication, I'd like to know? I never used a tooth-brush in me life, an' Joe Spiffins said he never heard of sich a thing till his kids began to talk about it. But what d'ye s'pose they've found out now?"

"I couldn't guess, Henry."

"Ho, ho, I bet ye couldn't. It's tonsils, that what it is, something way down the throat which must be cut out. A doctor visited the school last spring, looked down the throats of all the kids, an' found that more'n half of 'em have tonsils. Whoever heard of sich things before? If the Lord gave us tonsils, who has any right to cut 'em out? But that's what comes from them new-fangled notions. Me an' Sarah never had tonsils. Oh, no, things ain't what they used to be by a long chalk. Sixty dollars a month! New school house, manners, tooth-brushes, tonsils, big tax-bills, an' women runnin' things. Look here, young man, us men in this deestrict must raise up in our might an' rath an' make the women know an' keep their places. There must be no more sich nonsense. Men were made to rule an' to be lords of creation. I'm goin' to start right in the fust time I meet that teacher, an' tell her in mighty plain language what I think about her new-fangled notions.

"You won't have long to wait, Henry, for here she is now," Lemuel announced.

A startled expression came into Henry's eyes as he turned them in the direction of the teacher, who was coming toward them, accompanied by several children. His hands clutched hard upon his ax-handle, and he was about to beat a hasty retreat when Lemuel stopped him.

"You've got to face her, Henry," he laughingly declared, "so you might as well get through with it now."

"But I'm not ready, Lem," Henry gasped. "This is so sudden that me underpinnin's are clean knocked out. I must go."

"Don't be a coward, man. Miss Rivers won't hurt you. I'm sure she'll answer any of your questions about education, such as manners, health, and tonsils."

There was no time for further conversation, for the teacher was but a short distance away. Henry thrust the tax-bill into his pocket, stood on the defensive, and waited somewhat anxiously for the attack. It came in a most unexpected manner from Miss Rivers.

"Please stand just as you are, Mr. Winters," she ordered. "I want to get your picture. Your attitude is perfect."

Henry gasped and the perspiration poured down his forehead as he saw her seat herself upon a little knoll, place an open notebook upon her knee and start to work. He was too much dumbfounded to say a word, but simply stared at the young woman before him.

"You had better keep your face straight, Henry," Lemuel suggested, greatly amused. "Look a little more pleasant, please, but don't move."

Henry was never in such a fix in his whole life. He wanted to swear and throw his ax at that confounded self-possessed creature before him. He did neither, however, but stood like a statue among the bushes. Gradually his anger cooled, and a feeling of admiration stole into his heart. Her graceful position, the beauty of her animated face, and an indefinable charm that surrounded her, greatly impressed him. And the thought that she wished to have his picture had an additional effect. He could understand her sketching the trees, hills and flowers, but to want to sketch an old rough bronzed and battered farmer was beyond his comprehension. Nevertheless, it flattered his vanity, and he wondered what Sarah would say if she knew about it. Would she be jealous? He wished she would, for then she might not be so anxious to go away and leave him alone. This new idea came as an illuminating ray of light in a night of darkness. He had been vainly groping for some plan whereby he might cause his wife to change her mind about leaving him. Steady work, he knew, would solve the problem, but he needed something less strenuous and more exciting. And now he had it. This young audacious and beautiful teacher might prove his salvation. He was delighted, and so taken up was he with his plan that he hardly noticed that Miss Rivers had finished her sketch and was coming toward him.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Winters," she was saying. "I was anxious to get a picture of you among the trees, and when it is completed I shall show it to you."

"Yer very welcome, Miss," Henry replied. "It's too bad, though, ye couldn't find a better subject. Now, here's Lem, fer instance, he's young an' good-lookin', an' would make a much finer picter."

"Oh, I can get one of him any day," and Miss Rivers cast a quick glance at the young man as she spoke. "But you are harder to catch."

"Not if ye use the right kind of bait, Miss. An old critter sich as me kin be caught any time by a purty smilin' face an' charmin' ways. An' you've got plenty of sich bait, a' right."

"What about your school-tax, Henry?" Lemuel mischievously asked. "You have evidently forgotten all about that."

"I have, Lem, an' I don't want ye to mention it ag'in. I'll take care of that."

"She came; he saw; she conquered," Lemuel quietly remarked.

"What's that yer sayin', young man?"

"Oh, nothing of importance. I was just misquoting an old saying for my own pleasure. It's a habit of mine."

"Queer pleasure, I should say. But, then, you allus did odd things, so I s'pose yer hardly responsible."

"I hope you men are not going to quarrel," Miss Rivers intervened. "It would be a pity to spoil our pleasant time here."

"Oh, no, me an' Lem never quarrel," Henry assured. "We understand each other, a'right. But, there, I must git on with me work an' finish this fence. Time's mighty valuable these days with so much to do."

"I am sorry, then, that I interfered with your work, Mr. Winters," the teacher apologized. "I was about to ask you a favor, but as you are so busy I hardly like to."

"What is it, Miss? I'm never too busy to listen to any reasonable request."

"I was going to ask you to go to the Falls with us. I have never been there, so would like to go to-morrow and take the children with me. Where are they, anyway?" she asked, while an expression of fear came into her eyes. "I have forgotten all about them."

"They're jist over in that strawberry patch, Miss, so they're a'right. But what d'ye want me to go along with ye t'morrow fer? Won't Lem do? He'll go, of course."

"I suppose so, but I want to make a sketch of you sitting below the Falls fishing. It should make a splendid picture. And perhaps Mrs. Winters might like to come, too. We are going to have a regular picnic."

"I don't think Sarah could stand the trip, Miss," Henry explained. "She's troubled with corns an' finds it hard to walk. Ye'd better take Ada along, Lem. She kin stand the tramp, a'right."

"She wouldn't care to go," Lemuel quietly replied. "It would be no use to ask her."

Henry's eyes twinkled with amusement, for he was well aware that Ada would know nothing about the proposed picnic. He saw how matters stood, so decided to help all he could.

"I'll go with ye, Miss," he declared. "Where'll we meet? At yer house, Lem?"

"No, no. This is a good place. How will ten o'clock in the morning do?"

"It'll suit me a'right, I guess."

"And it won't take too much of your valuable time, Mr. Winters?" Miss Rivers asked.

"Not at all. It'll be time well spent in sich pleasant company."

"Oh, thank you so much. But I must go now and look after those children. Good-bye until to-morrow."

As she walked across the field, Lemuel took his place by her side. Henry stood and watched them for a few minutes.

"It's gittin' mighty serious, by the look of things," he mused. "It's the fust time I've ever known Lem to take a shine to any woman. My! he'll have a hard row to hoe when Ada hears of it. Poor feller! I pity him, so must help him all I kin. An' in helpin' him I may be able to block Sarah in her notion of goin' away. Things are beginnin' to git real excitin'. Mebbe the stars are goin' to fight fer me after all."

CHAPTER VI

THE PICNIC

All that evening Henry was very active about the place, and after he had finished the chores he worked for a while at the potatoes. Mrs. Winters was surprised and also pleased. She concluded that this was the result of her announcement about leaving home. Perhaps her husband had decided to turn over a new leaf, after all.

Henry was doing much thinking, and the excitement that he saw ahead filled his soul with satisfaction. He knew that it would not take long to excite Sarah's curiosity, and then when her jealousy had become aroused, his object would be attained. But he had to be careful and be able to prove, when the time came, that he was merely assisting Lem in his love-affair. Ada would soon find out what was taking place, he was certain, and then she would make her brother's life most miserable. She would also call upon Sarah for assistance, and there was no knowing what those two women might do when once started upon a rampage, one to save her brother, and the other her husband, from the wiles of a beautiful school teacher.

The next morning Henry asked his wife to put him up a lunch, as he did not expect to come home for dinner.

"It's a long walk from the back pasture," he told her, "an' I want to stick to the job until it is finished."

"Why, I thought you were nearly through, and had only a little more of the fence to do," his wife replied.

"I thought so, too, Sarah, but there were spots I over-looked. I'm goin' to do it well while I'm at it. Hayin' will soon be on now, so I don't want to be chasin' cows all over creation then."

Thinking that her husband meant every word he said, Mrs. Winters prepared his dinner and packed it in a small basket.

"You will need something to drink, Henry, so I have put in a bottle of milk. Keep it in a cool place. You will miss your tea."

"Oh, I don't mind fer one meal, Sarah. There's a good spring of water on the side of the hill, so I'll put the bottle in that to keep it cool."

Henry's conscience gave him an uneasy twinge as he left the house, shouldered his ax and made his way across the clearing to the pasture beyond. He was glad when the trees and bushes hid him from his wife's view.

"I feel mean at deceivin' Sarah this way," he mused aloud. "But what am I to do when she kicks over the traces? She sprung that trick on me about my bein' sick, so I might as well have my turn now. I've got to do something besides work to keep her from leavin' me, an' help Lem at the same time."

When at last he reached the appointed place of meeting, any qualms of conscience which had been troubling him vanished at the sight which met his eyes. Lemuel and Miss Rivers were already there, and with them five children, three girls and two boys, ranging from eight to ten years of age. They were all seated upon the grass, listening to a story Lemuel was telling. He had just finished as Henry arrived.

"Well, well!" the latter exclaimed. "You folks here ahead of me. I thought ye said ten o'clock, an' it's only half past nine."

"It is always good to be ahead of time, especially on such a beautiful morning as this," the teacher smilingly replied. "It is so nice in the shade of these trees. Mr. Karsall has been entertaining us with such a delightful story."

"H'm, I guess he's practising Miss."

"What for, Mr. Winters?"

"Ask Lem, an' mebbe he'll tell ye."

The young man, however, was not inclined to be questioned. He rose quickly to his feet, and picked up the lunch basket.

"Suppose we move on," he suggested, "and get to the Falls before the sun is too hot. It's going to be a scorching day."

The children were eager to be off, and ran excitedly forward, leading the teacher and contending with one another for the privilege of holding her hands. The two men brought up in the rear, walking side by side. Lemuel's eyes were constantly fixed upon the pleasant scene ahead, and unconsciously he sighed.

"Tired, Lem?" Henry asked.

"Not a bit. What makes you think I am?"

"By the way ye jist sighed."

"I was merely thinking; that's all."

"About the stories ye'll have to tell, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, ye know as well as I do. Does Ada know yer on this trip t'day?"

"Certainly not. But what difference does that make?"

"A great deal, it seems to me. Ye won't be able to deceive her long, fer she'll soon catch on to yer game. I'm in the same fix meself, Lem, so I kin sympathize with ye."

"You are!"

"Yep, that's jist it. Sarah's vowed to leave me if I don't git to work. An' she'll do it, too, unless I kin knock the underpinin's out of her plan. She wants me to work harder than is good fer me. But that doesn't appeal to me one bit, so I've sneaked off here t'day while she thinks I'm fixin' up the fence. How did you git away, Lem?"

The young man laughed in spite of himself, causing Miss Rivers to look back.

"We're comin', Miss," Henry quickly called out. "We'll soon ketch up to ye, so don't worry." He then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Be careful, Lem, and don't let the teacher know what villains we are. But, tell me, how in time did you git away from Ada?"

"The same as you did, Henry. She put up my dinner, thinking that I am to work all day in the back field."

"This is much nicer, eh, Lem?"

"It certainly is. Stolen pleasure is always the sweetest."

"But why should we consider it that, Lem?"

"Because you and I are cowards, Henry."

"Cowards!" Henry roared, and the sound of his voice caused both the teacher and the children to stop and turn around.

"I thought you men were quarreling," Miss Rivers declared as the men drew near.

"Naw, me an' Lem never quarrel," Henry replied. "We were jist havin' a little argyment, that was all. We understand each other, a'right."

They continued on their way and by the time they reached the Falls the men had forgotten all about their home worries. The glory of the day, the cool shaded path through the woods, and the laughter of the children banished all cares from their minds. Then came the beautiful water-fall, leaping over the high rocks, and splashing softly and musically into the foamy current below. On each side streams of water poured forth from between huge boulders, and then parting, flowed like gleaming threads of silver down over the surface of the great smooth stones. The scene was entrancing, and Miss Rivers' eyes took in every detail.

"What a picture!" she exclaimed. "And I must have you right in the foreground, Mr. Winters. You should be fishing."

"But I didn't bring me fishin'-outfit, Miss," Henry confessed. "I fergot all about it."

"I knew you would, so I brought mine along," Lemuel laughingly replied. "I shall cut a good rod and fit you out, all right."

"But the bait, Lem?"

"I have that, too, so don't worry. All you have to do is to sit where Miss Rivers puts you and do as she orders."

Henry found his task most pleasant when seated upon a big rock below the falls under the shadowing branches of a large tree, with the tumbling water behind him. He did exactly as he was told, and although he caught no fish, he did not mind. Life was sweet to him just then, and he wondered what Sarah would say should she happen along. He smiled grimly as he thought of the fence he was supposed to be mending. This was much better than the burning heat of the pasture. Lemuel was amusing the children along the stream a little farther down, and their shouts of laughter mingled with the noise of falling water. Miss Rivers sat a short distance away, her interest centered upon her work. Henry glanced at her from time to time, and he thought that he had never beheld a more beautiful woman in all his life. It was no wonder that Lem was about daft over her. If he were only young again, he, too, would certainly make a strong bid for her affection.

When at last the sketch was finished, luncheon was served, and there in a cool mossy spot upon the bank they all gathered. What a happy time they had, and Henry wished that he could always live in such a manner with no farm work to do, and with no one nagging at him all the time.

During the afternoon Henry played with the children on the edge of the stream. He made wonderful little boats for them which they sailed in shallow pools. When tired of this, they built stone houses and played in the sand and gravel that had been thrown up in heaps on bars along the shore. Miss Rivers and Lemuel were thus left much together, and Henry chuckled more than once as he watched them while they collected specimens of flowers or curious stones, and then seated themselves upon the bank to examine their treasures.

"It was more than to git my picter at the Falls that they wanted me along," Henry mused. "But I'm mighty glad I'm here, fer if I kin help them two young people with their love-affair it'll be a good work. Sarah an' Ada wouldn't think so, though, an' they'd call me an old fool, as mebbe I am. But I'd a durn sight rather be an old fool an' happy, than be mighty smart an' unhappy."

The afternoon sped all too quickly, and when it was time to start for home the children were loth to leave. They did not seem to be one bit tired and scampered lively back through the woods. Henry walked behind and watched with interest the merry group in front of him, Lemuel and Miss Rivers walking side by side, and the little ones racing on ahead.

After a tramp of over half an hour they came close to Lemuel's back field, and ere they emerged from the woods they could see the calm river far off in the distance. Then the open fields on the right came to view, sloping gently down to the house and the barn beyond. And as Henry looked in that direction he stopped dead in his tracks, for he had caught sight of two women picking berries, and he recognized them at once. He spoke quickly to Lemuel, and as the latter turned back to where he was standing, Henry pointed to the women.

"Sarah's there with Ada," he whispered. "I don't want to meet her jist now, so I'm goin' to leave ye right here an' cut down through me own pasture. You'll have to face the music, Lem."

"I'm afraid so," the young man ruefully replied, "But it might as well be now as at any other time. It's got to come, anyway."

"I know it, Lem, an' I sympathize with ye. But don't tell Sarah that I was at the picnic to-day."

"I won't give you away, Henry. She'll never hear it from me."

"That's good, Lem, an' I'll help ye all I kin, remember."

In another minute Henry was making his way through the bushes to where he had left his ax that morning. Here he stopped, and, hidden from view, he watched all that was taking place in the field beyond. He saw the berry pickers standing very erect looking intently upon the picnickers as they wended their way slowly along on the other side of the field down toward the house. He smiled grimly as he imagined what his wife and Ada were saying, and what was in store for Lem when his sister returned home.

"My, I'm mighty glad Sarah didn't see me," he muttered. "But she's bound to find out somehow, fer I've never been able to keep anything from her yit. She's a wonderful woman, an' no mistake. But she's got to have some suspicion before the week's up so she won't leave me. Now, how in time kin I manage it!"

He made his way slowly homeward, and when he reached the house he lighted the fire in the kitchen stove. By the time Mrs. Winters arrived the water was boiling in the kettle. She carried a bowl full of wild strawberries in her hand which she placed upon the table. When she had laid aside her wide-rimmed straw hat, she turned toward Henry who was fumbling in the wood-box for another stick to put on the fire.

"My! this has been a hot day," she declared. "It must have been terrible for you over there in the pasture."

"It was purty hot, Sarah. But, then, I'm used to it by this time."

"Did you get all the fence mended?"

"Yes, all done. It's as good as new now. Say, I'm as hungry as a bear, an' them berries look mighty temptin'. Where did ye git 'em?"

"I was out with Ada this afternoon. Poor girl, she is much worried."

"What's the matter with her now, Sarah?"

"It's about Lem. That school teacher has set her cap for him, and Ada's sure he's head over heels in love with her."

"That's nuthin' to worry about, Sarah. Lem's of age an' should know his own mind by this time."

"But it's the money question, Henry. If Lem marries, then he and Ada will get no more of their father's money. That's one of the things she's troubled about."

"What's the other?"

"The way Lem deceived her to-day. She put his dinner up for him this morning, thinking that he was going to work all day in his back field. But instead, he went off to the Falls with the teacher and some young children. Just think of that! How could he deceive his only sister that way?"

"Ye don't tell, Sarah! Well, I can't blame Lem. He's young an' the teacher's mighty handsome, so what kin ye expect? Ada does nuthin' but yang at him all the time about money, an' how he must never git married. She pounces on him like a hawk upon a chicken if he looks at a gal. I'm glad he's showed some spunk at last."

"But think of what's at stake, Henry. They'll lose all their money. And wasn't it mean for him to deceive her the way he did to-day?"

"Yes, that was mean, Sarah. But let's have some supper now. I'm about starved."

CHAPTER VII

THE "TWINS"

Supper was ready, and Ada Karsall had called her brother three times. When at last he did appear, he apologized for his tardiness.

"But I called you three times, Lemuel," his sister reminded.

"Is that so? Why, I heard you only once. But I was so taken up with several new specimens that I was completely lost. They are valuable, and we found them right at the Falls. They will prove a valuable addition to my collection of stones. I must go there again just as soon as I get time."

"And Miss Rivers will go, too, I suppose? She seems to be interested in such stupid things."

"Very much so, Ada. It was she who discovered a number of the finest. Miss Rivers is a keen student and knows a great deal about rocks, flowers, trees, and birds. She also paints and draws wonderfully well."

"She must certainly be a marvel, Lemuel. Have you just found out her remarkable attainments?"

"Oh, no. I have known for some time that she is interested in such things, but only lately have I learned how much she really knows. It was a great pleasure to talk with her to-day, and I enjoyed myself thoroughly."

"Did you intend to go to the Falls when you left home this morning, Lemuel?"

"I did."

"And you deceived me by saying that you were going to work in the back field. Why was that?"

Lemuel laid down the knife with which he had been buttering a piece of bread, and looked intently at his sister.

"I acknowledge that I told you a lie, Ada," he confessed. "But I shall never do such a thing again."

"H'm, do you think I shall ever believe you after this? I did give you credit for some sense, but I have now come to the conclusion that you have lost what little you had."

"Perhaps you are right, Ada. I may not have had much sense in the past, but I have recently found some of a different nature."

"What do you mean?"

"In the way I have acted, especially this morning when I deceived you. But I shall never do so again, as I told you. I am old enough to know my own mind, so when I want to go to the Falls, or anywhere else for that matter, I shall not lie about it."

Ada looked at her brother in astonishment. So long had she ruled him, that she could only consider his words as signs of open rebellion. Never before had he spoken in such a manner. Her face flushed, and the expression in her eyes told of her anger. Her authority over Lemuel was now at an end, and it was due to the influence of the school teacher. She had a suspicion of this before, but believed that she had her brother so much under her control that he would hardly dare to speak to Miss Rivers, let alone go to the Falls with her. It was a terrible dilemma in which she was placed.

Ada was two years older than her brother, and they had lived together on the farm since their father's death. They were commonly known as "the twins," being so much alike in manner. Some referred to them as "Lem an' Ada," and this at last was changed to "lemonade" by a parish wit. So "the lemonade twins" was at last generally used when reference was made to them. Ada was a good housekeeper, and looked after her brother's interest with a watchful eye. If the thought of marriage ever entered her mind, she never mentioned it. She was good-looking, bright, capable and intelligent. Several young men were more than anxious to win her, especially Joe Rundell. People said she would never marry owing to the peculiar clause in her father's will. She had no fear about herself, but the idea that Lemuel might some day fall in love with a girl filled her soul with a nameless dread. Hitherto he had given her no cause for worry, but had appeared

perfectly satisfied with his manner of living. But now what she had feared had come to pass, for she was certain that he was in love with the teacher.

Lemuel went on with his supper, and paid no heed to his sister. If he noticed her agitation he gave no sign, so deeply engrossed was he with his own thoughts. This added to Ada's annoyance. She longed to do something desperate, to shake him in order to arouse him from his indifference. When supper was over, she rose from the table and began to clear away the dishes. Lemuel did not leave his seat, but sat gazing steadily before him, lost in thought. This was more than Ada could stand.

"Miss Rivers must have affected your mind to-day," she began. "Or is that you are so lifted up to heaven that you cannot come down to earth?"

"It is neither," Lemuel laughingly replied. "I was thinking about those specimens and longing to have an expert's opinion as to their value."

"Doesn't the teacher know, Lemuel? She's such a wonder in your eyes that she should be able to tell you all about them."

"We both think the same about them, Ada. But we may be wrong."

"I don't care how wrong you are about those pieces of old stone. I wouldn't worry one bit if you never found out. But what does worry me is the way you and that teacher are acting."

"Why, for pity's sake, what have we been doing?"

"Acting like two fools. You know as well as I do what will be the outcome of all this. That girl will get you so entrapped that you'll have to marry her, and then what's to become of us? Have you thought of that?"

"I haven't bothered my head one bit about it."

"I thought so. But you should think of me even if you don't think about yourself. Isn't it stated in father's will that if either of us get married the money will cease?"

"I know that, all right, Ada. You have drilled it into my head ever since father died. I know it by heart."

"And what good has my teaching been when you begin now to flirt with a designing girl?"

"That's enough, Ada. I don't want you to use the word 'flirt' again. Miss Rivers is not that kind of a girl. And why do you call her 'designing'?"

"Because she knows you have money, and is anxious to marry you for that very reason."

"I don't believe she knows anything about it. And nine hundred dollars, which is my share, is not such an alluring sum, after all."

"But it is for a poor school teacher. It must seem a fortune to her."

"You are a good woman, Ada, but you look at things in a wrong light," Lemuel quietly replied. "Miss Rivers is no more to me than a friend interested in my special studies. There is nothing, I assure you, that should cause you any worry."

"I don't know about that. Judging from what has taken place to-day I have much reason to worry. You have begun the road all lovers travel, meeting each other through deception, and both interested in the same things. I see the end of my money."

"You think more of money, Ada, than of anything else."

"And why shouldn't I when I have nothing else upon which to depend? If that goes, I shall be destitute. Father never taught me to do anything but housework, and I suppose I can fall back upon that if necessary. He gave you an education, but he never thought about me."

"Yes, he sent me to college, Ada, if that is what you mean by an education. But what good has it done me in the way of earning a living? I learned nothing of any practical value."

"It spoiled you, that's what it did."

"I wouldn't like to say that. Although I studied many things which are of no practical use to me now, yet they helped to develop my mind, and for that I am thankful."

"It taught you to waste your time with a whole lot of nonsense. Look at the trash you have gathered in The Loft. And think how much it cost you to build that place. You might have used the money to a far better advantage."

"Money is not everything, remember, Ada. I get a great deal of pleasure out of my study of Nature. Men of great wealth are not always happy."

"But they have made a good living, Lemuel, and have everything they need."

"So do we, Ada. We have what we need, although we may not have all we want. We never will, I suppose, in this life. We have our comfortable home, and you look well after the house as I do the farm. We are not in debt, and we are able to pay for everything we buy, and put away a little in the bank each year."

"But how long will we be able to do so if you marry that teacher? If you bring her here, where am I to go? To the Poor House, for I won't have a cent to my name."

"I don't know what father was thinking about to put that strange clause in his will," Lemuel replied. "He was such a sensible man in other ways. But why he should not wish us to marry is more than I can understand."

"And the Trust Company has full charge of the money. We have not a word to say about it, and don't even know how much father was worth. He left everything for the Company to manage."

"That is so, Ada. We were not of age when he died, and did not trouble our heads about the will. We have always been satisfied to get our money twice a year."

"But don't you think it is time we should know more? We are over age now, so I think we should have a complete knowledge about father's business and how much he was really worth."

"We have talked about this before, Ada, and have often wondered what we could do about it."

"Have you ever tried?"

"No, I have not. I have often intended to go to the Trust Company when in the city to make some inquiries, but so far I have put it off."

"Well, I think that would pay you better than spending so much of your time upon useless stones, flowers, roots, and such things. If we don't look after our own interests no one else will."

"Suppose you, go, Ada," Lemuel suggested. "You can talk much better than I can. What a fine lawyer you would make. You have the spunk, all right."

"If I didn't have more than some men I know, I'd be ashamed of myself," Ada retorted.

Lemuel made no reply, but rising from the table, left the room. His sister continued her dish-washing and tidied up the kitchen. She was annoyed at her brother, but more so at Miss Rivers, whom she blamed for all the trouble. Until she came to the place, life had gone along very smoothly. But now all was changed. Lemuel was slipping from her grasp, and she would lose her father's money. What could she do to check her brother and bring him to his senses? She needed advice, and her thoughts naturally turned to Mrs. Winters. She was a woman to be trusted with her secret, and she would sympathize with her, at any rate, even though she might not be able to assist her in solving the problem. Yes, she would go to her at once.

CHAPTER VIII

FIRST AID

When Lemuel left the kitchen he went at once up to The Loft where he kept his specimens. He wished to be alone that he might think. And certainly it was a desirable place for study and meditation. It had formerly been a large store-room over the woodhouse, but Lemuel had cleared out all the rubbish and converted it into a suitable abode for his work. There were small windows under the eaves on the east and west sides, while on the south a large dormer-window had been placed which extended down two feet from the floor. This was Lemuel's favorite corner, and as he sat near the table he could obtain a splendid view of the main road, of undulating meadows, groves of trees, and a long stretch of the noble river beyond. Here he would sometimes pause in his work, gaze through the window, and dream great dreams, which he never imparted to others, not even to his sister.

His life, however, was not spent in dreaming, for the fine condition of his small farm, and the specimens he had collected were sufficient proofs of his activity. The latter were to be seen everywhere in The Loft. On the walls and shelves were samples of native woods, plants, pressed ferns and flowers in abundance. On tables were to be found glass-covered cases filled with insects, all neatly arranged and classified, from the most common to the rarest. Here also were specimens of rocks gathered from fields, brooks, and quarries for miles around. Eggs and nests of wild birds had their allotted places, and the corners of the room were filled with odds and ends of curiosities of nature he had found in his various rambles.

On shelves near the large window he kept his favorite books, and these worn and thumb-marked volumes told of constant use. A pile of note-books adorned the table, all numbered in alphabetical order. In these were recorded the lists of his treasures, together with any interesting facts he had discovered. No eyes but his own had ever read the contents, for no one in the parish was interested in such things, and there was none of his neighbors to whom he could reveal the deep things of the heart. Into these notes he had put the best that was in him, writing and re-writing them, at times giving his imagination free play, and breathing into them the spirit of romance that animated his own soul. Sometimes he would embody into his work lines from the poets, thus giving strength and beauty to the whole. Travelers passing along the road late at night would frequently see the light shining from The Loft, and wonder what Lem Karsall could be doing up there at such an hour. They often discussed the matter with one another, and although they acknowledged that he was a good farmer, yet they believed there was a "queer streak" in his head.

Lemuel knew of their indifference to his studies, but it did not trouble him. He often wished, though, that he could go out and talk with his neighbors about his discoveries, and cause their hearts to be stirred like his own. He had tried it several times, but all in vain, so at last gave up the attempt as useless. They could talk only of farm affairs, such as horses, pigs, cows, the crops, and when an election was pending they were interested in that.

But as Lemuel sat in his corner after leaving Ada, his mind was not upon his studies. Even his sister's harsh words did not disturb him, for his soul was filled with a strange and wonderful feeling. He knew its meaning, and was not ashamed to confess it to himself. It was his intense love for Nita Rivers. Her face was constantly before him as he sat there looking out of the window. He pictured her as he had seen her that afternoon at the Falls, seated upon the rocks, or walking by his side. He recalled the words she had uttered, and the varying expressions upon her face. And she was interested in his studies, too. In her he had at last found a kindred spirit, one to whom he could talk and who understood what he was talking about.

He was interrupted in his meditation by the sound of a voice below, and in another minute he heard the heavy thump of boots upon the stairs. Then the door was thrust open, and Henry Winters entered.

"My! I'm all out of breath," he panted, as he clumped across the room.

"Anything wrong, Henry?" Lemuel inquired, somewhat annoyed at this intrusion. "Have your cows broken out again, and you need another picnic to get your fence mended?"

"No, no, not me cows this time, Lem, though I wouldn't mind another racket sich as we had yesterday. But it's something serious now. Widder Brown's boy, Sammy, has shot himself in the leg, an' he's bleedin' to death."

"He is!" Lemuel exclaimed as he sprang to his feet. "Why didn't you go for the doctor?"

"It would take too long to git him, so I hustled fer you. Come on, quick."

Speedily they made their way down the stairs and out upon the road.

"What made you think of me, Henry?" Lemuel asked, as they hurried forward.

"'Cause you have larnin', that's why. A feller who reads an' studies as much as you do must know more'n the general run of folks."

"But the 'general run of folks,' as you call them, consider me daft, and laugh at me."

"How d'ye know that, Lem?" Henry asked in surprise. It embarrassed him, too, for he had often done the same thing himself.

"Oh, I know, all right, Henry. People think I am silly spending so much of my time with books, and hunting around for the beautiful and wonderful things in nature."

"I guess yer right, Lem. We all have made fun of ye, an' I don't deny it. But there was no real harm in what we said. There wasn't any spite to it. We talked jist to have a little fun, that was all."

"Because you didn't understand me, I suppose?"

"Ye've struck it right, Lem. We couldn't understand yer ways. But, say, let up, will ye? I'm about winded at this clip yer goin'."

Lemuel laughed, and slowed down a little.

"We're almost there, Henry, so keep up your courage a little longer. You understand now why I'm hurrying, don't you?"

"Indeed I do, me boy, an' it's well that we should hustle."

"That's just it, Henry. And so with other things. You all called me silly because you didn't understand what I was doing. You passed judgment upon me without trying to find out the meaning of my studies."

"Yer right ag'in, Lem," Henry panted, as he struggled to keep pace with his companion. "Now, when I got me school-tax a few days ago I was as mad as a dog with its nose full of porkypine quills. But when I met that teacher, heard her talk, an' larned what she is doin' fer the children of this deestrict, I cooled right down. Yes, I jedged her mighty hard before I understood her. I'm goin' to pay that ten dollars without another growl, even if I have to borrow the money to do it. I might have to git you to lend it to me, Lem."

"All right, Henry, let me know when you want it, but don't mention it to anyone. Ada might hear of it, and she has queer notions about lending money."

"She'll never hear of it through me, Lem, let me tell ye that. I won't say a word to Sarah, neither. Seems to me, what women don't know won't do 'em any harm. We're purty much in the same box jist now, so we've got to unite fer common defense."

They were now at Widow Brown's house, so further conversation was out of the question. Lemuel found several women there, all greatly excited, while Sammy was lying on the sofa very still and white.

"Oh, I'm so glad you have come!" Mrs. Brown cried, as Lemuel entered. "I was so afraid my poor boy would bleed to death before you could get here. Surely you can do something to save his life."

Lemuel at once set to work, applied first-aid remedy, and in a short time had the bleeding completely stopped.

"There, I guess that will do until the doctor arrives," he announced. "He can do the rest."

Henry had been watching with wide-eyed wonder and admiration as Lemuel checked the flow of blood by a simple tourniquet made of a handkerchief and a small stick. It was all new to him.

"Did ye larn to do that trick at college, Lem?" he asked when the job was finished.

"Yes, I took a special course in First Aid. Anyone can do that."

"I s'pose so, Lem, but no one here knew about it. Now, that's what I call edication. My! ye've riz a big jump in my estimation since ye done that. I'd heard tell that ye knew a lot of stuff, but didn't put much stock in it before."

Lemuel smiled at Henry's enthusiasm, although he was somewhat embarrassed. The women were looking curiously at him, as if he had performed some magical feat upon the wounded boy.

"Suppose you hurry away for the doctor, Henry?" he suggested. "Sammy needs more assistance than I can give him."

"I'll go at once, Lem. You stay here till I come back an' comfort the women folks. If ye need any special help, ye'd better run over fer Sarah. She's quite a good nurse, an' kin mend 'most anything from a chicken's broken leg to a cracked sasser."

"It's a wonder you didn't go for her, then, instead of hurrying for me, Henry."

"She couldn't have done that job, Lem. Even Sarah has her limitations. But, there, I must git along."

When once outside, he hurried on his way down the road. As he came to the house where Nita Rivers boarded, a sudden idea came into his mind. This caused him to stop in the middle of the road for fully a minute.

"I'll do it," he told himself with a chuckle. "I owe it to both of 'em. It'll be another chance fer 'em to meet ag'in when Ada won't be pokin' her nose around to spile the game. Ho! ho! I guess the Lord's on their side, a'right. Or mebbe it's their fightin'-stars."

He hurried onward, and when he had knocked upon the door, it was opened by the very person he wished to see. He thought she looked more beautiful than ever standing there in the doorway.

"Evenin', Miss," he accosted. "I jist stopped in passin' to tell ye that Sammy Brown's shot himself. He's one of yer pupils, so I thought ye'd like to know."

"Is he dead?" the teacher anxiously asked.

"Not now, Miss. But he would be if Lem hadn't made that thing he calls a 'turn-key' an' stopped the bleedin'. Guess he'd like to see ye, that is, Sammy, I mean. Great feller, that, I mean Lem this time."

"I shall go right over and see if there is anything I can do," Miss Rivers replied. "Thank you, Mr. Winters, for letting me know."

"Oh, that's a'right, Miss. But I must git on me way now fer old Doc. Benson."

Henry chuckled more than ever as he sped along the road.

"She thinks it's her duty to go to the widder's to look after Sammy, ha, ha. Lucky notion of mine to tell her about the accident. But, then, I'd do anything fer Lem after what he done to-night. I've got to see this thing through with them young folks. Ho! ho!"

CHAPTER IX

A LITTLE PICTURE

To Nita Rivers the day spent at the Falls had been very enjoyable. The children had been well behaved, and the presence of Henry Winters had added much to the picnic. A large portion of the pleasure, however, had been due to Lemuel Karsall. Nita had never met a more entertaining and delightful companion. His knowledge of the beautiful things of nature was wonderful, and she felt that her own knowledge was as nothing compared to his. She had met him on several former occasions, but then he had always seemed so quiet and reserved. She had often heard the neighbors speak about him as an odd young man with peculiar notions, and somewhat queer, who lived much in a world of his own. But now she understood him as never before, and the thought of him brought a pleasurable sensation to her heart as she slowly made her way homeward. He had been very attentive to her all the afternoon, and appeared so anxious to talk to her about his plants and mineral collection. His enthusiasm had been remarkable, and she wondered if it were due to her interest in such things. She had heard that his sister cared little or nothing about his studies, so, perhaps, it was a great joy to him to find someone who really did. Her heart was lighter than it had been for a long time, and she hummed the air of a popular tune as she walked from the road up to her boarding-house.

From this airy realm of fancy and romance she was suddenly brought to earth when she found a letter for her lying on the hall table. She knew the writing, and with fast-beating heart she hurried to her own room, and tore open the envelope. It was from her only sister from whom she had not heard for several weeks. She sank down into an easy chair, and as she read, the color left her cheeks, and her eyes became misty.

"*Dearest Nita*," so began the letter, "I am stranded here in New York, and am at my wits' end, having lost my position. Can you let me have $25 to pay for my room and keep life in my body a little longer? Dearest Nita, I have tried to do my best, but everything has been against me. Oh, how I long to see you. My heart aches all the time when I think how I hoped to succeed and have met with such dismal failure. Remember me, dear, in your prayers.

"Your loving sister,

"RUTH."

"P. S. I have a faint hope of getting another position to-morrow, and expect to find out early in the morning.

"RUTH."

Nita held the letter in her hand for some time, and gazed thoughtfully out of the window. So this was the letter for which she had been so anxiously waiting. She knew something of the struggle her sister was making to earn a living in a strange city. Over and over again she had urged her to come home and live with her for a while. But Ruth would not listen to it. She was such a high-spirited girl that she was determined to succeed or die in the attempt. Nita had sent her money before, and once Ruth had returned it. Never before had her sister even suggested a loan, so Nita knew that her position must be really desperate when she asked for it now.

Rising to her feet, she crossed the room to her little writing-desk, one of the few treasures she had brought with her from her old home. Seating herself, she at once began to write to her sister a letter full of courage and hope.

"You are bound to succeed," she said in part, "and I am going to help you all I can. I am sending you to-day $50 instead of $25. I have saved a little money, so am glad to share it with you." Then followed a bright account of the picnic at the Falls that afternoon, interspersed with bits of humor and the quaint sayings of Henry Winters.

"Ruth will like to hear about this," she said to herself, as she folded the letter and addressed the envelope. "Poor dear, she needs all the encouragement that I can give her. How I wish I had her near me now. She is too young to be in such a great city, battling her way alone against so many difficulties."

She was interrupted in her reverie by Henry's thump upon the front-door, and as Mrs. Stevens was out, she hurried downstairs and received the message about Sammy Brown's accident. This news came just at the right minute, as it gave Nita something to do to relieve and calm her agitated mind. She decided to go to Mrs. Brown's at once, and give all the help that she possibly could.

The widow was most grateful for the teacher's visit, and Sammy's face brightened as she entered the room where he was lying. Lemuel's heart beat fast as he watched her talking to the boy, and almost wished that he himself had met with the accident instead of Sammy. The color had again returned to Nita's cheeks, and she showed no sign of the worry and sadness her sister's letter had caused. Lemuel felt unusually embarrassed, for he believed that the women in the room were watching him. He longed to leave the house, and yet he did not want to go away while Nita was there.

When the doctor at last arrived, Nita bade Sammy good-night and left the house. Lemuel went with her, and together they walked along the road. This was a novel experience for the young man and for a while he felt very awkward and hardly knew what to say. He was not versed in love-lore, and he considered himself a fool for his lack of something appropriate to say. The evening was balmy, and the sky cloudless. A sweet stillness lay around them, broken only by the cheep of some tired bird, and the sound of their own feet upon the gravelly road. Lemuel was sure that his companion could hear the thumping of his heart, and he was glad that she could not see the flush upon his face. In all his life he had never experienced anything like this before. He wondered why the woman at his side should affect him in such a peculiar manner. The influence of women had always been a deep mystery to him in the past, and he had sometimes smiled with a sense of superiority at the devotion of young lovers. He believed that he was beyond such foolishness, and that no woman could ever make him lose his heart and head. But now he knew for certain that he was as strongly enmeshed as the most ardent lover he had ever met, and instead of being annoyed, he was much pleased.

"What a beautiful star that is," Nita at length remarked, as she stopped and looked over at the far-off eastern horizon. "It outshines all the others."

"That is Jupiter," Lemuel explained, delighted that at last the silence was broken, and he could talk about something with which he was familiar. "If you watch it night after night, you will see how it gradually moves southward. It is very brilliant and I enjoy looking at it."

"And do you study the stars as much as you do other things of nature?" Nita inquired.

"Not as much because I cannot capture the stars like I can plants and stones. But they have a fascination for me, and I like to watch them and read all I can about them."

"You study at night, so I understand. People see the light shining in your window very late."

"That is the time I can do my best thinking, Miss Rivers. Everything is so quiet then, and wonderful thoughts come to the mind. People think I am crazy, I guess, because I do things they cannot understand."

"Oh, you should not worry about what people say, Mr. Karsall, so long as your study and meditation make you happy. And I am sure you must be happy up in your Loft."

"I always have been, and thought there was no other life worth living. Lately, however, I have come to think differently, and have found out that there was something lacking."

"What is that?"

"The companionship of someone to whom I can talk and discuss the thoughts which come into my mind. My sister has never been in sympathy with me, and she thinks my studies are all silly nonsense."

"You should be a professor in some college," Nita replied. "You need to be in a big city where you could meet people who think as you do. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Very often. But I should cut a poor figure among stately college professors. I would not feel at home among them, and could not bear to be forced to spend my days in a class room lecturing to a group of restless students. Such a life would kill all initiative in me. I like to be free, to go my own pace, and make my own discoveries. And, besides, I feel my own ignorance. The more I study, the less I seem to know. Something new is turning up every day, and there are hundreds of things I want to search out when I get the time."

He ceased and stood for a few minutes gazing up silently into the star-studded vault above him. He believed that the young woman by his side understood him better than anyone else, and it brought a pleasant thrill to his heart. It was so easy to talk with her, and he did not feel in the least embarrassed. Their souls seemed to be mystically united, as if they really belonged to each other. So strong was this impression that an intense longing swept upon him to place his arms

around her and hold her close. He immediately banished this temptation, startled, in fact, at the mysterious influence that had so subtly possessed him.

"I must not detain you any longer with such talk," he quietly remarked. "I am so accustomed to lose myself in meditation that I make a poor companion for anyone."

"It is a great pleasure to me to listen," Nita replied, as they once more moved slowly on their way. "My father used to talk to me when I was a child about the wonderful things around us, but I was too young then to comprehend much of what he said. He was misunderstood by people, too."

"Is he living now?" Lemuel asked.

"No. He has been dead for many years. He was badly treated in business by men he trusted, and lost all he had. It broke him down completely. Just what happened we never knew, but he was brought home one day dead. He had been drowned in the river. It was a terrible blow to us."

"Is your mother living, Miss Rivers?" Lemuel inquired.

"She has been dead for several years. I have only one sister, Ruth, who is now in New York. I had a letter from her to-day."

Nita longed to tell Lemuel of her worry and to ask for his advice. She did want to speak to someone she could trust. She resisted the desire, however, and walked along in silence. She felt somewhat diffident about admitting a stranger into her secret, as he might not understand.

"And so you lived for years at Radnor, did you, Miss Rivers?" Lemuel asked.

"We did, and it is such a beautiful place. How often I long to see the old home again. My heart aches when I think of mother fighting so hard to make a living after father's death. But I have a picture I painted of the house. In fact, I have several."

"Would you mind giving me one, Miss Rivers? I should like to have it so much."

"Would you? What in the world would you do with it?"

"Place it among my specimens, of course."

"As another curiosity, I suppose."

"As a valuable treasure, Miss Rivers. If you favor me with a picture, I shall place it right over my desk as a remembrance of this wonderful day and evening, and also of the artist."

There was a deep intensity of feeling in these words which caused the color to mount to Nita's cheeks, although Lemuel did not notice it owing to the darkness. When at last they reached the little gate before the house, the girl requested him to wait there and she would be back in a minute. When she returned, she handed him the picture she had brought with her.

"There it is," she said. "I could not find any paper to wrap it up. But it is small, so you can carry it under your coat if you do not wish anyone to see it."

Lemuel stammered his thanks, bade Nita good-night, and turned homeward. As he walked along, he chided himself most severely for being such an idiot. He thought of the things he might have said, and the greater use he might have made of the blessed opportunity of being alone with such a beautiful and wonderful young woman.

Reaching his own house, he slowly mounted the stairs leading to The Loft. Here he lighted his lamp, looked for a long time at the little unframed picture, and then pinned it on the wall just over his desk. He then sat down, but he did not lose himself as formerly in his books. He was living over again the scenes and incidents of that day and evening. All the time his eyes were fixed intently upon the picture of the old house among the trees. It was the work of the woman he loved. Her face had bent over that picture, she had breathed upon it, and her hands had handled it. Impulsively he reached up, lifted it from its position, and pressed it fervently to his lips. He then gave a start and glanced quickly around, fearful lest anyone should be watching. He smiled at the foolish idea as he replaced the picture, blew out the light, and left The Loft.

CHAPTER X

CHECKING THE AGENT

It was evening and Henry Winters was seated upon the veranda of Red Rose Cottage enjoying a smoke. His wife was in the garden busy with her precious flowers. The air was balmy with not a breath of wind astir. The river, smooth as a mirror, shimmered beneath the glow of the westering sun. A feeling of peace and contentment possessed Henry's heart. His work for the day was ended, and after the heat of the afternoon it was pleasant to enjoy a refreshing rest. He never thought of helping his wife, for he had always left the garden to her. Flowers were merely so many weeds to him, and he had often wondered why Sarah spent so much of her time upon them.

"I can't understand what ye see in them things," he at length remarked.

"I know you can't," Mrs. Winters replied. "But I wish to goodness you could."

"But ain't there plenty of wild flowers in the fields an' along the roads? Why, they're jumpin' up everywhere, an' don't need to be 'tended, either. An' yit ye bother an' work with these which ain't half as purty as a hull lot of wild rascals I could show ye."

"That may be so, Henry. God has put His flowers everywhere and cares for them. Maybe He doesn't need these here in my garden, but I do. This is my one bit of Heaven on earth. I never had any children to love and care for, so I need my flowers."

"But think of the work, Sarah. Don't ye git tired slavin' out there when ye should be restin'?"

"This is where I rest," was the quiet reply.

"Ye do! Well, that's beyond me. Workin' to git rested! An' no pay in it, either."

"This is the only pay I ever get," Mrs. Winters retorted. "But I'm afraid it's the kind of pay you cannot understand, Henry. You only think of pay in dollars and cents, something that will give you food and clothes for your body and tobacco for your pipe. I receive soul-pay when I work among my flowers. But as you haven't any soul, so far as I can learn, such pay would be lost upon you."

Henry lapsed into silence for a few minutes, and puffed steadily at his pipe. His wife was more than a match for him when it came to words, and her reference to "soul-pay" was beyond his comprehension. He satisfied himself by considering women "queer critters, anyway, an' not one bit like men." He was not thinking of his wife as she moved about among the dahlias, honeysuckles, morning-glories, tiger-lilies, pansies, and other children of her care and fancy. He did not notice that homelike scene right before his very eyes. He had been accustomed to it for so long that it was too commonplace to excite his interest or admiration. He was trying to puzzle out what Sarah meant by "soul-pay." He could not see any sense in it at all. At last the meaning dawned upon him, and his mouth broadened into a grin. "Soul-pay"! It might satisfy some, but he wanted something far more substantial than that. He had often heard the parson speak about people needing food for the soul as well as for the body, but for the life of him he could make very little out of it. "It must be the 'soul-pay,'" he mused, "an' that's where Sarah got the idea." He emitted an audible chuckle, which arrested his wife's attention.

"What is amusing you now?" she asked, pausing in her work.

"I was jist thinkin' about a funny story I once heard," Henry explained. "Yer talk about 'soul-pay' brought it to me mind, though I never fully saw the pint of the yarn before. I do now, an' by jingo! it's great."

"It must be to give you so much pleasure, Henry."

"It sartinly is, Sarah. It's about a feller who was starvin', an' seem' some men diggin', he asked the man who looked like the boss to give him a job. He got it, an' when he had worked fer the rest of the day, he asked fer his pay. An' what d'ye think he was told, Sarah?"

"I have no idea."

"I guess ye haven't. Ye'd never guess it if ye tried the rest of yer life. The man who looked like the boss, sez to him, sez he, 'There's no money in this job, me friend. We're not workin' fer pay; we're jist givin' a day's work to help build the new church.' Ho, ho! wasn't that a good joke, Sarah?"

"It was hard on the poor starving man," Mrs. Winters replied. "I hope someone took pity on him and gave him a good meal."

"Oh, I don't know nuthin' about that. But mebbe he got a supply of soul-food while he dug. That's about the only thing the churches hand out, anyway."

"I wish to goodness you'd get some of it, Henry," his wife retorted. "You're always rapping at the churches. But, there, I want you to go and get me a pail of water. This ground is terribly dry."

"As dry as the parson's sermons, why don't you say?" Henry growled as he rose to his feet. "I thought I was all through work fer to-day, an' now I've got to lug water fer flowers."

It took him about ten minutes to go to the well, draw a bucket of water and return. When he reached the garden he was surprised to see a strange man leaning over the fence and talking most volubly to Sarah. Henry placed the pail upon the ground and then sat down upon the veranda steps. He wondered who the man was, and what he was trying to say. After a while he was able to learn that the stranger considered the river the finest he had ever seen, and the scenery the most beautiful. As for Mrs. Winters' garden, it was a wonder.

"I have traveled all over the province an' never sot me eyes on sights so marvelous," he jabbered. "This valley is like the Garden of Eden, sich as we read about in the Bible. An' your flowers, madame! Jist look at them purty blossoms! An' what colors! Now, if ye had a few shrubs to set 'em off, what a picter they'd make."

"I have enough to attend to as it is," Mrs. Winters replied.

"Ah, but you would not have to attend to the shrubs, madame. They'll look after 'emselves, an' grow jist as the Lord made 'em. I specialize in sich things, an' consider I'm doin' the Lord's work in introducin' 'em to people throughout the length an' breadth of this land. Souls must be stimulated with beauty, an' to have the beautiful allus before us inspires an' elevates in a wonderful manner. Shrubs do that, an' the variety that I handle would stir the heart of the wildest savage. Jist think of the glory of the bush-honeysuckle, the perfection of the weigela, the grace of the pinies, the sweetness of the iris, the wonder of the canterbury-bell, the pureness of the snowball, the clingin' tenderness of the woodbine, an' the lurin' wistfulness of the japonica. Why, I have known men to be stirred to their innermost depths by merely gazin' upon sich an' array of beauty."

"I would buy your whole outfit if I thought it would stir my husband," Mrs. Winters declared.

"Ye'd better try it, Sarah," Henry replied with a grin. "After that feller's parrot-like spiel, it'd be a pity not to buy something."

"Yer right, sir," the agent agreed, turning toward Henry. "You couldn't make a better investment. Yer children in years to come will raise up an' call ye blessed."

"Will they, Mister? Well, that's interestin', eh, Sarah? But they'll have to git a hustle on, fer they ain't begun to raise yit, seein' we ain't got any."

"But think what a joy they'll be to other children," the stranger replied, not in the least embarrassed by his mistake. "I said the same to Mrs. Stevens jist an hour ago when I tried to sell her some of my shrubs. She hasn't any children, either. An' when she explained that she had only boarders, I told her what a joy these plants would be to 'em. She was so impressed by what I said that she gave me a fine order. An', by the way, speakin' of Mrs. Stevens, reminds me of a friend I met at her house. An', say, wasn't she surprised to see me! I knew her hull family, an' what a terrible time they had."

"Who was it?" Mrs. Winters asked. She scented a bit of news, so was anxious to hear more.

"Nita Rivers, daughter of John Rivers, who did away with himself, poor feller. He got into some kind of trouble, forgery, or something like that, I fergit now which. Anyway, it was a bad mess, an' he couldn't face the music."

"And our teacher is the daughter of such a man!" Mrs. Winters exclaimed.

"Oh, Nita's all right, I guess. But she has a sister who's gone to the bad, so I hear. Ran away to the States. There's a queer streak in that family somewhere, jist like ye'll find in shrubs. Ye've got to know their pedigree. Now, I know all there is to know about my shrubs, an' kin give ye a history of each one. They're all good an' sound, with not a bad streak in any of 'em."

Mrs. Winters, however, was not interested in the pedigree of shrubs. She could think of nothing now but the important news she had just heard.

"It isn't right for us to have such a person teaching the children of this district," she declared. "She might lead the little ones astray."

"Oh, I guess Nita's all right, Madame," the agent replied. "I've never heard anything ag'inst her. But she's so mighty purty, an' has sich independent ways that one kin never tell. Them's the ones that are most dangerous."

Henry had now risen to his feet, his eyes blazing with anger, and his whole body quivering with excitement. He controlled his feelings, however, and sauntered leisurely over to where the stranger was standing.

"Are ye fond of cattle?" he unexpectedly asked.

"Why, yes, I like to look at a good beast," was the amazed reply. "I worked on a farm until I took up the agency fer shrubs. I like this work better than——"

"Well, then, come out to the barn," Henry interrupted. "I want to show ye something there. Ye kin come back an' talk all ye like about shrubs afterwards if ye want to. Come on."

There was nothing else for the visitor to do, so reluctantly, and with his mind filled with wonder, he followed Henry to the barn. Reaching the building, Henry led the way inside. Here he stopped, and turning to the agent looked at him intently for a few seconds.

"Have ye any family?" he abruptly asked.

"Y-yes, a wife an' five children," was the surprised reply.

"Ye love 'em, I s'pose?"

"Sure I do."

"Too bad."

By this time the stranger was glancing fearfully around, certain that he was face to face with a madman. He moved back a few steps.

"Got yer life insured?" Henry next questioned.

"No."

"No? That's a pity. There's nuthin' like a good life insurance, fer a man kin never tell what might happen."

"Look here, Mister, what's the meanin' of all this?" the agent demanded. "I thought ye brought me here to show me something. But ye've been doin' nuthin' but askin' me fool-questions."

"Well, don't ye see something now?" Henry roared, shoving the clenched fist of his right hand suddenly up under the stranger's nose. "An' ye'll feel something, too, mighty quick, if ye don't stop yer talkin' about Miss Rivers. See?"

The agent staggered back, his face blanched with fear.

"I-I d-don't understand yer meanin'," he gasped.

"Ye mighty soon will if ye don't do as I say. Ye've been talkin' too much about that teacher, an' ye've done a hull lot of mischief already by yer confounded gab. She's a darn fine young woman, no matter what her father an' sister have done. If ye've any sense at all in yer noodle, don't ye know that the folks in this deestrict, or any other, fer that matter, kin talk enough about a school teacher without a feller like you helpin' 'em out?"

"But what harm have I done?" the agent demanded.

"What harm! Didn't ye jist tell my wife about Miss Rivers' father committin' suicide, an' her sister goin' to the bad? What choicer bit of news could ye have told her? That's the harm ye've done. It'll be all over the place in a day or two."

"I'm very sorry," the agent apologized. "I had no intention of stirrin' up trouble fer Nita. Poor girl, she's had enough already."

"Ye should have thought of that sooner, Mister. But as ye've let the cat out of the bag, I want ye to put it back ag'in."

"Why, what kin I do now?"

Henry turned and pointed across the field.

"D'ye see that house?" he asked. "The one with the red roof."

"Yes."

"Well, Ada Karsall lives there, an' she doesn't like the teacher 'cause her brother Lem's in love with her. Now, if Ada hears that yarn of yours about the Rivers' family, it'll be jist to her likin', an' so she'll make it mighty uncomfortable fer Miss Rivers. See?"

"Yes, but——"

"Jist a minute, Mister. I want ye to go to Ada's an' try to sell her some of yer shrubs. Durin' the confab, mention that ye've seen the teacher, an' that she's an extry fine gal, an' a friend of yours. Don't say a word about her father an' sister, remember. An' look, if ye do as I say, I'll make it worth while, an' give ye an order fer twelve of the best shrubs ye've got. I was goin' to punch yer face, an' I'll do it yit if ye dare breathe another word sich as ye did to Sarah. D'ye agree?"

"Sure, sure, I'm only too willin'," was the eager reply. "But what kind of shrubs do ye want?" and the agent pulled a book out of his pocket. "Ye kin have yer choice."

"Anything ye like, as I know nuthin' about sich things. But I want ye to make a solemn promise that ye'll do as I say, an' wherever ye go in this deestrict speak in the highest terms of Miss Rivers."

"I promise on my word of honor, an' the Bible, also, if ye want me to. But what about the story I told yer wife? Won't she tell that?"

"Most likely she will, fer there are three mighty quick ways to spread news, so I've heard, telephone, telegraph, an' tell a woman. But if ye tell Ada an' others jist the opposite to what ye told Sarah, the women won't know what to believe. They'll be all mixed up an' buzz like a lot of hornets. There, now, I've told ye what to do, so go an' do it. But if ye don't, I'll not take a single shrub, an' I'll punch yer face into sich a shape that yer wife an' five kids won't know ye. Now, git."

Henry smiled grimly to himself as he watched the agent hurrying across the field. He knew that the fellow was thoroughly frightened, and it pleased him immensely.

"It was the only thing I could do," he muttered. "That feller deserves to have a good lickin', an' I'd like to do it. But mebbe it's better to give him a chance. I'm goin' to stick by that teacher. She'll need help when the women git after her. An' by the jumpin' frog! I'm goin' to be her champion, no matter what Sarah'll think an' say. I may not have any soul accordin' to her way of thinkin', but I've got something, anyway, that's goin' to make me stand up fer a helpless woman. An' I guess the Lord'll understand, even if Sarah doesn't."

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER BLUNDER

Ada Karsall was greatly worried over her wayward brother, for such she now considered him. He had gone daft over the school teacher. No matter how much she reasoned or scolded it made no difference. Lemuel had passed beyond all bounds. No longer was he willing to be directed by her. In her extremity she placed the entire blame upon Miss Rivers. She was the cause of all the trouble, and was luring Lemuel on to certain ruin. She took it for granted that the teacher knew about the money, and was more than anxious to marry a man who had such an income. In vain she racked her brains for some way whereby she might check Lemuel in his wild headlong foolishness. She knew how he and Miss Rivers had been at Mrs. Brown's, and afterwards had walked along the road together. It was disgraceful, so she believed, that her brother should do such a thing when he knew what the outcome would mean.

Miss Karsall did not take the heart into consideration in thinking about her brother. She herself had never been troubled that way. Such a love as Lemuel was undergoing was unknown to her. As for herself, she believed that she was absolutely immune from such folly, as she deemed it.

There were two main causes for this state of affairs. One was the fact that Ada was afraid of losing her father's money. Nothing in the form of a man could ever compensate for that. She was reluctant to think about marriage, and whenever the subject was mentioned in her presence she endeavored to pay little attention to what was being said. She called it a delusion and a snare, for she knew of a number of girls who had made sad mistakes in their matrimonial ventures.

The other reason was Ada herself. Although possessing more than an ordinary charm of face and form, she was so matter of fact and everlastingly industrious that any young man, except Joe Rundell, who had turned his eyes to her as a possible wife, had been repelled. The entire neighborhood was aware of her daily housecleaning, sweeping and dusting in season and out, and her horror at the least bit of dirt or dust upon tables and chairs. "As clean and busy as Ada Karsall," was a common saying, and she gloried in the notoriety. She was proud of the fact that she was able to keep men at a respectful distance. She felt that Lemuel was all she could manage, and he was enough to occupy her entire attention. But now he was getting beyond her, and the thought of this caused the broom and the duster to move faster than ever the morning after Lemuel walked home with the teacher. In work she found the one great outlet to her feelings, and judging by her swift and decisive strokes, her feelings were in a sadly disturbed condition.

When she had finished the lower rooms, she went upstairs, swept where there was no dirt, and dusted where there was no dust. Several times she glanced toward the door leading into The Loft. Only once a week did she clean there, and then only when Lemuel was present lest she should disturb or injure any of his precious specimens. Of course, she could visit the place as often as she wished, so long as she left things alone. Lemuel allowed his sister to run the house according to her fancy providing that she left The Loft alone. There he was determined to be master, and he was.

When Ada had ended her work upstairs, she opened the door to The Loft and peered in. She knew that her brother was not there, but a guilty feeling made her cautious. She had been thinking so much about Nita Rivers that she wondered if Lemuel had left a letter, or some other tell-tale evidence, upon his desk. She knew that it was wrong to pry into his private affairs, and hitherto she would not have dreamed of doing such a thing. But now it was different. There was so much at stake, that for her own sake as well as his, she considered it her bounden duty to do everything in her power to thwart the scheming school teacher.

Thus justifying herself in her own eyes, she hurried across the room to the desk and examined everything upon it. Seeing nothing there of a suspicious nature, she felt greatly disappointed, and she was about to leave the place when she caught sight of the picture above the desk. She had never seen it before, and she at once suspected that Miss Rivers had given it to Lemuel. She studied it most carefully, and in one corner she saw the small letters "N. R." Her doubts were now all removed. Her brother was so much in love with the teacher that he had hung one of the pictures she had painted where he could look at it as he sat at his desk. A strong feeling of jealousy welled up in her heart. Who was this Nita Rivers who had come to separate a brother and sister, and who was intent upon destroying their home? Who were her people, anyway? Perhaps they were of no account at all. So blinded was Ada in her desire to save her brother that she wished such might be the case. If she could prove to Lemuel that the teacher was far beneath him, and what a disgrace it would be for him to marry her, his eyes might be opened before it was too late. And it was her duty to find out. Just how to go about it she had not the least idea. But when a woman is aroused by fear and jealousy, mingled with a growing hatred,

she seldom stops to reason, but allows her lurid imagination to supply whatever information is lacking.

That afternoon she visited Mrs. Winters and discussed the whole problem with her.

"I feel that this is my mission in life," she declared. "I must save my brother and keep him from that designing woman."

"But what can we do?" Mrs. Winters asked. "That teacher is a most dangerous person. I am not surprised that she has bewitched Lemuel, for he is young and easily carried away by a pretty face. But I believe she has also cast some strange spell over Henry. If she can do that to such a cranky useless mortal as he is, what are we to think?"

"I do not know just what to do at present," Ada replied. "But I know the Lord will help me, anyway. I am going to put my trust in Him, and I am sure He will find some way to help me out of my trouble."

And thus they talked during the afternoon. They decided that Nita Rivers must leave the place that the men in the district might be kept safe from her wiles. Such was the only remedy they could suggest. So self-centered were these two women, and so certain were they of the righteousness of their cause, that they did not take into consideration the injury they might do to an innocent woman. The community had to be protected, so they believed, and they were the ones chosen for the purpose. Like so many so-called reformers, their views were bounded by their own short and narrow vision. Justice and right in their eyes only applied to their own interests. There were not two sides to the question. They were right, and on behalf of right as they interpreted it, all else must give way. These women, noted for their strict religious duties, and regular in church attendance, were looked upon with great respect by all in the community. And yet they were more than willing to persecute a helpless woman and drive her ignominiously from the place.

Thus with Mrs. Winters on her side, and inspired by the conversation that had taken place, Ada returned home and prepared supper. She said nothing to her brother about her talk with Mrs. Winters, and the teacher's name was not mentioned. After the chores were done, Lemuel did not go to The Loft as usual, but dressed himself in his best suit and left the house. Ada watched him as he walked down the road. Tears came into her eyes, and her heart beat fast. She was feeling more angry than ever as she stood looking out of the window. Then she went out to the veranda, sat down upon a rustic-chair, and gave herself up to deep thought.

"He is off to see the teacher," she mused. "But he might have said something to me. I am nothing more to him now than a slave to cook his meals, wash and mend his clothes, and attend to the house. Some day after he is harnessed to that doll-face teacher he may appreciate all that I do for him."

The calmness and the glory of the evening meant nothing to her as she thus sat brooding over her mountain of trouble. She paid no attention to anything around her, and did not even see the shrub agent until he was almost at the garden gate. She started at sight of the stranger, afraid lest he might be a tramp, of whom she was always in great dread.

"Fine evenin', this, fer meditation, Miss," the visitor began, touching his hat with his right hand. "A nicer view than this I never sot eyes on."

"I don't seem to know you, sir," Ada severely replied. "Do you wish to see my brother?"

"Oh, not at all, Miss. I kin allus do more with women than with men in my line. They have a great appreciation of the beautiful. Beauty is of the soul, Miss, an' that makes all the difference."

He paused and looked intently upon the garden.

"There's a proof of it," he continued. "A woman, an' not a man, planted them flowers, an' cared fer 'em. She did it because the love of the beautiful is in her soul. I'm sure that's your work, Miss."

Ada was becoming curious about this voluble man. Her vanity was also touched.

"Yes, I attend to them," she acknowledged. "I am glad that you like them."

"They are wonderful, Miss. But if ye had a hedge of shrubs around yer garden people would come miles to look at it. Now, I have some of the choicest shrubs that ever grew. They are the pick of all lands under the sun, an' I consider I am doin' the Lord's work in introducin' 'em to others."

"So you are an agent, then?"

"Some might call me that, Miss. But I consider myself a philanthropist, a man who goes about doin' good. Whenever I sell a shrub, I give more than a mere plant. An' I have sich a great variety fer my uplift work. Souls are stimulated by the glory of the bush honeysuckle, the perfection of the weigela, the grace of the piny, the sweetness of the iris, the wonder of the canterbury-bell, the pureness of the snowball, the clingin' tenderness of the woodbine, an' the lurin' wistfulness of the japonica. Why, the mere mention of them names brought tears to the eyes of Mrs. Stevens down the road an' that purty teacher who boards with her."

"You mean Miss Rivers?" Ada asked, now all alert. "You met her, then?"

"Oh, I knew Nita Rivers when she was a baby. My! wasn't I surprised when I saw her to-day. Hadn't the least idea what had become of her."

"You knew her when she was a baby, did you say?"

"Sure. Why, I often held her on me lap an' played with her. I knew the hull family well. They were the finest people that ever drew breath. An' Nita's jist like her ma. An' what shrubs they had about their house. Rivers himself used to work every evenin' in his garden when he wasn't busy at the bank."

"Did he work in a bank?"

"Did he! Why, he was manager until the bank bust up an' left the poor feller without a cent. He felt so bad about it that he didn't live long afterwards."

"Was it his fault that the bank failed?" Ada questioned, hoping to gain some information against the family.

"Not on yer life, Miss. Rivers was as honest as the sun. The trouble was elsewhere, so I understand."

"And you knew Mrs. Rivers well?"

"Should say I did. Knew her parents before her, too. She was certainly one fine woman, of old Loyalist stock. An' what an interest she allus took in them shrubs her husband planted. Why, she'd sit an' admire 'em by the hour. Now, Miss, if you had some right around yer garden, what a wonderful sight they'd make."

"I don't want to hear about shrubs," Ada snapped. "I'm more interested in the Rivers family. My brother is head over heels in love with Miss Rivers, the school teacher, and that doesn't satisfy me. I want to separate them, so when you told me that you know her, I was hoping that you could tell me something against her."

"But, Miss! how was I to know that?" exclaimed the astonished man.

"I don't know, and what is more, I don't care. If you had told me something against that teacher I would have given you a big order."

Rising to her feet, Ada went into the house and closed the door with a bang. The agent stood staring after her in a dumbfounded manner. He then moved slowly on his way, more puzzled than he had ever been in his life.

"Well, if that isn't the limit!" he at length muttered. "When I told the truth at one house, I got into trouble with a he-devil. An' when I tell lies at another, I get in all wrong with a she-devil, fer that's all I kin call a woman with sich spite in her heart. So she wanted to hear something ag'inst Nita Rivers, did she? Afraid she'll marry her brother, an' so she wants to separate 'em. Holy smoke! that makes me ragin' mad. Poor Nita! I pity her. But I'll stand by her, as sure as my name's Ezry Pond, no matter how many more lies I'll have to tell."

CHAPTER XII

HER DESPERATE IDEA

Dinner was over at Red Rose Cottage, and as Henry rose from the table he pulled a paper-covered book from his pocket and began to read to himself. This aroused his wife's curiosity, for reading was not one of her husband's habits. She asked no questions, however, but went on with her work. Henry sat for some time deeply intent upon one page. He then thrust the book back into his pocket, took off his coat and hung it upon a hook behind the door.

"Guess I'll git to work now," he announced. "That hay I cut yesterday should be dry by this time. Mebbe ye'll give me a hand haulin' it in."

"Let me know when you are ready," his wife somewhat absent-mindedly replied, for her thoughts were more upon the book than upon the hay.

When Henry had closed the door behind him, Mrs. Winters glanced at the coat on the wall. When she was sure that her husband was far enough away, she crossed the room and lifted the book from the pocket. And at once her worst fears were confirmed, for she found it was a copy of "The Manual of the School Law and Regulations of the Province." So that was what Henry had been studying! It proved to her beyond all doubt that his action had something to do with the teacher. He must be so much in love with her that he wished to know all he could about the School Law. She had heard and read about old men whose heads had been turned by sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, and a flutter of lace. But never in her wildest imagination had she thought of Henry being one of them. She had been young once herself, but now she felt very old and worn. Intuitively she glanced into the small mirror by the side of the window, and what she saw there brought her no comfort, for the white hair and faded face belonged to her. She was Henry Winters' wife, and he had once loved her. Never had he been untrue to her until Nita Rivers came to the place. This thought made her angry, and she looked again at the open book she was holding in her hands. A paragraph upon the page was marked with a lead pencil, and she knew that it was this that Henry had been studying. What did it mean, anyway? Slowly she read the words, which referred solely to the question of the contract between a teacher and the trustees in any district in reference to a notice of termination.

Mrs. Winters was puzzled. Was Henry helping the teacher in some underhanded manner that he was so much interested in School Law? And where had he gone, anyway? She now believed that he had been lying to her, and instead of attending to his hay he was with the teacher. Perhaps he had made an appointment with her. For a few minutes she stood silently there, lost in thought. She then reached for her sun-bonnet, determined to go and find out the truth for herself. But before opening the door she glanced out of the window, and what she saw there caused her to shrink back in amazement. By the old well stood her husband and Nita Rivers. They were talking together, and seemed to be greatly amused at something. Perhaps they were laughing at her. This thought caused her heart to beat fast, and she longed to rush out and confront them both. What impudence for them to come so near the house and carry on their flirtation! They must surely know that she would see them. But, perhaps, they had come there on purpose to annoy her.

Mrs. Winters was so deeply agitated that for a time her sense of reason deserted her. Jealousy inflamed her heart, and her imagination ran wild. With blazing eyes she watched the two, and presently she saw Henry standing calmly by the well while the teacher seated herself a short distance away and began to sketch him. This was the final drop in Mrs. Winters' cup of mental agony. Had it come to that! Was the teacher so infatuated with Henry that she wished to have a picture of him? Again the strong impulse surged upon her to go out and denounce them. She resisted this, however, and stood glaring forth upon the daring couple.

After a while she turned and went wearily upstairs. A desperate idea had come into her mind. She would go away and leave Henry to his new love. Her steps were unusually slow, and the stairs seemed exceptionally steep. Reaching her bedroom, she sank down upon the nearest chair. She did not weep, but sat motionless there, dry-eyed, thinking it all over. Yes, she would go to the city, stay with her sister for a few days until she found some work to keep life in her body. She would cook, scrub, wash, anything, no matter what it might be. She would not need much, and that only for a short time. When a woman's heart is broken what interest can she have in life?

Ere long she rose slowly to her feet, mechanically opened her closet door, brought forth her best Sunday dress, and laid it upon the bed. For years she had worn it, and often she had made it over to appear as decent as possible. How old-

fashioned it would look in the city, and perhaps her sister and her smartly-dressed family would be ashamed of her. But she would buy a new gown when she had earned sufficient money. She did not care for herself, as she had nothing to live for now. And that young hussy of a teacher was the cause of her overwhelming trouble!

Again her anger flamed up fiercer than ever. Crossing the room, she looked out of the little window facing the dooryard. Henry was now standing near the teacher, looking with admiration upon the picture she was sketching. Mrs. Winters' hands clenched hard and her lips pressed firmly together. How she longed to teach them both a lesson they would not soon forget. But by going away she would do that more effectively than in any other manner. Henry would have no one to look after him, and when Miss Rivers found that she had a useless man on her hands she would then learn what misery her captivating wiles had brought upon her.

Dressing quickly, she packed a few extra articles in an old battered grip, and then went downstairs. She looked into the dining-room, parlor, and finally into the kitchen. This had been her home ever since her marriage, and now she expected never to see the place again. In the kitchen she saw Henry's long-legged boots at the back of the stove, and nearby was his old boot-jack. A patched coat hung on a peg, and also his faded felt hat. A sudden pang smote her heart as she gazed upon these familiar things. She could not leave Henry without some advice and a message of farewell. He must know the reason for her going away.

Bringing down several sheets of paper, pen and ink from the clock shelf, she seated herself at the table. She was not much of a letter writer, for she wrote only on rare occasions, and then to her sister.

"Dear Henry," she began. As that looked too affectionate, she scratched out the word "dear." But that did not sound right, so after considerable thought, she began a new sheet with "Mr. Henry Winters," which looked much more dignified, so she thought. She also believed that it would cause Henry to wince when he read it. "I am sorry to inform you that I am going to leave you forever," she wrote. "I am certain that you do not love me any longer. You have taken up with the school teacher, so you will not need me after this. I shall not tell you where I am going because you will not care.

"Sarah."

Carefully she read this over word by word, and then gazed straight before her for a few minutes. She then picked up the pen again and wrote:

"P. S. You'll find your clean socks in the top drawer of the bureau, and your Sunday shirt on the shelf in the closet off our bedroom. I guess that's all.

"Sarah."

Once more she laid down the pen and gave a deep sigh. She looked out of the window upon her garden. She was sorry to leave her flowers upon which she had expended so much attention. Henry would not look after them, she was certain, and they would become choked with weeds. She tried to picture him living alone in the house. But would he be alone? Perhaps he would bring the teacher there, and she would do his cooking, and sit at the table with him. And she would make use of her dishes, the ones she had collected with so much care during her married life. No, it must not be. She could not endure the thought of a usurper peering into her closets and bureau drawers. What was she to do? The perspiration stood out in beads upon her wrinkled forehead at this new aspect of the situation. The mere idea of another woman, and a hated rival at that, who had alienated her husband's affections, taking her place was terrible to contemplate. And yet she must go. She would take her belongings with her. She would pack up everything, and get a team to take them to the station. That teacher should not handle an article that belonged to her. She would go over to the store and get Tim Heaton to do the hauling for her that very day. Tim would do it cheaper than anyone else.

The next instant a frightened expression came into her eyes, and her face turned paler than ever. She rose to her feet, walked swiftly across the room, and lifted down a small box from a shelf on the wall. This she opened and looked in. There was not a cent left! She had given the last dollar to Henry to help pay the school-tax. No money! The helplessness of her position overwhelmed her, causing her to stagger back to the table and sink down limp and hopeless upon the chair she had recently left. How could she buy the ticket to the city, let alone pay Tim? Henry had no money, and there was not a person in the place she would ask for any. With a groan of despair she buried her face in her hands. Her cup of sorrow was now full to the brim and overflowing. She had slaved and denied herself all her life, and now she was

penniless! She did not have enough money to take her to the city! And Henry was the cause of all this. His laziness had brought them to such a depth of poverty, and instead of being ashamed of himself, he was making love to a girl young enough to be his granddaughter. The fool! Why should she not stop the spooning out by the well? She had her rights to defend.

Rising again to her feet, she hurried to the door, opened it, and came full-tilt against a boy just outside. With a yell of fright the visitor started back, lost his balance and toppled over upon the ground.

"For land's sakes, Jed Dyer! what do you mean by scaring me like this?" she demanded. "What do you want anyway?"

The boy rose slowly to his feet, brushed some dirt from his clothes, and stood on guard lest the woman should attack him. Seeing that she was waiting for him to speak, he mustered up his courage and advanced a couple of steps.

"Hen's wanted at the phone," he explained. "Somebody's callin' him from the city. Tell him to hustle."

"Wanted at the phone, is he?" Mrs. Winters asked, eyeing the boy keenly. "Who is it?"

"Dunno. I was told to tell him to hustle. That's all I know."

Mrs. Winters' curiosity was now aroused, as it was a most unusual thing for anyone to call Henry from the city. Several years ago he had received a message informing him of the death of his cousin, Jemima Juskins. But that had been the last. What did this one mean? She glanced over at the well, but Henry and the teacher were not there. She stepped out into the yard, and looked up and down the field where her husband had been haying that morning. When she saw him alone, raking hay, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"There he is," she said to the boy. "You go and give him the message yourself. He'll hustle now, all right."

CHAPTER XIII

"THE STARS ARE COMIN'!"

Mrs. Winters' curiosity was greatly aroused over the call from the city. She knew that Henry would waste no time in getting to the store, and most likely he would stop at the house on his way. She did not wish him to see her all dressed up in her Sunday clothes, as she might find it hard to explain, and she would not lie. The best thing would be to change her dress as speedily as possible.

Hurrying upstairs, she again entered her room, and had the last button fastened when she heard her husband's voice calling to her.

"Hi, Sarah, where are ye?" he shouted.

"I'll be down in a minute, Henry." Mrs. Winters replied, taking a peek into a little mirror to be sure that her dress was all right. She felt a little embarrassed as she thought of her contemplated flight. She wondered if she could keep calm in his presence.

Henry, however, was too much taken up with the telephone call to notice anything else. He was standing in the middle of the kitchen, anxiously awaiting her appearance.

"It's a call from the city, Sarah," he announced. "Now, who in time kin want me there! The last one I had was when me cousin, Jemima Juskins, died, an' they wanted to make arrangements fer her burial here. I hope t'goodness it's her husband this time, an' he's left us some of his money. Anyway, I'll soon find out."

"Don't be long, Henry," his wife begged. "I am as anxious as you are to know what the call means."

"Oh, I'll be back in a jiffy, 'specially if there's anything of importance. Mebbe the stars are goin' to fight fer me, after all, instead of ag'inst me. Won't it be great if old Juskins has left us all he had. He was worth a lot of money, so I believe."

"Yes, yes, he was. But never mind that now. Get along, and hurry back."

It seemed like hours to Mrs. Winters as she awaited Henry's return. Often she looked down the road, hoping to see him appear. She was well aware that when once at the store he forgot all about the passage of time. She thought, too, of her futile plans that afternoon. What had become of the teacher, she wondered. Why did she want to get Henry's picture at the well? And why had she not come into the house when so near? Perhaps she was afraid to do so owing to her guilty conscience. As she thought of this her anger once again returned. She could not go away until she had some money. But she would get it, and unless Henry changed for the better, she would leave him and let him get along the best he could. She was not going to grub and slave as she had in the past, and then not have enough money to buy a ticket to the city. It was disgraceful, and she would not put up with it much longer. She would wait, however, until she found out what the call from the city meant.

An hour passed, although it seemed like an age to the waiting woman, before the door was flung open and Henry entered. He was greatly excited, and puffing hard.

"Hooray, Sarah! The stars are comin'! The stars are comin'! Hooray!"

"Henry Winters, what is the matter with you? Are you crazy? What do you mean about the stars coming?"

"'The stars in their course fought ag'inst Sisera,' but they're goin' to fight fer Henry Winters after this. They're comin' in all their glory, an' we must be ready to receive 'em."

Mrs. Winters was certain now that her husband had taken leave of his senses. Her face turned pale, and her body trembled. She kept as calm as possible, hoping to find out the cause of Henry's excitement.

"What do you mean by the stars? Who was calling you from the city?"

"Why, didn't I tell ye, Sarah?"

"Indeed you haven't. You have been yelping ever since you came home about the stars."

"Is that so? Well, that's queer. I thought I told ye it was the manager of a movin'-picter concern; that's who it was. Now are ye satisfied?"

"But why was he calling you?"

"To make a picter, of course. Can't ye understand what that means?"

"He wants you to make a picture. That's nonsense. A queer picture you'd make."

"Huh, can't ye understand, Sarah? What more kin I explain? Didn't I tell ye that he wants to use our place to make a picter of 'The Old Home.' He said it is jist what he wants, an' he'll pay us well fer it, too. Now, what d'ye think of that?"

"I begin to understand a little now, Henry. And did you tell him he could have it?" Mrs. Winters was becoming quite excited, too.

"Sure I did. D'ye think I'm a fool? He's goin' t' bring his company here in cars. They're all stars, so he told me, an' they're goin' to make a great picter."

"My lands!" Mrs. Winters threw up her hands and sank down upon the nearest chair. "What in the world are we going to do with them? They'll expect us to feed them, I suppose. And where will they sleep? We haven't room for so many people, especially stars."

"Oh, ye needn't worry about that, Sarah. They'll go back to the city every night, an' come out early each mornin'. They'll bring their own grub along, too. It's to be a kind of a picnic with 'em, so I gathered from what that feller said over the phone. He has a mighty nice voice, an' he talked as if I was doin' him a great favor by allowin' him to come here."

"How did he happen to choose our place, Henry?"

"'Cause it jist suits him."

"What! this old unpainted house, the rickety barn, and the signs of ruin everywhere. I cannot understand it."

"But it's jist what he wants, Sarah. He's seen it, an' that old well took his eye at the first shot. It's the only one in the country, an' it's to figger prominent in the picter. Mebbe ye won't growl so much at me after this fer keepin' that old well as it is. It's comin' in very handy now."

"But the buildings are in a disgraceful condition, Henry. I shall feel ashamed to have strangers look at them."

"Oh, they're jist what he needs, so don't worry, me dear. The barn, woodshed, an' house are all to appear. An' he wants us in the picter, too."

"Wants us!" Mrs. Winters was aghast at the idea. "What do we know about such things? I thought they used only stars. We'd make fine looking stars, wouldn't we? Can you imagine us appearing upon the screen in the city?"

"Sure I kin."

"I can't, then. It is almost too ridiculous to think about."

"But we're to be stars, Sarah. It's to be a picter accordin' to nature, wild-like, with nuthin' artificial, but real as fleas on a dog's back."

"H'm, it certainly will be according to nature if you appear in it, Henry. You're about as near to wild life as anything I ever saw. There's nothing artificial about you, I must confess. With that old hat and clothes you're wearing, and your hair which hasn't been cut for months, you should satisfy them, all right, if they are looking for something wild."

"I'll suit 'em fine, remember, Sarah. Ye've allus been growlin' about the way I look, an' I never had any come-back. But can't ye now see fer yourself that it's me appearance that's goin' to make me fortune? If I was all dolled up like them city dudes, they wouldn't need me. But they want me jist as I am. Say, Sarah, it reminds me of that hymn they sing in church, 'Jist as I am without one plea.'"

"Don't talk that way, Henry. It's not right to use those words in such a connection. They are too sacred. And that reminds me of something I had forgotten all about. I wonder if it's proper for us to take part in the making of that picture? The people are all stars, so the manager said, and that means that they are actors and actresses. Now, we know what they are like and what lives they lead."

"How d'ye know that, Sarah?"

"Oh, I have read about them in papers, and people have told me things which are not to their credit."

"Whose credit, Sarah? The stars or the people who told ye? Ye words are somewhat hazy."

"The stars, of course. Surely you have enough sense to know that. And I'm thinking, too, about our position as church members. What will the parson and the rest think if they see us acting like two fools with all those strangers? We must consider our good names in the community."

"I'm not worryin' about that, Sarah. It doesn't trouble my religious principles one bit."

"Simply because you haven't any to be troubled about, Henry. You'd do almost anything for money, except good honest work. I know you well enough by this time. But I have myself to think about, so I don't want to do anything to disgrace my good name."

"Ah, don't let that bother ye, Sarah. Them stars are as respectable as the folks in this settlement. They're not goin' to contaminate us by their comin' here. An' let people talk if they want to. It's none of their bizness what we do. An' by jingo! when they find out how much money we're makin', they'll be as mad as hornets 'cause they didn't git sich a chance. Money does a mighty lot these days to take the stingin' edge off of religious principles."

"Henry! Do you realize what you are saying?"

"Should say I do, Sarah. Doesn't Sim Watters, a great churchman, allus put the little apples in the bottom of the barrel an' the fine big rosy ones on top?"

"But that is a different thing altogether, Henry."

"Not from my way of lookin' at it. Doesn't the extry price he gits fer them apples take some of the sting out of his religious principles? An' didn't Joe Parker patch up that old spavined an' heave-struck hoss of his an' sell him fer a sound critter? Joe is great at attendin' church, but—"

"That will do, Henry," Mrs. Winters interrupted. "I don't want to hear any more of such talk. All you do is to pick out the weak members of the church and hold them up to ridicule. That isn't fair. You might as well take the lunatics in the Asylum an' judge all the sane people by them."

"But, Sarah, let me—"

"Just a minute. Please wait until I'm through. You might as well judge all the people by the ones in jail, as to judge the church members by the weak ones."

"I know that, but—"

"Didn't I tell you to wait until I have finished with what I have to say? Or you might as well judge all the apples or potatoes in a barrel by the rotten ones. Now, do you think that would be a fair thing to do? And yet, that is just the way you judge and criticize the church members."

"I guess yer right, Sarah," Henry acknowledged. "I see something new now which I never saw before."

"I am glad that you have some sense left, anyway."

"I've enough sense left to ask ye one straight question, Sarah."

"And what is that?"

"It's about them stars. Ye've been judgin' 'em purty hard, it seems to me. Ye've heard an' read that some of 'em are not jist

altogether right. But should ye judge all by a few that go crooked?"

"But they're all bad," Mrs. Winters snapped, realizing how she had placed herself in an awkward position.

"How d'ye know that?"

"Well, I was just judging by the ones I heard and read about."

"So ye judge all the rest that way, eh? Didn't ye jist pitch into me fer doin' the same about church members? Didn't the Lord Himself say there'd be tares among the wheat? An' it seems to me that it doesn't matter whether the wheat is the church or a movin'-picter consarn. S'pose we jist wait an' judge them stars ourselves."

"When are they coming, Henry?" Mrs. Winters asked, now quite willing to end the argument.

"Oh, in about a week's time. The manager is to let me know the exact day."

"Dear me, I can't for the life of me imagine why they want to come to such a wretched place as this."

"Ah, but it'll all be fixed up later, Sarah, so that feller told me. Everything is to be changed like magic, an' we won't know the place when they git through with it. I've given 'em permission to do as they like, fer no matter what they do they can't make it look any worse than it is. I guess ye needn't worry any more about yer religious principles. The money we'll make will act like a soothin'-syrup to any troublesome qualms of conscience. It will to me, anyway."

Mrs. Winters sighed as she thought the matter over. She was pleased at the idea of the strangers coming, and yet she was afraid. Money and excitement were coming to her in a way she had never imagined. But was it right?

"And they'll be here in about a week's time, Henry?"

"Yes, an' they want to begin shootin' right away."

"Shooting! Why, what are they going to shoot? I thought they were going to make a picture."

"So they are, Sarah. Don't ye understand? They call it 'shootin',' an' the first thing they're goin' to shoot is you an' me settin' at the front door."

"My lands! Are we to be in it, Henry?"

"Sure. I thought I told ye that. You an' me are to be 'pa' an' 'ma.' I'm to do a hull lot of stunts, while you are to take the weepin' gal, who is the hero-ine, in yer arms at the right minute. Oh, it'll be all explained to us when they git here."

"But we'll have to be all dressed up, Henry, and I've got nothing but that old dress of mine."

"Not a bit of it, Sarah. That feller said he wants to shoot us jist as we are, showin' us a hard-workin' couple, almost down an' out an' mighty discouraged at our hard luck. It's to show us ready to be turned out of our old home. Gee! it's goin' to be great. I guess there'll be more truth in that scene than them actors'll ever imagine. Anyway, the stars are comin', Sarah, an' are goin' to fight fer us. Hooray!"

CHAPTER XIV

A DISCOVERY

Lemuel Karsall was busy at his hay. He had been at it since early morning, trimming the corners of the field with his scythe where the mowing-machine could not cut, and shaking out the heavy swathes. The day was warm and bright, and peace reigned over river and land. There was also a great peace in the young man's heart. This was due to his thoughts about Nita Rivers. She had brought a new meaning into his life. To him she was the very embodiment of all that is true, beautiful, and noble. On all sides he seemed to feel her presence. Everything reminded him of her. The smiling flowers visioned her beauty, and the songs of birds the music of her voice. Nature was transfigured by the mystic influence of his first great love. A new world was opened up, and he wondered how he had found any joy in life before his meeting with her. He was no less interested in his daily tasks, but now they were lifted to a higher plane, and he associated everything with her. It was for her sake he was working—the benediction of her smile, and the inspiration of her words of encouragement.

He thought of all this as he worked, and that afternoon as he sat down under the shade of a big tree by the side of the road to rest she was still in his mind, a glowing reality. Formerly he had kept all his hopes and plans to himself, for his sister cared for none of these things. But now it was different. In Nita Rivers he had found a kindred soul, and he longed for the day's work to be done that he might meet her again and talk about the things that interested them both.

And as he sat there a vision rose before him of the house in the valley below with Nita in charge, awaiting his coming in from the fields. He pictured her standing at the door watching for him, and the smile of welcome upon her face as he approached. And what evenings they would have together in The Loft, arranging and labeling their specimens. And what rambles they would have through fields and woods, searching for new wonders of tree, flower and stone to add to their collection. Occasionally his sister appeared in this vision, and then the dreamer came down suddenly from the realms of fancy to stern reality. How could Ada and Nita live together in the same house? he asked himself. He knew that it would be impossible. Anyway, he was not going to worry about that now. Ada was old enough to look after herself, and with the money coming from their father's bequest she could live comfortably. He would let her have the house, if she demanded it, and build another little one just for himself and Nita.

But if he married, their father's money would cease, and Ada would be penniless. This thought startled and aroused him from his dream. What was he to do? He could make a living, all right, but what about his sister? He could not leave her destitute. Neither could he give up the woman he loved. It was a difficult situation in which he was placed. Then a feeling of indignation came into his heart. What right had his father to leave his money in such a manner? Until Nita came into his life Lemuel had given it little thought. But now it made all the difference in the world to him. The money was there in charge of the Trust Company. It was the money his father had left for him and Ada providing that neither married. And if they did marry, what would become of the money? Who would get it? This idea aroused him, and he rose quickly to his feet. He had never thought of this before, so contented had he been with receiving the allowance that had come so regularly twice a year. But he must find out more about his father's will. He would go to the city and have a talk with the manager of the Trust Company. He was not going to give up Nita, neither would he lose that money without a struggle.

So intent was he with his own reflections that he did not notice an auto glide silently up the road and stop near the big tree. The sound of voices, however, arrested his attention, and as he glanced quickly around, he saw two men alighting from the car. They at once came toward him, and Lemuel noticed that they both were evidently well past middle age. Their faces were pleasant, but they showed by their manner that they were men well to do and accustomed to command. He looked again at the car and saw that it was a fine large Sedan with a chauffeur at the wheel. He knew that they must be men of considerable importance, and he wondered what they wanted.

"Excuse me," he heard one of them, the stouter of the two, say, "please tell me if we are on the right road to Crestville?"

"You are," Lemuel replied. "It is a little over fifteen miles away."

"Dear me! I didn't think it was so far, did you, William?"

Receiving no response from his companion, he glanced around and saw him off to the right examining something upon the ground.

"Isn't he the limit!" he exclaimed, while his eyes twinkled with amusement. "He's always on the lookout for some new discovery. I do not know how many times we had to stop this afternoon while he examined rocks, stones and flowers along the way. Why, he forgets all about time, and his meals, too, for that matter. But this is a most pleasant place, and if we are not intruding, I should like to rest a while under this fine tree."

"You are perfectly welcome, so make yourself at home," Lemuel assured him. "Your friend is a student of nature, I see."

"Indeed he is," the stranger replied as he stretched himself full length upon the grass. He then drew a silver cigar-box out of his pocket, opened it and held it forth to the young man. "You smoke, of course? You'll find these extra good."

Lemuel took one and put it into his pocket. The reclining man watched him curiously.

"Why not smoke it?"

"It will keep. I cannot smoke and work at the same time very well."

"Is this your place?"

"Yes. I live just down yonder," and Lemuel motioned to the house below.

"How I envy you, young man. What a glorious life you must lead. Married, eh?"

"No. Just my sister and myself."

Lemuel's eyes were fixed upon the other man as he spoke. He wanted to speak to him and find out what he was examining. So he was a student of nature like himself. It had been a long time since he had met such a person. Perhaps he might be a professor of some college. How he should like to show him his specimens in The Loft. But a natural diffidence restrained him.

And as he watched, the man rose from his knees, and clutching something in his hands, came toward them.

"I have found some sweet-hay," he announced. "Just smell that, Char-Daniel," and he thrust a portion of the hay close to his companion's nose. "Doesn't the scent of that thrill your very soul?"

"It certainly does, William. It takes me back to my childhood days, to my old home during the haying season. What would I not give to be as happy and free from care as I was then. And how strong and well I was, with an appetite always ready for my meals."

"If you lived here for a while, Char-Daniel, I mean, you would soon be your former self again," Radcliffe replied, taking his seat upon the ground by his side. "Suppose we spend a week or two in this place. I should like to study the plants around here. This is a new country to me, and I am most anxious to do some exploring."

"I am afraid I cannot stay, William. I also have considerable exploring to do, although of a different nature to yours. I am eager to end my quest and to learn the truth, no matter what that may be."

He rose to his feet, and turned to Lemuel.

"Do not be surprised if you see my friend prowling around here some day. He is perfectly harmless when chasing bugs and searching among the flowers and rocks. You might keep an eye over him, though, for he is subject to strange freaks when lost in thought. Just leave him alone and he will do no harm."

"I understand what you mean," Lemuel smilingly replied. "'There is no solitude like nature,' as an old writer said. It would be a great pleasure to have a kindred spirit tramping over my place and studying the many things that have so greatly interested me."

Both men looked curiously at Lemuel. Radcliffe was the first to speak.

"Are you, too, a student of nature? As you work your farm, do you keep your eyes open to the wonderful things around you? Have you been studying the plant life in this community? If so, I am much pleased, and shall consider you the best discovery I have made in years."

Lemuel colored a little, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He wanted to talk to this man about the things which were so near his heart. And yet he felt a diffidence in doing so. This man was a stranger to him, and he did not feel altogether at ease. If it had been Nita it would have been different, and his tongue would have been loosed at once. But he had to say something, and not act like a fool.

"Suppose you come with me to my house down yonder," he suggested. "I have a collection there which might interest you. Would you care to look at it?"

"With pleasure. Come, Char-Daniel, I mean, confound it! Let us go."

Charles Stanfield had heard hardly a word of this conversation. He was not at all interested in plants, but was gazing thoughtfully down over the fields and out upon the river. But at Radcliffe's closing words, he moved slowly toward the road, and took his seat by the chauffeur's side, while Lemuel and Radcliffe sat behind. It did not take them long to reach the house and to climb the stairs leading to The Loft. Lemuel led the way, and as he reached the floor above, he stood back and motioned to his collection.

"There are some of the fruits of my labors," he quietly informed them. "They mean a great deal to me."

With an exclamation of surprise and delight Radcliffe darted forward, and was soon examining the specimens in the cases, on the shelves and walls. Lemuel watched him with fast-beating heart. Here was a man who understood and appreciated such things. He paid no attention to Stanfield, who was wandering about the room, peering indifferently at the things which were of so much concern to the others.

"What a discovery!" Lemuel heard Radcliffe say, as he moved from case to case, and from shelf to shelf. He followed him and observed the keenly interested man. This to him was worth a lifetime of toil and neglect. His heart thrilled, and he longed for Nita to be present. What a story he would have to tell when he saw her again.

An exclamation of surprise from the other side of the room attracted his attention. Looking quickly in that direction, he saw Stanfield in the "corner" gazing intently upon the picture over the table.

"Where did you get this?" Stanfield abruptly inquired.

Lemuel crossed the room, and stood looking at the painting.

"It's pretty, isn't it?"

"It is. But where did you get it?"

"From a friend of mine." Lemuel colored a little, but the other did not notice his embarrassment. "Miss Rivers, the school teacher here, did that. It is a picture of her old home, and it is a fine piece of work."

Stanfield, however, made no reply, but stood staring at the scene before him. He then stepped up closer and fixed his eyes upon the two letters "N.R." in the lower right hand corner.

"Her initials, I suppose," he remarked.

"Yes. Nita Rivers is her name."

"Ah! And you say she teaches here?"

"She does during school term."

"So she is not here now?"

"Oh, yes. She is boarding at Mrs. Stevens' near the station."

Charles Stanfield was more excited than he had been for years, although outwardly he was very calm. He knew that one of his sister's daughters was near, but decided not to make himself known to her for a while that he might learn more about her. This young man knew her, and, perhaps, was in love with her. Matters were getting very interesting.

"Excuse me, but would you mind telling me your name? Mine is—is Daniel Doncaster, and my friend's is William

Radcliffe, president of a college in the United States. We are touring this province, and like to know the names of people from whom we receive favors."

"I am Lemuel Karsall," was the reply, "and I have lived here most of my life. I am always pleased to have visitors come to this part of the country. I hope that we shall see you again."

"Indeed you shall. You have won the heart of my friend by your fine collection, while I am greatly interested in this picture. The work is well done, and there is a strong appeal in that old house among those noble trees. I should like to meet the artist sometime. When I come back, you must be sure to introduce us. Have you any more of her pictures?"

"That is all I have. But I am sure that Miss Rivers will be pleased to show you others which she considers superior to this. Painting is one of her hobbies."

"She has others, then?"

"Yes, indeed she has. She is very fond of nature study, and has been of much assistance to me."

"I am sure she has," Stanfield replied, more to himself than to Lemuel. "She certainly must be a remarkable young woman. But, there, we must be on our way. Good-bye for the present. Come, William," he called, "it's time for us to be off."

"Dear me! What are you in such a hurry about?" Radcliffe growled. "You are always dragging me away just when I am enjoying myself."

"But you can come again," Stanfield smilingly replied. "We must not detain Mr. Karsall any longer to-day. It has been good of him to give us so much of his time."

"Indeed it has, Char-Daniel, and with you I wish to thank him for the pleasure he has given me this afternoon. How did you happen to take up this study?" he asked, turning to Lemuel.

"I was led to it when a mere boy by an Englishman who lived with us for a while. Then at college I continued the study. My best discoveries are recorded there," and he laid his right hand upon the pile of note-books upon his desk.

Radcliffe stepped forward, and was about to examine the books when Stanfield restrained him.

"Not now, William," he ordered. "They are private property, remember. And, besides, you have not the time at present. I know what it will mean if you get your eyes upon those pages. Come along."

Very reluctantly Radcliffe turned away from the desk and walked to the head of the stairs. Here he stopped and looked up into Lemuel's face.

"You are doing a fine work here, young man. I am astonished and delighted at what I have discovered. Alone, and with little encouragement, you have made a collection of which any man might well be proud. But for this tyrant who insists upon dragging me away, I would stay and have a long talk with you. I also long to examine your books. But you shall see me again some day. In the meantime, I shall write to you, and I trust that our correspondence will be of much benefit to both of us. Oh, if I could only instil into the hearts and minds of my students something of your wonderful spirit. But they shall hear of your work and the collection you have made. Yes, yes, I am coming," he called out to Stanfield. "Confound that impatient man! Good-bye, Mr. Karsall, and good luck to you."

Lemuel watched the car as it sped away. He then returned to The Loft, and walked slowly across the room with his eyes fixed upon his specimens. Going over to his corner, he sat down and looked upon the picture over his desk. He was very happy. The president of a college had congratulated him upon his work. How pleased Nita would be. He longed to see her as soon as possible and tell her the good news.

CHAPTER XV

STARTLING NEWS

For only a short time did Lemuel remain alone in The Loft. He then went back to his work in the field. The afternoon was drawing to a close, and he had lost over an hour and a half already. He felt no regret, however, for the visitors had given a new zest to his life. The professor's interest in his collection thrilled his soul, and as he continued his raking he would sometimes pause and gaze dreamily out over the river. Wonderful thoughts were passing through his mind, and often his lips moved as he repeated some favorite quotation. Choice words of great masters had always cheered and inspired him in the past. He had learned many lines by heart, and at times he would repeat these aloud as he worked. Neighbors passing along the road had stopped to listen, and had told others of Lemuel's strange mutterings out in the field. Such things were more than they could understand, so decided that the lone worker was "queer." They did not know that their judgment was the same as had been pronounced upon all thinkers through the ages. Neither did they realize, and, in truth, they would not have listened had anyone tried to enlighten them, that the men who were considered "queer" were the very ones who had done most for the welfare of mankind.

Lemuel was well aware how the people laughed at him and talked about his strange doings. It only tended to increase his self-dependence, and to make him more reserved in speaking about his discoveries. It caused him to devote himself more than ever to his beloved work, and in the joy of study to forget what others said and thought.

But at times there had come to him an intense longing for some kindred spirit to whom he could speak. He had found such a person in Nita Rivers, who had come into his life bringing love and inspiration. And now those two strangers had visited him, and one was a professor who had been greatly pleased with the collection in The Loft. And he had promised to write and pay him another visit. Lemuel's heart beat fast and a vision rose before him of the wonderful conversation they would have together. There were many questions he longed to ask which he felt sure the professor would be able to answer. And he was the president of a university! It seemed almost too good to be true that such a man had been under his humble roof and had examined his treasures.

A shrill blast of a horn fell upon his ears, telling him that supper was ready. It was later than usual, but he had forgotten all about eating. He knew that Ada had been away that afternoon, but she had not told him at noon where she was going. The gulf which separated the two had widened of late so they had not much to say to each other. Lemuel was quite willing now that Ada should go her own way, so long as she left him alone.

Little was said during supper. Lemuel did not notice that his sister looked at him somewhat curiously, and that her step was unusually light. There was also a peculiar expression of triumph in her eyes, which was not caused entirely by her walk that afternoon. A stranger observing her would have been much attracted by her appearance, for Ada was possessed of more than ordinary beauty of face and form. But she never looked better than she did this evening, although her brother did not notice it, being too much absorbed with his own affairs. Considerable blame rested upon him, no doubt, for his indifference to his sister. Had he considered her more, and taken her somewhat into his confidence it might have meant a great deal, especially so now.

After supper Lemuel attended to the chores, and when he had finished, he went to his own room. When he reappeared he was dressed in his best suit. Without a word he left the house and walked quickly to the main road. Ada watched him until he was out of sight. She then went back to the table, cleared away the dishes, washed them and put them upon the pantry shelf. She worked rapidly, in keeping with the agitated state of her mind. Her heart was filled with anger against her brother and the teacher. In this she felt perfectly justified, for she believed that she was doing her duty in trying to save Lemuel from a designing woman. In all ages people had done the same, hauling men and women to prison, torturing them on the rack, or burning them at the stake. All had felt justified in doing such diabolical things. In a lesser degree Ada Karsall thus became one of the innumerable throng. She, too, justified the fire of anger and revenge raging in her heart. It was righteous indignation, so she believed, and that could not be wrong. She, like so many others, never stopped to consider whether the ones she was willing to persecute had as much right to their opinions as she had to hers.

Lemuel made his way to Widow Brown's, expecting to find Nita there. Although he waited for some time, she did not appear, and he wondered what had detained her. He was disappointed, so when he at length left the house he walked slowly along the road leading to the station. He called at Mrs. Stevens' and inquired for the teacher. To his dismay he was told that she had gone never to return. Mrs. Stevens noted the expression of concern upon his face, and asked him to

sit down. She was a motherly woman, and fond of Lemuel whom she had known since he was a child.

"Miss Rivers has gone because she is not wanted here as a teacher any longer," she explained.

Lemuel could hardly believe that he had heard aright. He stared wide-eyed at the woman before him.

"Not wanted," he gasped. His throat was dry and a great weight was pressing upon his heart. "What is the meaning of all this?"

Mrs. Stevens plucked at the corner of her apron as if unwilling to explain. Her face bore a worried look which did not escape Lemuel's eyes.

"Is there anything the matter?" he asked. "Don't be afraid to tell me, for I want to know the truth. Why is she not wanted here?"

"Because of her family record. It is reported that her father was a bad man. He broke his wife's heart and then committed suicide, leaving her to provide for her family by taking in washing and going out to work by the day."

"Oh, is that all?" Lemuel was much relieved, and his face brightened. "It is sad, I acknowledge, but why should that affect Miss Rivers as a teacher? She cannot help what her father did. There is no stain of dishonor upon her, is there?"

"No, no, there is not a word against her. But she has an only sister who has gone astray, so it is reported."

Into Lemuel's eyes came an expression of anger, and his hands clenched hard together. He was a peace-loving man, and had never been known to quarrel with anyone. But this was more than human endurance could stand. The injustice of it all overwhelmed him. He could hardly believe it possible that people would turn against Nita because of what her father had done. He took a quick step toward Mrs. Stevens.

"Where did this information come from?" he demanded. "Who are the ones who have spread this report?"

He stood very erect and tense in his agitation, ready to go forth at once to confront and denounce Nita's enemies.

"Your own sister has been the chief one," Mrs. Stevens replied.

At these words Lemuel's face went white as death, and his body trembled.

"Ada!" he gasped. "Ada started that report! It can't be true. There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake, Lemuel. Ada has taken a great dislike to Miss Rivers, as you, no doubt, know, so she wants to get her away from this place. She is afraid that you will marry her, and that she will lose your father's money. There, now, I have told you the plain truth, hard though it is."

With a moan Lemuel slumped down upon a chair and stared straight before him. His own sister his greatest enemy! The perspiration came out upon his forehead as he thought of this. What was he to do? What could he say to her? Had it been anyone else, it would have been different. But his own sister!

"Have you any idea how Ada learned about Miss Rivers' family?" he presently asked.

"Mrs. Winters told her, so I believe. And she had her information from an agent who was here a day or two ago selling shrubs. He saw Miss Rivers and recognized her at once. That was how the story first started. I am so sorry, for I think a great deal of Miss Rivers."

"But who gave her notice to quit?" Lemuel asked. "Who has the authority to do that?"

"Oh, no one has done that yet, although I understand that the trustees are about ready to do so. As soon as Miss Rivers heard about it she turned very pale. I was sure she was going to faint. She never uttered one word but went quietly to her room, packed up her few belongings, except her writing-desk, which she wishes me to keep for a while. She then came downstairs and bade me good-bye. I tried to reason with her, but it was no use. She said that she was not going to stay where she was not wanted, even though she had right on her side. Poor girl! my heart aches for her."

"When did this take place?" Lemuel asked in a husky voice.

"Only this evening, and she got away on the seven train. I had her trunk sent to the station. She would not ride, preferring to walk, so she told me. She seemed bewildered when she left the house, just like a person in a dream. Her eyes were so big and bright, and she looked at me like a hunted creature. It gave me a queer feeling which I can't get over."

"Where did she go, Mrs. Stevens?"

"To the city, of course."

"But her address there?"

"She didn't leave any. She said that she didn't want anyone to know what had become of her."

At that instant a loud knock sounded upon the door, and as Mrs. Stevens opened it, Henry Winters entered. His eyes were blazing with anger, and he glared at Lemuel as if he were his mortal enemy. He was carrying a paper-covered book in his hand, which he flourished with much vigor.

"Where is the teacher?" he demanded. "I want to see her at once."

"She's gone," Mrs. Stevens replied. "She went on the seven train."

"Gone! gone! Then, I'm too late."

"What is the matter, Henry?" Lemuel asked. "You look at me as if I were to blame. I had nothing to do with her going."

"H'm, is that what ye think about it? I'll jist open yer eyes, then. If it hadn't been fer you, Miss Rivers would not be in this mess of trouble."

"But, Henry—"

"There, now, keep cool, Lem, an' don't git excited at what I say. Ye know as well as I do that it's fer yer sake she's gone. She doesn't want ye to lose yer dad's money on her account. She's one gal in a million, that's what she is. She's not willin' to separate you an' Ada an' break up yer home. I'm not cross at you, remember, fer it's only nat'ral that ye should think a heap of her. But I'm mad, ragin' mad, at the ones who spread them yarns which that agent started. But they can't drive her out. She has the school law on her side, an' she kin stay, no matter what the trustees do. Read that," and he thrust the book he was holding into Lemuel's hand. "That's the School Law of this Province, an' there on that page which I have marked ye'll find that she can't be fired from this deestrict without due notice. Why, we are now well on into July, an' that book says in plain language that notice to quit must be given to a teacher at least one month before June the 30th. Miss Rivers got no sich notice, an' she has the right to stay here fer the hull of the next term. That's what I wanted to see her about, an' advise her not to leave."

"It would have made no difference, Henry," Lemuel replied. "Miss Rivers must know that she has the school law on her side. But she would not stay with so many against her. She does not want to make trouble between Ada and me."

"An' are ye willin' to let it rest at that, Lem? By the jumpin' crickets! If I loved a gal as you seem to love her, I'd raise sich ructions that people 'ud think the Day of Judgment had come."

A semblance of a smile flitted over the young man's face and his eyes brightened a little. He held out his hand to his worthy neighbor.

"Thank you, Henry, for the interest you have taken in this affair. I must go home now and think this all out, that I might do nothing rashly."

Henry grasped the outstretched hand in a firm grip of understanding and sympathy.

"That's right, Lem, think it out. But in all yer thinkin', stand by the gal ye love, an' I'll stand by yez both to the last ditch. When ye want any help, jist call upon yer old friend, Hen Winters of Red Rose Cottage, an' he'll be with ye quicker'n greased lightnin'."

CHAPTER XVI

UNDER COVER OF NIGHT

Lemuel left the house and walked slowly back along the road. He felt grateful to Henry for his words of encouragement. He knew that he had a true friend in the old man. Just now he did not want to meet anyone. His only desire was to get away by himself that he might think. So Nita had gone! And she had not even bidden him good-bye! And it was on account of that money. Ada had accomplished her purpose, he was well aware. She had used the agent's story to serve her purpose. A feeling of anger came into his heart. His sister was willing to sacrifice his happiness and injure the girl he loved so dearly. And it was all for the sake of money. If he married, the bequest would cease. How often Ada had dinned that into his ears. It had mattered little to him in the past, and he had been quite willing to let her talk as much as she wished. But now that such an overwhelming love had come into his life it made a great difference. What was money, an ocean of it, compared with his love for Nita Rivers? But to Ada it meant everything, and he knew that she felt justified in the course she had taken. He was sure that she had made it a matter of religion and had prayed over it most earnestly. That was her nature. He knew how she would consider it from one point of view only, that which affected her own interests. She would not think of the ones she was seeking to injure, he was certain. She was right, and that was the end of it.

Reaching his own place, Lemuel did not go into the house. It would be too close there, and should Ada be awake, he did not want to answer any questions she might ask. In fact, he was in no mood for any conversation with her after the way she had treated the girl he loved. He preferred to remain outside where he could breathe more freely. He walked slowly to the barn, for it looked companionable standing silhouetted in the moonlight. The big doors were open, and the sweet scent of new-mown hay drifted softly out from the partly-filled bays. The air was balmy, and peace reigned upon river and land. But no peace came to Lemuel's tortured brain as he sat down upon a pile of hay that he had left upon the floor. He thought of Ada and her contemptuous scheme to interfere with his love for Nita. Again he thought of the money. How he hated that word. She had made a god of it, and it was dominating her entire being. Through it he had lost Nita. Where had she gone? he asked himself. Was she thinking of him? Did she love him as he loved her? This idea was startling. Perhaps she had only looked upon him as a friend. Was that the reason why she had gone away without one word of farewell? The perspiration came out upon his forehead at the thought. So intense was his love, that never for an instant had he considered whether she loved him. Was it only a one-sided affair, after all?

And as he sat there, half reclining upon the hay, his eyes turned to the big field beyond. The barn cast its shadow obliquely upon the ground, fantastic in shape, like some huge structure half up-reared. Elsewhere all was bright. To his heated brain it assumed the appearance of a black monster coming forth to blot out the glory around. Was it an omen of what was coming to him? Did it mean that the shadow which had swept so suddenly upon him was to darken and take all joy out of his life? He had always scoffed at such superstitious notions in the past. But now it was different. That splotch of shadow fascinated him, and riveted his attention. In fact, he preferred to watch it rather than the bright spaces beyond, as it was more in harmony with his sad and gloomy state of mind.

And as he looked, he became aware of a form moving slowly through the blackness. He sat bolt upright, and strained his eyes in an effort to see more clearly. It was a human being, he was certain, and who could it be prowling around the place at such a time of night? Perhaps it was a thief. His heart beat fast, and cautiously he drew himself to his knees ready to spring forth and confront the intruder. The next instant, however, he was on his feet, for in the dim form he recognized Nita Rivers. At first he could hardly believe his eyes, but imagined that it was only a vision he saw. But as she came nearer and stopped not far from where he was standing, he knew that it was no dream but the girl herself.

Lemuel was now in a quandary and much puzzled. Where had she come from? Mrs. Stevens had told him that she had gone on the seven train. But here she was only a few steps away. He longed to speak to her, to call her by name and ask her what she wanted. But he hesitated, his mind filled with wonder. He would wait and find out what she intended to do. It was a trying situation, but he was not kept long in suspense, for presently Nita stretched out her hands in a mute appeal toward the house but a short distance away. At once Lemuel surmised her meaning, and with a great throb of joy in his heart, he leaped forward and stood by her side. With a half-suppressed cry of fright, Nita turned, and the next instant she found herself caught in a pair of strong arms. For a few seconds she struggled in an effort to free herself, and then gave up the attempt, permitting her lover to hold her fast. She knew who it was, and an overwhelming sense of happiness came into her heart. She was content to remain there forever and enjoy the rapture of her first great love. It was heaven to

know that some one loved her like that. In a few minutes, however, she again endeavored to free herself from those encircling arms.

"This is not right," she gasped. "Let me go."

At once Lemuel bent his head and kissed her again and again upon the lips.

"I love you," he whispered, "and now I know that you love me. Let me hear you say it yourself."

Nita's only reply was to entwine her arms around the young man's neck and cling to him like a tender vine to some sturdy tree. Then tears came into her eyes, and she sobbed as if her heart would break. Lemuel was greatly disturbed.

"What is the matter?" he asked, loosening somewhat his hold. "Surely you are not unhappy."

"It is not that," the girl sobbed. "Forgive me, but I cannot help it. This is all so unexpected. I hope you do not mind my foolishness. Let me get my handkerchief."

Lemuel stood and watched her as she wiped the tears from her eyes, although he could not see her face very well owing to the darkness. His heart beat wildly from the intensity of his emotion. This was a new and wonderful experience to him. It was his first great love, and it had overwhelmed him like a mighty flood. Nothing else mattered to him now. Ada and the money were forgotten. He would gladly have stood forth upon the highest hill and proclaimed his joy to the world. He led Nita out of the shadow into the brightness beyond. He did not consider that Ada might be watching, and he would not have cared, anyway. Eagerly he looked into the girl's eyes.

"Are the tears all gone now?" he asked.

"Yes, all gone." Nita was smiling, although her face was flushed. Then with a sigh, like a tired child, she rested herself against him, supported by his encircling arm.

"I must hurry back to the station," she presently declared. "The train will soon be here, and I must not miss it this time."

"I am glad you missed the other one."

"So am I now. I missed it on purpose, too."

"You did! Why, I thought you were anxious to get away from here."

"So I was, but I could not go without saying good-bye to you."

"Why didn't you let me know that you were going?"

"I couldn't bear the thought of bidding you good-bye forever. But I did want to look at your house once more, and so—"

"You missed the train on purpose that you might come here to-night?"

"Yes, that was it. But I never expected to meet you this way. I am afraid I have done wrong in coming."

"No you haven't, darling," and Lemuel again drew her close. "If you had not come, I should not have known of your love. My heart was breaking as I sat there in the barn thinking about you, and the cruel way you have been treated. And you must stay."

"No, I cannot. I could not bear to remain here with the people, and your sister especially, against me. And it is not right that I should be the means of separating you and Ada and causing you to lose your father's money. I am determined to go, and nothing can stop me."

"But we love each other so much, Nita. I don't believe anyone ever loved another so much as I love you. It doesn't seem possible sometimes, but I worship the very ground on which you walk. How could I get along without you? Without you life would be unbearable."

"We shall have the remembrance of our love, Lemuel, and that will mean a great deal. But, there, I must go to the station, as I do not intend to miss the train this time."

Lemuel was in despair, and reasoned with all eloquence at his command. He pleaded and begged for her to stay. The money did not matter. He could earn a living and make enough for themselves, and Ada, too, for that matter. With Nita by his side he could accomplish anything. His was the rapture that would overcome all obstacles. He would go to the city and win his way there. He would become a professor in some college and gain money and fame. Nita smiled somewhat sadly as she listened to his glowing words. She understood more about the world than he did, and what it meant to struggle against mountains of difficulties. She thought of her mother's fierce fight as well as her own. Lemuel did not know what it meant, she was well aware. He had never as yet come face to face with the cold and cruel facts of life. Although he had worked hard, he had always been sure of a living. Starvation had never menaced him, and he did not know what it was to strive against debt and grinding poverty. But she knew only too well, and for that reason she was in a better position to judge the value of what he said.

They were walking slowly along the road toward the station as Lemuel pleaded his cause. To Nita, young and alone as she was in the world, it was a strong temptation to remain with the man she loved. But her stern sense of duty warned her that it would not be right.

"I must go away—now," she at length replied. "For your sake as well as my own it would not be well for me to remain here."

"But you will come back, Nita."

"I cannot."

"Oh, don't say that. Anyway, you will send for me if you want me."

"Perhaps so."

"Why do you speak that way, Nita? Won't you tell me for sure that you will come or send for me some day?"

"How can I, Lemuel? I shall never do anything that will cause you the least regret. I must not come between you and your sister, and ruin you both financially."

"Oh, that is all nonsense."

"No, it is not. I can see things which are hidden from you now, so I do not wish to do anything that would make you unhappy in the future."

"But how could I be unhappy having you always with me, Nita? Life would be like one grand sweet song."

"Oh, I wish I could agree with you," and the girl gave a deep sigh. "Perhaps I am thinking too much about the discords that would mar the harmony of the music."

"Discords! Why, there wouldn't be any. Our love is so great and true that nothing could ever disturb the harmony. Promise, oh, promise me, that you will come back and be my wife."

"I cannot promise, Lemuel."

"You won't promise!"

"I promise you nothing now. It would not be right. We must wait."

"But why did you say that you love me? Didn't you miss the train on purpose that you might come here?"

"I have told you already, Lemuel. But had I known all, it is not likely I should have done such a foolish thing. I have only made you more unhappy, and that was farthest from my heart."

They were at the station now, and in a few minutes the train would be due. Only two or three people were there, for the hour was late. Slowly they walked up and down the platform, their hearts filled with sadness at the thought of parting.

"Where are you going, Nita?" Lemuel asked.

"To the city, of course."

"I am glad of that, as I was afraid you were going farther away. I shall see you there soon. You must give me your address."

"No, you must not know where I am."

"What! You surely don't mean that, Nita! I must know where you are staying. How can I live without seeing you again, and soon?"

"I do mean it," was the low reply, and there was a tremor in the girl's voice as she spoke "Oh, I cannot explain what I mean, and you would not understand if I did. I am doing it all for the best."

"Nita!"

Lemuel caught her in his arms and drew her to him. No one was watching, and neither did he care, so overcome was he with his deep emotion.

"You must not go like this," he declared. "You must tell me."

Before Nita could reply the train blew for the station, and the blazing headlight shot its fiery gleam along the track.

"Good-bye, dear," Nita whispered. "I must go."

The young man bent his head, his lips met hers, and the next minute she was gone. But the impression of that kiss remained to him through weary days like a sacred benediction.

CHAPTER XVII

A WORTHY CHAMPION

Henry Winters came home from the store in a fighting mood. His wife had never seen him so angry. In fact, he was so excited that he had very little appetite, and hardly touched a thing upon the table. Mrs. Winters was quite certain what was the trouble. She had heard about the teacher's departure that day, and had secretly rejoiced. Her husband's worry did not bother her in the least. It was for the good of the community that the teacher should go, so she reasoned, and it was better for Henry to suffer than for the entire settlement to become contaminated. Why should a happy home be wrecked through a silly flirtation? Lem and Miss Rivers would soon get over their infatuation for each other when they were separated for a time, and thus everything would turn out well in the end.

When Henry rose from the table, he lighted his pipe and picked up his hat. He glanced at his wife as if about to say something, and saw that she was watching him calmly, almost with triumph. He knew very well what she was thinking about, and it made him more incensed than ever. Without a word, he hurried to the door and passed out. Going to the barn, he attended to the chores, and when these were finished he sat down upon the doorsill of the horse stable. He was in an ugly frame of mind and would gladly have welcomed an encounter with almost anyone except a woman, especially his wife.

"I'd jist like to git me hands on them trustees," he growled. "I know the women folks are back of all this. But one can't hit them except with the tongue, an' that ain't much satisfaction when they git the better of ye every time. Now, with a man it's different. Ye kin stand right up to him an' have it out with the fists. An' to think that them women have made a dead-set ag'inst that poor little innocent teacher! It makes me blood bile to think of it. I'm sorry Sarah's mixed up with the racket."

He sighed as he rose to his feet, and picked up the milk-pails.

"Guess I'd better git through with the milkin', an' then stroll over to see Lem. Poor feller! I pity him. He must be purty well down in the dumps, an' I don't blame him if he is."

When he had finished milking, he returned to the house and set the pails down upon the milk-house floor.

"There, I guess that'll do fer to-day, Sarah," he declared. "I'm goin' over to see Lem fer a few minutes. I want to borrow a fork, as I broke mine yesterday pitchin' hay."

"I didn't know you ever worked hard enough to break anything," his wife retorted. "The fork was all right this afternoon when I was at the barn. I saw it stuck into the hay which you were too lazy to pitch up into the loft. If you broke it yesterday, as you say you did, it must have mended itself. It had plenty of time, anyway, for you haven't touched it since."

Henry waited to hear no more, but beat a hasty retreat. Mrs. Winters smiled sadly as she turned her attention to the straining of the milk and placing the pans upon the shelves.

"He's hopeless," she mused. "I wonder what he wants to see Lem about, anyway. More mischief, no doubt."

Henry seated himself upon the wood pile and gazed off thoughtfully toward the barn.

"What's the use of lyin' to a woman like Sarah?" he muttered. "She catches me every time. Now, if I had said something else instead of that fork, sich as the rake-handle, the whiffle-tree, or some other dang thing, she might not have caught on. But to think that she was snookin' around the barn an' saw that fork! Guess I'll have to give up lyin', 'specially to Sarah."

While he was thus meditating, Ada Karsall came into view, walking rapidly across the field straight toward him. Henry's face grew stern, and his eyes shone with anger. He felt in his bones that something out of the ordinary had taken place to cause her to walk so fast.

"I don't want to see her," he growled. "After the mischief she's done I might not be able to control me temper. Sarah says a man should allus be perlite to a lady. I ginerally am, the Lord knows, but me patience is sometimes strained to the bustin-pint at some of the so-called ladies I run up ag'inst."

Ada saw Henry, and made at once for him. She was greatly agitated, and her face was very white. She was breathing

hard from her fast walk.

"What's wrong now, Ada?" Henry inquired. "Ye look 'most scared outer yer life. Lem's not hurt or dead, I hope?"

"Oh, it's worse than that," Ada replied. "I'm afraid he's gone out of his mind, and he may be dead now, for all I know."

"Ye don't say!" Henry rose to his feet, his eyes filled with concern. "Crazy, is he? When did it come upon him? Set down, gal, yer all wrought up."

"I can't sit down, Henry. I can't rest a minute. Oh! what am I to do?"

"Where is Lem now?"

"I don't know."

"H'm, is that so? What happened, anyway?"

"He left me without a word, and it's all due to that teacher."

Henry's face cleared, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He was about to ask another question when Mrs. Winters came out of the milk-room. She had heard the sound of voices, and was curious to know what was going on. Seeing the two at the barn, she came at once to where they were standing.

"My dear, what's all the trouble about?" she asked Ada. "You look completely fagged out. Come into the house and rest yourself."

"Oh, Ada can't rest," Henry explained. "She told me so herself, an' it proves what the Bible says that there's no rest fer the wicked."

"Henry Winters! how dare you insult a poor troubled girl like that?" his wife demanded. "I am thoroughly ashamed of you."

"Mebbe ye are, Sarah, an' it's no news to me. But I was jist havin' me little joke, that's all. Don't mind what I say, Ada. I'm so chock-full of Scripter texts that they jist gush out like sweat on a bilin' day in summer. The parson would be pleased to know how well I remember that favorite text of his."

"He'd be very much annoyed if he knew how you are applying it now to such a noble woman as Ada. And how do you know it is his favorite text?"

"'Cause he uses it so often, Sarah. Why, I've heard it at least once a year as long as I kin remember."

"H'm, I guess that is about all you do remember, then."

"Not a bit of it, Sarah. I know that sermon all by heart, an' how the parson has it divided into the firstly, secondly, thirdly, and so on, to the tenthly. An', my, what a grand closin' he has where he picters the misery an' unrest that comes upon the wicked who injure their neighbors an' the innocent ones."

"Henry! Will you stop talking so much? I want to hear what's troubling Ada. Your tongue is like a mill-clapper, and—"

"An' a'most like the tongues of the wicked when they git lashin' some poor unfortunate woman who can't help herself. The parson says that is the most contemptible thing on earth, an' I agree with him fer once."

"Henry!"

"It's true, Sarah, no matter what ye think. There's no rest fer the wicked, an' that's one of the ways the Lord punishes 'em."

"You are quite right, Henry," Ada agreed. "The Lord will surely punish Miss Rivers for luring Lemuel away from me and breaking up our home. He's gone! he's gone!" she wailed, "and it's all the fault of that wicked teacher. She wants to get his money."

Henry stared in amazement at the distressed woman. She had not taken his pointed words to heart at all, but had applied them to her enemy.

"Well, I'll be—be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "I can't understand some people nohow."

"I can't understand Lemuel, anyway, Henry. He was always a good brother to me until that—that woman crossed his path. She's turned his head completely, and now he's gone!"

"When did he go?" Mrs. Winters asked.

"This evening. I suspected something, and watched him closely all day."

"Poor feller!" Henry murmured. "He's got my sympathy, all right."

"But he hasn't mine," Ada emphatically declared. "He doesn't deserve any for acting like a fool. Why, he didn't sleep at all last night. In fact, he never went to bed, but was prowling around out of doors."

"What was he doin'?"

"Doing! I don't like to tell you the terrible thoughts which are in my mind."

"It's jist as well, Ada. Ye'd better keep them there, fer me an' Sarah might be shocked. We're too religious to know what yer thinkin' about. If ye want to cuss an' swear, go ahead. I kin stand that, a'right, though mebbe Sarah can't."

"Well, you can judge for yourselves what I think. Look at that."

She had pulled a small handkerchief out of her dress pocket, and held it up for inspection.

"There it is. I found it right by the barn, and whose do you suppose it is? It's hers, of course, for you can see the letter 'R' there in the corner. That is all the evidence I need, and it makes me so weak I can hardly stand."

"I can't see what's wrong about that," Henry defended. "S'pose she did drop that little thing, what of it? It doesn't prove anything ag'inst her."

"But it proves that she was around the barn last night. And what would she be doing there if Lemuel wasn't with her?"

"Sure, sure, that's only nat'ral. I wouldn't blame him one bit. I'd do the same meself if I was young ag'in."

"And you'd do it now if you had the chance, Henry," his wife retorted. "You are just as rattle-brained and giddy as ever when it comes to a pretty face and a flutter of skirts. There's no fool like an old fool."

"And there are young fools, too, Mrs. Winters," Ada reminded. "And Lemuel is the most hopeless I ever saw. To think that he was with that woman out there by the barn last night! They were up to no good, I am sure of that. She must be bad through and through."

"She goes to church, though, doesn't she?" Henry queried.

"Oh, yes, I know she does. But no doubt she does that as a cloak to her wickedness, and to impress people, especially Lemuel."

"Then, all people who go to church are not saints, eh?"

"You go, Henry, and you are far from being a saint," Mrs. Winters replied. "I don't believe you get one bit of good by going."

"Oh, I go 'cause you drag me there, Sarah. Now, that teacher goes 'cause she likes to go, an' it's her nat'ral element."

"H'm," Ada contemptuously sniffed. "She's a hypocrite, that's what she is. I can't understand why Lemuel doesn't see through her wiles. She's set her cap for him just to get his money. And now he's gone and left me."

"An' Lem didn't tell ye where he was goin'?"

"No. He didn't eat a mouthful of food all day, and whenever I spoke to him he stared at me in such a way that I was really frightened. Then this evening he put on his best suit and left the house. Oh, I don't know what I am going to do! I do not dare to stay in the house alone to-night."

"Ah, ye needn't worry about that, Ada. You jist camp here with Sarah, an' I'll go over an' sleep at your place. I kin have Lem's bed, I s'pose?"

"Oh, will you do that for me, Henry? It will be such a relief. Lemuel's bed is all made up, and you can make yourself at home. Be sure to put the cat out and fasten the back door. Here is the key."

"I'll look after everything, a'right, Ada. Mebbe Lem 'll come home in the night. But tell me, why has the teacher left, anyway? I thought she was hired fer the next term."

"Because of her guilty conscience; that's why. It's always the way with such people, and it's a terrible punishment. There is certainly no rest for the wicked, as you just said."

"But are ye sure that's the reason, Ada? If she's after Lem's money, as ye say she is, why, then, has she gone away. It seems to me she'd hang on like a bull-dog to a rat if that was her purpose."

"There is another reason," Ada slowly replied. "It has to do with her family. Her father was a bad man, and her only sister has gone astray. The evil streak must be in that teacher, so we don't want the children of this place to be contaminated by such a person. Think of the untold harm she might do to little innocent minds."

"An' so the good people of this place set upon that young woman 'cause of what her father an' sister have done? An' it was all fer the sake of the souls of little ones. Did they ever think of her soul? Did they stop to consider what a contemptible thing it is to persecute a woman fer the sins of her family?"

"Henry!" Mrs. Winters cried.

"Jist a minute, Sarah. I'm only moralizin' a bit. It's good fer me own soul. Now, when I find a couple of rotten pertaters in a row, I don't throw all the rest away 'cause of them bad ones. I'd be a dang fool to do a thing like that. An' yit, that's jist what Christian people are doin' too often to-day. They have societies fer convertin' the heathen an' bringin' 'em inter the fold. But it seems to me there should be some darn good housecleanin' right at home."

"Henry! do you realize what you are saying?"

"Never more than now, Sarah. Me mental machinery is in fust-class workin' order, so don't worry. When that sinnin' woman was brought before Christ, He didn't set all the women upon her. Not a bit of it. He wanted to help that poor unfortunate critter to lead a better life, an' He went about it in the right way. An' it'd be a mighty good thing if the ones who call 'emselves His followers would take a leaf out of His book. Now that I've had me say, I'll git along an' look after yer house, Ada. Hope ye'll sleep well to-night an' yer conscience won't trouble ye too much."

Henry scratched a match, lighted his pipe, and sauntered off across the field, leaving the two women staring after him.

"Well!" Mrs. Winters exclaimed.

"Well!" echoed Miss Ada. "What did he mean by such an harangue, anyway? I hope to goodness he doesn't forget to put the cat out and lock the back door."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON GUARD

With his old pipe going to his satisfaction, Henry leaned back comfortably in a big chair, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of the evening. His feet rested upon the low veranda rail as he looked out upon the mirror-like river.

"My! this is great!" he mused. "Not a thing to do, an' no one to disturb me thoughts. I wish Ada would hire me as watchman. She could stay with Sarah as long as she wants to. An' mebbe she'll have to if Lem doesn't show up. I wonder where the poor feller has gone to, anyway? After the teacher, no doubt, an' I can't blame him. S'pose they should git married in the city an' come back here to live! What would Ada do? She couldn't stand it fer one day. There'd be trouble, an' I pity the woman that'd come here. No, I guess Lem has enough sense not to do sich a foolish thing as that. An' so has Miss Rivers. But, hello! who's this?"

The exclamation was caused by a big auto which had pulled up in front of the house. At once a man alighted and walked slowly up to the veranda steps. He stopped and looked up at Henry.

"Is Mr. Karsall at home?" he inquired.

"Naw, Lem's not in. I'm keepin' house t'night. Anything I kin do fer ye?"

Charles Stanfield was disappointed. He had been looking forward to this visit ever since he had been at the house with the professor on that memorable afternoon. He longed for a talk with the young collector that he might learn more about Nita Rivers.

"When do you think Mr. Karsall will be home?" he asked.

"That's hard to tell, Mister. His movements are somewhat unsartin these days."

"Would it be any use for me to wait?"

"It'd do no harm. But ye might have to hang around fer quite a while, a week or a month, mebbe. Anyway, come up an' take a seat. It's mighty comfortable here, an' the view can't be beat."

Speaking to his chauffeur, and telling him to return in an hour's time, Stanfield stepped upon the veranda and sat down in a splint-bottom chair which Henry had pulled forward.

"You are certainly right about the view," he remarked, as his eyes roved over the fields and out upon the river. "I suppose Mr. Karsall sits here quite often."

"D'ye mean Lem, Mister? We don't know him by any other name, so 'Mr. Karsall' sounds strange. He's been 'Lem' to me ever since he was a baby, an' allus will be, I guess."

"So you've known him all that time, have you? Well, that's interesting."

Stanfield pulled a well-filled cigar case from his pocket, opened it, and held it out to Henry.

"Try these, my friend. I think you will find them extra good. You enjoy cigars, I hope."

"I sartinly do," Henry assured him, as he lifted a big fat one from among its fellows. "But I don't often run across sich beauties as these. Once in a dog's age I git treated, or treat meself to a five-center. Most of the time I have to be satisfied with me old pipe."

"Take more than one," Stanfield insisted. "Here, don't be afraid of them."

He lifted several from the box and handed them to Henry.

"If you like this brand, I'll send you a whole box. Light up, and we'll enjoy a smoke together. Let me give you a light. There, that's better."

Henry was deeply impressed by the stranger's friendly off-hand manner and generosity. He thought of the big car, the chauffeur, the silver cigar case, and the well-to-do appearance of the man. As he took a long luxurious pull at the weed, he tried to make out something about the visitor. He might be an agent. No, that could not be, for no agent who came that way ever traveled in such style. If an election were pending, he might consider him a politician. And what in time did he want to see Lem for? His curiosity was becoming greatly aroused. He watched the man out of the corner of his right eye and decided that he was someone of real importance.

"Yer not an agent, are ye?" he at length asked, hoping to gain some information.

"Oh, no," Stanfield smilingly replied. "I have not the honor to belong to the Knights of the Road. I am merely—ah—Daniel Doncaster. I happened to see Mr. Karsall's fine collection of flowers and minerals and am anxious to meet that remarkable young man again."

"Oh, so yer that perfessor chap Lem was tellin' me about! Well, I'm mighty glad to meet ye. I'm Hen Winters, his neighbor, an' live jist over there down by the shore."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Winters," and Stanfield held out his hand. "Have you any family?"

"Jist me an' me wife Sarah. We've lived there fer about forty years all by our lonesome at Red Rose Cottage jist over yonder. Say, perfessor, that's a great cigar. Best I ever tasted."

"I am glad you like it, Mr. Winters. It's my special brand."

"It must be great, perfessor, to smoke nuthin' but cigars like this. Cost something, too, eh? Ye git quite a sal'ry, I s'pose?"

"Yes, I get enough to live upon."

"What d'ye perfess, anyway? I mean, what d'ye teach? Belong to some college, I reckon."

"Oh, I'm only an honorary professor, and am connected with Strongbow University. You have heard of it, no doubt."

"Naw, never did. I'm not much on edication. In fact, never took no interest in the school in this deestrict, even, until lately. Me school-tax allus made me hoppin' mad, an' I looked on teachers as useless critters, gittin' money fer doin' nuthin'."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"I have as fer as this deestrict is consarned. Why, I've gone as fer as to read the School Law an' found it a mighty interestin' book."

"What brought about the remarkable change?"

Henry blew forth a cloud of smoke, and gazed thoughtfully out over the fields.

"Well, as ye've asked me pint-blank, I don't mind tellin' ye. It was due to our teacher, Miss Rivers. She's opened me eyes to see things in a new light."

"How did she come to do that? She must be a good talker. What special argument did she use?"

"She didn't use no words, perfessor. We never argied one bit. She herself was all the argyment I needed."

"Oh, I understand now. It was her personality that won you. She must be a remarkable young woman to make such a conquest."

"She is, perfessor, an' no mistake. Now, if she had come along with any high-falutin' ways, an' big words, I'd gone dead ag'inst her. I can't stand sich women. But when she doesn't do nuthin' like that but is quiet, purty, an' modest as a flower, well, that's the argyment that gits me every time. She reminds me of them flowers Sarah's allus fussin' with in front of our house. They don't make a noise or shout about their beauty. An' yit ye allus feel better when ye look at 'em. Sarah'd laff at me fer sayin' this an' call me sentimental. But it's the Gospel truth, fer all that."

"I think I understand what you mean," Stanfield quietly replied. "It is silent goodness, after all, which counts most in life,

and not the noisy advertising kind."

He remained for a few minutes lost in thought. His eyes had an expression of pleasure, and his heart was full of satisfaction. He was learning much about his niece, and from a most unexpected source. If Nita were all that this rough old farmer said she was, then he need have no doubt about her worthiness. His dream was coming true, after all, and he was greatly elated.

"Yes, perfessor, that's the kind of a woman that gits me every time." Henry's words roused Stanfield from his reverie. "It's a dang pity, though, that she has to be tramped upon an' persecuted fer what's not her own fault."

"What do you mean, Mr. Winters?"

"Haven't ye heard what they've done to Miss Rivers? No? Well, that's queer. Guess ye've not been here long or ye'd soon found out. It makes me ragin' mad when I think of it. Lem's gone about daft, an' that's why he's not home t'night, so I'm lookin' after the place. Ada's too scared to stay here alone. Mebbe I'm a fool, but if the Lord made me that way, it can't be helped."

"Why, what's the matter, anyway?" Stanfield asked. "What has happened to Miss Rivers?"

"Blamed if I know. She left yesterday an' hasn't been heard of since. But I know only too well what some of the folks in this deestrict did to her before she cleared out. Why, the women got started after her with Ada in the lead, an' Sarah, I guess, not fer behind. An agent was around here sellin' shrubs, an' he did some yangin' about the teacher's family. He told Sarah that Miss Rivers' dad was a bad egg, who broke his wife's heart, an' then took his own life. He also said that the teacher's only sister had gone to the devil, or somethin' like that, an' is follerin' the foot-lights somewhere in the States. I happened to hear him an' stopped his blattin', but not soon enough. He didn't say nuthin' more, though, ag'inst the teacher while he was in this parish."

"So that report got around, did it?" Stanfield queried. He was becoming aroused now and anxious to hear more.

"Should say it did, perfessor. Sarah told Ada what she'd heard, so the fat was in the fire in no time. The women in this deestrict got excited an' said it wasn't safe to have a woman with sich a family record to teach their kids. They stirred up the trustees to dismiss the teacher. But she took matters into her own hands an' lit out. She was too sensitive to stay when she knew she wasn't wanted. But she could have held on, fer she has the School Law on her side. It's all there in black an' white that a teacher's got to have notice in plenty of time to quit."

"This is certainly strange, Mr. Winters," Stanfield remarked. "I never imagined that women acted so uncharitably these days. Was there any other cause back of this?"

"Ye bet yer life there was. It was Ada, Lem's sister, who stirred up the rumpus. Ye see, her an' Lem have lived together most of their lives, an' when their dad died, he left his money to them in charge of some Trust Company in the city. But they only git the interest pervidin' they don't marry. If they do, it stops. I guess old Karsall must have been daft to fix his will that way. But that's the cause of the trouble, an' the storm's fallen upon the head of that poor innocent teacher. If Ada hadn't found out about the gal's family, she'd hunted up some other excuse. That's the way with women when they git started, so I've learned."

"But what had Miss Rivers to do about the money?" Stanfield asked.

"Can't ye understand, perfessor? Lem's tumbled head-over-heels in love with her, an' I don't blame him one bit. Guess I'm in the same fix meself. Anyway, Ada's nigh crazy, an' is goin' about like a ragin' an roarin' lion, as the Bible says. Wonnerful, isn't it, how that Good Book knows folks, 'specially women?"

Stanfield hardly heard the question, so wrapped up was he in his own thoughts. He felt certain now that Nita Rivers was a most worthy young woman, and a sense of pleasure thrilled his soul. She needed his help, so it seemed, and he had arrived at the opportune time. So Lemuel Karsall was in love with her. Did she return his love? he wondered. And what about her sister? People believed that she had gone to the bad. This was a disturbing thought, and his brows knit in perplexity. But the gossip might be entirely wrong. He could not believe that his own sister's daughter could ever go astray. It was not reasonable, knowing Marion as he did. And yet it did sometimes happen. Anyway, he must find out. But where could he go for the necessary information? He did not even know where she was living. Nita might have her address, and, perhaps, he could learn something from her. But how could he do this without telling Nita who he really

was. He longed now more than ever to see Lemuel, as he might be able to tell him something.

"Did Miss Rivers leave any address?" he at length asked.

"Not as fer as I know, perfessor. Lem may have an inklin', as the two were together last night, so Ada said. But he's gone, an' there's no knowin' when he'll be home. What a funny thing love is, anyway. Now, who'd a thought six months ago that sich a quiet, steady-goin' feller as Lem would ever lose his heart an' head over a woman. He seemed to be so taken up with his studies that he could think of nuthin' but the trash he's gathered up there in The Loft. But one never knows what young people'll do. I guess, though, the new specimen he's after now is of more interest to him than anything else."

When Stanfield at last rose to go, he thanked Henry for the pleasant evening.

"Although I am sorry, Mr. Winters, that I have not met Mr. Karsall, I have thoroughly enjoyed my conversation with you. As I am staying for several days at the Riverview Hotel, I hope to see you again."

"Sure, sure, perfessor, I want to have another chat with ye. Come over an' see us as soon as ye kin. I want Sarah to meet ye. She's better with the tongue than I am."

"She must be a wonder, then," Stanfield smilingly replied.

"She sartinly is, though she ginerally talks sense, while I rattle off the fust thing that comes into me head. Yes, come an' see us, perfessor, an' make yourself to hum. We'll be on the lookout fer ye."

As Stanfield sank down in the seat of his car on his way back to the hotel, he did considerable thinking. He had much work ahead of him, and a great deal of extra information to be obtained. But he had made a good start, anyway, and that was something. He smiled at the new title which Henry had given him. What a choice bit of news that would be for Radcliffe, and he knew how heartily he would enjoy the joke. But Stanfield was quite pleased, as he felt sure the name would assist him in his undertaking. He wished to keep his identity a complete secret, and how could he accomplish this better than by posing as a professor of Strongbow University and interested in Lemuel's specimens? For his sister's sake he was going to carry this thing through. His thoughts turned to that old dilapidated house he had visited several weeks before, and the room where Marion had died. A mistiness came into his eyes as he pictured her brave desperate struggle to support herself and her two daughters. He could do nothing for her now. The time of opportunity had passed. He might be able, though, to do something for her children, but he wished to do it in a way that would prove best for all concerned. The undertaking was becoming more interesting than he had anticipated. There were difficulties confronting him which he had not foreseen. But Charles Stanfield was a man accustomed to perplexing situations, and his old feeling of exhilaration returned to him this night, the first time since his serious illness.

CHAPTER XIX

STANFIELD MAKES A CALL

Early the next morning Mrs. Winters set earnestly to work housecleaning, that she might be ready for the movie people. She had been worrying about it ever since Henry had told her of their coming. With the time now drawing near, she became more anxious than ever and confided her troubles to Ada.

"I do hope it will rain in torrents to-morrow," she said. "I somehow can't bear the thought of those people sweeping down upon us, taking possession of this place, and tramping through the house. I know that I shall be so flustered and upset that I shall make a fool of myself."

Ada was assisting her neighbor with the work of preparation. She had been over to her own house early that morning and had attended to the chickens, while Henry milked and did other chores around the barn. In return for his help, she wished to do what she could for Mrs. Winters. And, besides, she was unusually lonely with Lemuel absent. She missed his presence, and there seemed to be nothing for her to work for now with him away. She had carried the mats out of doors for Henry to shake and had just returned to the room when Mrs. Winters gave vent to her feelings.

"Why, I thought you were delighted at the idea of having those people here," Ada replied. "You told me it would make some excitement, and also bring in a little extra money."

"I know I did, my dear. But that was when I first heard of their coming. But as the time is almost here I feel terribly nervous. You see, Henry and I have lived so long together in our own quiet way, that to have a commotion around us, and with strangers in charge of the house, makes me tremble from head to foot. Perhaps they will make fun of us and our old-fashioned ways."

"I can understand just how you feel about it, Mrs. Winters," Ada replied, seating herself upon the horse-hair sofa to rest, "but it is not nearly so bad in your case as in mine."

"Yours!" Mrs. Winters looked up in astonishment. "They're not going to your place, are they? Why, you never told me a word about it, and neither did Henry."

"Oh, no, the movie people are not coming to my house, Mrs. Winters. But I could put up with them far better than the one who is coming. I would be clear of them in a few days, but she will stay forever."

"And who in the world is that?"

"The teacher, of course. Lemuel will marry her and bring her home. And what will become of me? I shall have to leave, for I could never live in the same house with that woman. And I shall be penniless, for father's money will cease. Oh, what am I to do! I am almost crazy!"

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Mrs. Winters stood watching her for a few seconds, and then crossed to where she was sitting.

"There, there, don't take on so hard, Ada. So long as I have a home, you shall share it with me. I know as well as you do, and, perhaps, better, what queer creatures men are. I speak from an experience of forty years with one man. And I think it was ridiculous of your father to leave his money in such a foolish manner. I can't imagine what possessed him to do it unless his mind was affected when he made his will. Have you ever thought of that?"

"I never have," Ada sobbed. "I never gave a thought to it until this trouble came upon me, for I was sure that Lemuel would never get married. But my father always seemed clear-minded, and a good business man. I cannot understand it at all."

Mrs. Winters returned to her work, as she had little time to waste. As she bustled in and out of the room, sweeping, dusting, moving chairs and tables, Ada sat gloomily upon the sofa. Presently Henry's heavy tread sounded in the kitchen, and as he thrust his head in at the parlor door he gave a gasp of surprise.

"Holy Moses!" he exclaimed. "What a mess! An' what's wrong with Ada? Hasn't fainted, has she?"

"She's just resting," his wife explained. "But I'm glad you've come, for I want you to shake those mats out at the back door. We're getting ready for the picture people. The house is filthy."

"But ye cleaned the hull place last spring, Sarah. An' as fer the parlor, nobody ever comes here. The blinds are allus down, an' the chairs kivered with them cotton things to keep 'em from fadin'. I don't see any use of all this extry work."

"No, I suppose not, Henry. You are a man, so can't understand such things. But you understand how to shake mats, and that's what I want you to do right away."

"But, Sarah——"

"I haven't time to argue, Henry. If you don't want to do it, don't, and I'll do it myself."

Henry gazed at his wife, and also glanced over at Ada. He then backed slowly from the door and clumped out of the kitchen.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he growled, staring savagely at the mats lying in a confused heap before him. "Women are queer. Cleanin' all the time, an' never satisfied. Sarah is sartinly a hustler at it, an' no mistake. Wonder what's wrong with Ada now." He sat down upon the doorstep, pulled his pipe from his pocket, filled and lighted it. "Mebbe she's mournin' over Lem. Hope t'goodness she is. It serves her blamed well right. Well, I s'pose I must git at them mats. Wonder what mats were made fer, anyway? They're only a nuisance. But, hello! what's this? A car. It must be that perfesser bringin' them cigars. Guess I'll let the women entertain him. Ada kin do it fine. Mebbe she'll git him fer a beau. I'll slip into the woodshed an' peek through the winder."

Within the parlor Mrs. Winters continued her work with great energy. She was about to call Henry to bring in the mats, when happening to glance out of the window, she saw a big car stop in front of the house. A man alighted, opened the little gate, and walked slowly up the path, looking from side to side at the flowers.

"Here's a visitor!" Mrs. Winters exclaimed in alarm. "And he's right at the door. Who can it be! And he's carrying something in his hand, too."

Ada rose quickly from the sofa and stood by Mrs. Winters' side.

"It's only an agent," she disgustedly declared.

"But I never saw an agent traveling around in such a fine car as that."

"Oh, almost anybody can have a fine car these days. But, there, he's knocking. You'd better go to the door."

"You go," Mrs. Winters pleaded. "I'm not fit to be seen, but you're clean and neat. Hurry!" she whispered. "He's knocking again. Tell him we don't want anything."

Reluctantly Ada did as she was ordered. She opened the door, and was just on the point of repeating Mrs. Winters' words when she hesitated and became somewhat embarrassed. Something about the man, she could not tell what, brought a peculiar quickening to her heart and shattered her ordinary self-confidence. She drew a step back and remained silent.

And Charles Stanfield, too, was unusually impressed. He expected to meet Mrs. Winters, and he felt certain that this young woman could not be Henry's wife. And Ada did certainly present a pleasing picture as she stood in the doorway. No matter what people might say about her sharp tongue and the way she ruled her brother, they all had to acknowledge that she was possessed of more than ordinary beauty of face and form. So she seemed to Stanfield as she confronted him this morning. He noted her flushed cheeks, the graceful poise of her head, crowned with such a wealth of dark hair, neatly arranged. Her light calico dress fitted her to perfection, and the apron she was wearing was spotless. All this he beheld at a glance, and wondered who she could be.

"Excuse me," he began, "but I was expecting to meet Mrs. Winters. Is she in?"

"Mrs. Winters is very busy just now," Ada explained. "Is there any message I can give her for you?"

"Oh, no, never mind troubling her. Her husband will do just as well. I saw him at the back door as I drove up."

"Wait a minute while I call him," Ada ordered.

She then stepped upon the veranda, walked to the left and looked for Henry. But he was nowhere to be seen. She called, but received no reply.

"It is strange what has become of him," she said, turning to the visitor. "I know he was there just a minute ago shaking the mats. Sit down here while I look for him," and she motioned to a rustic chair.

"No, no, do not go to all that trouble," Stanfield protested. "My mission is not so important as all that. I met Mr. Winters at Mr. Karsall's house last night, and had a pleasant chat. He enjoyed the cigar I gave him, so I have brought him a box of the same brand. Perhaps you will give it to him, and also this for Mrs. Winters, with my compliments," he added placing the two boxes on the chair.

"So you were at my house?" Ada asked in surprise. "Henry never said a word about your being there."

Stanfield started and looked keenly into the eyes of the woman before him. Surely there must be some mistake, he thought. This cannot be Lemuel Karsall's sister who is making life so miserable for him and Nita Rivers! But what else was he to infer from her words?

"Are you indeed Miss Karsall?" he at length asked. "I am so pleased to meet you. I am Daniel Doncaster, and called last night to see your brother. I represent Strongbow University, so am very much interested in his fine collection of native stones and flowers."

"So you are a professor, then!" Ada was now more deeply impressed than ever. "We thought at first that you were a book agent."

Stanfield laughed outright, and even Ada could not help smiling.

"Excuse me," he apologized, "but this is the second time I have been mistaken for an agent. Last evening Mr. Winters thought I had something to sell, shrubs or machinery, I forget now which."

"Suppose you sit down," Ada suggested, motioning to the rustic seat, while she herself occupied a splint-bottom chair close by. "Now, this is better," she added.

"It certainly is," Stanfield agreed, pleased to have her near him. "I trust I am not intruding upon your morning's work, Miss Karsall."

"Not at all. I have very little to do since Lemuel left, so I spend much of my time here with Mrs. Winters. She is very busy getting ready for the picture people."

"And who are they?"

"A moving-picture company who wish to use this place. Mrs. Winters is naturally much flustered over the thought of their coming."

Stanfield was now keenly interested, and asked several questions to which Ada readily replied. They talked about this for a while, and then the conversation turned upon Lemuel. Stanfield brought it shrewdly about, and it was not long before Ada was telling him of the trouble that was pressing so heavily upon her heart and mind. She found it easy to talk to this man, who was so sympathetic and seemed to understand her point of view perfectly.

And as Stanfield listened, he learned the cause of her antagonism to Nita Rivers. It was the loss of her father's money that she feared, and she considered herself thoroughly justified in her opposition to the teacher. He saw what a serious matter it really was to her, and he did not treat it lightly as did Henry. He compared her words and the farmer's, and although they both told the same story, the manner of telling made a decided difference. He saw that Miss Karsall had good reason for her worry, although he believed that she had been unwise in what she had done. Her strong feelings of resentment had carried her beyond all bounds. When at last he rose to go, he held out his hand.

"Thank you very much for telling me all this," he said. "But you must not get too down-hearted. Perhaps everything will turn out better than you expect. But about those picture people. Did I understand you to say that they are coming here to-morrow?"

"Yes, in the morning, providing the day is fine."

"May I come around and watch them? Do you think I would be in the way? I have a few days to spend here, and there is not much going on in this settlement."

"I am sure that Mr. and Mrs. Winters will be pleased to have you come, Mr. Doncaster. But, you see, this place will not be theirs to-morrow. It will belong to the picture people until they are through with their work."

"Oh, I guess that won't make any difference," and Stanfield smiled "I shall watch from a safe distance, so as not to be in the way."

Ada stood upon the veranda until the car had disappeared from view down the road. She was much excited, and this Mrs. Winters noticed when at last she went into the house.

"My lands! what a time you've had with that man out there," she exclaimed. "He must be a friend of yours by the way you two talked and laughed."

"He is," Ada evaded, although she knew that her cheeks were crimson.

"And maybe he'll be more than a friend by all appearance. Isn't that so, my dear?"

"Why, w-what do you mean?" Ada stammered.

"I was just thinking, that's all. It's better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave. I was Henry's slave when I was young, and I've been the same ever since."

Before Ada could further reply, Henry stood in the doorway. He was holding in his hands the two boxes Stanfield had left outside on the chair.

"Ye fergot these, Ada," he announced. "Seems to me that feller of yours is startin' in strong when he gives ye two presents at the fust slap."

"They are not mine," Ada indignantly retorted. "One is for you, and the other is for Mrs. Winters, so there."

"For me!" Mrs. Winters exclaimed. "Why, what can it be?"

She quickly unwrapped the box, and then stood gazing at the contents in amazement.

"Chocolates, eh, Sarah?" Henry queried. "An' mine's cigars, an' mighty good ones they are, too. He said he was goin' to give me a box of 'em, but I fergot all about it."

"When did you meet that man?" his wife sharply inquired. "And who is he, anyway?"

"Oh, I met him last night when he called to see Lem's specimens. He's a perfessor, so he said, of Strongbow College, wherever that is, an' his name is, let me see. By jingo! I've fergot it. Now, isn't that annoyin'?"

"Doncaster," Ada assisted.

"Ah, that's it; Dan'l Doncaster. An' a mighty fine chap he is, too. I took quite a shine to him last night. We had a great chat."

"Why didn't you come to speak to him, then?" Mrs. Winters demanded. "You knew he was here, didn't you?"

"Sure I knew. But I wanted him to meet you women, 'specially Ada. Thought it might be her last chance, so I made meself scarce, an' hid in the woodshed. I saw all that was goin' on, though, fer I was peekin' through the winder. An' say, Ada, ye did fine. I admire ye fer the purty airs ye put on an' the way ye talked to him. From all appearance, he was quite taken with ye."

"Stop your nonsense," Mrs. Winters ordered. "You've got the poor girl all flustered and excited. Get on out of the house, for I must finish this room."

"A'right, me dear, I'm quite willin', as I want to sample these cigars while you women 'tend to the chocolates. Sweets fer the saints an' smokes fer the sinners. Hurray! Cigars t'day an' the movie folks t'morrer. Guess the stars, are fightin' fer old Hen Winters, after all. Hurray!"

CHAPTER XX

THE "SHOOTING" BEGINS

The morning of the memorable day dawned fair and warm. The Winterses were astir unusually early, for there was much to be done ere the arrival of the motion-picture people. While Mrs. Winters prepared a hurried breakfast, Henry sauntered toward the barn with milk-pails in his hands. He stopped half way and looked out upon the river. The water was like glass, and above the surface great massy banks of fog were hanging and gleaming beneath the rays of the sun riding low over the far-off eastern horizon. Peace reigned on all sides and myriads of dew-laden leaves, grasses and flowers sparkled their welcome. The chirps and twitters of birds sounded from tree and bush, and as Henry watched and listened a sense of exhilaration filled his soul.

"Guess them picter folks'll like that," he mused aloud. "The day's jist made on purpose fer 'em, it seems to me. A mornin' like this should knock the kinks out of any soul, no matter how much it's tangled. Why, it makes me feel like a frisky colt."

When the chores had been finished at the barn, he went back to the house. Mrs. Winters was in the kitchen frying pancakes over a hot stove. She was greatly flustered, and Henry could see that she was in no pleasant frame of mind. She ordered him to carry some water from the well and to fill the wood-box.

"Ye seem to be upset this mornin', Sarah," he remarked, as he threw down the last armful of wood. "Why not step outside fer a few minutes. The air is great, an' it'll do ye a world of good."

"What time have I for any airing, I'd like to know?" was the sharp retort. "Those people may be upon us at any minute, and I have no end of things to do. Hurry up, now, and eat your breakfast, so I can get the dishes washed and the house tidied up before they come. Dear me! I hardly know what I am doing. I'm so upset at the thought of those strangers landing upon us."

"Don't worry, me dear," Henry replied, as he took his seat at the table and helped himself to a pancake. "Jist think of the fun we're goin' to have. The older I git, the more I like to keep me wonder-box in good repair. I've never fergot a sermon the parson once preached about that very thing. It set me thinkin', an' I haven't stopped yit."

"For pity's sake, Henry Winters! what are you talking about?" his wife exclaimed. "I hope all this excitement hasn't affected your brain. What do you mean by the wonder-box'?"

"Me brain, of course. The parson said that too many people close up their wonder-boxes, or let 'em git out of repair. I fergit which it was, though it don't make no difference. My! that was a great sermon. He said we must allus be filled with the spirit of wonder, like children, fer instance, an' be allus on the lookout fer new things which the Lord has in store to s'prise us. An' it's true. If ye jist step outside fer a few minutes, Sarah, an' look around, I guess ye wonder-box'll begin to work. If it doesn't, then there's something wrong with it."

"You must have been dreaming, Henry. I never heard the parson say anything like that. Anyway, what has it to do with the people who are coming here this morning, I'd like to know?"

"A great deal, me dear, from my way of thinkin'. Me wonder-box is so busy that it's runnin' at high speed. I'm wonderin' what them folks'll be like, how they'll act, what we'll have to do, what the place'll be like when they're done, an' what kind of a picter it will be when it's finished. An' them's only some of the things I'm wonderin' about. I'm expectin' a hull lot of fun an' excitement, as well. Gee! I wouldn't miss it fer anything. It'll be better'n a circus any time. It'll be a change from listenin' to Ada's troubles, anyway. D'ye think she'll show up to see the fun?"

"She said she'd drop over to help if I need her," Mrs. Winters explained. "Poor girl! she hasn't much to look forward to now."

"Oh, yes, she has, Sarah. She's set her cap fer that man who was here yesterday. If she don't git him, it won't be her fault."

"Henry! I'm surprised to hear you say such a thing. Ada will never marry, especially a man so much older than herself. She has always spoken against marriage, considering it a snare and a delusion."

"It may be all that, Sarah, an' no mistake. But it's wonderful how many people are willin' to take the chance. An' I guess Ada wouldn't mind runnin' into the snare if it meant a rich feller as that Doncaster seems to be. Jist think of that fine car with the chaffer at the wheel. Why,—But say, here comes the picter folks!"

Hurrying to the door, they saw the strangers alighting from the cars. They were all so pleasant and full of enthusiasm that Henry and his wife liked them at once. There was no unnecessary delay, for the manager wished to take advantage of every minute of the beautiful morning. Henry waited upon him, showing him about the place, and answering all sorts of questions.

One young woman, who seemed little more than a girl, appealed strongly to Mrs. Winters. In fact, she became flustered when she presently called her "ma" to the amusement of her companions. But the sight of the elderly woman standing amidst the flowers in the garden brought to Cora Davidson a vision of other days, and she hurriedly brushed away a tear that was stealing down her cheek. Otherwise, she was happy, for she was among scenes which were most familiar to her, and she believed that here she could perform her part to perfection.

To Mrs. Winters this was the most wonderful day she had ever experienced. She and Henry were in great demand, and in the rush and excitement she became much bewildered. She watched as in a dream the actors performing their various parts. It was a stirring picture that was being made, and the manager worked his company hard. The neighbors, too, were called upon to assist, and all day long great wagon loads of boards and deals were hauled from the saw-mill some distance up the road. What all the lumber was intended for Mrs. Winters had no idea, and her husband was too busy to explain.

The next day more excitement prevailed. For a while it centered around the old well. Henry was pressed into service, and according to instructions he had received, furiously chased a young man who had come to see his daughter Cora. The lover, Tom Gaskin by name, leaped into the well as the nearest place of refuge in order to escape being blown to pieces by an old shot-gun which the angry father discharged at him. Then there was the tear-dimmed damsel clinging frantically to her father, begging him not to kill her lover. Henry was hard to appease. He performed his part so well that Sarah, watching his antics, was quite proud of him. When Tom was at last rescued from his perilous position, he presented a woeful appearance, with his wet clothes and terrified face. The lovers separated in deep dejection, with Henry shaking his fist at the defeated young man in the most menacing manner.

"You did fine, Henry," his wife complimented when they were together for a few minutes. "I believe you were cut out for such work."

"I know I was, Sarah. But, say, don't call it work, or I'll pitch the job. It's been the greatest fun of me hull life so fer, so I hope ye won't spile it by suggestin' that it's work. We've only got nicely started, an' there's heaps of more fun ahead. Ye'll fairly split yer sides laffin' the next time I chase them lovers. That Cora is a mighty fine gal, an' knows her work to perfection."

Cora Davidson had taken a great fancy to Mrs. Winters, and asked if she might stay with her that night. To this the manager readily consented, telling her to coach Henry for his part on the morrow. The Winterses were delighted to have the girl to themselves, and that evening as they sat at the table after supper was ended, the girl told them something about her life. It was a tale which appealed to the hearts of the two sympathetic listeners. She told of leaving home with the vision of fame and wealth before her. She believed that with her beauty and natural talent she would at once leap into the lime-light of success. But her fond hopes were soon dashed to the ground, and she was doomed to drink of the bitter dregs of discouragement and want. It was just when she was at the lowest ebb that John Joyce, the manager, who had known her for years, obtained for her the present position. The fact that she had come from a very poor home and was well acquainted with country ways, at last opened the door of opportunity to her.

"Why, I thought yez were all stars!" Henry exclaimed when the girl had finished her story.

"Indeed we are not, Mr. Winters. You might as well know now as later that this is merely a venture on the part of Mr. Joyce. He is a good man and understands his business. But he has had some trouble, so he has started out to make pictures on his own account. For this undertaking he gathered around him people like myself, although he has several who know the work thoroughly. He believes that if he can get the right kind of a picture, it will take with the public, whether there are great stars in it or not. I believe he will succeed, for we are all putting our hearts into the work. If we do, then I shall have no more trouble. It will be great!"

And thus they talked, Cora giving the Winters a new insight into the struggles and temptations of city life, as well as her own plans for the future.

"I know that I shall succeed," she declared. "And now that I have made such friends in you two good people, I am happier than I have been for years—since I lost my dear father and mother," she added in a low voice.

"An' ye'll marry that young feller, Tom, I s'pose?" Henry queried.

"Why, what makes you think so?" the girl asked, while a bright color flushed her cheeks.

"'Cause I've got eyes an' ears, Miss. Mebbe I'm not as stupid as I look, though Sarah thinks I am."

"But we were merely acting, you see," Cora defended. "We were only pretending to be lovers."

"Well, keep on actin', then, fer yer doin' fine, jist like I'd do if I was in Tom's place. There's to be lots more t'morrow, I s'pose?"

"Oh, yes, it will be great. You chased Tom away, but he will return, and we are about to run away when you appear on the scene. We take refuge in the barn and climb up into the loft. You order us to come down, and when we refuse, you set fire to the building."

"What! burn me barn down!" Henry exclaimed, aghast at the idea.

"Certainly. It is ours, anyway, and you have not much hay in it yet. But you will get a new barn in place of the old one. That's what all that lumber is for."

"Well, I s'pose it will be better in the long run, Miss," Henry replied as he ran his fingers through his thin hair. "But I do hate to see that old barn go up in smoke."

"And what will happen to you and Tom?" Mrs. Winters anxiously inquired. "Isn't it a pretty risky thing to do? You might be burnt to death."

"Actors have to do that, you know, Mrs. Winters. It's to be one of the big thrills, and that is what the public likes. The more we have of them the better. We know what to do, so shall make out all right."

"An' what's to happen after that?" Henry asked. "Some more good stuff, I s'pose?"

"Oh, yes, there will be the grand final wind-up. You will chase Tom away, and rescue me. But he will come back as the representative of a company that believes there's oil on your place. You are to be paid a liberal sum to allow them to make investigations. They will strike oil, you will make a fortune, and then you will be glad to let me marry Tom. Thus everything will be changed as if by magic, and the closing scenes will show the new barn, the house made over and painted. You will not know the place when we get through with it."

"Well, well!" Henry exclaimed, "D'ye hear that, Sarah? I guess them stars in their courses are with me at last."

While Mrs. Winters washed the supper dishes, Cora instructed Henry in the parts he was to take the next day. He was an apt pupil, and easily comprehended each situation.

"Why, it's easy as rollin' off a log," he declared. "I don't need to study them instructions ye've written down there. I'll fit in a'right, when the time comes. I'll make me actions as I go along. The manager said I done fine to-day."

"You certainly did," Cora agreed. "He believes that your acting will do much to make this picture a success, as it is so natural. Oh, I hope it will take with the public, for, then, both of us will be famous."

"We're famous now as fer as this settlement goes, Miss. Why, all the people are so excited that they kin talk of nuthin' else. They're swarmin' around here from all over the country watchin' our actions. An' that feller, Doncaster, was here all day. He said it was the best fun he ever had, an' told me I did great. He said nice things about you, too."

"About me! Why did he single me out from the rest?"

"I don't know. But he had his eyes on ye, an' seemed to be much impressed by yer actin'."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"A perfessor chap, who landed here lately. He's waitin' fer Lem Karsall to come home, as he wants to see his specimens. Lem's great on flowers, stones, flies, bugs, an' sich things, so the perfessor has taken a notion to him."

"Where is Mr. Karsall now, Mr. Winters?"

"Blamed if I know. He's gone somewhere after his sweetheart, who was chased from this place by his sister, Ada, 'cause her brother has fallen in love with her. Ye might have noticed Ada t'day here with Sarah. She's all wrought up over her brother. I've been stayin' at her place at night since Lem lit out. But Betsy Stebbin's there t'night, though, as I'm too busy to go. When a man comes to be a famous actor, he hasn't any time to act as a watch-dog."

Cora was much interested about Lemuel and his sister, and Henry told her the whole story. Mrs. Winters said nothing, and her husband was wise enough not to mention her name in connection with the matter, for which she was most thankful.

"I do pity the lovers," Cora remarked, when Henry had at length ended his tale. "But you haven't told me her name. You have merely referred to her as 'the teacher.'"

"So I have, Miss. Well, that was stupid of me. An', besides, it's jist as easy to say 'Miss Rivers' as 'the teacher.' Yes, her name's Nita Rivers, an' it's a mighty purty one to my way of thinkin'."

At these words a startled look came into Cora's eyes, and her face turned very pale. Her hands trembled, and so great was her agitation that Mrs. Winters became quite alarmed.

"Are you sick, dear?" she asked. "Perhaps you have been working too hard to-day, and need a rest."

"I think you are right," the girl replied, making an attempt to smile. "I have these spells at times, and they come very suddenly."

"You must go to bed at once, then. A good sleep will be the best thing for you. We have been talking you to death."

Cora was only too glad to get away by herself that she might think. Her brain was in a whirl as she accompanied Mrs. Winters upstairs. She thought at times that what she had just heard must be a dream from which she would soon awaken.

Downstairs, Henry sat alone. His eyes were unusually bright, and as he filled and lighted his pipe, he chuckled more than once.

"I see it now as clear as through a knot-hole," he mused. "I knew she reminded me of someone I had seen before. But when she went to pieces at the teacher's name, the hull thing cleared like a mornin' fog. Gee whiz! things are gittin' more interestin' every day, an' the end's not yit in sight."

CHAPTER XXI

PRESSED INTO SERVICE

Charles Stanfield enjoyed watching the motion-picture people at work. With his car parked some distance away, he mingled with the crowd of onlookers, and keenly observed all that took place. Henry's natural acting amused him greatly, and at times he laughed outright at his quaint words and antics. Forgotten was everything else, and not once did his mind dwell upon himself. He was plunged into a new world of interest and excitement which the day before he would have considered impossible. In spirit he was a youth again, and as much enraptured in all that was going on as when a boy he had lost his senses to some traveling circus. Although he did not realize it, this was just what he needed, and it did him more good than a trip abroad or the most careful treatment at an expensive sanatorium.

He was much impressed with Cora Davidson, and considered her a remarkable young woman. He was not only attracted by her face, which was of more than ordinary beauty, but by her manner as well. He liked her acting, which was superior to the others. She seemed to throw herself entirely into her work and for the time being she was really the character she was impersonating. Henry amused him, but Cora stirred in him an altogether different feeling. Gradually his interest in her became personal, and he longed to know more about her. Who was she, anyway? What was she like in actual life? He made no effort to suppress this feeling, but allowed his imagination to wander at will. Just why he should choose her from the other young women present he did not know. In truth, the question never entered his mind. How wonderful it must be to have such a daughter, he mused. Suppose she were his own child. The idea flashed suddenly into his mind, causing his blood to quicken and his heart to beat fast. Imagine such a radiant being calling him "father" and looking to him for assistance, and loving him as he believed such a girl must be capable of loving. And if he had a daughter, he would want her to be just like Cora Davidson, as beautiful, graceful, and overflowing with such health and abounding animation. What a joy she would be to him in his loneliness.

He liked the manager, too, especially the way in which he kept everybody busy, and did it all in such a pleasant manner. It seemed almost like a picnic instead of a very serious piece of business for those who were taking part. Stanfield was surprised when the manager came to him ere closing for the day, and requested a favor.

"I hope you won't think it impudent of me," he apologized, "but I am short of help for a part that has been suggested to me by Mr. Winters."

"So you want to get me into trouble, eh?" Stanfield smilingly queried. "Well, nothing would suit me better than to be mixed up with your fun. So, go ahead, and tell me what you want me to do."

"Simply to act the part of a returned son," the manager explained. "You will need a woman with you, and Mr. Winters is sure that he can induce Miss Karsall to be your wife."

"My! this is getting interesting, Mr. Joyce. What a marvel! To have a wife after so many years of single misery. Little did I suspect what would be the outcome of my visit here. A wife! and I know nothing about her. Why didn't you suggest Miss Davidson? She's great."

"I know she is, sir. But she will have to continue her part as the farmer's daughter. You see, the farm is to be sold, and Henry, his wife and daughter are to be turned out of house and home. The hour has arrived, the neighbors have gathered from far and near, and the auction has begun. At the critical time, you, the son, who have been absent for many years, arrive in a fine car with your wife, mingle with the crowd, and, of course, bid in the place. I shall explain all the details to you, if you wish. But your part will be so simple that very little coaching will be necessary."

"It seems so," Stanfield replied. "You attend to the rest, and I shall have no difficulty with my part, providing my wife is willing. This is really funny, as it is the first time I have ever taken a wife into consideration in any of my plans. What time shall I be here in the morning?"

"I cannot tell definitely, sir. But if you do not mind hanging around so as to be ready when you are needed, you will do me a great favor."

"Oh, I shall be here, all right," Stanfield assured. "I wouldn't miss the fun for anything. But be sure that my wife is ready, too. I hope that there will be no kissing for me to do. That is the only thing which would cause me to back down. I'm not

used to that."

"Oh, don't let that worry you," the manager laughingly replied. "The young woman who will act as your wife is not the kissing kind. She would permit no man to take any liberties with her, so Henry informed me."

"Does Miss Karsall agree to act as my wife, Mr. Joyce?"

"Henry thinks he can arrange it, all right. He has promised to see her, anyway. That fellow can do almost anything. It's wonderful how well he took the part of the old farmer to-day."

"I have been watching him with interest and amusement. If I can do half as well to-morrow I shall be satisfied."

"You won't have much to do, Mr. Doncaster. Be ready at the right moment; drive up, stop your car, mingle with the crowd, start bidding, and when the place is knocked down to you, go forward and tell Henry and his wife who you are. Be as natural as possible, and you should have no trouble."

Stanfield thought it all over that night, and the idea of taking part in the performance pleased him. It was a new experience, and drew away his thoughts from himself. He had the idea, too, that the whole affair was a daring venture by the manager. The pressing of Henry and his wife into the work, and then the request for his own service, as well as Miss Karsall's, lent color to his suspicion. He recalled the time years ago when he himself, with very limited means, had staked his all on a single throw. He had won against great odds, but he had never forgotten the thrill of the fight and how much it had meant to him. He had entered upon many an undertaking since then, and had made much money, but never again had he experienced the wonderful sensation of that first venture. He had been young then, and with the audacity of youth he had considered himself another Columbus risking his all in one great enterprise. So some of this sensation returned to him now as he imagined Joyce, the manager, doing a similar thing. It stirred his spirit within him, gave him a new zest to life, and brought to his heart a longing to be mixed up in the struggle. He smiled as he pictured the surprise of this friend, the president of Strongbow University, if he were aware of the role he was about to play.

Stanfield was an hour ahead of time the next morning when he arrived at Red Rose Cottage. He had given his chauffeur a day off, and drove the car himself. He found the liveliest excitement all over the place, with everybody busy. Henry saw him as he drew up in front of the house, and hastened to meet him.

"I've roped ye a wife, a'right," he announced. "Ada's willin' to act. She's in the house gittin' her hair fixed up, an' she'll be out in a minute."

"Are you ready for us to take our part?" Stanfield inquired.

"Not fer some time yit. They're doin' some stunts over behind the barn now. That'll take about an hour, so the manager said. We'll then be ready fer you an' Ada. But here's yer new wife now, as purty as a picter, an' all togged up in her finest."

Ada never appeared to better advantage than she did on this occasion. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. It was all a new and wonderful experience to her, and it seemed as if her dreams were coming true after all. Ere stepping into the car, she stopped to speak to Henry.

"Lemuel came home last night," she informed him.

"Did he!" Henry exclaimed. "An' how's he lookin'?"

"Oh, about the same; as dumb and gloomy as ever."

Henry asked no more questions just then, but stood for a while lost in thought as the car sped away up the road.

"Ada doesn't seem to be so much worried over Lem as she did," he mused. "Mebbe she's hopin' to git hitched up to Doncaster. It'd be the best thing that could happen to her. An' she'd make him a good wife, too. She's got brains, if she'd only use 'em in the right way. It sartinly would be a joke if they did hitch up. My! my! it's wonderful what unexpected things are takin' place these days. Them stars must be fightin' fer Ada as well as fer me, from all appearance. But there, I must git back an' see how me earthly stars are makin' out."

That was the most glorious morning Ada had ever known. Hitherto her life had been of a quiet humdrum nature, with

really nothing of much importance to break the monotony. She had often dreamed of just such an experience as this, bowling along in a fine car, the companion of a fine-looking wealthy man. Of course, the hero of her dreams had always been young. But this did not affect her now. She was quite happy, and it was pleasant to lean comfortably back upon the soft cushion as the car purred onward. She gave a slight sigh, which Stanfield at once noticed.

"Are you getting tired, Miss Karsall?" he asked. "I thought you would enjoy a spin on such a beautiful morning as this."

"I am not tired, Mr. Doncaster. This is delightful, and I am enjoying every minute of this ride. It is a great change for me."

With the conversation thus begun, Stanfield ere long induced his companion to talk about her own interests, which were of more importance to her than anything else in the world. Thus by the time they at last came back to their starting-point, he was fairly well acquainted with many of the concerns of the Karsall household; of Lemuel and his strange ways, and the subtle influence that Nita Rivers was exerting over him. He asked several guarded questions about the teacher, and from Ada's answers he wisely drew his own conclusions. It was nothing more than jealousy and the fear of losing her father's money, he was aware. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, trusting that when he came to know Miss Karsall and her brother better he might be able to do something to arrange matters in a satisfactory manner.

There was already a crowd in front of the Winters' house, and it was quite evident that the time had come for the wandering son and his wife to arrive. The manager was waiting for them, and seemed greatly relieved as Stanfield brought his car to a standstill just outside the gate.

"I am glad you've come," Mr. Joyce declared. "Everything is ready, so if you will run your car up to the edge of the crowd and then get out and perform your part, it will be just the thing. The auction will begin right away."

Stanfield did as he was told, and ran the car through the gate up to where the people were standing. He and Ada at once alighted, and mingled with the crowd. At the front door stood Henry and his wife, with Cora Davidson by Mrs. Winters' side. The girl was trying to soothe her mother, who was weeping bitterly. Henry was defiant, and with clenched hands and blazing eyes was facing the crowd as the auction proceeded. Then when the place was knocked down to the highest bidder, Stanfield stepped forward with Ada by his side and announced himself as the long-lost son who had just returned in the nick of time to save his parents from ruin. The crowd cheered wildly as Mrs. Winters rushed forward and threw her arms around her son's neck and kissed him on the cheek. She then turned her attention to Ada, and clasped her to her breast. Henry shook hands with his son and daughter-in-law, and there was great ado, in which laughter mingled with tears of joy. Cora did her part to perfection and welcomed her brother with a sisterly kiss, which Ada thought was overdone.

The manager was delighted. He thanked Stanfield and Ada, and congratulated them upon performing their parts so well.

"You could not have done better if you had practised for a week," he told them. "Everything was so natural, absolutely real, in fact."

"Too natural and real," Stanfield pantingly replied, as he struggled to arrange his twisted collar. "My! I wouldn't go through such an ordeal again for anything. My cheeks are burning yet from those kisses. You should have been in my place, Mr. Joyce."

"I wish I had," was the quiet reply. "I wouldn't have minded how much one of those women kissed me."

An amused twinkle shone in Stanfield's eyes, for he believed that he understood the meaning of the manager's words, and scented a romance.

CHAPTER XXII

THE THRILLING STUNT

Excellent progress was made during the afternoon, and the manager was delighted.

"I never saw things work so smoothly," he confided to Henry. "The weather holds good, and there has not been a hitch of any kind so far. I believe that we shall have a great picture. If the next big stunt comes off all right, success will be assured."

"I'm somewhat anxious about that stunt," Henry replied "It's goin' to be a costly affair, to say nuthin' of the risk."

"I know it, Henry. But we must have hair-raising thrills. People demand them these days, and I am determined to give them full satisfaction in this picture. As for the cost, you need not worry about that. You will get a new barn for the old one, which is on its last legs, anyway."

"I'm not worryin' so much about the barn, Mr. Joyce, as I am about that gal, Cora. Me an' Sarah have taken a great notion to her, an' I wouldn't like any accident to happen."

"Neither would I, Henry. But Tom understands his business thoroughly, and I have complete confidence in his judgment. He has performed many feats far more risky, and has always come through without a scratch."

"Well, I hope t'goodness he'll do the same this time. I'm not thinkin' so much about him as I am of that fine gal who's to do the stunt with him. Ye kin git a man like Tom a'most any time, but ye don't run across a woman like Cora Davidson every day, let me tell ye that."

Henry sauntered off to the house, and the manager stood gazing thoughtfully after him.

"I wonder what's come over the old fellow," he mused. "He seems to be down in the dumps and very anxious about Cora. If I thought there's anything in the presentiment he seems to have I wouldn't let her run the risk." He glanced over at the barn for a few seconds. "That stunt can't be called off now. Why, it would upset everything, and the picture would be too flat with it left out. It's to be the big thrill, and I feel that I can trust Tom. He's made all the arrangements. He has the board loose, just ready to push off, and the rope in the loft is firmly fastened. He told me so himself. We must run the risk or give up and have the picture spoiled."

A larger crowd than formerly had gathered that afternoon, for word had spread that something of a most unusual nature was to take place. The road was blocked with autos, and people stood in a long line patiently waiting for the big event to be staged. And among them was Charles Stanfield. He had arrived early upon the scene, and as the day was fine and warm, he did not mind waiting. He sat in his car, smoking and watching all that was going on.

The afternoon was well advanced when at last everything was in readiness for the big event. After some preliminaries, Henry, the angry father, came across his daughter, Cora, and Tom making love to each other beneath the shade of an old apple tree. Armed with a shot-gun, he presented a formidable appearance. Greatly frightened, the young couple sped for the barn as their only haven of refuge. As Henry followed, they climbed a ladder to the high loft, which had been specially prepared. And there they clung to each other, watching fearfully the enraged man below.

"Come down out of that," Henry roared, brandishing his gun. "I'll teach you two a lesson fer sich actions."

As the couple made no move to comply with this request, Henry pulled a match from his pocket, scratched it, and touched it to a small pile of dry hay lying upon the floor. In a short time the barn was on fire, with Henry outside yelling at the top of his voice.

In the meantime Tom and Cora were making a spectacular escape on the opposite side of the building. They had torn away the wide loose board, squeezed themselves through the opening, and in another minute both were dangling in the air high above the ground. It was a thrilling sight, and the crowd of onlookers almost held their breath in the intense excitement. Smoke and flames poured from the barn, and the situation of the escaping lovers looked most perilous. With his left arm firmly holding the girl, and with his right hand clutching the rope, Tom began the descent, and when over half way down the anxious watchers gave vent to an involuntary cheer. But just then the rope gave way from its fastening at

the top, and the next instant the young couple dropped like stones upon the ground below.

The spectators believed that this was a part of the regular program, and some again cheered. But Stanfield thought differently. He surmised that such a fall had not been planned, but that it was really an accident, how serious he could not tell. He saw Tom rise slowly to his feet and bend over the prostrate girl. Certain now was he that Cora had been injured, and a great fear came into his heart. Perhaps she was dead!

Leaving the car, he hurried through the crowd and made his way as fast as possible to the scene of the disaster. By this time the barn was a seething mass of flames, and Tom had the girl in his arms and was bearing her away to a place of safety. The manager and others had rushed to his assistance, and as Tom staggered beneath his burden, willing hands reached out, caught the girl and carried her over to the old apple tree, where they laid her tenderly down upon the shaded grass beneath.

Intense excitement now prevailed, and all forgot the spectacular sight of the burning barn in their thought of the injured girl. How badly she was hurt they did not know, and they crowded around eager to learn what they could. Stanfield saw that Cora still breathed, although she was unconscious. He knew that assistance was urgently needed. Seeing Henry standing near, he turned to him.

"Carry her into the house," he ordered, "while I go for the doctor. Get her away from this crowd at once, and I shall be back as soon as I can."

In a few minutes Stanfield was speeding along the road, straight for the station where the doctor lived. He found him at home, and in a few words explained the situation.

"Is there a good nurse anywhere near?" he asked.

"Not nearer than the city," was the reply.

"Then send for one, doctor. You can do that better than I can, for you know about such matters. Never mind the cost."

Crossing to the station, the doctor sent an urgent message to the city for a nurse, and received the reply that one would leave on the next train.

"There will be a nurse on the 6.30 train," he explained to Stanfield, who was waiting for him outside.

"That's fine, doctor. I shall meet her. We must do all in our power for that unfortunate girl."

Stanfield was deeply interested in Cora Davidson. Just why he did not altogether know. But he had taken a liking to the girl from the moment he first saw her. He would have chosen her from a thousand, so he believed. He was attracted by her bright and buoyant manner, her sunny smile, and the heartiness with which she performed her various parts. She did not seem to be acting as did the others, but threw herself unreservedly into her work.

There was another reason as well for her influence over him. In all of his wanderings and experiences among people he had never before seen any woman who reminded him of his only sister. But as he watched Cora moving about, he had more than once imagined himself back in his old home playing with his sister. At times the resemblance was so real as to be startling. It was Marion he beheld, and not the actress. It was her voice, her face and form such as he knew long ago. Try as he might, he could not account for this strange impression. It brought a deep sadness into his heart by the vivid remembrance of other days. He thought of the old orchard, the games, and the happy times they always had together. He had made money, and he was looked upon as a successful business man. But what did it all amount to? Willingly would he have exchanged it all for the old-time comradeship of his sister, and the abounding health that had then been his. This feeling had returned to him that day he stood in the wretched room in which Marion had breathed her last, and it returned whenever he looked upon Cora Davidson. And the girl who had so deeply affected him was now lying seriously injured! This was the thought that surged through his mind ever since the accident. It now caused him to drive the car at a furious speed along the road, giving the doctor considerable anxiety by its reckless onward rush.

"My! that was a close shave," he gasped, as they almost grazed another car in passing. "Better be careful, sir, or it will be necessary to send to the city for a special doctor."

Stanfield, however, made no reply until he had reached his destination and brought the car to a standstill.

"It's up to you now, doctor," he quietly remarked. "I have brought you here in double-quick time, and if you do your part as well and speedily as I have done mine, I shall be satisfied. And, listen," he added in a low voice, "send your bill to me, and don't breathe a word to anyone about it."

The doctor merely nodded his assent as he alighted from the car. He wondered, nevertheless, what should cause Stanfield to take such a special interest in a movie-actress.

"He seems to have gone daft over the girl," he mused as he made his way toward the house. "Maybe it's another cause of an old fool with too much money dazzled silly by a snip of a girl. I've seen it before."

Nearly all of the spectators had left the place, and the actors were standing over by the apple tree, engaged in earnest conversation. Stanfield truly surmised what they were talking about. He longed to know about Cora, and was on the point of going over to the group to make some inquiry, when Henry came out of the house. There was a worried expression in his eyes as he approached the car.

"I'm mighty glad the doctor's come," he began. "The sight of that poor gal layin' there is more'n I kin stand."

"How does she seem to be?" Stanfield asked.

"Jist like she was when she was carried into the house, 'cept that she's come to, an' moans at times as if in much pain."

"Too bad, too bad," Stanfield mused, gazing straight before him.

"It is, sir, an' I warned Tom that it was too risky a stunt fer sich a gal as Cora. Why, if she was me own daughter I couldn't take any more interest in her. She's gripped me an' Sarah as no one ever did before."

Stanfield looked straight into Henry's eyes, and the expression he saw there stirred his heart in sympathy for the rough old man. He noted, too, his gnarled hands, and thread-bare clothes. He then glanced around at his run-down place, and at the gray and weather-beaten house, with its poorly-patched roof. What kind of future was there for such a man? he asked himself. No doubt he had brought much of it upon himself, yet he was an old man now, with a big heart and a deep love for an unfortunate girl, who was almost a complete stranger to him. Impulsively he leaned over and touched Henry upon the shoulder.

"Your wife will need special help, Henry, so I want you to get the best you can find. Never mind the expense, for I shall attend to that."

"But, Mr. Doncaster——"

"Just a minute, Henry. If you need two women, or half a dozen, get them, it won't make any difference to me. I am not used to household affairs, so you and your wife can attend to them. And don't you worry about the food. All you need do is to find a place to store it when it arrives."

Stanfield smiled at Henry's profound amazement. For once the old man was at a loss for words.

"I hope you don't mind my doing this, Henry. This place is mine, remember. I bid it in for five thousand dollars, so I have a right to some say around here."

Henry was about to reply, when Joyce came out of the house, and hurried at once to the car.

"Her leg is broken!" he gasped. "The doctor wants these things from the store," he added, handing Stanfield a piece of paper. "Can you go, Mr. Doncaster?"

"Yes, anywhere, and for anything," was the decisive reply. "Come, Henry, jump in. A drive will do you good."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MORNING CALL

Cora Davidson was lying very still, staring straight before her. The room was quiet, and the only sound heard was the twitter of birds outside the open window. Her eyes were dim with tears, the first she had shed since the accident. Through all the suffering she had endured no cry had escaped her lips. But now alone in the room, and with a slight lessening of the pain, her thoughts turned to the future. The prospect looked dark and discouraging. She had expected so much from the picture of which she was such a vital part. It had meant the fulfillment of her most cherished hopes. In vision she had seen it upon the screen, and her own name being read by thousands. And with this picture a success, she would be in great demand, and the door of a famous career would be open to her. But the accident had put an end to it all. It would be months before she could do anything again. The tears flowed down her cheeks as she mused upon all this. She was glad that the nurse had left her for a while, as she did not wish any one to witness her misery.

Ere long she wiped away the tears with her handkerchief. In fact, she felt somewhat better for her quiet cry. It had relieved her pent-up feelings, anyway, so that was something. She looked toward the window where a soft breath of air was gently stirring the curtains. It brought to her the perfume of flowers from the garden in front of the house, and the scent of sweet clover from the meadow beyond. Memories of other days came to her mind, which seemed now so far off. She thought, too, of the great kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Winters. She knew that they were very poor, and she had wondered at times during the last two days how they could afford to surround her with such luxuries. She believed that they loved her, and for her sake they had sacrificed so much. She had been provided with such a capable nurse, and, in addition, there was a bright young woman helping Mrs. Winters with the housework. The parlor had been given up to the invalid, and it had been transformed as if by magic from a closed-up dingy room to a bright pleasant place. Fresh flowers were always on a table by her bedside, and there were books and the latest magazines in case she wished to read. Oranges and grapes were within hand's reach, and a large box of choice chocolates was close by. She had been somewhat surprised at such dainties, and had asked the nurse where they had come from, but had gained no information. But she had been suffering greatly then, and could hardly think of anything else. Now, however, it was different, and as she lay quietly there she began to puzzle her brain about such matters. Surely the Winters had not done all this for her! They could never have bought the luxurious cot on the other side of the room for the nurse's special benefit. She thought of John Joyce, and a slight flush came into her cheeks. Poor John! He would gladly have given his last cent for her, she was well aware. But he was having his own worry now in financing his picture. He had told her of his difficulties, and she was certain that he could not afford to spend so much upon her, no matter how willing and anxious he might be to do so. At last she was forced to give up the problem. She would question the nurse again about it when she returned.

A light tap upon the partly-opened door arrested her attention.

"Come in," she invited, wondering who it could be, for the nurse, Mrs. Winters, and the doctor never knocked.

Slowly the door was pushed wide open and Henry entered. He looked over at the invalid, and then around the room in a half-frightened manner.

"Good morning, Mr. Winters," Cora accosted, pleased to see him.

"Mornin', Miss. All alone, eh?"

"Alone with my thoughts. Sit down, won't you? I am so glad to see you."

"Are ye, now?" Henry queried, seating himself upon the edge of a chair. "I was afraid I might be intrudin', an' Sarah allus says that's bad manners. I ain't used to payin' sich calls. But I couldn't resist the temptation this mornin', so I've jist slipped in while the women are busy in the kitchen. An' how are ye feelin', anyway?"

"Somewhat better this morning, thank you. The pain is not so severe now."

"That's good, Miss. We'll have ye around in a few weeks, pervidin' yer not in too much of a hurry to git out. Ye want to take care of yerself."

"Others are doing that for me, Mr. Winters. Who is responsible for all this kindness?"

"Jist yerself, an' nobody else."

The look of surprise in Cora's face caused Henry to smile.

"Ye don't understand, eh? Well, that's queer. Now, s'pose ye should ask who's responsible fer all the attention them flowers out there in the garden git? Everybody passin' along the road stops to admire 'em, an' the bees fairly love 'em to death. Who's responsible fer all that? The flowers 'emselves, of course, fer bein' so sweet an' beautiful. That's why they git so much attention. No one in his right senses would think of goin' in raptures over them burdocks an' thistles along the road. Now, I'm like the thistles an' burdocks, Miss, while you're like the flowers. That's the reason ye git so much attention."

"I am afraid you have greatly overestimated me, Mr. Winters," Cora smilingly replied. "I am not one bit like a flower, and I do not feel like one. Flowers are sweet, fresh, and bright, while I am sour, faded, and gloomy. I feel that way this morning, and have just had a good cry to myself. Everybody is so kind to me, and I feel so unworthy of it all."

"Oh, you'll be chipper in a day or two, Miss. It's no wonder yer down in the dumps after what ye've gone through. The purtiest an' sweetest flowers droop a little at times. But they soon freshen up ag'in."

"I didn't know you were so poetical, Mr. Winters."

"Poetical! Me poetical!"

"Certainly. You speak so much about flowers. It shows what beautiful thoughts you must have. You are always so bright and cheerful, too."

"Fer pity's sake, Miss, don't tell Sarah that. She thinks I'm the most cantankerous an' lazy critter that ever breathed the breath of life. An' as fer poetry, she says I don't know the difference between a poem an' a grind-stone. She says there's nuthin' beautiful in my soul, an' mebbe she's right."

"But I am sure there is, Mr. Winters," Cora declared. "You have been so good to me, both you and your wife. I think you are two of the dearest people I have ever known. Why, if I were your own daughter you could not treat me better. I hope I shall be able to repay you a little some day."

"Tut, tut, Miss, don't talk that way," Henry chided, suddenly lifting his right hand and brushing his eyes which were unusually misty. "I'm not used to sentiment. All we ask is fer ye to git well as quick as ye kin. When ye git word of that picter, it'll work wonders, an' all yer blue-devils'll skedaddle in no time."

"So you think the picture will be a success?" Cora anxiously inquired.

"Sure it will, Miss. If that picter don't make a hit, then I miss my guess. It's all done now as fer as we're consarned. My! it's been lively around here since yer accident. I've been hustlin', an' no mistake."

"I hope they got along all right, Mr. Winters. I heard the hammering and the sound of voices, but my suffering was so great that I didn't pay much attention to anything else. It all seems like a dream to me now."

"An' it seems like a dream to me, too, Miss. If ye could see the change that has been made ye wouldn't know the place. There's a new barn instead of the old one, an' the house has been painted to look like one of 'em cute things ye see advertised fer sale in the magazines. It was all done up quick, too. That Mr. Joyce is sartinly some hustler when it comes to gittin' work done."

"Who took my place in the final scenes of the happy family, Mr. Winters?"

"Ada took yer place, an' she looked mighty sweet settin' by me an' Sarah as our daughter in front of the house after the clouds of trouble had all rolled away."

"I am glad that she did so well."

"She sartinly done fine, considerin' she had to jump right in at sich a short notice. She hung back fer a time, like a balky horse, but consented at last after Mr. Doncaster had a talk with her. He's a great man, that, an' I believe Ada's struck on him. Say, I never fer a minute expected to see Ada Karsall fall in love with a man old enough to be her father, an' mebbe

her grandfather, fer all I know. It's a great joke, an' no mistake."

Henry brought the palm of his right hand down upon his knee with a vigorous slap, and the funny expression upon his face caused Cora to laugh outright.

"Why, I thought Miss Karsall was very much opposed to matrimony. You told me so yourself the first night I spent in this house."

"She allus has been dead-set ag'inst it, judgin' by her words an' actions. But the way Lem has acted has, no doubt, made her see things in a different light. Most likely she thinks that matrimony is her only salvation, an' now that Mr. Doncaster has arrived on the scene, she looks upon it as an act of Providence. Ada was allus great that way, an' could see the Lord's hand in things which nobody else could."

"Will she lose her money, Mr. Winters, if her brother marries Miss Rivers?"

"Not a bit of it. I saw Lem last night fer the first time since he came home. He wasn't very talkative, but from what I could gather, he had seen the Trust Company when he was in the city, an' everything is all right."

"So Mr. Karsall and Miss Karsall won't lose their money, then, if they marry? Is that what you mean?"

"That's about it, as near as I kin fathom. Lem didn't say much, but I found out enough to make me sartin there was a misunderstandin' of some kind. Old Karsall didn't want Lem an' Ada to enter the matrimonial state too young, so he had a clause put in his will that if they did marry before they were twenty-one they wouldn't git another cent of his money. Anyway, they're both old enough now, so they shouldn't worry no more."

"Isn't it strange that they didn't know about that before?" Cora asked. "Didn't they read and understand their father's will?"

"Oh, I s'pose they did at one time. But they were quite young, ye see, when their dad died, an' the Trust Company managed everything fer 'em. They didn't bother their heads, bein' content to go on in their quiet way without askin' any questions. But when Miss Rivers landed upon the scene, an' Lem fell head over heels in love with her, it made a great difference."

"Where is Miss Rivers now?" Cora inquired.

"No one seems to know. I asked Lem, but he only shook his head an' looked sad. Poor feller! I feel sorry fer him, a'right. Miss Rivers is sartinly a fine gal, an' I do hope that her an' Lem'll git married."

Cora made no reply, but gazed straight before her. Henry, watching her, smiled to himself. He believed that he knew more than she imagined.

"Well, I must be goin' now," he presently announced.

"Hope I haven't stayed too long, an' worn out me welcome."

"No, no, Mr. Winters, you have not. Come as often as you can, for you cheer me up."

"Do I, now! I'm mighty glad to hear that. But ye must be careful, Miss, an' not try to git well in too big a hurry. We want ye to be in good shape when we go to see that picter in the city. So, good-bye fer the present, an' do yer best."

CHAPTER XXIV

REVELATION

Shortly after dinner Henry went for the mail. Cora eagerly awaited his return, hoping for a letter from Joyce telling her how he was getting along with the picture. A whole day had elapsed since he had written, and it seemed to her a long time. She knew how greatly he was worried over financial matters, and that everything depended upon this venture. How they had talked and planned what they would do when success had crowned their efforts. They had known and loved each other for years, but hitherto the tide of fortune had flowed against them. Now it would turn, so they fondly believed, and their oppressive worry would be ended. Joyce had written regularly since the accident, and several times had phoned for information as to Cora's condition. What was the matter? she anxiously asked herself as she lay there listening for the sound of Henry's footsteps. But, perhaps, he was so busy getting everything arranged that he had for once omitted his letter to her. But that was not like John. No matter how busy he might be he had never neglected her before. It was only natural that she should be much concerned, and that her heart should beat rapidly when Henry at last appeared in the doorway.

"I've got a letter fer ye to-day, Miss," he announced, flourishing it in his right hand. "Guess it's from him, too. How are ye feelin' now?"

"Better since you have arrived, Mr. Winters," Cora smilingly replied.

"An' this letter'll make ye feel better still. I'll light out at once, so ye kin read it."

With trembling hands Cora opened the envelope. She hoped that it would make her feel better, although she had her doubts. And at once her fears were confirmed in the all too-brief letter. In it John told a tale of hopeless defeat. The picture had been seized by his creditors, and he was in despair.

"I pleaded with them to give me a little more time," he wrote, "but they have refused. I have done everything in my power, but fate is against me. But for one man, I am sure that I would be allowed time to get the picture on the market. But he is dead-set against me, and refuses to listen to anything. He has no mercy, and will not give me even one day. Anyway, it would be no use, as I know of no one to whom I can turn for help. And to think that I must tell you all this, darling, when you are suffering so much, and this will only add to your trouble."

Cora finished the letter, with the final words of endearment, and then let the paper drop upon the quilt by her side. Her face was very white, and her eyes filled with tears. Her last hope was now gone. The picture upon which so much depended was about to be seized, and John would be ruined. What could she do?

For some time she lay there and with closed eyes tried to think of some way whereby she might avert the disaster. But the more she thought, the more hopeless she became. And had she not done the same a thousand times in the past? Had she not lain awake night after night in her lonely destitute pen of a room thinking, always thinking, until she believed she would go mad? And daylight had never brought relief. Oh, she knew it all, and what defeat and despair meant. So it had come again when the dawn seemed about to break upon a new day of success and happiness.

With a sigh she turned her face to the wall just as the door was pushed gently open and the nurse ushered Charles Stanfield into the room. Cora turned to look, not caring much who the visitor might be. But when she saw Stanfield beaming upon her from his splendid height, a new and strange glow stole into her chilled heart. He looked so strong and noble that she could not help feeling better.

"I hope I am not intruding, Miss Davidson," he apologized. "But I have been anxious to see you since my return, so hastened here at once. I hope you are improving."

"It is good of you to come, sir," Cora replied, reaching out her hand. "I have been wondering what had become of you. Won't you sit down?"

Stanfield drew a chair up close to her side, sat down, and looked upon the girl's white face. In another minute the nurse had left the room, so the two were alone together.

"What's the meaning of all this?" Stanfield asked.

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Doncaster?"

"The troubled expression in your eyes, of course, and the tear stains upon your cheeks?"

He glanced at the letter lying on the bed.

"Pardon me, but have you had bad news?"

"How do you know that?" Cora asked in surprise. "Did anyone tell you?"

"No one but yourself. It's from Mr. Joyce, is it not? Is he having trouble with the picture?"

Cora was now so much overcome that for a minute she could not trust herself to speak. It seemed to her as if this man was reading her very soul. How did he surmise so truly what the letter contained? And she did need some one to talk to more than anything else. That Stanfield was a stranger to her did not matter. He had been kind to her, and she had the feeling that he was responsible for the comforts she was enjoying. Just why he should do so much for her she could not understand, although she had thought much about it since the accident. But so hard had been her life that she accepted willingly such attentions as a blessed relief. She would find out later, and when she became rich she would repay everything. Such had been her fond imaginings, but now they seemed all in vain.

"Forgive me, Miss Davidson, if I have been intruding into private affairs," Stanfield continued after a somewhat awkward silence. "You need not tell me anything unless you wish."

"But I do wish to tell you, Mr. Doncaster," Cora declared, turning her tear-stained face to his. "Your kindness has so overcome me that I feel unable to express all that is in my heart. I am certain now that you are the one who has been so good to me in giving me all these comforts, the nurse, the flowers, books, chocolates, and oh, so many things. How can I ever repay you?"

"You can best repay me by forgetting all about it," Stanfield quietly replied. "I was hoping that you would never suspect me. I only wanted to be of some assistance to you in your trouble. And that is why I asked you about the picture. I have no personal interest, remember. It is merely a notion of mine. I admired the way you took your various parts, and as I was included in the making of the picture, I am naturally anxious to know how it is getting along."

"It is about to be seized for debt," Cora confessed. "There is John's letter. You might like to read it. I do not mind if you see every word in it. John and I have loved each other for years, and when we believed that our troubles were all at an end, we now find they have really just begun. I am afraid this will go hard with both of us. I cannot see how we shall ever recover from this disaster."

Stanfield picked up the letter, and as he read an expression of deep interest appeared in his eyes. It took him but a minute to realize the tragedy back of those words, and how much it meant to the young lovers.

"Who is the man who refuses to give Mr. Joyce more time?" he asked.

"I do not know, as John has not mentioned his name. It doesn't make any difference, I suppose. Poor John is ruined, and I am so helpless lying here that I cannot do a thing, and not even comfort him by my presence."

Stanfield made no immediate reply, but sat very still staring at the letter. He was thinking deeply, and once he pulled out his watch and glanced at the time. Cora was too much concerned with her own troubles to notice his absent-mindedness. She was thinking of John, and longing to see him, even for a few minutes. The room seemed to her like a prison, and the bed a rack upon which she was bound.

In a few minutes Stanfield rose to his feet, and held out his hand.

"I must go now, Miss Davidson," he said. "I hope I have not tired you."

"Must you go so soon, Mr. Doncaster? You have not tired me in the least. In fact, it is a great comfort to have you here. It seems as if I had known you all my life. Please stay a while longer, that is, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Stanfield assured her, resuming his seat. "I haven't much to do these days, except ride around in my car. I was merely going for another spin."

"Don't let me detain you, then."

"Oh, that's all right. I have plenty of time yet. A few minutes won't make any difference."

"I am so glad, Mr. Doncaster, for there is something I want to tell you, and I hope you won't think it childish or foolish. But when you are near me I have the strange feeling that my mother is right by my side, looking upon me and talking to me. I cannot understand it at all."

"That is remarkable, Miss Davidson. Is your mother living?"

"Oh, no. She died several years ago."

"Ah, perhaps that accounts for it, then. Your mother may be nearer than you imagine. Some people have the idea that our departed loved ones come very close to us at times, although we cannot see them."

"I know it, Mr. Doncaster. Several times I have felt sure of my mother's presence, but never so much as this afternoon. When you look at me I can see her in your eyes."

"You must miss her so much," Stanfield replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Miss her! I cannot begin to tell you how I miss her. I did not think so much about it when I first left home, for I was going to be rich and successful. But, oh, how can I describe what I long to say? I wish I could, for it would relieve my feelings."

"Tell me anything you like, Miss Davidson, and I shall consider your confidence as a sacred trust."

"Please don't call me 'Miss Davidson' any longer," the girl cried. "That is not my real name. It is Ruth Rivers."

At this confession Stanfield started and then leaned slightly forward. His heart was beating fast, and only with extreme difficulty could he control himself. He felt that he had not heard aright, or that he must be dreaming. But it was no dream, for there before him was his niece waiting for him to speak. What should he say? He understood now why the girl had thought of her mother when he was by her side. There had been a remarkable resemblance between him and Marion, especially in their eyes. And so he had found his sister's wandering child at last! A great joy came suddenly into his heart at the thought that she was worthy of his care and love. In his visions he had never imagined his niece would be so beautiful. And for Marion's sake, at least, he must do everything in his power for her daughter. His eyes grew misty and he turned away his face to hide his emotion which he was no longer able fully to control. The girl mistook this for annoyance, and she laid her right hand gently upon his arm.

"I hope you are not angry with me, Mr. Doncaster," she began. "I did it all for the best. I wanted to hide myself until I had become successful, and then I would take my right name. But, oh, it has been so hard, and I did want to tell some one. Nobody knows it but you and John."

"I am not angry with you," Stanfield quietly replied, thinking of his own deception. "I am most grateful indeed for your confidence. There is no reason why you should be ashamed for assuming another name. Many have done it."

"I know they have, and thought little about it. But I always seemed to be acting a lie. I wonder what Mr. and Mrs. Winters will think of me when they know what I have done."

"It will make no difference with them, I am certain. They love you too much to take any offense. The name Rivers is a beautiful one. And, by the way, there is a Miss Rivers who taught school here last——"

"She is my only sister," the girl interrupted in a low voice. "Oh, how I long to see her. She was always so good and kind, and helped me so much whenever I asked her. I know she sacrificed a great deal for my sake, sending me money when

she could not afford to do so. But I planned to pay her back when I became rich. But now I know that I can never do that."

"Where is your sister?" Stanfield inquired.

"I do not know. She left here, so I believe, but gave no one any address."

"And you receive no letters from her?"

"Not now, as she does not know where I am. I have kept this visit here a secret from her."

"But you knew she had been teaching here, didn't you?"

"I never for a moment thought that this was the same place. You see, I only remembered the name of the post office, and if Nita ever told me the name of the parish I forgot all about it. Not until after my arrival did I find out the truth from Mr. and Mrs. Winters. They were talking about Nita the first night I spent with them, and when I heard her name mentioned, and learned how badly she had been treated, I could hardly control myself. They, dear souls, imagined that I was over-tired after the exertions of the day. But, there, I must not weary you with my sad and miserable story."

"You do not weary me at all, Miss, ah, Miss Rivers. I am keenly interested in all that you have told me. Your father is dead, I suppose?"

"Yes, he died years before my mother. It was then that she fought such a hard battle for Nita and me. That was the reason why I left home. I had great ideas about making money, and then going back to do so much for mother. How little I knew then what was ahead of me."

"Tell me all about it," Stanfield urged. "I want to hear about your mother and father, as well as your own experience."

For a few minutes Ruth remained thoughtfully silent. She then began and told him the whole tale of her troubles, her poverty and discouragements. When she was at last through, Stanfield rose to his feet and grasped her hand in his.

"I must go now," he said in a choking voice. "Thank you for what you have told me. But keep up courage. The darkest cloud has a silver lining, remember. I am going away for a day or two, and when I return I shall come to see you again. Good-bye, and do not worry. We want you to get well as soon as possible."

CHAPTER XXV

AT THE STORE

It was evening and several men were gathered at the store. Most of them had come to do a little shopping, but the main object was to hear the latest news. They formed the usual group, men like Henry Winters, who spent too much of their time at this place. For days the motion-picture performance had been the main topic of conversation. It had been discussed so much that it was now becoming thread-bare. Still all eagerly awaited for something new to happen, and they were naturally curious to know how the beautiful young woman at the Winters' house was getting along. The women folks would be sure to inquire about her, so they longed to find out anything that would be of interest.

Henry had been seldom at the store of late, so the chief source of information was lacking. He had been too much occupied about other matters to spend his time in idle gossip. He knew that he was missed, as several of his neighbors had chided him for his absence from their nightly gatherings. This pleased Henry, and he chuckled to himself as he thought of his old comrades waiting on the rack of suspense.

"It won't hurt 'em," he mused. "They'll be all the more delighted to see me when I do go. There's nuthin' like absence to make the heart grow fonder, so I've heard Sarah say. But if I thought it would make her fonder of me, I'd stay away a long time, blamed if I wouldn't."

At last the men in the store decided to go home. They were disappointed, as they had heard nothing new to carry back to their wives. They were about to leave the place, when the door was suddenly opened and Henry entered. He was warmly greeted, and all breathed a sigh of contentment.

"Where have ye been this long time, Hen?" Sim Rodgers asked. "We've missed your company. You surely haven't been working."

Henry made no reply, but stepping to the counter ordered a fig of tobacco.

"You surely haven't come down to that after all the fine cigars you've been smoking of late," Seth Denham bantered. "I thought you had enough Havanas to do you the rest of your life. Has your rich friend gone back on you? You've been living high these days."

Henry leaned against the counter, drew out a jack-knife from his pocket and began to whittle off several slices from the plug the storekeeper had handed to him. Presently he looked over at Seth.

"I have been livin' high lately, an' no mistake," he began. "But no matter how many cigars I smoke, I allus come back to me old pipe. It's hard to break away from a friend of long years."

"I'm glad to hear ye say that, Hen," Jerry Slocum replied. "We thought maybe ye'd forsaken your old friends down here at the store for your new ones. I hope you feel the same about us as you do about your pipe."

"I sure do, Jerry. But me new friends are a'right, let me tell ye that, 'specially that gal up at the house, an' that Doncaster feller. They're worth knowin', an' I wish there was more like 'em."

"How is Miss Davidson getting along?" Sim Rodgers inquired.

"As well as kin be expected with so many women flutterin' around her. I had a chat with her lately, an' she was mighty glad to see me fer a change."

"You always took well with women, Hen," Seth again bantered. "At picnics you're always the center of attraction."

"It's me good looks an' takin' ways, Seth," Henry replied, winking at the other men. "Don't ye wish you had sich gifts? But I ain't a match to that Doncaster chap. Why, he's the limit. The women folks are jist crazy over him. An' so is Ada Karsall. If that isn't proof enough, then I give up."

"So I've heard," Tom Logan, a big strapping farmer, replied. "She's set her cap fer him, hasn't she?"

"Seems so, Tom. She's mighty jealous of his attention to Miss Davidson. She's sartin that he's the one who's doin' so

much fer that poor unfortunate gal, an' she's jist eatin' her heart out with envy. I was up to her place this afternoon, an' ye should have heard the way she talked."

"What did she say?" Sim asked.

"Oh, I can't remember all. But she doesn't believe it's right fer a complete stranger to do sich things fer a young gal. But if she was in Miss Davidson's place she wouldn't talk that way, not on yer life. It's wonderful what jealousy'll do, 'specially among women. Now, I was never troubled with that bug."

"How is Lem getting along these days?" Tom asked. "I haven't seen him since he came home. Did he find his sweetheart when in the city?"

Henry looked at Tom for a few minutes in silence. His pipe had gone out, but he was pulling at it as vigorously as ever. He then struck a match and applied it to the partly-burned tobacco.

"I can't very well answer all of them questions, Tom," he at last replied. "I saw Lem to-day, but he wasn't in a talkin' mood. He was workin' in the field tryin' to git in some hay. But, poor feller, his heart was not in what he was doin'. I could see that in a minute. He's failed, too, since I saw him last, an' he seems mighty peeked like."

"Oh, when a man's in love he's generally that way," Bill Hoskin declared. "Lem'll come around, all right, when he gets married. I know I did, anyway."

"Ye sartinly did, Bill," Henry agreed. "Yer wife knocked all foolish sentimental nonsense out of yer head. An' I guess that's true of the rest of us here. Sarah cured me, a'right."

"But maybe Lem'll never get married," Sim suggested. "He doesn't seem to know where the girl is. She cleared out of her own free will, didn't she? Perhaps she did it on purpose to be free of Lem."

"I've thought of that, Sim, but I kin hardly believe it. Her an' Lem were mighty fond of each other. No, it's somethin' else, an' we all know what that is. It's the women's tongues that drove Miss Rivers out of this place. An' we let 'em do it without liftin' a voice on her behalf. It jist shows how our wives have us under their thumbs. I suggest that we start a society an' stand up fer our rights ag'inst the female element that's runnin' this deestrict."

"Will you head the movement?" Tom asked.

"Sure I'll head it, an' tail it, too, fer I don't believe one of you fellers'll jine me. The hull bunch of yez haven't got enough spunk an' backbone to say yer souls are yer own when yer wives are around."

"Don't be too hard on us, Hen," Jerry pleaded. "We're men of peace."

"Yes, peace at any cost. Peace! H'm! An' yit ye call yerselves men, an' let an innocent gal like Miss Rivers be treated worse than we treat a dog. Bah! I'm sick of sich actions."

"What can we do about it?" Tom inquired. "We're not the ones really to blame. Didn't your own wife and Ada start the trouble? Didn't they make all the mischief in the first place? And yet you blame us."

"I know they did, Tom, an' the other women backed 'em up. I'm not clearin' Sarah an' Ada of what they done, not a bit of it. But what I want to do is to bring that teacher back an' make up fer the way she's been treated."

"Oh, that's easier said than done, Hen. She'll never come back after the way she's been treated here. She's got too much spunk fer that."

"Mebbe Lem kin work it, pervidin' he's able to find her. But, there, I must git along."

"What's yer hurry, Hen?" Jerry asked. "It's early yet, and as you haven't been with us much of late you might stay a while."

"Oh, I'm too busy these days to hang around here. Time's mighty precious to me now."

"Why, I should think you could afford to lay back a little after the way yer place has been fixed up. I wish t' goodness a movin'-picture consarn would come to my farm. It needs a dang lot of repairin'."

"Yes, I sartinly am proud of the way me old house looks, to say nuthin' of the new barn. But it was a mighty close shave. If them folks hadn't come jist when they did, it would have been the Poor House fer me an' Sarah. I was jist on the verge of takin' out a mortgage on the place when Mr. Doncaster came to the rescue. He's a great man, that, an' no mistake."

This was something new to the listeners, and they were naturally very curious to know what Henry meant. He read their minds and it pleased him. He always enjoyed startling his neighbors, and when it was anything of real importance the joy was greatly enhanced.

"Yes," he continued in a drawling voice, "when that man bid in me place fer five thousand dollars at the auction, it put me right on me feet."

"But that was only a make-believe, wasn't it, Hen?" Sim queried. "It surely wasn't the real thing!"

"It wasn't, eh? Then, that's all you know about it. Ye've got to larn something more about me worthy friend. An' look what he's done fer Miss Davidson. He's been supplyin' grub by the wagon-load fer the hull house, besides hirin' a nurse fer the invalid an' a woman to help Sarah. He pays 'em, too, an' the doctor, as well, an' he's done a hull lot of other things, sich as fittin' up the room with fine furniture, and sendin' her flowers an' choc'lates. That's the kind of man he is."

"He must be a millionaire," Seth suggested. "D'ye know anything about him?"

"Nuthin' 'cept what he's been doin' since he came to this place. I fust thought he was a perfessor. But I've come to the conclusion now that he's a wealthy magnet, who's got heaps of money, an' has taken a notion to that poor unfortunate gal. Them rich magnets take queer notions sometimes, so I've read in the papers."

"So have I," Jerry agreed, nodding significantly, "'specially when a pretty girl appears."

"He's not that kind," Henry sharply retorted. "He's a real man, an' none of yer hunker-bunkers."

"Who is he, anyway, Hen? D'ye know where he came from, or who he really is?"

"I only know that he's treated me white. He's stood by that poor unfortunate gal, too, an' is doin' what he kin fer her welfare. An' that's a darn sight more than any of the neighbors have done. Why, not one of yer wives has ever come to see how Miss Davidson is gittin' along. If it hadn't been fer Mr. Doncaster's help I don't know how in the world we'd got along."

"Our wives have all they can attend to now," Seth defended. "They can't get through with half the work they have to do."

"I 'spose that's true, Seth, owin' to you fellers spendin' so much of yer time hangin' around this store. I used to do it meself, but me eyes have been opened of late, an' I've turned over a new leaf an' intend to pay more attention to me farm. I've been yangin' about the stars fightin' ag'inst me. But now that they're fightin' fer me, I'm goin' to do my part. I've acted like a fool in the past, but don't intend to do so no more."

"Oh, yer gettin' mighty high-falutin' since ye've come into sich good luck," Sim growled. "I s'pose ye'll have no more use fer yer neighbors after this. It's the old story, I guess, of a beggar ridin' on horseback."

"I was never a beggar, Sim," Henry replied with some heat. "I never begged a cent from any man. An' the only back I'm goin' to depend upon is me own backbone. If after what's come my way doesn't make a new man of me, then I'm a miserable cuss an' don't desarve to be called a man."

Henry rose slowly from the box upon which he had been sitting, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"I must be goin' now," he explained. "But I don't want yez to git offended at anything I've said. I didn't mean to hurt yer feelin's. We've been good friends too long to quarrel at our age of life. But I advise yez all to take my words to heart an' git a hustle on. We've been all purty much alike, allus growlin' an' knockin' things in general. But that won't git us anywhere unless we pitch in ourselves an' do our part. Yez kin chew over that, so good-night."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE NIGHT VISIT

Lemuel Karsall sat in his corner in The Loft lost in deep thought. He leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. He gazed straight before him at the picture above his desk which Nita had painted of her old home. But he saw little of the house and the trees surrounding it, for another picture was in his mind. He was thinking of that day at the Falls, and he saw again the woman he loved with animated face playing with the children. That was one of the happiest days of his life, and it all came back to him now. And since then she had gone from him, and he did not know what had become of her. He thought, too, of that last night they had been together out by the barn. The words she had uttered then had thrilled his soul, and the meeting of their lips in that brief kiss had been to him like a sweet benediction. He knew that she loved him as he loved her. And it was for his sake she had gone away, perhaps never to return. He had searched frantically for her in the city, but his efforts had been all in vain. Now he was at his wit's end, not knowing what to do next. He could not settle down to work upon the farm, and he knew that he could not go on day after day, week in and week out as he had been doing since his return home.

At length his eyes dropped from the picture to some papers lying upon his desk. Leaning forward, he picked up the largest, and by the light of the lamp he read again his father's will, a copy of which he had obtained from the Trust Company when in the city. Everything was now clear, and he had explained it all to Ada. Their father had only guarded them against marrying too young, that was all. He and his sister could obtain the entire bequest, if they so desired, and use it as they wished. It was not a large amount, but the interest if wisely used would make a good living for one of them. Ada should have it all, so Lemuel decided, providing he had Nita. He believed that he could make his own living somehow. Anyway, the question of money would not stand any longer between him and the woman he loved.

Lemuel had made this resolve several days before, and a letter lying on his desk strengthened him all the more in his decision. It was the only ray of light in his darkness, and it brought a sense of satisfaction to his heart. The secret desire of his soul was about to be fulfilled, and in a manner he had never imagined. He wondered what Ada would say about it when he told her the news. And what would his neighbors think? He knew pretty well what they thought of him. To them he was an enigma, and as they could not understand his strange ways and intense interest in the study of nature, they considered him quite odd. They had made light of the collection he had gathered with such painstaking care, and The Loft from which the midnight light burned so regularly was the object of much amusement and not a little ridicule. Lemuel had paid no attention to what his neighbors said and thought, being so much in love with his studies. But Ada, who was determined to keep him informed of what the neighbors said, was of a different nature and took the remarks very much to heart. More than once she had rebuked him for his dreamy manner and lack of sociability.

"I wish you were like other men, Lemuel," she had declared one morning at breakfast.

"In what way, Ada?" he had asked, glancing up from the cup of coffee he was thoughtfully stirring. "What men do you want me to be like?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. But I wish you were different from what you are. You need more go and snap, instead of wandering around through the fields and woods, and moping so much up in The Loft."

"You would prefer that I spend my time at the store like Sim, Seth, Jerry, and others, I suppose? Perhaps you would hear more gossip if I did."

"No, I don't want you to be like them, Lemuel. But I want you to be a man so the neighbors won't make fun of you. It is very humiliating to me to hear what they say."

"I suppose it is," Lemuel had quietly replied, and said no more.

This conversation came to him now as he sat in his corner musing upon the letter he was holding in his hand. The faint semblance of a smile appeared upon his face as he thought of the news he would have to impart to Ada in the morning. And the neighbors would soon hear of it, too, for his sister would be swift to attend to that.

The sound of someone thumping up the stairs startled him. He wondered who it could be, as it was most unusual for any one to disturb him in his nightly vigil. He was not left long in doubt, however, for the next minute the door was pushed

open and Henry entered. He was puffing as he paused at the top of the stairs and looked over at Lemuel.

"My! them steps are gittin' steeper every time I come up 'em," he growled. "Ye should git an elevator, Lem, like they have in them big stores in the city fer sich an old man as me."

"You and I would be the only ones to use it, Henry," Lemuel replied. "It's not your age that makes the steps seem so steep, but the weight of your boots, judging by the noise they make. But I'm pleased to see you, no matter what racket you make. Come over here and sit down."

"Mebbe yer right, Lem," Henry agreed as he clumped across the room and sat down upon a chair near the desk. "I'm glad I'm not disturbin' ye in yer great thoughts. I saw the light shinin' from yer winder, so thought I'd jist come up an' have a little chat. I was down to the store an' got disgusted with the bunch there. Somehow they don't interest me no more with their yangin' an' silly gossip."

"You have found something more important in life, eh?" the young man queried.

"I sartinly have, 'specially since that poor unfortunate gal down at the house came our way, to say nuthin' of Mr. Doncaster. Ye haven't seen Miss Davidson, have ye, Lem?"

"Not yet, although I have heard about her from Ada. She must be a very fine young woman. I hope to meet her some day."

"She sartinly is, but I'm s'prised that Ada thinks so."

"She doesn't, Henry. She hasn't a good word to say about her."

"Well, then, what makes ye think she's a fine young woman?"

"Because Ada doesn't like her. I need no better reason."

Henry stared hard at Lemuel for a few seconds. Then a smile appeared upon his wrinkled face and he chuckled.

"Oh, I see. Yer thinkin' of another gal, I s'pose?"

"I am, Henry, and the best and noblest girl that ever lived. Ada has misjudged her, and no doubt she has done the same about Miss Davidson."

"She has, Lem, if she told ye anything ag'inst her. But tell me, have ye heard anything about Miss Rivers since she left?"

"Not a word."

"An' ye don't know where she is?"

"No. I have tried in every way to find where she is, but all in vain."

"D'ye s'pose she's in the city?"

"That I cannot tell. I am afraid I have lost her forever."

"It's funny fer her to act that way, isn't it, Lem? She might have dropped ye a line to tell ye what's happened to her."

"It's just like her, though, Henry. She is so noble-minded that she is willing to sacrifice herself rather than cause trouble between Ada and me. And she is so proud and sensitive that the lies about her trying to marry me for my money have about broken her heart. Oh, if I could only punish the ones who started those false reports. But what can I do when the chief offender is my own sister?"

"An' Sarah, too," Henry added in a low voice. "I understand, Lem, I sartinly do. It's a ticklish problem."

"We are comrades in distress, Henry. And what is worse, we cannot undo the mischief that has been done. Nita will not come back."

"But she might if she knew about the will, Lem. From what ye've told me, I gather that yer marryin' won't affect the money yer father left."

"That is quite true, Henry. But there is another obstacle. As I just said, Nita won't return after what people have been saying about her wanting to marry me for my money."

"Would she come fer any other reason, Lem?"

"H'm, what other reason would cause her to come to this place where she has received such unjust treatment? I know of nothing."

"But s'pose there was some one else she's very fond of here. An' s'pose that some one has met with an accident an' is feelin' purty lonely at times?"

"What do you mean, Henry? To whom are you referring? Oh, now I understand. It is Widow Brown's little boy. But he's almost as well as ever. Anyway, I don't think she would come back just to see him."

"No, it's not him I'm meanin', Lem. Ye've got another think comin'. Isn't there some one else who met with an accident in this place?"

"Yes, Miss Davidson, to be sure. But why would Nita be anxious to come to see her?"

"But s'pose Miss Davidson is her only sister?"

At these words Lemuel started, leaned forward and laid a firm hand upon Henry's shoulder. He was greatly excited.

"What are you saying?" he demanded. "What reason have you for such a question as that?"

"Keep cool, Lem, an' don't git too much upsot. I have a reason fer askin' that question, fer I believe my suspicion is about kerrect."

"That Miss Davidson is Nita's sister?"

"That's jist it."

"But what reason have you for such an idea?"

"Me own nat'ral horse-sense, of course. Then, what I found out later. Ye see, the fust night Miss Davidson stayed at our house the conversation drifted around to the way the school teacher had been treated. An' ye should have seen Miss Davidson when she learned the teacher's name. She turned as white as a ghost, an' then took a faint spell. Sarah thought she was weak from her exertions through the day, an' hustled her off to bed. But I kinder suspected somethin'. I knew that Miss Rivers has a sister on the stage, an' sizin' things up, I decided that Miss Davidson is that sister."

"But have you asked her?" Lemuel inquired.

"Not yit. I'm jist waitin' to see how the fun'll turn out. I don't want to spile her little game until she is ready to tell."

"But it is only a surmise, after all, Henry. You don't know for sure."

"It was until t'day, Lem. But now I'm sartin. Only this mornin' the nurse at our house handed me Miss Davidson's grip an' asked me if I could mend the handle which was a'most ripped off. I took it out into me work-shop an' saw there was one of 'em leather tags fastened to the handle in which a piece of card was stuck fer the owner's name. I noticed that the little strap on this was ripped, too, so decided to mend that while I was about it. The name 'Cora Davidson' was written on the outside of the card, but when I took it out so as not to spile it while I worked, I happened to turn it over. An' there on the other side I saw the name 'Ruth Rivers' as plain as could be. Now, if that isn't evidence enough, I'd like to know what ye want."

Lemuel had now risen to his feet and was standing by Henry's side.

"I guess you are right," he declared. "Miss Davidson must be Nita's sister, and she has assumed that name as a disguise. Now I understand what you mean. Nita might be induced to return for her sister's sake, if for nothing else. My! this is all very wonderful."

"It sartinly is, Lem. An' the sooner we fetch her back the better it will be fer all consarned."

"But how are we to do that when we do not know where Nita is? I have searched for her in vain."

"Jist let me have a try at it, Lem. Mebbe I know the city better'n you do. Now, where did ye look fer her, anyway?"

"At the hotels and on the streets, of course. I tramped around for several days until I was completely tired out."

"H'm, I imagined as much. An' then ye ended up at the Nat'ral History Society, I s'spose?"

"Why, how do you know that?"

"Oh, I don't know, Lem," and Henry laughed. "But I know you, so thought likely that's where ye'd land among them flowers, stones an' stuffed critters. You couldn't find that gal, fer ye didn't go about it in the right way."

"Do you think you can, then, Henry?"

"Can't say fer sure. But I'm goin' to have a try, anyway. If I don't succeed, it'll be no use fer anyone else to undertake the job."

"When will you go, Henry?" Lemuel eagerly asked.

"Oh, in a day or two. I've got to do some bankin', open up an account fer the fust time in me life."

"You did well, then, with the moving-picture people?"

"Should say I did. Sold me place to Mr. Doncaster, an' got a check fer five thousand dollars."

"You did!"

"Bet yer life I did. There it is," and Henry pulled out the check from his pocket and held it up to view.

"I am glad for your sake, Henry," Lemuel quietly replied. "Let me congratulate you. Your stars are fighting for you, after all, are they not?"

"They sure are, Lem, an' they'll fight fer you, too, if ye jist have patience an' keep a stiff upper lip. Don't git too much down-hearted. Things'll turn out a'right."

"I am coming to believe so now, Henry. I have a strong hope that Nita will return when she learns that her sister is here. And I believe that you will find her. Then, there is something else. Here is a letter which I received to-day which gives me much encouragement. It is from President Radcliffe, of Strongbow University, and he makes me a wonderful offer."

"That doesn't s'prise me, Lem. He wants ye to become a perfessor, eh?"

"No, not exactly that, Henry. But he wants me to go and give several talks this coming fall on my studies and the discoveries I have made. It is called the 'Stanfield Course,' in honor of a wealthy man who gave the money for this purpose. The idea is to enlist the services of men who have made independent studies in various fields that they may give the benefit of their knowledge to the students of the University. In his letter the President says that Mr. Stanfield, the donor, is anxious to have a man from his native country to tell something about this province, so I have been chosen. The offer has come to me as a great surprise, although it has been an ideal I have had in my mind for years. It seems almost too good to be true."

"How in the world did he hear about you, Lem?" Henry asked.

"I met him this summer. He and your Mr. Doncaster stopped to inquire the way to Crestville. They saw my collection here, and Mr. Radcliffe, although I didn't know who he was then, was very much interested. He has written to me several times since about my studies."

"So Mr. Doncaster was with him, eh?" Henry queried.

"He was, and although he paid no attention to my collection, he was greatly interested in that painting. In fact, he was quite excited."

Lemuel motioned to the picture over the desk, and Henry rose to his feet and peered keenly upon it.

"Miss Rivers painted it, and gave it to me," Lemuel explained. "It is a picture of her old home."

"So Mr. Doncaster was interested in it, Lem?"

"Very much so, and he asked a number of questions about Nita."

Henry picked up his hat and turned slowly away from the corner.

"Guess I'll go now, Lem. It's gittin' late, an' Sarah'll be wonderin' what's happened to me. So good-night, Lem. We've both got enough to think about fer a while. Don't ye worry, me boy, the stars'll stand by us, a'right."

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED

Seated at his desk in his small downtown office, John Joyce was staring through the dust-covered window on his right at a marine junk-yard below. It was not an inspiring sight upon which his eyes rested. It was nothing but a mass of odds and ends collected there in confused heaps. Twisted rods of iron, old boilers, anchors with broken flukes, frayed wire ropes, rusted cables, and other relics of sea-faring ways were all jumbled together in that yard. They were all the wrecks and ruins of bright hopes of former days. Now they were cast aside as of little value.

To Joyce they were just like his own life. He had tried hard to succeed, but everything had been against him. And now his last effort was nothing but a dismal failure, a wreck more pathetic than that he beheld through the window. He had built so much upon the picture of "The Old Home," and he felt certain that it would prove a winner if he had only a little more time. But that was denied him, for the man upon whom he depended had now failed him at the critical moment. He saw the meaning behind Bartley Ripton's refusal to allow him more time in which to get the picture on the market. It was greed and nothing more. Ripton realized the value of the picture and wished to obtain possession of it at Joyce's expense. He had advanced him the money to carry on the work and now he demanded payment. This was the last day of grace, and as the afternoon was now well advanced and he had failed in his frantic effort to obtain any money in the city, Joyce felt that he was doomed. It was already four o'clock, and at five Ripton would arrive. That would be the end so far as Joyce was concerned, for he knew that his hard-hearted creditor would have no mercy, but would demand the last poor scruple.

A moan as of a creature wounded to death escaped Joyce's parched lips. He thought of the ones who had stood by him so bravely in his last desperate throw. They had not been paid for their services, and they were greatly in need of their money. How could he meet them and explain the hopelessness of the situation? Of course, they could hold the picture for payment. But that would mean delay, and in the meantime they needed what was due them. And besides, it would be difficult for them to deal with such an unscrupulous man as Ripton. Joyce knew of the Law's delays, and what several weeks would mean to the needy ones.

His crowning agony, however, was in thinking of Ruth Rivers. She had been almost constantly in his mind since the day he had left her lying so white upon her bed of suffering to hurry away to the city. She had been very brave then, though racked with pain. He had spoken hopefully of success, and had cheered her in every way possible. His letters, too, had been encouraging until that last one when he had been forced to tell her the bitter truth. He knew how it would add to her sorrow, but he felt it was not right to keep the information from her. He pictured her lying there in the room in the old farm-house with the birds singing outside, and the scent of flowers drifting in through the open window from the garden and the fields beyond. How he longed to be by her side and away from the city. If he and Ruth could live always in the country what happiness it would be. And they had planned to spend their summers there, at any rate, just as soon as success had crowned their efforts. They had a snug cottage in view, close to the river, like the one in which Ruth had spent so many years of her young life. She and John had even talked of buying the old house at Radnor, repairing it, and making it their summer home. But now all that could never be. Their bright visions could never be fulfilled. And it was all due to the overwhelming greed of one man! Little wonder, therefore, that there was almost murder in Joyce's heart as he sprang to his feet and paced rapidly up and down the small room. Why should such things be allowed? he asked himself. Where was the justice in life, anyway? He had struggled honestly to make a living, and had failed. He had won the love of a true pure woman, and yet there was little or no hope that they could ever be united. While on the other hand, Ripton seemed to prosper. He had money in abundance, and from what Joyce heard, he had obtained his wealth in very questionable ways. And even his character was far from blameless, according to rumors which were afloat. He was morally bad, and the world knew it. Yet he succeeded.

"Bah!" The word broke from Joyce's lips and he stamped in impotent rage upon the floor. Such anger was most unusual to him, but there was good reason for it now. He was at bay, with his back against the wall, and with no hope of escape. Only a god could be calm in such a situation.

A knock upon the door startled him. It was Ripton, no doubt, over-anxious and ahead of time for his prize. Angrily Joyce strode to the door and flung it open. Instead of beholding the oily and fat-faced Ripton, great was his surprise to see Charles Stanfield standing before him.

"Excuse me," the visitor apologized. "I hope I am not intruding."

"Not at all, sir," Joyce assured. "Come right in. I thought you were some one else, my nemesis, in fact. But I am delighted to see you. Sit down here and tell me the news. How is—is Cora?"

"I thought that would be your first question," Stanfield smilingly replied as he sat down and drew forth his cigar-case. "Have a smoke. It's good for the nerves. I find it so, at any rate."

"Do you think I am in special need of something stimulating now?" Joyce queried, as he touched a match to his cigar.

"I believe so, judging by the expression in your eyes when you opened the door."

"And there is good reason for my anger, Mr. Doncaster. I am in the clutches of a devil, and see no way of escape."

"So I surmised from your letter to Miss Davidson."

"She told you about it, sir?" Joyce eagerly asked. "How did she take the news?"

"She let me read the letter. The news of your trouble was a great blow to her, but she was as brave as could be expected. She seemed to think only of you."

"Poor girl!" Joyce murmured. "It is hard to bear up after what we have both done and endured. And to think that all this trouble is due to one man."

"Who is he, Mr. Joyce? He wishes to get control of your picture, so I understand."

"He certainly does, and it seems that he has about succeeded. I never imagined that Ripton would do such a contemptible thing as that."

At these words Stanfield gave a slight start, took the cigar from his mouth, and looked keenly at the young man.

"So Ripton is his name, eh?" he queried.

"Yes, Bartley Ripton. He promised to be my friend and help me with my undertaking. He had the money, so I went ahead. But now he has turned traitor. This is the last day of grace. He will be here at five o'clock, and I am helpless. The picture will have to go. I am finished."

Stanfield pulled out his watch and glanced at it. He then sat very still with his eyes fixed pensively upon the window opposite. Joyce was too much taken up with his own thoughts to pay any attention to the sudden silence of his visitor. He drummed absent-mindedly upon the desk with the fingers of his right hand.

"Where did this man Ripton come from?" Stanfield at length asked.

"From somewhere in the States, so I believe."

"What is his business?"

"He is a promoter, so he informed me."

"H'm, a promoter of his own interests, so it seems."

"Yes, at the expense and ruin of others."

"And you say he will be here at five?"

"So he told me. But he may come sooner, for he is a hot-footed scoundrel and is keen to get control of my picture."

Again Stanfield pulled out his watch.

"He should be here, then, in about twenty minutes, if not before."

He then leaned over toward Joyce. "Look, I want to be near when Ripton arrives, but he must not see me or know that I am anywhere around. Your story has given me much food for thought. I once knew a man by that name, and am anxious to

find out if he is the same person. How can we manage it?"

"Suppose you hide yourself in that little room there," Joyce suggested, somewhat surprised at Stanfield's request. "You can hear every word that is said here without any trouble. You can see, too, through that hole in the plaster. The wall is full of holes, too many, in fact. I guess it must have been used as a Star Chamber at one time. Anyway, it will be that when Ripton arrives. It will be torture, all right."

"For you or for Ripton?" Stanfield quickly asked.

"For me, of course, and that villain will do the torturing."

"Don't be too sure of that," Stanfield quietly replied, and Joyce wondered what he meant. He had no time to say more, for a loud knock sounded suddenly upon the door. Stanfield leaped to his feet, and had just disappeared into the little room adjoining as Ripton entered.

"Ah, waiting for me, eh?" he began, as he crossed the room to where his victim was sitting. "I'm a little ahead of time, I admit. But it's a habit of mine."

Joyce made no reply. He found it difficult to control himself in the presence of this rascal. He longed to spring upon him, clutch him by the throat, and change that bland triumphant expression in his eyes to terror. He would like to see him gasping and begging for mercy. The wild beast nature was tugging at Joyce's heart as he watched Ripton standing there rubbing his fat hands together and gazing so complacently upon him. But for the thought of that silent man in the next room Joyce might have done something of a desperate nature just then. Stanfield's presence gave him much needed assurance, just why he could not tell. Neither did he attempt to analyze his feelings. He merely knew, and that was sufficient to restrain his rage of passion.

"You have everything ready, I suppose?" Ripton queried. "I'm in a hurry to-day, so wish to get this little matter settled as soon as possible."

"Little matter!" Joyce cried. "Do you call this a little matter? It may be so to you, but to me it means my life-blood. You are about to ruin me."

"That's too bad, Mr. Joyce. But it's all in the business game, my dear fellow. It's heads I win; tails you lose."

"And you won't give me a little more time, Mr. Ripton? Won't you permit me to get the picture finished and placed on the market?"

"I can't do it. There is too much at stake. It's a risky affair which you have undertaken, and I cannot afford to take any chance."

"But you will get your money all back with big interest. Are you afraid of losing what you loaned to me?"

"I want the picture, and unless you have the money right now, it's no use for us to talk any longer."

Ripton's bland manner had suddenly vanished and he was the stern gloating tyrant. He had his victim in his grasp, so there was no use for more diplomacy. The blood beat through Joyce's veins, and his hands clenched hard together.

"Ah, I see your game, Mr. Ripton. You know that my picture is a good one and that it will be a success. You want to get control of it and handle it yourself, and thus rob me of all profits. I understand your scheme, all right.

"It is merely self-protection, Joyce. You can call it what you like, for it makes no difference to me. But let us get down to business and have the papers signed. If you are ready, I shall call in my lawyer to witness our signatures."

"It makes no difference to me what happens," Joyce gloomily replied. "Everything is ready, so we might as well get the matter settled at once. But I did hope that you might have mercy."

"I know nothing about mercy, Mr. Joyce, when it comes to business. We do not consider mercy in the business world."

"But the Great Master said 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.' Have you ever thought over those words?"

"Bah! they're all rot. How could we carry on business to-day if we stopped to think of such twaddle as that? Why, the wolves would fleece the lambs every time. It may be all right in theory, but not in practice. Those words are nothing but empty bombast. Christ was nothing but an idealist. His principles are not practicable to-day. But, come, I can't afford to waste any more time talking such nonsense."

"Just a minute, sir."

These words coming so unexpectedly from the right, startled Ripton, causing him to turn quickly around. He then staggered to his feet, his face as white as death and his eyes bulging with fear. He tried to gasp out Stanfield's name, but only succeeded in uttering a few unintelligible gurgles.

"You recognize me, I see," Stanfield quietly remarked.

"Y-y-yes," stammered the confounded man.

"I thought you would. You should remember me, all right, for there is a good reason. And I have a better one."

Stanfield ceased and stood watching with contempt the creature now cowering before him. His face was very severe and his eyes shone with the light of anger. Joyce, watching, was astonished at Stanfield's wonderful transformation. Instead of the quiet, mild-mannered and leisurely gentleman such as he knew, he saw him as a stern judge about to pronounce sentence of doom. His calm dignified manner fascinated him. At the same time a sense of hope, mingled with exultation, thrilled his soul. In Stanfield he saw his deliverer in time of need, and the downfall of Ripton, for what cause he did not know.

"And so you have been carrying on your diabolical tricks here, have you?" Stanfield at length asked the unfortunate wretch. "You escaped me five years ago, and I had little hope of ever seeing you again. But we shall let that past transaction rest for the present. You were engaged with Mr. Joyce when I rudely interrupted your conversation. So go ahead and settle up your business. I can wait until you are through."

Ripton, however, was not at all anxious to continue. His former bland and domineering manner was gone. His eyes roved furtively around toward the door. Stanfield, noting this, smiled.

"It's no use trying any nonsense upon me. I have you just where I want you, so you shall not escape this time. Mr. Joyce, will you please call up the Police Station and ask that an officer be sent here at once."

At this Ripton uttered a yell of terror, fell upon his knees and abjectedly pleaded for mercy.

"For God's sake, don't have me arrested!" he shrieked. "Let me go."

"What! you plead for mercy when you denied it to Mr. Joyce only a few minutes ago. You said that you know nothing about mercy. And I guess it is true, for it's not in your make-up. When as my agent you robbed widows and little children and then fled from the country was there any mercy in your heart? If I had not paid every dollar, the ones you so basely treated would be destitute to-day. And now I find you here on the verge of ruining Mr. Joyce. I am thankful that I happened along to-day to balk you in your game. You have a score or more of things to settle in your own country, and back you shall go to settle with the ones who have been searching for you. Mr. Joyce," and he turned to the young man, "please send in an urgent call to the Police at once. I don't want any more delay."

Joyce did as he was ordered, and as he was phoning, Ripton sprang to his feet and looked wildly around. He then made a mad rush for the door, but Stanfield followed and hurled him aside ere he could lay a hand upon the knob. The baffled man, greatly enraged, would have hurled himself upon his accuser had not Joyce, leaving the phone hurried across the room.

"Leave him to me, sir," he said to Stanfield. "I am just aching to get my hands upon him."

He then gripped Ripton firmly by the arm, led him over to the chair near the desk and flung him down.

"Sit there," he ordered, "and don't you dare to move until I tell you."

Ripton was now thoroughly cowed. The perspiration was pouring down his fat face and he was trembling violently. His dilated eyes roved wildly around the room as if seeking some avenue of escape.

"While we are waiting for the Police we shall attend to that 'little matter,'" Joyce continued. "Are you willing to give me more time to finish the picture?"

"H—— with the picture," Ripton growled. "Ask him," and he motioned to Stanfield. "It's up to him now."

"Oh, I guess you can have all the time you need," Stanfield replied. "Ripton, I call him that, although it is not his real name, is in no special hurry for the money just now. He has other things to attend to first. And, by the way, how much did he let you have, Mr. Joyce?"

"Five thousand dollars, sir."

"Only five thousand dollars!" Stanfield exclaimed in astonishment. "And for that amount you were willing to ruin an honest man," he continued, turning to Ripton. "For three thousand dollars you wished to steal that picture, which at a low estimate should be worth fifty thousand! It seems incredible."

Ripton made no reply, and in a few minutes the door was opened and an officer entered.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Take charge of this man," Stanfield ordered, pointing to Ripton. "I shall go along to explain matters."

Ripton staggered to his feet and sagged across the room by the officer's side. He said nothing and made no effort to escape. Ere leaving the room, Stanfield turned to Joyce.

"Go right ahead with the picture," he told him. "You can depend upon me to back you to the limit, for I have a special interest in your undertaking. I shall return shortly and we shall go into the whole matter."

Joyce's only reply was to reach out impetuously and seize his rescuer's hand in his. There were tears in his eyes when a few minutes later he looked once more through the dust-covered window. But it was not the junk he saw there now, but a vision of a girl far away, and the light of joy that would illumine her eyes when she received the good news.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR HER SAKE

It was early morning and Henry Winters was milking. When he was through with the last cow, and had emptied the milk into a larger pail, he started to do the job all over again. He was brought to his senses, however, when the cow objected and moved off toward the bars as if anxious to get out into the pasture. This action puzzled Henry.

"What's come over that cow, anyway?" he growled. "I never saw her so restless."

Then light dawned upon his mind, and he laughed aloud.

"Well, bless my stars!" he exclaimed. "I've milked her a'ready! That cow has more sense than I have. Me head's off me shoulders this mornin', I guess, an' I hardly know what I'm doin'. But is it any wonder?"

When he had let down the bars, and the cows had trooped gladly out of the yard, Henry opened the gate leading to the house, lifted the pails and set them down outside. He closed the gate, and securely fastened it with a wooden pin. He stood there for a few minutes very still gazing after the cows wending their way slowly along the lane to the pasture beyond. But it was not of the animals he was thinking. Something of far more importance occupied his mind.

"I can't see any other way out of it," he muttered. "I've thought about it all through the night an' yit I can't decide. I wonder what Sarah would say to sich a thing."

Fumbling in a back pocket of his duck overalls, he brought forth a small black pocket-book. This he opened and drew out a piece of soiled paper. This he unfolded and holding it in both hands studied it carefully.

"Five thousand dollars!" he whispered. "An' that's all that stands between us an' poverty! It's a heap of money to throw away at one slap. But what else kin I do? I can't see that gal die of a broken heart. Confound it all! I wish I didn't have a heart sich as I've got. It's been me ruin all through life. A funny thing the heart is. I kin stand 'most anything, sich as a tongue-lashin' an' argyments. But let anything touch me heart an' I'm as weak as a baby."

An impatient voice from the house startled him.

"What's keeping you with that milk?"

"I'm comin', Sarah," Henry replied. "I'll be there in a jiffy."

When he reached the house, he clumped into the milk-room and set the pails upon a bench.

"Ye seem to be in a hurry this mornin', Sarah," he remarked.

"I am," was the snapping reply. "But what's the use of being in a hurry when waiting for you? What were you doing out there, anyway?"

"Jist thinkin', Sarah, that was all. Me mind seems to be all afloat this mornin', an' I find it hard to keep it fixed upon me work."

"That explains, then, what you did when you made the fire in the stove. After you had lighted the kindling, you put the wood in the oven and shut the door. I had to build the fire again, for it was all out when I got up. After a while I smelt wood burning, and opening the oven door, found out what you had done. I hope to goodness you won't do anything like that again."

"Well, well! did I really do that, Sarah?" Henry asked in surprise. "Put the wood in the oven! Bless my soul! An' when I got through milkin' I started to do the job all over ag'in. But that cow, Bess, knew more'n I did, an' objected. Wonder what's comin' over me? I never did sich odd things before."

Henry clumped out of the milk-room, leaving his wife staring after him. A peculiar expression shone in her eyes as she at length turned her attention to her work.

"I can read that man like a book," she mused. "I know what he's thinking about as surely as if he told me with his own

lips. He can't deceive me."

Henry made his way to the kitchen, sat down heavily upon a chair and took off his boots. He washed himself carefully in the basin at the sink, then combed and brushed his thin white hair.

"Guess I look better now," he commented, surveying himself in a small mirror hanging on the wall. "I'm mighty glad none of the women folks are here. It's lucky Sarah's 'tendin' to the milk, the nurse is in with Cora, an' that gal, Rosy, is out feedin' the chickens. It's the fust time the coast's been clear fer days. It must be the Lord's doin's, as Sarah would say."

He then went softly upstairs, entered his bedroom, and dressed himself in his Sunday suit. This did not take him long, and when he had finished he went back to the kitchen. He was tempted to knock at the closed door of the front room and ask how the invalid was feeling this morning. But he knew that would not be the proper thing to do, as no doubt the nurse was attending to her just then. He glanced up at the clock and went out of doors. His wife was still in the milk-room and as he peered somewhat guiltily in, she saw him and turned quickly around. Instead of greeting him with words of surprise and disapproval, Henry was astonished at her calmness and matter-of-fact manner.

"You will have a long wait for the train, Henry," she quietly remarked.

"How in the world d'ye know I'm goin' to the train, Sarah?"

"You don't have to tell me about your movements. Your actions speak louder than words. You are going to the city with that check."

"Well, I'll be blowed! I allus knew you were a wonderful woman, Sarah, but I never imagined ye could read my mind so well."

"I can see through you as if you were a pane of glass."

"Ye kin!"

"I certainly can. I knew from your absent-minded manner that you were planning to go to the city this morning. But you do not intend to get that check cashed."

"Sarah!"

"Just a minute, Henry, until I'm through. You intend giving it to Mr. Joyce for Cora's sake."

A frightened look came into Henry's eyes and his body sagged against the right side of the door frame.

"H-how d'ye know that?" he gasped.

"Because I have been thinking of the same thing. When you tossed about so much last night I knew that you were worrying over that dear girl the same I was. She didn't sleep a wink all night, so the nurse told me this morning, and she just lies there now with her face to the wall and takes no interest in anything. She is heart-broken over the news she received yesterday about that picture. Something has got to be done to save her, and it seems that we are the only ones who can help her now."

"By handin' over that check, eh, Sarah?" Henry queried, much relieved.

"That's just it. I don't believe I would do it for any other living soul. But that girl has so twined herself around my heart that I love her as much as if she were my own daughter. I would be willing to do almost anything for her sake."

"So would I, Sarah. An' I'd like to git me hands on that critter who's made all the trouble by goin' back on Mr. Joyce. Say, I've had murder in me heart ever since I heard about his villainy."

"I know it, Henry. And when you said your head was all afloat I knew what you were thinking about."

"It's mighty hard, Sarah, to give up all that money fer what that cur's done. But if I kin block him an' save Cora, it will be a good job. I've got me two hands, so I guess we kin manage to pull along somehow. But five thousand dollars is a big sum of money to us."

"I know it is, Henry. But what is money when a life is at stake? Why, if anything happened to Cora and we didn't do what we could to help her, that money would only bring a curse upon us. Anyway, I couldn't sleep at night, for her pathetic face and sad eyes would be always before me."

"Yer quite right, Sarah, ye sartinly are. If I had to go through ag'in what I did last night I'd be crazy in a day or two. No, I couldn't stand it, so as we're agreed fer once, it must be the right thing to do."

"And it's our duty as Christians, Henry," his wife reminded. "Doesn't the Bible say that it's more blessed to give than to receive?"

"I thought ye'd come around to somethin' like that, Sarah, before we got through, an' so I haven't been mistaken. But to tell ye the truth, I wasn't thinkin' anything about me duty as a Christian, nor what the Good Book says. I only want to help that poor gal layin' in there. If I git credit or not doesn't matter much. I only know what ought to be done, an' I'm goin' to do it, like Joe Simkins said when he married a widow with ten children. Guess I'd better git off to the station now. I've got me ticket to buy an' don't want to be late."

"When will you be home, Henry?"

"Can't tell fer sure. T'morrow, mebbe. It all depends upon how the cat jumps."

"Have you a clean handkerchief, Henry?"

"Yep, got two. Found 'em in the bedroom. Well, s'long, Sarah, an' keep an eye over things. I'll be back as soon as I kin."

When about half way to the station Henry heard the yell of the early morning up train off in the distance.

"It'll be half an hour yit before the down train comes," he thought. "There's no need of hurryin'. But, dang it all! I wish I'd told Sarah who Cora really is. She'd be mighty interested in knowin' that she an' Nita Rivers are sisters. When she does find out I wonder if it'll make her treat the teacher a little more like a Christian should. Sarah's a great woman an' she has the Bible at her finger tips. But sometimes her perfession an' actions don't altogether jibe. I wonder why some church people are that way."

He thought over this as he moved slowly forward. Coming at length in sight of the station, he stopped at a wayside watering tub for a drink.

"I might as well rest here a bit an' git composed, as Sarah says, before I make me appearance in public. But, hello! who is this? Why, it's Mr. Joyce, as sure as I'm alive. Where in the world did you drop from?" he accosted. "I was jist on me way to see ye."

"Were you?" Joyce asked in reply. "I am glad that I came part way, for it's very nice here under the shade of these trees and near this fine tub of water. Can't we transact any business you have with me right here? But first of all, tell me about Cora. How is she getting along?"

"None too well, I'm afraid. She's worryin' herself t'death over the trouble with that picter. An' it's about that I was on me way to see ye. Yer in need of money, so I understand, an' me an' Sarah have decided to let ye have this to help along."

As he spoke, he pulled out his pocket-book, took from it the check and handed it to the young man. The latter unfolded the paper, and when he saw what it was his eyes grew big with amazement and understanding.

"And you are really on your way to let me have this?" he asked.

"I sartinly am, an' I hope t'goodness it ain't too late."

"But this is the check Mr. Doncaster gave you for your place, Henry!"

"Well, s'pose it is? Can't I do what I like with me own money?"

"Sure, sure. I wasn't disputing your right. I was merely thinking, that's all."

Joyce stood very still, looking straight before him off into the distance. But he saw nothing of the trees, spacious sloping meadows, nor the river beyond. His eyes were too misty for that. Henry noticed that something was affecting the man,

and it worried him.

"Not offended, are ye?" he queried. "Me an' Sarah are mighty anxious to do what we kin fer Cora, so if ye don't like to take that check fer yer own sake, take it fer hers."

A smile at once overspread Joyce's face as he reached out and grasped Henry's right hand.

"God bless you!" he fervently declared. "Your act of kindness and self-sacrifice so unnerved me that I could hardly speak for a minute. I cannot find words to express how deeply I appreciate your thoughtfulness. But I am thankful to be able to tell you that I do not need this now. Mr. Doncaster has come to my assistance and is backing me to the limit."

"He is!"

It was all that Henry could say just then. So he would not have to part with his money, after all. It seemed too good to be true, and he longed to hurry back home to tell Sarah.

"Yes, Mr. Doncaster has proven a wonderful friend," Joyce explained. "He caught the villain just in the nick of time to save me from ruin. The man goes by the name of Ripton, and he stole money, or something like that, from Mr. Doncaster several years ago, and then ran away. You should have seen the rascal's face when Mr. Doncaster suddenly appeared. It was better than any play I have ever beheld. He's safe now in prison, so he is not likely to trouble us any more."

"I'm mighty glad of that," Henry declared, seating himself upon the mossy bank and pulling out his pipe. "So Mr. Doncaster came to yer rescue, eh? Who in time is he, anyway? It isn't often a rich man takes sich an interest in poor people. Now, jist think what he's done fer Cora. My! won't she be glad to hear the good news. Ye'd better git along, Mr. Joyce, an' brighten up her purty face. Yer a lucky man to have the love of sich a gal as that."

"I know I am, Henry. She's as true as steel, and has stood by me through thick and thin. She has had a terrible struggle, but a change for the better has now come. You'll go back with me, won't you, Henry?"

"I'd like to, sir, jist to see the joy in Cora's eyes. But I've special bizness in the city which must be attended to."

Away at the right came the shrill shriek of the down train. Henry leaped to his feet and started to run toward the station.

"You can't do it," Joyce laughingly called after him. "Better give it up."

"Confound it all!" Henry growled as he walked slowly back. "I did want to git to the city t'day."

"Oh, you can go with me on the afternoon train, Henry. I expect to have a private showing of my picture to-morrow night, and I would like to have you there to see it. Your advice will be most valuable. Let us get on our way. We have wasted too much time here already."

"Is the picter as near finished as that?" Henry asked as he walked along by Joyce's side. He was somewhat mollified now at missing the train.

"Yes, it needs only a few more touches and then all will be ready. Mr. Doncaster has promised to be with us."

"Gee whiz! won't Cora be glad when she hears about this. Things are turnin' out right, after all, I guess. The stars are fightin' on our side now fer sure. Hurray!"

CHAPTER XXIX

DISCOVERED

It had been a busy afternoon at the ribbon-counter, but as closing time drew near the customers became few. Nita Rivers was very glad of this respite for her head was aching and she was unusually tired. The store was exceptionally hot and often as she ran the long ribbon streamers through her fingers she thought of that happy day she had spent at the Falls with Henry, Lemuel and the children. The different colored ribbons brought sweet memories to her mind; the long white silken bands resembling the gleaming water-fall; the blue of the almost cloudless sky overhead; the pink of the dresses of the children; and the various shades of green of the restful foliage of the noble trees surrounding the place. She longed to be back there again instead of in that stuffy store. She had been here just one week, and each day it was the same monotonous work. Never before had she realized what it meant to stand upon her feet from morning until evening in a close body-heated atmosphere in mid-summer waiting upon fussy and at times unreasonable people. How difficult it was to maintain a calm unruffled temper and to be courteous to some women who acted and spoke more like savages than civilized beings. The majority, of course, were gentle and lady-like, but several that day had brought her almost to the verge of her endurance. One of these overbearing creatures had just left, and Nita gave a sigh of relief as she put the ribbons back into their respective places. How much longer could she stand this? she asked herself. She glanced around upon her companions in distress, and knew that they were chained to such an existence. But with her it was different. In two or three weeks she would be free and teaching again.

Nita had imagined that she was through with teaching. No school could ever be like the last one to her. The children had all become so dear to her heart that she believed she could not bestow her affections upon others. And there she had found the man she loved, although he could never be hers. No, another school in different surroundings could not be thought of for a moment. But as the days passed she became restless. She had to do something for a living, for she could not afford to be idle. But one week in a large store at a ribbon-counter had opened her eyes. She was a teacher and not a mere machine. What inspiration was there in handling endless yards of ribbon and waiting upon impatient people? Her duty was elsewhere, among children of whom she was so fond. She would get another school, so she decided. Accordingly, she answered an advertisement in the paper and eagerly awaited a reply. There were several schools seeking for teachers, so she felt quite hopeful of getting one of them.

Nita had thought much about Lemuel. In fact, he was seldom out of her mind. She longed to write to him to learn how he was getting along. But she had set her face strongly to what she believed was right, so she must not falter in her resolve. She would not stand between Lemuel and Ada and thus be the means of depriving them of their father's money. Of that she was determined. But her heart did go out to the one man in the whole world she loved and who loved her. They understood each other and had so much in common. She thought of that last night they had been together near the barn. It thrilled her soul, and at times her face flushed and her hands trembled as she measured out the ribbon. The thought of him was the only thing that gave her any real joy. It was a comfort for her to feel that he was thinking of her, and her heart was full of pity as she pictured him sitting night after night in his corner in the lonely Loft.

The last roll of ribbon had been put back into its place and the store was almost empty. There was no one at her counter, so for the first time that afternoon Nita had nothing to do. In a few minutes she would be free, and with the rest of the girls would leave the building. Most of her fellow-workers had their homes in the city with the evening ahead with various pleasant engagements. But with her it was different. She would go back to her little room in the boarding-house with no one to welcome her and none to take any interest in her welfare. She had joined no young people's society and had made no friends with whom she wished to associate. It was a dreary prospect and a slight sigh escaped her lips.

Just then she had the idea that some one was watching her. She could not account for the feeling, but it caused her to give a slight start and glance quickly around the store. At once her eyes rested upon a man standing but a short distance away. In an instant she recognized Henry Winters and her face grew somewhat pale and her body trembled. This was followed by an indefinable joy and a smile overspread her face. Henry replied with a broad grin as he stepped up to the counter.

"Evenin', Miss," he accosted. "I want ye to pick out a nice ribbon fer me wife. I haven't given her one since our courtin'-days, so it's purty well faded by now. I guess it's time she had a new one."

"Mr. Winters!" Nita gasped in a low voice. "How did you happen to come here?"

"I'll tell ye later, Miss. But git me the ribbon fust. A nice pink one'll do. I don't know whether Sarah'll wear it or not. Anyway, it'll show her that I haven't fergot her while in town."

Nita looked keenly into the honest humorous eyes of the old man, and then turned toward the shelves on her right. She wanted to ask him so many questions, but all he could think about was the ribbon for his wife.

"How will this do?" she inquired, showing him a pink roll.

"Fine, Miss. Give me a yard or two of that."

While Nita was measuring the ribbon, Henry pulled some money from his pocket and laid it upon the counter.

"Take the price out of that, Miss." He then leaned toward her. "I'll wait fer ye outside, Miss," he whispered. "Ye won't be long, I s'pose?"

"Just a few minutes more, Mr. Winters. Here is your change."

"Thank ye kindly. But don't keep me waitin' too long."

The next minute Henry was gone and Nita stared after him until he had left the store. Several of the girls nearby had been curiously watching the whole proceedings.

"What a funny man to be buying ribbon," one of them remarked. "What do you suppose he is going to do with it?"

Nita made no reply, for her mind was too much occupied with other things. She was glad that Henry had found her out, for she was sure now that his presence there was but an excuse to speak to her. And yet mingled with this joy was a feeling of regret. Henry would be sure to go back home and tell everybody about her. Lemuel would know, too, and he would come to her post-haste. She must get Henry to promise not to tell of her whereabouts. She wondered what he wanted to see her outside for, anyway. She was thinking of this when she at length left the counter and made her way to the door. Henry was awaiting her coming, and he smiled pleasantly as she appeared.

"Yer the fust woman that never kept me waitin' long," he complimented. "Sarah is allus behind time. Which way d'ye want to go, Miss?"

"Anywhere, Mr. Winters," Nita replied as she walked along by his side. "It doesn't make any difference to me."

"Is that so? Well, s'pose we git somethin' to eat. I'm 'most starved, an' there's a good eatin'-place jist up the street. Ye don't mind goin' with a rough old feller like me, do ye?"

"Not at all. It will be a great pleasure, and a pleasant change from the boarding-house fare."

"So yer boardin', eh? Where?"

"It would be giving myself away if I tell you," Nita smilingly replied. "I don't want anyone to know where I am living."

"H'm, ye'll have to git out of this city, then, Miss. I found ye in that store, so I guess it'd be no trouble to do the same with yer boardin'-house if I tried."

"So you have been searching for me, have you, Mr. Winters?"

"Oh, yes, I've been cruisin' round a bit, an' thought most likely I'd run across ye in one of the big stores. It was lucky I went in after that ribbon fer Sarah."

"I don't believe you ever thought of the ribbon until you saw me at that counter," Nita charged. "You can't deceive me."

"No, mebbe I didn't. But here we are at the eatin'-place. We'll have a good meal, an' then both of us'll feel better. Ye can't do much when yer hungry, so I've found out."

They took their places at a little side-table, and Henry ordered the best the place contained.

"Give us chicken, an' lots of it," he told the waitress. "An' don't keep us waitin' long, fer we're 'most starved."

Nita leaned back in her chair and looked around the room at the men and women seated at the tables. Then she gave a slight sigh.

"What's wrong, Miss?" Henry inquired, looking keenly into her face. "Not sorry to be seen with an old codger like me, I hope?"

"Not at all, Mr. Winters. It was just a sigh of contentment. It feels so good to sit here and rest. And, besides, it is such a pleasant change for me."

"Glad ye like it, Miss. Now, it seems to me ye should have some one to look after ye all the time. An' there is one willin' to do it if ye'll only give him the chance. Ye know as well as I do who that some one is."

"Don't, please," and Nita laid her right hand lightly upon Henry's arm. "I can't stand to hear you speak about him just now. Tell me how things are getting on at—at home. I haven't heard a word since I left."

"Ye haven't! An' no one has told ye about the movie stars who came to our place an' cut up sich wonderful shindies?"

"How could I hear when I haven't heard a word from home?"

"Sure, sure, Miss. But I'm mighty glad to hear ye say that word 'home.'"

"It is really the only home I know," was Nita's low confession. "Tell me everything, please."

Before Henry could begin, however, the waitress arrived. But after she had gone, he told Nita in a low voice all about the moving-picture company, and the accident which had happened to Cora.

"My! I wish ye could see her, Miss. She's a wonder, an' no mistake. She's at our place now an' has a special nurse lookin' after her. Sarah has a woman helpin' her, too, an' Mr. Doncaster pays fer everything."

"Who is Mr. Doncaster?" Nita asked.

"The finest feller on earth. I really don't know who he is, but he's got plenty of money, an' what's more, he's not afraid to spend it in a good cause. Jist see what he's done fer Cora an' me. An' that isn't all. He came to Mr. Joyce's rescue an' settled the hash of that rascal Ripton an' saved the life, I believe, of that poor unfortunate gal at my house."

"In what way, Mr. Winters?"

"Didn't I tell ye? No? Well, that's queer. I thought I told ye how Mr. Joyce an' Cora are engaged, an' when she heard that Ripton was goin' to seize the picter fer debt, I was sure she'd die, fer she wouldn't eat nuthin', but jist lay there on her bed starin' straight before her. But when Mr. Doncaster had Ripton put in jail an' then backed Mr. Joyce to the limit, ye should have seen the change it made in Cora. We call her that now, ye see, fer she is jist like one of the family. Mr. Joyce came all the way to our house to tell her, an' after they'd been together fer a while they called me an' Sarah into the room. An' there was Cora with tears in her eyes, but smilin' an' so happy. Mr. Joyce was settin' by her side as proud as a peacock as he watched her."

"I should like to meet Miss Davidson and Mr. Doncaster," Nita declared. "They must be very nice, and Mr. Joyce, too."

"Indeed they are, Miss. An' ye kin see 'em this very night, if ye want to."

"How?"

"By goin' with me to see that picter which was made on my place. It's a dandy, so Mr. Joyce says, an' he's goin' to try it out t'night. He's invited a few special friends to see it, an' asked me to come along. I'm to meet Mr. Doncaster at the hotel where he's stayin', an' we're goin' together. He'll be delighted to meet ye, I know."

"But how shall I see Miss Davidson?"

"In the picter, of course. Ye'll see her actin' her parts like the rest of us. Me an' Sarah, an' Mr. Joyce, an' Mr. Doncaster are all in it. An' so is Ada Karsall. I fergot to tell ye 'bout her. Ho, ho! it's a great joke. After the accident, she took Cora's place as our daughter, an' she done fine, too. But fer a time she fell head over heels in love with Mr. Doncaster, an' sot her cap fer him. She's given him up, though, so I hear, since Lem got his dad's money matter cleared up, an' has

taken up with a young feller who wanted to marry her some time ago."

"Has she?" Nita asked, glancing up quickly into her companion's face. This news was of the greatest importance to her.

"Yep, that's the truth, an' I wouldn't be s'prised if the weddin'-bells'll be ringin' before many months. It's often the way with gals who yang so much ag'inst marriage. To hear 'em talk ye'd think they'd never put their necks under the yoke of matermony. But, gee whiz! fust thing ye know, off they go an' git hitched up like all the rest."

"And who is the—the fortunate young man, Mr. Winters?"

"It's young Joe Rundell. But whether he's fortunate I wouldn't like to say. He's got a good farm, an' Ada'll make him a fine housekeeper. But it takes more'n that to make a home. Oh, well, it's their own outlook, so I'm not goin' to worry. But ye'll come to see the picter, won't ye, Miss?"

"Yes, I shall be pleased to go, Mr. Winters. But I must go to my boarding-place first and get fixed up a little. There will be time, I suppose?"

"Oh, sartinly. The show doesn't begin till eight o'clock. S'pose we meet in the Square near the fountain at seven-thirty. I have some bizness to 'tend to in the meantime. But I'll be there on the dot. Say, Miss, I wonder what Sarah would think if she knew I am makin' sich an engagement with a fine-lookin' young woman?"

"I am sure she wouldn't mind, Mr. Winters. I don't, anyway."

"H'm, perhaps yer right. But I guess ye don't know Sarah as well as I do or ye wouldn't feel so sure. However, I'm glad ye take sich a sensible view of the matter an' speak as ye do. But, there, I guess we'd better be movin' as soon as I pay the bill fer this tuck-out. Now, don't fergit, Miss. Seven-thirty in the Square, near the fountain."

CHAPTER XXX

WHAT THE PICTURE REVEALED

The day had been a trying one for Charles Stanfield, so after dinner he sought a much-needed rest upon the comfortable sofa in his room. He had felt so well the last few days that he had neglected his doctor's orders to be careful lest his old trouble should return. Added to the excitement at the farm in the making of the picture, and his discovery that the beautiful young actress was his niece, was his trouble with Ripton. That day he had been at the Court room, and had given his evidence against the rascal, with the result that Ripton was to be deported. And Stanfield would have to return to New York to have the fellow convicted. He did not like the idea of going away when everything that now interested him in life was centered in his native province down by the sea. His former life with all its worries he had cast off forever, so he had fondly believed. But this matter concerning Ripton had to be attended to. After that he would come back and spend the rest of the summer and the fall among his own people and the scenes of childhood days. In Henry Winters and his wife he had found true friends. He liked them both, and he turned over in his mind the best way in which he could assist them.

He thought, too, a great deal about Ruth Rivers, and as he lay there with closed eyes, he pictured her as he had last seen her when she had confessed to him who she really was, and the story of her desperate struggle to earn a living and become successful in her chosen career. A slight smile flitted across his face as he planned what he would do for her, and how surprised she would be when she learned that he was her uncle. But how should he tell her? In what way should he impart to her the startling information? Perhaps she would reject his help, if not resent it for his neglect of her mother, his only sister.

He shifted uneasily and his face became very serious as he thought of this. Again there came to his mind that little house among the trees where Marion had fought the terrible battle for herself and children, and where she had at length died. The thought of that neglected house, and the little room with the rat-holes on all sides caused a shiver to pass through his body. He knew that the building was now repaired and put into good condition. But what could ever repair his neglect of his sister? And all this his nieces must surely know. How could he stand before them, and tell them who he was in the face of such condemning evidence?

Stanfield now was anxious to become better acquainted with his nieces. He had met one and he had found her so charming that he longed to meet the other of whom he had heard so much. If Nita were anything like Ruth he would be more than satisfied. He wondered what he could do to find her. When he returned from New York he would see what could be done. A vision rose before him of the two sisters, Marion's daughters. Ruth resembled her mother, and Nita, no doubt, did, too. How he should like to have them near him, to be as his own daughters, in fact. But this he knew could never be. Ere long they would be married and have homes of their own. He sighed as he thought of this. He was learning like too many others that the real things cannot be put on like a cloak in a brief space of time; that a man cannot spend his entire life in the pursuit of money and then when it has been acquired expect at the last to have the enjoyment of love and true home-affection, which he had sacrificed for material gain. To Stanfield all his wealth seemed of little value now. He was alone in the world. His means could provide him with certain comforts and fawning attention. But what he wanted more than anything else was sincere heart-love, and that he had bartered for what was after all nothing but a mere mess of pottage. His nieces were the only ones to whom he might naturally turn for what he craved. But how could they give what they did not possess? The tender plant of love must be nourished and tended, and what had he done to sow even the least seed of love in their hearts for him? He groaned inwardly as he thought of this. He had neglected their mother, so his name, no doubt, was almost unknown to them.

The buzz of the telephone aroused him from his reverie, and brought him to his feet. It was a call from the office, telling him that a "lady and a gentleman" wished to see him downstairs. This reminded Stanfield that he was to meet Henry Winters at seven-thirty, but who the "lady" could be he had no idea. Replying that he would be right down, Stanfield hung up the receiver and a few minutes later left his room. Descending by the elevator, he saw Henry standing near the office watching the people moving to and fro. There was no woman with him, and Stanfield wondered what had become of her. He stepped forward and laid his right hand upon Henry's shoulder.

"Hello," he accosted. "Have you been waiting for me long?"

Henry wheeled around, and when he saw who it was, a smile of relief overspread his face.

"Oh, it's you, eh?" he queried. "Glad to see ye. Thought mebbe ye'd fergotten."

"I really did. But there is plenty of time for us to see the picture. Where have you been all day, anyway?"

"On the tramp. But I found her at last. It was sartinly some hunt."

"What do you mean, Henry? Who is this 'her' you're talking about?"

"Why, don't ye know, sir? There's only one woman besides Sarah an' Ruth that I'd waste me time in lookin' fer, an' that's Miss Rivers, the school marm. It's her I've found."

"You have!" Stanfield was all alert now with eagerness. "Where is she?"

"Jist in the room over yon, waitin' fer us. Come on, an' I'll introduce yez."

Nita was seated in a big comfortable chair near a window as they entered the room. She was watching the people passing along the street, so did not notice the men until they stood before her.

"Dreamin', eh?" Henry queried. "This is Mr. Doncaster, the man I was tellin' ye about."

Nita rose at once to her feet and silently held out her hand. Stanfield took it in his and held it in a firm pressure as he looked upon her face. He was almost on the point of murmuring "Marion" for such a striking resemblance did he observe between this girl and her mother. There were Marion's lustrous brown eyes, the same cast of countenance, the wealth of wavy dark hair, the broad, though not high forehead, the lips so ready to part in a smile, and the dignified poise of her shapely head. Yes, she was his sister over again, and in spirit he was carried away to those far-off days when they had played so much together. His silence was embarrassing to Nita, and a deep flush mantled her cheeks at his close scrutiny. This he noted, and it brought him to himself with a start.

"Excuse me," he apologized, "but you remind me so much of one I knew years ago that I imagined she was standing before me. I am very glad to meet you, Miss Rivers. My good friend, Henry here, has been telling me about you."

"And he has been telling me about you," Nita smilingly replied. "I hope his report of me was as favorable. If so, I am quite satisfied."

"He told me the truth, Miss Rivers, which I fear is more than he has done about me. He knows you better, and how you tried to hide yourself from your friends."

"Oh, is that all, Mr. Doncaster? I feel quite relieved now. But has Mr. Winters told you how he spied upon me to-day and then dragged me here to-night to face the wonderful Mr. Doncaster?"

"I haven't had time yit," Henry hastened to explain. "But I guess ye was mighty glad to see the face of yer old friend, Hen Winters, as ye measured out ribbon behind that counter. Ye was gittin' purty sick of yer job, if I'm any jedge of women folks. An' I didn't have to do any draggin', either, fer ye come along as meek as a lamb. But, there, I guess we'd better be gittin' a move on if we're goin' to see that picter. I wouldn't miss it fer anything. You two go on ahead, an' I'll tag along behind as a body-guard."

Stanfield looked at his watch and found that they had but ten minutes to reach the place.

"Shall we walk?" he asked, "or do you prefer to ride?"

"I would rather walk," Nita replied. "It is so nice to be in the fresh evening air after having been cooped up all day in that hot stuffy store."

They left the hotel and walked slowly along the street, Stanfield and Nita in the lead with Henry a few steps behind. Nita liked her new acquaintance far better than she had imagined. There was something about his face and manner which appealed to her and inspired her with confidence. She found it easy to talk to him, and before long she was telling him about her old home, her mother, and her own life as a school teacher. It did not seem at all out of place that she should thus talk about the things which were so important to her. She could not explain this feeling, neither did she try. She was pleased that her companion seemed so much interested in her story, and he asked her questions now and then, showing that he was following every word she uttered.

Stanfield was indeed greatly impressed by his niece, and also much interested in what she told him. Occasionally he glanced upon her animated face and his heart thrilled at the thought that he was her uncle. How he longed to tell her who he really was, and to ask her to forgive him for his past neglect. He resisted the temptation, however, deciding to wait a more favorable opportunity when she and Ruth were together. It would be far better, so he believed, for them both to hear his story at the same time.

He was thinking of this as they entered the building where the picture was to be shown. There were not more than a dozen persons present among whom was Mr. Joyce, alert, and eager to view the picture which meant so much to him. Stanfield sat next to Nita with Joyce on his right. In a few minutes the room was darkened and the light turned on the small curtain on the wall. Then scene after scene appeared in rapid succession. Henry was quivering with excitement, and several times he gave expression to his excited comments.

"There's Sarah, a'right," he explained. "My! wouldn't she like to see this."

He was enjoying himself immensely. But with Nita it was different. From the first her interest had been centered upon Cora Davidson, and her heart beat fast whenever she appeared. She thought that she must be dreaming, so much did the actress resemble her own sister Ruth. As the pictures continued to appear, she became convinced that she was not mistaken. Then when the accident scene was shown, she gave a cry of fright and rose to her feet.

"It is Ruth!" she exclaimed. "Now I understand. Oh, my poor sister!"

She sank back into her seat and covered her face with her hands. Stanfield tried to comfort her, as also did Henry.

"She's gittin' along fine now," the latter explained. "She's at my house an' well looked after."

"What happened to her?" Nita asked.

"Had her leg broken, Miss. But she's well on the mend."

"I must go to her at once," Nita declared, again rising to her feet.

"Wait till the picter's done, Miss."

"I can't wait, and I don't want to see any more. Ruth needs me, so I must go."

"Suppose you wait until the morning, Miss Rivers," Stanfield suggested. "You can't go very well to-night, as there is no train. But I shall run you up early in the morning in my car. You might as well see the rest of the picture while you are here. Your sister is in good hands."

Nita was calmer now, and realized the reason of these words. Murmuring her thanks, she resumed her seat and fixed her eyes upon the scenes before her. But her brain was in a whirl, and only with great difficulty could she control herself. She longed to be away in her own room that she might think it all over. Glad, indeed, was she when at last the final scene was shown and they rose to leave the building. She hardly heard the words of congratulation which were bestowed upon the happy Joyce. She could think only of Ruth in that farm house in the country.

CHAPTER XXXI

HENRY'S "SPECIMEN"

Dinner was almost over when Ada Karsall announced that she was going to marry Joe Rundell. Lemuel looked quickly up with a startled expression in his eyes. He noticed the flush upon his sister's face, and knew that it had taken much courage for her to tell him the news.

"W-why, Ada, I thought you were never going to marry," he stammered.

"Oh, I've changed my mind, and that's a woman's privilege. I have to look out for the future, as no one else will do it for me."

"Do you love Joe?"

"I have not thought about that. But I like him as well as I could ever like any man. He is a quiet, steady-going fellow, and his farm is in good condition. Since his mother died he has had a hard time of it. The housekeepers he has had have not been satisfactory, and I am just longing to get my hands on that house and give it a thorough cleaning. It needs it, dear knows, from what Joe has told me."

Mentally Lemuel pitied Joe, for he knew what housecleaning meant when Ada was around. Heaven, he believed, would be a dreary place to her if there was no cleaning to be done, no floors to scrub, no chairs or tables to dust, and no pots, pans and silver to scour and polish.

"When do you expect the important event to take place?" he asked.

"Sometime in September. We have not set the exact date yet. I have considerable sewing to do, and will have to get a wedding-dress made."

"This is certainly startling news to me," Lemuel replied, as he pushed back his chair from the table. "I never expected you to leave this place, and I shall feel lonely here without you. We have been together most of our lives, and I shall miss you so much."

The note of sadness in her brother's voice checked several sarcastic words Ada was about to utter. She was thinking of Nita Rivers.

"Oh, you'll get married yourself, Lemuel, before long. I don't mind now how soon it is. Since we know about father's money it won't make any difference."

"I wish to goodness your eyes had been opened sooner, Ada," Lemuel declared as he rose slowly from the table. "It would have made a great difference to me. However, the past cannot very well be remedied now. You know what I mean, so it is no use for me to explain. Anyway, I wish you every happiness, Ada, even though I can expect none for myself."

"But she will come back, will she not?"

"How can I tell that when I do not know where she is?"

Lemuel's steps were slower and heavier than usual as he made his way up to The Loft, where he sat down in his corner and gave himself up to serious thought. So Ada was going to marry Joe! Wonderful what a change had taken place in such a short time. He picked up a letter he had received that morning from the President of Strongbow University and read it again. It brought a glow of pleasure into his eyes, for it told how everything had been arranged for his lectures during the next term. As he laid it down, he thought of Nita. How he longed to tell her of the honor that had come to him. He wanted to talk it all over with her, for she was the only one he knew who could understand what it really meant. He wished for her more than ever just then, and for some time he sat gazing thoughtfully out of the window at the river beyond.

He was at last aroused by the arrival of Henry Winters, who clumped up the stairs, crossed the room, and sat down by his side.

"Moonin' same as ever, eh, Lem?" he queried. "It's too nice a day to be settin' here. A little fresh air'll do ye a world of good."

"I have been in the field all the morning," Lemuel replied, "so I enjoy it here for a change. The view is so nice from this window."

"It sure is, Lem. An' I'm mighty glad to be back ag'in an' away from the dust an' the smell of the city. There's no place like the country to my way of thinkin'."

"You made quite a visit, Henry. When did you get home?"

"This mornin' with Mr. Doncaster in his car. Mr. Joyce came, too. I saw his picter last night, an' say, it's great. I wish t'goodness Sarah had been there."

"So everything is arranged all right at last?"

"Should say it is, an' that Ripton feller'll git his dose fer sure. An' ye should have seen Cora's face when Mr. Joyce went into her room. Poor gal, she was so upsot at the bad news that I thought fer sure she'd die. Then to see her so bright an' happy this mornin' was a wonnerful change. I'm not sentimental as a rule, but I couldn't keep the tears out of me eyes an' they ran down me cheeks. An' Sarah was mighty worked up, too. She jist put up her apron an' sniffed fer all she was worth. I never knew what good an apron was before. But it's the handiest thing on earth when ye begin to blubber. I haven't been meself since, so lit out an' spent the rest of the mornin' in the woods along the brook. My! it's great to be out there where ye kin breathe in the fresh air instead of bein' shet up in them narrow streets with their noise an' bad smells. An' say, Lem, I've found a specimen down there I want ye to see. It's the finest I ever sot eyes on. It'll do ye more good than all the things ye've got in this Loft. I want ye to come an' see it."

"What is it like, Henry?" Lemuel asked, now quite interested. "I thought I had found everything of any importance in this neighborhood."

"I can't tell ye exactly, Lem, what it's like. Some might call it an animal, though you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"'Cause of the nature of the specimen. Now, Sarah or Ada might call it that, but you'll consider it a pearl of great price, like that Bible story the parson read in church last Sunday."

"Look here, Henry, what is the meaning of such talk? Don't you really know what it is? There must be some joke about this."

"Ye think so, eh? Now, s'pose I ask ye a question. Who is the one ye want to see more'n anybody else on earth?"

At these words Lemuel started, looked keenly at his visitor, and then rose to his feet. His eyes were bright with eagerness.

"Is it Nita?"

"Ho, ho, Lem. I thought ye'd guess it," and Henry slapped his knee with the palm of his right hand. "She's the specimen I've been tellin' ye about. It's a wonder ye didn't ketch on sooner."

"But when did Nita come here, Henry? Who found her? How do you know she is up the brook? Did she send you to tell me? Does she want to see me?"

"Hold on, Lem, ye're runnin' away. D'ye expect me to answer sich a shower of questions all at once? Me brain won't stand sich a drive as that. Set down an' I'll tell ye all about it."

"I can't sit down," Lemuel declared. "I must go to her this minute. This is wonderful news to me."

"Jist a second, Lem. It won't take long to explain, so flop down into yer chair. Ye can't go to her all excited like that. There, that's better. I know how ye feel, fer I was young once meself. It's strange what love'll do to a man, upsettin' him completely. Now, I remember when I was courtin' Sarah. I didn't know——"

"Oh, never mind about that now, Henry," Lemuel impatiently interrupted. "I want to hear about Nita. The story of your courting days will keep until another time."

"Sure, sure. It sartinly will keep, fer it's purty well cured an' dried after forty years. Now, as I was goin' to tell ye, I found Nita in the city, workin' in a store at a ribbon counter."

"You did!"

"Yep, that's where she was. My! it was hot, an' she was mighty glad to go with me to git something to eat. We then went to the Admiral Beatty, that big new hotel, where we met Mr. Doncaster. After that we all went to see that picter of 'The Old Farm.' Mr. Joyce was there, too, an' some other people. Bimeby the picter got goin', an' a fine one it is, too. Purty soon Nita cried right out. It kinder sent the chills up an' down me spine."

"What did she cry out for?" Lemuel asked as Henry paused.

"Why, can't ye guess, Lem? Where are ye brains, anyway? Can't ye understand it was her sister she saw in that picter?"

"Oh, certainly. I am stupid, Henry. And so there is no doubt at all that Miss Davidson is really Nita's sister?"

"There wasn't any doubt in my mind after I saw that tag on her grip about which I told ye."

"This is all very wonderful, Henry. I can hardly believe it is true. And you are sure that Nita is up the brook now?"

"I saw her go there meself, Lem. She started jist afore I lit out fer here. She said she wanted to be among the trees an' listen to the ripplin' of the water. She's got poetry in her make-up, that gal has, an' I wouldn't be a bit 'sprised if she'll write it all out some day."

"Does she know that you came here to tell me?"

"Not on yer life, Lem."

"Did she speak about me when you talked with her in the city? Perhaps she has forgotten all about me."

"Now, don't git any sich nonsense as that inter yer head. She hasn't fergotten ye, an' never will. She's as true as steel. Yep, she asked me how ye was gittin' along, an' I told her the truth. What else could I do? I'm not in the habit of lyin' when it comes to sich a serious matter twixt a man an' a maid."

"Thank you, Henry. You have been a good friend to both of us, and we shall never forget it. But I must hurry away now. Oh, this is a great day to me!"

"Yep, ye'd better git along to that specimen, Lem. Ye can't afford to waste any more time gassin' to an old codger like me. Gee, I'd like to be in yer shoes."

Together they left the building, and when out upon the road they parted. Lemuel made his way rapidly down across the field to the brook beyond, while Henry walked slowly homeward.

"Guess I've done a bit of good work t'day," he mused. "I'd like to take a peek at 'em when they meet. My, my, it's great to be young an' have the sap of love flowin' through one's bein'. I wish t'goodness us old folks could allus feel that way. I wonder what hinders us. It's nice, though, to have young people around to liven things up a bit."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FINAL TEST

The day had been a most wonderful one at Red Rose Cottage, and the hearts of all were light and happy. Charles Stanfield felt almost like a boy again, and he was never tired of watching his nieces and talking with them. Nita had returned from her visit to the brook with a new light in her eyes and a flush upon her cheeks. Henry chuckled to himself as he looked at her, although he made no comment. He wished that Lemuel had come back with her, and he made up his mind to give him a good sound piece of advice the next time he saw him.

"Lem's too everlastin'ly shy," he mused. "He doesn't deserve to have the love of sich a gal as Nita if he skedaddles off like that an' lets her come home alone. Why, if I was in his shoes I'd be hangin' around this place every blessed minute of the day."

Supper ended, they were all gathered in Ruth's room. Stanfield was ready to go back to the city, and Joyce was going with him. He seemed, however, to be in no special hurry. He listened to the animated conversation, but said little. At times he turned and glanced out of the window near which he was seated. He might have been merely viewing the smiling fields and the garden for all his companions knew had they given it a moment's thought. But they noticed nothing out of the ordinary, so taken up were they with their conversation about the new picture.

At length Stanfield gave a slight start, and moved as if to rise from his chair. He resisted this temptation, however, and sat very still. In another minute a step sounded upon the veranda, and presently Mrs. Winters entered bearing a letter in her hand.

"It's a telegram for you, Miss," she explained, handing it to Nita. "Jimmy Davis brought it from the station."

Much surprised that anyone should send a telegram to her, Nita tore open the envelope, and as she read her eyes grew big with surprise, and her face became somewhat pale.

"Bad news, eh?" Henry queried.

"I am afraid it is," was the quiet reply. "Listen, and I shall read this."

"'Your uncle Charles Stanfield is in dire need. Can you do anything for him?

"'Samuel Goodgrace.'"

A deep silence now ensued, while the man at the window sat very erect, every muscle in his body rigid and tense. He knew that the real testing-time had now arrived, and that everything depended upon how this startling news would be received. He felt nervous and guilty.

"Where's that thing from?" Henry inquired, pointing to the paper.

"New York," Nita replied. "I know nothing about the writer, Samuel Goodgrace."

"H'm, it's a fraud, no doubt, Miss. It's a scheme to git money out of ye. They do sich things in them big cities, so I understand."

"But we have an Uncle Charles," Ruth explained, lifting herself slightly on her pillow. "Mother often told us about him. He is her only brother."

"But no credit to yer family, judgin' from that telegram. The idea of any man havin' a thing like that sent to his nieces. What's the matter with him, anyway? Can't he work fer a livin'?"

"We know absolutely nothing about him, Mr. Winters," Nita replied. "Mother never heard from him during our lifetime, and she was so much worried over her own troubles that she made no inquiries. But she often spoke about him, for I knew she loved him. She told us what happy times they had together when they were children."

"Yes, Nita, and mother taught us to pray for him every night," Ruth quietly remarked. "And I have never left him out of

my prayers."

"Neither have I, dear. I did it because I knew mother would like it."

"Little good yer prayers have done," Henry growled.

"We cannot tell," and Nita gave a deep sigh. "But I wonder how he knew where to have that telegram sent. He must have found out through some one."

"H'm, trust a beggar to know, Miss. Mebbe it was through yer prayers. It's wonnerful what they'll do, so Sarah says, 'cept on me. Guess I'm too hardened an old sinner."

"I don't believe a word of what you say, Mr. Winters," Nita laughingly replied. "If my uncle is half as good as you are I shall be satisfied. Now, I wonder what I can do to learn the truth about him?"

"What! are ye goin' to help him, Miss?"

"I am going to do all I can. He is mother's brother, and our uncle."

Stanfield's heart beat fast at these words, and in his eyes was a far-away look. He had not been mistaken, after all.

"But how d'ye know this hull thing isn't a put-up job?" Henry asked. "Mebbe it's a trick to git money out of ye. Surely ye won't be in a hurry to let yer heart run away with yer brains."

"I shall write to Mr. Goodgrace for more information. I would go myself to find out the truth if I could afford it."

"Suppose you let me do that for you, Miss Rivers," Stanfield suggested. "I expect to leave for New York in the morning. I am well acquainted with the city and know the street mentioned in that telegram."

"Oh, will you?" Nita asked, greatly relieved. "How can I ever repay you for your kindness? I have never been there, so dread the idea of going."

"Good fer you, Mr. Doncaster!" Henry exclaimed. "Yer a man after me own heart, a'right. Ye came here as a stranger an' now yer one of us. An' ye took part in the makin' of that picter, too, an' ye done fine. Ye'r a tip-top movie actor."

"My part has been very easy and pleasant, Henry. I have enjoyed my visit here more than I can express. It's the best holiday I have had for years. But I must leave this happy gathering now and get on my way."

He rose slowly and somewhat wearily to his feet, and held out his hand.

"I must bid you good-bye now, Miss Rivers. But I hope to see you up out of this when I return. I am thankful you are getting on so well."

"What can I ever do in return for all your goodness to me?" Ruth asked in reply, while tears came into her eyes. "But for you I do not know what would have happened, for you have saved us from ruin and despair."

"Please do not say anything about that, Miss Rivers. It was very little, I assure you. The pleasure has been mine, and in making so many friends I have been amply repaid. When I come back we must have a picnic out in the woods. I long for a whole day along that brook."

He then turned to Nita who was standing a little apart.

"Look well after your sister," he told her. "And do not worry about your uncle. I shall do all I can for him."

Nita was holding a pocket-book in her hand, and from this she drew a ten-dollar bill and offered it to Stanfield.

"Please take this, Mr. Doncaster. It is all I have at present, but I shall send more as soon as possible, and after I hear from you."

These words spoken so simply, and the offering of all that she had, almost unnerved Stanfield, and a mistiness came into his eyes. With an effort he controlled himself, lest his emotion should betray him.

"Keep your money, Miss Rivers," he said in a husky voice. "If I need it I shall let you know."

"Guess ye'd better keep it, Miss," Henry remarked. "Not likely that old uncle is worthy of it. The idea of him sendin' to you fer help! If he'd sent word that he was leavin' ye a fortune, it'd be somethin' like."

"It wouldn't make any difference, Mr. Winters. If to be poor were a crime, then most people in the world would be criminals. We would be so, anyway, and also my dear mother. But she was the best woman I ever knew. The same may be true of my uncle. How can we tell what misfortunes may have come upon him through no fault of his."

"My! I admire ye fer them words, Miss. Me an' Sarah have been poor as Job's turkey all our lives until the stars took fightin' fer us. But we didn't feel very wicked, or at least, I didn't, though Sarah sometimes said I was the most ungodly man on earth. But s'pose yer uncle had left ye a fortune, what would ye do with it?"

"I never thought about that, Mr. Winters," Nita smilingly replied. "I never even dreamed about having money left to me."

"But I have," Ruth emphatically declared. "I know the first thing I would do, and that is to place a nice tomb-stone at my dear mother's grave."

So unexpected was this announcement that an intense silence reigned in the room for a few seconds. Then Nita stepped over to the bed, bent down and gave her sister a loving kiss.

"You dear girl," she said, "so that has been troubling you, has it? But you must not worry any more, for that has been attended to already."

"A stone over mother's grave, Nita?"

"Yes, dear. I had one placed there some time ago."

Tears were in their eyes as memories of the past came upon them. Stanfield, watching, was strongly tempted to make a full confession. But how could he do it? he asked himself. Shame for his neglect restrained him. He wanted to get away lest he should make a fool of himself. So bidding them all good-bye, he left the house, boarded his car, and sped on his way.

"A great man, that," Henry declared when he had gone. "I wonder if he'll find that uncle. Guess ye'd better git a room fixed up fer him, Sarah. Hope t'goodness he's able to work, fer I need extry help about this place."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE UNCLE

It was a beautiful afternoon as Nita and Lemuel walked side by side across the meadow toward Red Rose Cottage. A thunder storm with a heavy rain during the night before had made the air fresh and sweet, and all the bright things of nature were rejoicing beneath the warm sun. It was good to be alive on such a day, so the young lovers thought as they strolled slowly along, care-free and happy.

Two weeks had passed since Lemuel had found Nita seated by the brook under the shade of a big maple tree. But it had seemed much shorter to both so filled were their hearts with a deep and overwhelming love. They had spent as much time as possible together in the open, searching for new specimens and talking over their plans for the future. Forgotten were their cares of the past, for the kingdom in which they now lived was the enchanted realm of romance.

Coming at length to a fine view of the valley below and the river off to the left, they stopped to rest at the edge of a small grove of white birch trees and to gaze upon the magnificent scene beyond.

"What a wonderful day this has been," Nita murmured. "How all nature is responding to our happiness."

"Every day is wonderful to me now," Lemuel replied, as he took both of her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "Life means so much to me now. Ada says I have lost my senses completely since your return. She had the laugh on me this morning."

"Why, what foolish thing did you do?"

"Oh, I was merely giving expression to my happiness. It was such a glorious morning that when I went out of doors I took off my hat in reverence to Him who made everything so beautiful. Ada happened to see me, and she was much amused."

"I am glad your sister is so friendly to me now, Lemuel. She has changed greatly, and seems quite contented."

"Yes, Ada is almost like a new person. She was always good, but hard to live with at times. Since she has decided to marry, she does not mind if I do the same. She is so much taken up with her own affairs that she does not worry about me any longer. She has learned, too, that is it is a difficult matter to run other people's business, and finds it better to let them manage their own concerns."

"She nearly ruined our lives," and Nita sighed as she thought of her past experience. "But everything has turned out all right.

"I don't want to think about those days, Nita. Let us forget the past and look forward only to the future. There is so much in store for us."

"I hope that I may be worthy of you, Lemuel, and also some help to you in your work. Wasn't that a splendid letter you received yesterday from President Radcliffe? Just think, you are to be a special lecturer at Strongbow University on the subject so dear to you. And you will not be tied down to regular class work like the other professors. It seems almost too good to be true."

"It is a very happy arrangement, Nita," the young man replied as he turned his face from hers and gazed thoughtfully out upon the river. "It is so wonderful that at times I feel it must be nothing more than a fleeting dream. I cannot understand why such a favor should come to me, of all men."

"Because you are so worthy; that is the reason."

"In your eyes I am, darling," Lemuel replied as he stooped and kissed the fair face upturned to his. "But I seem so unworthy to myself. But you will make me more worthy, I am sure. With your help I know I shall do much."

They wished to stay longer here, but the position of the sun warned them that they must leave this quiet retreat. They had noticed the gleam of something white under a big apple tree near Red Rose Cottage, and understood its meaning.

"We must not be late for supper," Nita remarked. "Ruth will be so disappointed if we are not there on time. This is her

birthday, and Mrs. Winters has made all arrangements to have supper in the orchard. Dear good woman, she has been cooking all day while I have been spending my time in idleness. But it wasn't my fault, as she would not let me help her. She said I was only in the way. Perhaps she will let me do something when I get back."

"Oh, Henry will be on hand to assist, so you need not worry, Nita. And John will be there, too. He intended to come this afternoon, did he not?"

"He will not fail to be on hand. And how happy Ruth will be. And now that she is getting along so well, we should have a most pleasant time."

"I wish Mr. Doncaster were here, too," Lemuel said as they moved on their way. "No one has had any word from him since he left two weeks ago. It would be just like him, though, to show up now and surprise us all."

Supper was all ready by the time they arrived at the house, and they received a hearty welcome.

"It's a wonder to me that you young gad-a-bouts ever think of eatin' at all," Henry declared. "Now, when I was courtin' Sarah I lost me appetite fer a hull week, an' dwindled a'most to a shadder."

"You've been making up for it ever since," his wife retorted. "I have never seen you satisfied yet."

"It's yer cookin', me dear. Jist look what ye've given us fer this birthday-party. Come now, one an' all, an' git busy."

Everybody was in the best of spirits. Ruth was very happy. She was seated in a big invalid's chair, which had been wheeled from the house. The old apple tree shaded them all with its great spreading branches. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. The air was musical with the twitter of birds and the hum of insects. And added to all these was the presence of the ones she loved and the new friends she had gained during the last few weeks. What a joy to have John close by her side, with Nita and Lemuel just opposite where she could watch them to her heart's content and rejoice with them in their happiness. And there was Henry, always ready with his quaint remarks and good cheer, and Mrs. Winters so much interested in seeing that everybody was waited upon. It was an ideal birthday-party, and all cares, if they really had any now, were for the time forgotten.

When supper was at length over, Henry groped into his pocket for his pipe and tobacco. Joyce, noticing this, produced a box of cigars which he had concealed by his side.

"Never mind your pipe now, Henry," he told him. "Help yourself to these. Pass them to the ladies, please, and also to Lemuel."

"Cigars! Well, bless my stars! I haven't had a good one since Mr. Doncaster went away." He helped himself, and then passed the box along to Lemuel. "Now, I wonder what kin be keepin' Mr. Doncaster," he continued, as he bit off the end of his cigar and lighted it. "We haven't heard a word from him since he went away. Hope t'goodness nuthin' has happened to him. He should be here fer yer birthday-party, Ruthie."

"He made preparation for it, though, before he left," the girl replied. "He's not like most men who think only of their cigars and forget that women like a treat, too. Look at this."

Removing a rug by her side, she produced a box which caused all to gasp in amazement.

"Choc'lates!" Henry exclaimed. "What a box! Why, it must weigh five pounds, or more! Did Mr. Doncaster send that?"

"He made arrangement with John before he left."

"He did! So he knew the date, eh?"

"He found it out from me," Joyce explained.

"Well! well! Asked her age, too, I s'pose? Now, that was mighty nice of Mr. Doncaster. I wish he'd show up now an' give us another s'prise. It would jist round off this pleasant gatherin' in a right good manner."

Scarcely had Henry finished speaking, when a boy was seen coming swiftly toward them from the road.

"It's Jimmy Dale," Mrs. Winters declared, pausing in her work of piling up the dishes. "And he's carrying a letter, I

believe, in his hand."

"Mebbe it's a message from Mr. Doncaster," Henry suggested. "Hello, Jimmy, what's up?" he demanded as the boy drew near.

"A telegram for Miss Ruth Rivers," the boy explained. "It's from Noo York, so the station agent said, an' it's important. Here 'tis, Miss," and he handed the message to Ruth.

"Ah, it's from Mr. Doncaster," Henry exclaimed. "He's in New York. It's about yer uncle, no doubt. Hope ye haven't spent that ten dollars, as I guess ye'll need it now, a'right."

With trembling hands Ruth tore open the envelope. She was thinking of a big motion-picture concern from which she had been anxiously waiting word for several months. Was this a message telling her that she was needed? Was she to succeed, after all? But when her eyes rested upon the words of the telegram, her hopes vanished. The others, eagerly watching, saw the changed expression upon her face, and wondered. Mechanically she handed the paper over to her sister.

"Uncle Charles is dead," she said. "He died three days ago. Mr. Goodgrace says he has sent a letter which should reach me about the same time as the telegram, explaining everything. Perhaps it's at the office now."

The messenger boy who had been staring hard at the box of chocolates, gave a sudden start and thrust his right hand into an inside pocket of his jacket.

"Gee! I nearly fergot this," he exclaimed, pulling forth a letter and handing it to Ruth. "The postmaster gave it to me as I was comin' by. He's says there's another one there which ye've got to git yerself, as it's registered."

"Do you like chocolates?" Ruth asked as she took the letter.

"Do I! Well, I guess! Ain't they beauts?"

"Help yourself, then."

Reaching out a brown hand the boy was about to do as he was bidden when Ruth checked him.

"Let me help you, my lad. Hold out both your hands. There, that's better," she added as she picked out several of the choicest chocolates and filled the grimy palms.

"Gee!" the boy again exclaimed. "I hope ye'll git another telegram soon, Miss, an' I'll be sent with it."

All laughed heartily at this remark, while Mrs. Winters gave the boy two large pieces of cake.

"You're a good boy, Jimmy," she told him. "You didn't ask for anything like some boys would."

"But ye asked with yer eyes an' mouth, eh, Jimmy?" Henry bantered. "Ye know how to work upon women's feelin's, a'right. I could do the same when I was a kid like you."

In the meantime Ruth had opened the letter, and as she glanced over the contents, her eyes grew big and she became greatly agitated.

"What is the matter, dear?" Nita asked, stepping around to her side and looking over her sister's shoulder.

"It's from Uncle Charles," Ruth explained. "And, oh, Nita! he was our Mr. Doncaster!"

So astounding was this news that a dead silence ensued for a few seconds. A peculiar feeling swept upon the little group and no one knew what to say. It seemed all too wonderful to be true. It was Henry who broke the tension.

"But Mr. Doncaster was rich," he reminded, "while yer uncle was as poor as Job's turkey."

"This letter explains everything," Ruth replied, lifting her eyes from the page. "I can hardly believe my senses. Listen."

"'My dear nieces, Ruth and Nita Rivers:

"'I know you will be surprised at receiving this letter from me. But I have a confession to make, and I am doing it while lying here in this hospital in New York. This is intended for you only in case I do not recover. If I get better, I shall tell you this with my own lips.

"'I am your Uncle Charles Stanfield, your mother's only brother. No doubt she has told you something about me, how we played together as children and loved each other. I cannot write this without tears. But let that pass. I went away from home and made money, a fortune to be more exact. For many years I thought only of money and how to make more money. All my home ties and heart affections I sacrificed to that god. I thought it would make me happy, and some day I would retire and enjoy life to the full. But in that I was doomed to a bitter disappointment. I became very ill, and over two years ago while lying in a hospital I reviewed my whole life, and realized what a mistake I had made and what a miserable man I really was. Although my money gave me certain bodily comforts, and many attendants to wait upon me, it could not give me the heart-love I craved. I wanted some one of my own kin, which I knew I could never have. For that I alone am to blame. In the course of time I regained something of my former health, and was able to resume my work. But I was a changed man, and took little interest in business matters. I no longer thought about making money, but what I should do with what I had already made. I knew of my sister's death, but of her family I had not the least idea. If she left any children I was anxious to know all I could about them. To make a long story short, for I am feeling too weak to write at great length, I visited the place where my sister died. I shall not attempt to describe my emotion when I entered the old battered house. That is known to me alone. Anyway, after a while I found one of my nieces, and later, the other. Under the assumed name of "Daniel Doncaster" I was known to you both, so I need not burden you longer with details. On several occasions I was on the point of confessing all, but cowardice restrained me. I was ashamed of my neglect of your mother, so put off the telling from day to day. I found you both to be what my dear sister ever was, true and noble. But before leaving you on my last return to New York I gave you the great and final test. I had my lawyer, Mr. Goodgrace, send you that telegram saying that I was in dire need. It was only partly deceptive, for I was in need in a way you never imagined. It was not money I needed, but the love and companionship for which my heart now craves. When you received that message and acted so nobly, I was more than satisfied, and really a happy man. Upon my return to New York, I was anxious to get through with my business as soon as possible and hurry back to you to tell you all, and to unfold my plans for the future, which to me were very golden. But my old trouble coming upon me again, makes my return very uncertain. I can write but little more at present, so shall now come to business matters.

"'You will find that my will, which Mr. Goodgrace will forward to you in case of my death, leaves everything I possess to you two, with the exception of a bequest to my dear good friends, Mr. and Mrs. Winters, and another to Strongbow University for the purpose of lectures similar to that which will be given by Mr. Karsall during the coming fall. I believe it will be of great benefit to the students to have such talks from men who have made careful and independent studies in subjects which have interested them for years. All the rest of my money I leave to you, my nieces. I have not the slightest doubt now in my mind about your use of it. As it is all well invested, I would advise you to permit my trustworthy friend of long years, Mr. Samuel Goodgrace, manager of the Golden Trust Company, to handle my estate for you. He understands all the details, and his services should be of great value.

"'There is really but little more for me to add. I hope your lives will be happy, and I am sure they will with such men as Mr. Joyce and Mr. Karsall for your husbands. Money, remember, will not give the real pleasure in life. Only in homes where love reigns and the peace of God abounds is found the fullest and truest joy. May God's richest blessings rest upon you both.

"'Your affectionate uncle,

""'Charles Stanfield.'""

Ruth could hardly finish the reading so overcome was she with emotion. Her eyes filled with tears, while Nita was silently weeping by her side. She laid down the letter and no one spoke. With a corner of her apron Mrs. Winters wiped her misty eyes, and then began to clear up the dishes. She had to do something to relieve her feelings. Henry searched in his pocket for his pipe and tobacco, unheeding the cigars in the box before him. Lemuel and John wisely remained silent. But their hearts were beating fast at the wonderful news they had just heard.

"Poor Uncle Charles!" Ruth at length murmured between her sobs. "Oh, if we had only known sooner!"

Impulsively Nita twined her arms around her sister.

"It all seems like some strange dream, doesn't it, dear? To think that Mr. Doncaster was really our Uncle Charles, and that he has left us his money!"

Henry took his pipe from between his teeth, scratched his head, and looked over at the sisters.

"It's no dream, me dears," he reminded. "It's the solid truth, so instead of weepin', yez should be singin' with joy at yer good fortune. I know yer sorry to lose yer uncle; that's only nat'ral. But he's gone now, an' yez have done all ye could."

"You are right, Mr. Winters," Nita replied. "I feel better now after my crying spell, although completely bewildered."

"Sure, sure, Miss, an' so am I. An' I guess Sarah is, too. Jist look what she's done, poured the cream into that box of cigars."

"My lands!" Mrs. Winters exclaimed. "Did I do that? Why, I thought I was pouring it into that empty pitcher."

They all laughed and felt greatly relieved. Henry scrambled to his feet, picked up his old hat and waved it in the air.

"Hurray fer Uncle Charles an' Mr. Doncaster!" he shouted. "An' hurray fer them fightin'-stars! They're all luck-bringers. An' hurray fer the happy couples! I kin a'most hear the weddin' bells ringin'. Hurray fer everybody!"

THE END

By H. A. CODY

FIGHTING STARS
THE FIGHTING-SLOGAN
THE MASTER REVENGE
THE TRAIL OF THE GOLDEN HORN
THE KING'S ARROW
JESS OF THE REBEL TRAIL
GLEN OF THE HIGH NORTH
THE TOUCH OF ABNER
THE UNKNOWN WRESTLER
UNDER SEALED ORDERS
IF ANY MAN SIN
THE CHIEF OF THE RANGES
THE FOURTH WATCH
THE LONG PATROL
ROD OF THE LONE PATROL
THE FRONTIERSMAN

Transcriber's Notes:
hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original
page 47, "No? Something worse?' ==> "No? Something worse?"
page 47, it, Henry?' ==> it, Henry?"
page 54, it too hot. ==> is too hot.
page 123, haling men ==> hauling men
page 155, money is such ==> money in such

[The end of *Fighting Stars* by H. A. Cody]